

This is a translation of a letter written by Mme Pascaline Duquesne, the director of l'Ecole Maternelle Simandari-Maison des Enfants, to Tracy and Antoine at the beginning of the year. Tracy and Antoine are sponsors of the school and they wanted to share the current news from the school with the parents of Une Ecole Pour Tous.

ECOLE MATERNELLE SIMANDARI-MAISON DES ENFANTS

Fada N'Gourma, 5 janvier 09

Dear Friends,

You had the courage to believe in and support our school project. Thank you for doing so. On behalf of the pedagogical team, please accept our heartfelt wishes for "Peace, Love, Joy, Health, Longevity, Success and Prosperity" as we say here. May the smiles that you helped place on the children's faces convey a message of hope for 2009.



After a long holiday period, three solid months dedicated to field work, we have had our first true school opening. The previous six months allowed parents to discover our Maison des Enfants and the parents clamored to register their children. The need for nursery schools is so great in this community (10,000 children under the age of 6 and only three schools) and our meager 20 openings will not solve the problem. The lack of space in our current facility restricts our ability to construct a third classroom and we cannot expand the walls in the two existing rooms.

So many parents presented themselves at registration time to make the case for their child's inclusion in the program. It was very difficult to not be able to accept all the children and having to turn some parents away was heart-wrenching. We have since established specific criteria for admitting children who come from particularly impoverished backgrounds. This will allow us to focus our attention on effectively presenting the pedagogy of the Montessori program.



On the 6th of October, our young students crossed the threshold of l'Ecole Maternelle Simandari-Maison des Enfants to begin a new year of learning. Some students moved to the primary level while 27 new students joined the fold. We now have a total of 67 students enrolled in our school, 27 of whom are from families in great difficulty. While many parents recognize the benefits of attending school, other parents need more encouragement.

Identifying these impoverished families and trying to convince them to send their children to the school has taken patience and much persuasion. On a daily basis we are faced with the harsh realities of ill health, poor hygiene, and neglect among these families.

Prior to the school reopening we washed, repaired and improved the teaching materials and classroom facility. We constructed a shed to house the kitchen which freed up some office space. The school is now taking shape as I envisioned it would with small child-friendly work spaces and room to circulate amongst the centres.



The first days at school for our new students went well even though there were some tears to dry and some inappropriate habits to address (e. g. Peeing on the steps leading to the school entrances, etc.). Our new students are adapting nicely.

Our educators are motivated, attentive and dedicated to the needs of the children despite the numerous health issues that present themselves in our community such as malaria and typhoid. The recent rainy season was longer than usual and we have had several children fall victim to malaria.

With the experience we acquired last school year, we are better organized and we have established a balanced approach to teaching and evaluating the children. The individual programming and the Montessori pedagogy are gradually taking hold. This represents a significant change and improvement over how things have been done in the past and as a result it will take some time and much persistence for this method to be completely accepted.

One of my objectives for the educators is that activities be planned in advance and that they meet the needs of all the children so that no children are left to idle in their chairs. Another objective is for the educators to more creative and to take more initiative to invent, prepare and vary activities for the children. To this end I have made available a pedagogical lending library so that the educators can resource themselves. One day a week is now set aside to take note of resources on a particular subject and to assemble a binder of reference material that will result in an exchange of ideas and lead to the preparation of appropriate materials. We are off to a good start.



Once again this year we are fortunate to have a young volunteer with us, Florisse Lepez , who in addition to supporting the program, also helps to bridge the two cultures in the school. As of the first trimester we have experienced a period of positive and productive learning for all.

On the financial side:

Since the opening of the school in January 2008, we have found 56 families to sponsor the school fees for our students. Fourteen families have agreed to cover these expenses for the long term. I greatly acknowledge their generosity and their particular financial contribution as the economical sustainability of the school is a constant challenge. In order to pay our staff salaries and to maintain our canteen until June 2009 we will require 8500 euros (150 euros per child, per year; 13 euros a month) in school fees.

Thank you for your continued support and for breathing life into l'Ecole Maternelle Simandari-Maison des Enfants . I send you my best wishes.

Pascaline Duquesne

