

CLOSING ... AND REOPENING

FIRST, WE CLOSED ...

Last winter, when the word began to get around that the drastic virus in China was cropping up around the world, and especially in the United States, WSMS administration started to float “what if” scenarios. As the reporting became more widespread and ominous, our planning began to have more urgency.

In early February, Head of School Mimi Basso advised families that we were adhering to CDC guidelines, and that anyone travelling from mainland China would need to quarantine, adding that, “the current risk to New Yorkers is low.”

A few weeks later the world had turned upside down.

In early March faculty had already set up Zoom accounts to use from their homes. The timing was spot on.

On Sunday, March 15, Mimi sent an email to parents telling them that we were closing for the next two days because of two suspected cases of Covid. Less than three hours later, she sent another email: the city had closed ALL public schools, effective immediately, and we were following their protocol.

The rest is history.

Luckily for us the timing coincided with Spring Break, so not all families were affected at first—though the impact was certainly felt on families who relied on us for childcare.

WSMS faculty and staff responded with alacrity and creativity. Teachers worked via Zoom with their classes every day, sometimes in small groups. They “met” regularly with parents, often individually, and supported them in dealing with issues their children might be facing. Carol Baird conducted Zoom movement classes. Teachers were provided with sup-



port from Judy Jablon (founder of the nonprofit Leading for Children) and Becky Lewin (occupational therapist). Rebecca Hershberg (clinical psychologist and parenting coach) conducted Fireside Chats for parents. Mimi, Loren DeNicola and Judy Lyons held weekly meetings with parents. One of the first things teachers did was create and share a digital book, *WSMS is Closed Today*. Children and their families appreciated this simple, inclusive, and informative narrative. We developed—and updated regularly—a resource page, complete with online programs, book suggestions, and other activities to keep children entertained and stimulated when class was not in session. Former teacher, Cara Zelas, created a six-week online course with multiple daily activities—including creative projects and yoga—which we subscribed to for all families.

Meanwhile admin worked (remotely, for the most part) to stay on top of the DOHMH, DOE, CDC and other guidelines, which sometimes seemed to change daily. A 17-page document of Covid-19 protocols was written, submitted and implemented.

Though Zoom classrooms stopped in June, Carol’s movement Zooms, the weekly Fireside Chats and parent meetings with Mimi, Loren and Judy, and interactions with teachers continued through the summer.

And then we found out we could re-open, since we are licensed as an early childhood provider by the DOH.

OUR MISSION

We prepare children to be resilient, creative and independent problem solvers. We are leaders in teaching Montessori principles and incorporate the best practices of modern early childhood education in our classrooms.

West Side Montessori School is a vibrant, collaborative community of passionate teachers, joyful children and engaged parents. Our diverse community is a reflection of the city in which we live.

THEN, WE HAD A SOFT REOPENING...

Mimi galvanized the group. Judy Lyons reached out to WSMS families for interest in up to three weeks of camp, making it clear that there would be health testing protocols, classroom size limitations and strict distancing. Amy Stoney and Sean Cumberbatch established cleaning and sanitizing practices, and sourced supplies like masks, plastic partitions for public spaces (like the front desk), and new cleaning equipment. We ended up with 4 classrooms of 8-10 children over three weeks, starting on July 20.

Meanwhile, in anticipation of a school-wide fall reopening, things got very busy.

Based on DOHMH rules, we realized we could have a max of 15 children per class ... below our usual norm. We knew that a substantial number of families had re-located for the spring and summer outside the city, and surveyed them to see what their fall plans were. We determined we needed space for 185 children in 309 and 302 ... and came up with a plan: add a PM class, and divide the gym into two classrooms. There were, of course, some logistical issues to be resolved—conducting a lottery for PM, getting DOHMH approval of a divided space—but we did it! We were able to accommodate our numbers without switching some children's programs to PM.

AND IN SEPTEMBER WE WERE BACK TO SCHOOL!

Teachers and most admin returned September 1 (after testing negative), learned the new norms (serving meals, sanitizing of materials, outdoor limitations, ...), held meetings, set up their classrooms, and participated in online workshops and professional development. New children had two individual visits to their classroom with a family member to meet the teaching team, and were invited to come again with two or three other new children. We also held two workshops for parents on how to support children's separation. We provided books—*I Am Going Back to West Side Montessori School* for returning students and *Welcome to West Side Montessori School* for children new to WSMS—so they could anticipate, and adjust to, the new arrival and classroom routines. On Monday, September 21, the doors opened to returning children, and new children started the next day.

Getting through these doors is a different experience than a year ago. Classrooms are assigned specific drop-off windows, so we don't have everyone arriving at once. The child and their accompanying adult (only one is permitted) have their temperatures taken by someone from admin, and the adult must complete an "attestation form" on their cell phone, using a posted bar code. They confirm that neither the child nor anyone in their family has Covid symptoms, or has been exposed to someone who does or has been diagnosed as having Covid.

Teachers take the children in small groups to their classrooms. Admin members bring children who arrive after their scheduled window. No adults other than employees (or repair personnel, if necessary) are allowed in the building. Pick-up is similarly staggered and conducted outdoors.

The good news is we received city permission to close 92nd Street between 7:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. We are utilizing this permit for arrival and dismissal times. Parents can wait in the street until their children go inside every morning, and come out later in the day, with plenty of room for social distancing.

We also received a permit to use the Crabapple Grove in Riverside Park. Children go outside every day. Teachers had professional development training from Leslie Day, author of *Field Guide to the Natural World of New York City*, which enabled them to enhance the curriculum to include more outdoor learning.

And—surprisingly to us—the children are unfazed about wearing masks!

WHAT COMES NEXT?

There are a lot of unknowns ... For example, how do you do outdoor drop-off and pick-up when it rains or snows or is bitterly cold?

If someone tests positive, we have to quarantine the class for two weeks; if this happens in two classrooms, we have to shut down. What if the city shuts down ALL schools again?

The good news is that our experience with remote learning last spring was codified into an impressive guidebook by key teachers this summer, so we won't be starting from scratch. The guidebook incorporates Montessori standards into best practices and specifics for creating online learning.

You can read their thoughtful introduction in the article entitled, "How We Did—and Will Do—Montessori Learning Online."

And fingers crossed we all stay healthy!

