

## AMI/USA Heads of Schools Webinar June 17, 2020

Given by Paula Lillard Preschlack, Head of Forest Bluff School

*This is a strange time! Who ever thought we'd be trying to make Montessori into something abstract and virtual?! But we are being forced to create some kind of model to get through this period, because if we do not, our schools cannot survive, and if we do not, our children have nowhere else to turn. We must try to do something innovative, knowing that nothing virtual truly meets the developmental needs and characteristics of children properly. And we hope to return to our classrooms with the children and materials and with our Montessori practices as soon as possible.*

*In using our Montessori principles and practices as best we can, our goal in this remote learning time must be to foster COMMUNITY amongst the parents, teachers and students, and to keep this virtual community strong and active, growing and learning. Below, I will briefly describe:*

*A. What Forest Bluff school did during the recent school closure*

*B. What we plan to do in the fall 2020*

*C. The Remote Learning Plans for each age level that we designed for the possibility of more school closures in 2020*

### **A. What did Forest Bluff School do during the recent school closure?**

**Website resources:** On the website, we posted pages of suggested home activities for learning, in volumes, for parents to choose from. Teachers referred to these with parents in phone calls, specific suggestions for each child. We wrote reflection pieces to give parents guidance in homeschooling, blogs weekly, and posted resources for people to print out to use with children. Our teachers created lists and lists of ideas for educational home activities!

Each teacher **called every parent** once a week:

In these calls, (between ten minutes and 45 minutes each), teachers gave an individualized lesson plan for each child for the week, gave advice, and referred to specific points in the volumes on the website for activity ideas.

Following calls, teachers emailed the work plan and any **links, forms, resources or worksheets** parents could print out to use with their child. The last of these calls occurred in the last ten days of school, wrapping up the year and relaying what each child accomplished during the weeks of remote learning.

Teachers **met with each child** once a week or more for every elementary aged child, and for younger ones *for those who asked* for this, via video call, to review their week and discuss their work and what they will do the next week. Some children held up work to show their teachers.

In these calls, some teachers gave **short lessons** or reminders of how to do something academic, made suggestions for work and reviewed any work the child held up for them to see.

Some children **emailed their work** to teachers to be reviewed, corrected and sent back. This was mainly SL and Up El children.

**Videos** were sent of our teachers showing children how to do something, or saying hello or reading to them. Two a week were sent to Primary children, one a week and a supplementary packet to accompany the activity was sent to YCC children.

**Zoom group meetings** were held with SL and Elementary children: Once a week for some and two or three times a week for other groups. These involved teachers giving information and children sharing ideas with each other to inspire follow up work.

**Parents also received** an email once a week or more often from the Head of School, and we also held a virtual Book Fair, Mother's Exchange Zoom gathering for the YCC families, virtual Open House for the Secondary Level parents, a virtual Drama Workshop for two weeks with all elementary children, a virtual Graduation ceremony and an individual visit from the Head of School to each graduate's house.

All of this activity was in response to the **individual needs of each child** and parent-teacher communications. Directors felt that responding one-to-one was much more effective than grouping students to address their learning needs. However, many teachers were on the phone or Zooming/Facetiming for most of every weekday, up late at night and working much longer hours than normal to meet the demands. We will need to design a more efficient, organized way to manage a school closure in the future, now that we have time -over the summer- to gather information and form a plan.

Some children needed their teacher to meet with them almost every day. Other families did not want their child on the screen at all and did not want to be called often. So, there was a range of needs. It felt a bit disorganized and we were adjusting constantly. As most schools reported, it was exhausting- we were working hard all the time, and it never seemed to be enough. It was not sustainable.

One of our challenges is that we do not have separate teachers for separate topics of study, like sports, art, music or a language. Instead, we give individualized attention and the teacher covers all topics, so making this remote was the hard part. A flexible day in the school classrooms translates into a sense of "groundhog day" when transferred to home life long-term. Children were also doing their work without the teacher present and the parents were more involved. So, we decided to make adjustments for the fall; we designed a Remote Learning Plan to meet the needs we observed.

On the positive side, we saw children and their parents do incredible things! See the Photo Gallery on our website for examples. Children made things, explored topics, wrote reports and presented to each other via Zoom, kept very busy- they were resilient and demonstrated a high

level of motivation and interest in learning. This is where Montessori children really stand out! Where other students were looking to adults to tell them what to do or resenting being given assignments on line, most Montessori children really took the lead. They showed that we learn wherever and whenever you are, as a way of living. This message was one I constantly pointed to in emails and correspondence with parents and teachers. Despite all else, this was the big “take away” from this quarantine.

Below, see examples of what we wrote for Forest Bluff parents this spring on our website, and please look at [forestbluffschool.org](http://forestbluffschool.org) under “FBS families” tab for more, if interested:

**Examples of Forest Bluff volumes of homeschooling activity recommendations spring 2020:**

<https://forestbluffschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Primary-at-Home-Volume-1.pdf>

<https://forestbluffschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Lower-Elementary-Homeschooling-Volume-2-Games-WEBSITE.pdf>

<https://forestbluffschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Young-Children’s-Community-Homeschooling-Volume-3.pdf>

*(There are many other volumes for each age level on the website. Some ideas were given by other educators, and sourced from different places, but most were created by our teachers/Directors).*

**Blogs to Guide Families Working from Home with their Montessori Children:**

Montessori Classroom Principles Work at Home, Too!

<https://forestbluffschool.org/montessori-at-home/>

How Can I Help? Creating a Routine with Chores

<https://forestbluffschool.org/chores-routine/>

Putting on My “Montessori Teacher” Hat

<https://forestbluffschool.org/my-montessori-teacher-hat/>

Through Darkness to the Light

<https://forestbluffschool.org/through-darkness-to-the-light/>

*(There are many other blog articles—over 50—on our website that may be helpful to parents at home. These are written by our Directors and myself).*

## **Reflections on Homeschooling:**

*Written by Forest Bluff Directors:*

We'll Drive Each Other Crazy! How to Stay in a House  
Helping Your Child Start the Homeschooling Day  
Building Your "Montessori Mindset" at Home  
A Season of Growth: Hope, Resilience, and Creativity  
Primary Homeschool Reflections  
Let Yourself Be Surprised  
Less is More  
A Letter From a Teacher Suddenly Turned Stay-at Home Mother

*Shared from our Forest Bluff Parents:*

How We Homeschool  
Montessori at Home: Learning From our Children  
A Month of Homeschooling: Hardship, Learning and Rewards  
Beginning Homeschooling: Enthusiasm and Gratitude

Find any of these at: <https://forestbluffschool.org/reflections-on-homeschooling/>

*Administration:* We really focused on building community by having the **virtual events**, with my weekly emails to parents (can be reviewed on our website under FBS families tab/School Communication) and pairing younger children up with older children in other classrooms to Facetime or be pen pals once a week. We called this the Big Friends/Little Friends- almost the entire school participated, it was precious! It helped children feel connection when lonely and gave them someone to look forward to seeing in person when we get back to school. We also held a "Reverse Parade" the last day of school so that children could see their school and their teachers, where the families drove through the circle parking lot and teachers stood and waved. It was a gorgeous day. There were tears, cheers, and gratitude- it was beautiful!

## **B. What We Plan to do in the fall 2020:**

We will try to be in session starting late August with CDC guidelines and Illinois restrictions, which so far have been very stringent. We will make decisions when the time gets closer, but we may stagger start times, alternate days for groups of children, keep groups of ten separate from each other with their teacher almost like "pods" and try to be outside as much as possible.

The biggest concern parents seem to have about enrolling for next year is that if and when we have days at home, they felt we should provide something more to warrant charging tuition. As

with many schools around the country, despite our efforts and doing everything we could think of, we did get a fair amount of complaining that we weren't doing more!

So, we sent out a simple parent questionnaire in late May to collect reactions and ideas, we collected information and ideas from many AMI teacher colleagues at other schools, and we talked to teaching friends at conventional schools, as well. We really dove deep into the options and tried to come up with something that we can use in the fall for remote learning the next time and when closures may be more regular or long-lasting.

The outcome: We learned that children still need more structure to the work day when at home for a long period, more contact with teachers and classmates, a measureable sense of progress and to have their parents less involved in the teacher-student relationship. To accommodate these changes, we sent out the following email to parents and attached Forest Bluff School's Remote Learning Plan below:

***Relevant segments of an all-school email to parents:***

**Email Number XX**

June 12, 2020

Dear Forest Bluff School Community,

**Forest Bluff School expects to be open for students to attend in person in the fall! We want to be in the building with the children as much as possible with constant attention to their safety.**

**If we have to work remotely again for any reason, we have created a great plan. Please review the appropriate attachments of our Remote Learning Plans at the bottom of this email.**

**All-School Events**

Supporting you in your roles as parents is a big part of what we do at Forest Bluff, and we see direct, positive results in the children themselves. In this coming year, we are putting together some all-school events that will be virtual (or recorded for Forest Bluff parents unable to attend if held in person):

- Montessori From the Start audio lectures and Zoom discussion groups for parents of ages 0-6
- Montessori Approach At Home lectures and Zoom discussion groups for parents of ages 6-14
- Book Discussions on Zoom in small groups
- Continuing Education Evenings as Zoom webinar presentations for all parents to view

These will be led by Paula Lillard Preschlack or another Director, with *email invitations from the office* to Forest Bluff parents only. They will address relevant topics as we see them arise, such as homeschooling challenges, family discussions about equity and anti-racism, or managing children's anxieties. We look forward to continuing these conversations and growing together!

## The Remote Learning Plan

Below please find the Directors' Remote Learning plans for each age group. Adjustments and changes may be made to these later, based on updated information over the summer and observations of children's responses in the fall on a weekly basis. Giving you this outlined plan now will make you feel confident to commit to Forest Bluff for this upcoming fall. Your children's intellectual knowledge, motivation to learn and sense of responsibility for their learning, close relationships with their Directors and their social experiences with others, are prioritized in these plans. The Remote Learning plans differ from one another to reflect the characteristics and developmental needs of each age level. They address:

The **structure** of each work day that reflects the classroom day.

That the children will be held **accountable** for their learning.

Ways **instruction** will be delivered.

The fact that physical learning **materials** may be borrowed or created for use at home.

That individualized **work plans** and **meetings** with the Directors will guide student progress.

How Directors will give feedback and encouragement to **children's work**.

Director availability for individualized **conversations** with parents.

### C. Remote Learning Plans

Dear Heads of Schools, attached are Forest Bluff's Remote Learning Plans for each age level. We hope they are helpful to your AMI schools! Please feel free to use them to make your own plans, and let us know as you learn more, too. Many of you and your teachers helped us to come up with these ideas. We do not know if they are "perfect", and we have not tried them out in entirety, but they seem to be the best culmination of what we and others learned from last spring, what parents are asking for, and what children may benefit from. We are hoping that our AMI trainers will be able to give us their feedback and direction, and that we can all help each other to navigate this uncharted territory to give our children the most Montessori experience possible, to support them to keep learning when they are at home, and to keep our schools going!

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you,

My best,

Paula

Thank you to the Forest Bluff Directors who created much of this content: Haley Tate, Maggie Kelly, Melanie McEneely, Kaiti Andersen, Debbie Secler, Ann Marie Nedeau, Sarah Robbins, Regina Cyvas Sokolowski, Matt Robbins, Elisabeth Miles, Abbey White and Iuditha Jager, and also to Rachel Coad, Margaret Jessen Kelley, Anne Mahon, Lynn Lillard Jessen and Paula Polk Lillard for contributing ideas and guidance.



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