INSIGHT FROM
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Hybrid learning in a rural setting

Optimism and flexibility drive adaptations



BY **SONYA HEMMEN**
WITH **NCMPS STAFF**

We sat down with Sonya Hemmen, Head of School at Ross Montessori School in Colorado, to hear about their pandemic adaptations.

MontessoriPublic: To get started, can you tell us a little about Ross?

Sonya Hemmen: Ross Montessori School is a public charter school located in the Roaring Fork Valley of Colorado, in Carbondale. We are a rural resort community and draw students from four local counties. As a charter school committed to access and equity, we're proud that our student demographic, 70% white and 30% Hispanic, reflects the counties we serve.

Ross opened in 2005 as one of the first two schools authorized by the Charter School Institute of Denver and not by the local school district. Ross was founded by parents and teachers who wanted their children to be able to continue on beyond preschool at Mt. Sopris Montessori Preschool, founded by Mark and Kathryn Ross in Carbondale.

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Here's our mission statement:

Ross Montessori School Mission 2045

The mission of Ross Montessori School is to prepare compassionate life-long learners to have a positive impact on the world.

Core Values

Children, Joy of Discovery, Dedication to Mastery, Compassionate Love, Community

Vision

We envision a time when Ross Montessori School will be an exemplary educational institution and recognized as such all over the world. Educators from all backgrounds will observe and learn from our model, grounded in the Montessori Method. Parents will choose our school over any other with a steadfast belief in the value we create for the children, families, and communities we serve.

Our children will be immersed in the joy of discovery. Programming will be enriched with art, music, and drama through all the seasons. Students will actively participate in community service projects and conservation programs, and every child will emerge as a creative and competent problem solver.

We will send citizens into the world who have a profound impact on their communities. They will face adversity and challenge with humility, grace, and compassion. They will inspire others to better the Earth and its inhabitants. All who know them will be better for it for generations into the future.

Ross will be a place to train to become a Montessori teacher.

MP: That sounds like a school I would want for my children, to be sure. What was that about training teachers?

SH: According to the North American Montessori Teachers Association, approximately 200 available jobs remain unfilled each year. The demand is so great that some schools even sponsor candidates to take Montessori training in exchange for a contract to teach at the school for a certain number of years. If you're a teacher trained by a respected Montessori program, you'll have no trouble finding a job. It's a fairly secure career to get into as well since the demand for teachers isn't going away any time soon. Part of our Strategic Accountability Plan accounts for this program. We are constantly looking for, recruiting, and vetting appropriate candidates into this program at Ross Montessori. Furthermore, Ross has started to engage with the Center for Guided Montessori Studies for online teacher training with the support of a skilled Teaching Coach on site.

MP: How did your school respond to the pandemic in the spring? What was your experience with distance learning?

SH: We opened online exactly ten school days after being sent home by the Governor. Spring break had been scheduled for the five days afterward and Mandi Franz, our Teaching Coach and a Ross founding teacher, spent her entire week getting research done and preparing us for the new normal of online Montessori instruction. We continued on with the online learning model until the end of May. Lead teachers and teacher assistants billed about 4 hours per day online

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and school leaders attended close to all online sessions to support Montessori education with our children and adults (staff members and parents).

All students with plans such as 504, ALP, and IEP continued to receive online and phone calls to continue to guide them in their learning. Weekly optional online sessions to talk and process through what was going on were offered to children and parents from the Head of School through the end of May. Technology support was figured out with everything from a mass pickup of Chromebooks the first week of instruction to several local pickup and drop off sites for the parents of Ross who live in the local four surrounding counties. Phone and email support were also widely available.

MP: How was that received by your community?

SH: Overall, parents and children indicated high levels of satisfaction and perceived support. We all still know, however, that the best option is face-to-face learning model and are so happy to be back and in our second week of this!

MP: How are your children and families doing now? Have you had much engagement with them over the summer?

SH: I would like to think that we engage informally all of the time and I know this to be true in the small area in which we live. We did not have any formal all-school gatherings from March 15 through the start of school in the fall. We postponed 8th-grade continuation until November because the adolescents asked for this and want to meet, again, in-person one last time when it is possible and allowed by the Department of Health. We did operate three separate summer camps (one CSA Garden and Play, one art, and one theatre) serving about 100 or so students in K-8. All were following all the guidelines and we had no one get ill during the whole summer.

MP: What's the situation now that school has started back up?
SH: We are open, full-time with all students. 85% are face-to-face learners and 15% are learning at home. We have one teacher online to serve grades 4-8 and a part-time teacher online to serve grades K-3. We use Guidepost Montessori online, Google Classroom, and Kahn Academy. We also sent home some hands-on manipulatives for student use this fall as we knew this was a downfall from last spring to not have these ready. We are also working on getting more works ready to grab and go for At Home Learners.

MP: What were the biggest challenges?

SH: The decision, itself, was a challenge to talk about and plan for as we kept 38 staff members in the loop and a volunteer board of seven members. Working all summer to prepare for the hopeful eventuality of opening in-person was time-consuming and good work. Zoom calls, webinars, conference calls, always waiting to find THE ANSWER. It never came. Staffing two models is a challenge. Answering the same questions about COVID is a challenge. Just being so much more attentive to cleaning and disinfecting, making sure everyone is masked and washing hands, and adults all have new protocols and procedures to guide students through like lunch in the classroom and a lot of different techniques to keep cohorts together and separate from other cohorts.

MP: What do you expect for later in the year?

SH: We expect on one hand that we will have to follow the local Health Department guidelines and the geographic district for the decision to switch to At Home Learning for All or Hybrid Learning for All. However, I personally believe that with the mask-wearing, hand-washing, and social distancing, we might have one of the healthiest fall/winters we have seen since opening 15 years ago. Seriously, our local COVID stats are really good and the fresh Colorado air, our outdoor learning spaces, and our increased cleaning could be the variables in this experiment that allow us to continue on with the current and best model of Face to Face learning.

Sonya Hemmen is Head of School at Ross Montessori School.

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