



The FALCON

ARBORBROOK CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

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A Dream Temporarily Deferred

COVID slows plans for new school building

John Lennon once said life is what happens while you're busy making other plans. Arborbrook was very busy making plans on a new building project when life interrupted in the form of a global pandemic.

By now, Arborbrook's board had hoped to have broken ground on two approximately 10,000 square foot buildings—one to house the upper school and another for kindergarten through sixth grades. But along with countless other aspects of life in this unprecedented season, the coronavirus threw a wrench in their timing.

"COVID has definitely stopped everything in its tracks," says Head of School, Dr. Andy Zawacki. "Once upon a time the new school was supposed to be built by next school year. But I don't think that's going to happen at this point."

Experience with delays and ongoing pandemic restrictions have left Zawacki a little gun shy about committing to an adjusted time frame. "We're just not clear what's possible now," he explains. "But we are hopeful that in a year we will at least be able to have all the approvals done and begin excavating."

In the meantime, though, discussions on how best to incorporate Charlotte Mason's philosophy into the various details of the buildings are moving ahead full steam. Arborbrook's foremost goal is not to build something that looks like the typical school.

"Most schools in the United States look sort of like prisons," says Zawacki. "What we want is a second home that will allow us to educate children as whole persons, designed by God with individual gifts and interests. We want a place where students will be welcomed in and encouraged to enjoy their education." Anyone with a passing familiarity with



Charlotte Mason's ideas knows she believed engaging with nature is crucial to learning. To this end, Zawacki describes buildings that look more like farmhouses than penitentiaries, with back walls that feature large, garage style windows. Teachers would be able to lift them up to create airy spaces full of natural light that allow students to walk outside. He also details unique indoor elements that will take classrooms beyond the typical uninspiring environment of desks in sterile rows facing whiteboards.

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“I mean, there will be whiteboards! There will be desks,” Zawacki laughs, “but there will be more than that. There will be spaces designed specifically to allow kids to be kids and allow them to learn the way they want to. So if they want to sometimes sit on the floor in those younger years, they still can. That’s a hallmark of what we do here. We want learning to be a joy.”

Zawacki also hopes the new school will express the ideals Arborbrook stands for to the community. “What we’re

trying to do is capture our philosophy of education in a building style so that, when you drive by, you are mesmerized and say, ‘What is that? That’s a school? That’s unlike any other school building I’ve ever seen.’ And that’s the point. We want to communicate what’s happening on the inside of our walls to the outside world.”

Lennon may have had a point about life and plans, but God’s Word has far greater wisdom on the subject. Proverbs 16:9 reminds us that while we may plan our course, the Lord establishes our steps. He decides which plans come to fruition and when. The whole world has received an education over the last six months that we do not know what tomorrow will bring. But as we wait to find out, we keep moving forward, trusting in God’s perfect timing. ■

EDUCATION ALFRESCO

Emphasis on outdoor learning uniquely prepared Arborbrook for unusual times

Using the book of nature to illustrate Scripture studies, as well as other academic disciplines, has always been a significant element of the Charlotte Mason practice at Arborbrook. That approach has never been more valuable than in 2020.

In August, citing research that risk of COVID transmission is considerably lower in fresh air, Coronavirus Task Force leader, Dr. Anthony Fauci, recommended schools offer as much outdoor instruction as possible. His advice left unprepared districts across the country scrambling to adapt. Fortunately for Arborbrook, learning in nature has long been business as usual.

Most schools in the Charlotte metro area had to begin the 2020-2021 school year the same way they finished the last—cobbling together a staggered schedule of distance learning and Zoom meetings. But Arborbrook’s commitment to outdoor education meant the school already had gardens, nature trails, and other facilities in place to follow Fauci’s suggestion. Over the summer, a group of parents and teachers pooled their resources (and

sweat) to expand the school’s outdoor options even further.

They took what used to be a patch of weedy asparagus beds and overgrown Maximillian sunflowers and transformed it into a partially shaded K-6 outdoor classroom. Right next to the edible garden, it features

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privacy fencing, a picnic table, a chalkboard, stumps for seating, potted plants, and new raised beds for herbs and flowers. Nature Studies teacher Carina Brossy promises the space will continue to evolve with more panels and a garden mural.

“We had already envisioned a new nature playscape for K-6 that could be used during and outside nature studies class time,” says Brossy. “That was even before there were clear COVID protocol directives for the fall. As we got closer to the middle of the summer, it became very clear that this would not only be a fun Charlotte Mason-inspired space, but a true necessity as the school sought to meet necessary health protocols.”

Though the weather has been particularly warm the first few weeks of school, Kindergarten teacher Jillian Myers says her grade has made heavy use of the space already.

“Nature studies was already a huge part of what we did, but having that area right outside of the Kindergarten cottage means we’ve taken our teaching outdoors even more,” she explains. Beyond simple physical safety, Myers says having somewhere to take a break from face shields gives teachers and students a morale boost as well—something they especially need in this tense season.

Social science backs up Myers’ observation. Even before the global pandemic, studies routinely showed that regular time in natural spaces reduces student anxiety and distraction while increasing creativity and motivation. That’s why Brossy says she’s far from finished developing new outdoor spaces. Her next order of business is a new peace garden that will provide students a dedicated space to discuss the examples of overcoming hardships through peacemaking we find throughout literature, history, and Scripture.

Dr. Anthony Fauci recommended schools offer as much outdoor instruction as possible.

Her plan is to renovate an unused and unsightly area between two buildings and install student tables, umbrella shades, seating, and white boards. She then hopes to accent the space with inspirational symbols including healing herbs, medicinal flowers, a peace fountain, and several student-created art installations and storytelling murals.

Brossy believes that whether it’s through community or quiet contemplation, finding joy is what nature studies is all about. “The Lord brings us through all sorts of seasons in our lives,” she says. “Some seasons we feast. But we also have dry seasons that leave plants withered and needing pruning. Through that we have new growth...In so many ways, He teaches His deepest lessons through creation.” ■



Finding Unity in Times of Trial

“Look,’ they say, ‘how these Christians love one another’ (for they themselves hate one another); ‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).” ~Tertullian, Apologeticus, A.D. 197

You don’t have to be a devoted nightly news-watcher to notice how many aspects of life have divided the American public these days. When individual states began placing a variety of restrictions on businesses and institutions last March, that division grew. Schools, especially, have borne the brunt of trying to abide by local health orders while also trying to serve the needs of their communities.



Naturally, parents and students within Arborbrook have different views on how best to proceed in the midst of uncertainty, with some wishing safety protocols were more stringent and others preferring they were less so.

“I think this has been one of the most challenging seasons of trying to straddle the chasm,” says Head of School Dr. Andy Zawacki. “And the biggest thing in my heart for our community is that we’re not all going to agree about everything ever. There’s always going to be this or that we have different feelings on. But all of that bows to the love we have for Jesus and each other.”

Zawacki also sees this moment as a unique opportunity to model unity in disagreement to a society that is rapidly forgetting what grace and mercy look like.

“We’re living in a time where if you disagree with me politically then you’re no longer valid and worthy of my respect,” he says. “But that’s not the heart of Christ. So what we are trying to teach our students at every level is that we need to love one another even if we disagree about things. And the bottom line is, we’re willing to do what we have to do for this season to keep the school open. But everyone is longing for the time when we won’t have to do these things anymore, and I’m at the top of that list.”

Talk to the students and staff at Arborbrook and almost everyone will mention that while they may wish that temperature checks, masks, and social distancing weren’t necessary, they’re grateful that we have at least been able to have in-person classes.

“One thing that really struck me is just a lack of complaining from upper school about how this is affecting school,” says Bible teacher Andrew Reinken. “It was one of those things that I expected. I thought masks would be a really hot button issue, especially with like junior high and high school students for whom complaining is often their second language,” he laughs. “And the fact that I’ve heard little to nothing from even students that I know very well, who would be very comfortable coming to me and rolling their eyes, is refreshing. If you look on social media, even inside the church, things just seem to be really divisive. But I haven’t seen it from our students. There are things about school they love and things about school they don’t, but



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the masks and the COVID policies have not been a big issue to most. And it's surprised me."

Zawacki, too, has noticed that the student body has been especially upbeat this year: "It's remarkable how on time our students have been. I mean, we struggled with this for years—how do you get students to be on time? Well, suddenly we're telling them we need to take temperatures so you need to leave five minutes earlier, and we maybe had only one or two instances where a student was a couple minutes late. That is miraculous!"

Both Reinken and Zawacki attribute the positive attitudes to renewed thankfulness for fellowship. "So many activities were cancelled for so long," says Reinken, "and so many of the kids didn't see people over the summer—they are just thrilled to be around each other. I guess they think whatever they have to do to make that happen is a worthwhile sacrifice."

High School Science teacher Lindsay Mangas points out it's not just the students who are overjoyed to be together again. She says teachers have been encouraging each other

in small ways as well. "The other day someone offered to finish my copies for me and bring them down when they were done," she says. "We share laughs constantly. There's

a new perspective when you lose something in that you see how valuable it is to you. Being with my friends and students is that way. I missed them so much, so now we know how sweet each day is that we get to be together".

Kindergarten teacher Jillian Myers echoes all the same sentiments. But she also stresses that, while a deep love for one another has led to renewed appreciation for fellowship after a season of isolation, she doesn't believe those are the only things prompting so much joy on campus. She also thinks it stems from Arborbrook's trust in the Lord and His provision.

"I think the people that are in a lot of other schools are experiencing a lot of fear in this moment because they're having to trust a system that's very broken right now," she says. "We're not trusting in a system to keep us safe. We trust in something much bigger. And that, more than anything, I think, is what unifies us." ■

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—Andrew Reinken
Bible Teacher





ARBORBROOK OVERHEARD

Teacher: "Young man, you're a leader and I expect you to understand your responsibility in this area."

Second grader: "I'm a child and you're a grown up. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Teacher: "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to see you this morning."

Fourth Grader: "We are boys and girls."

Teacher: "Yes, and you are also ladies and gentlemen, and I'm still delighted to see you."