Q & A Information for Incoming Teachers-May 2014

Working at ASA

1. What materials and resources are available for instructional support?

- ES classrooms are very well outfitted, and an adequate budget is given each year to order needed supplies. Students bring their own materials (pencils, colors, notebooks, etc.) A supply list goes home for the next school year, so contact your teaching partners if you have a particular item you want the kids to bring. Special items like stickers, bulletin board border, etc. are available, but can be hard to find and expensive. If there is something you must have for your classroom, bring it, or contact your mentor about specific items.
- This is highly dependent on what you are teaching. Most classes have textbooks, but not all do. Instructor resources that go with them are often not available (at least at the high school level), but there may be some other miscellaneous resources that have been left by previous teachers.

2. What technology is available for instructional support and for teachers’ use?

- The ES has Big Universe, Reading A to Z, IXL.com, and Brainpop and Brainpop Junior available for teacher use. Also, there are Smartboards and camera documents available in every classroom. In addition, the ES technology instructor is very available for any help you need in using and implementing technology in your classroom.
- As for hardware, all of the classrooms have Smartboards with projectors and a desktop computer. There is a teachers’ lounge with computers and a printer as well as printers for each school (ES, MS, HS). All of the teachers and students have Google accounts, all grades, attendance, etc. are done through RenWeb. All high school teachers will use Schoology as their digital learning platform and all of the middle school teachers use Edmodo. Turnitin has been added to the high school resources as well. Jason Gipson is the technology integration specialist, so he can help you get comfortable with any technology that you aren’t familiar with.

3. Is the school’s curriculum readily available and does it allow for any flexibility? Is it followed?

- The curriculum is readily available (each school level has copies of course curricula and they are also on the ASA website). It is expected that teachers follow the general curriculum; however, there is also great flexibility in instructional methods, assessment of students, and the types of resources teachers use. For example, in the high school, I use many outside resources and readings to address the curriculum and rely very lightly on the issued textbook.
- The curriculum is available online and allows for flexibility as long as you’re following the flow of the curriculum. You can be as creative as you want as long as you are teaching the material required.
4. What kinds of Professional Development opportunities are available for ASA staff?

- The school wide PD goals and trainings are aligned to the mission, and to the curriculum. Recently, PD has been more and more differentiated to fit the learning styles, needs, and preferences of teachers. Many teachers take the initiative to seek out training and development opportunities that they find beneficial and have received support from the school.

- We have a half-day of Professional Development as a school once a month. Each month is different. Some months each school (Elementary, Middle, and High) have separate PD sessions, some months everyone is together, some months we meet by content area, some months there are breakout sessions where you can choose which topic interests you. We’ve had a lot of variety this year. Teachers are also sent to conferences a few times throughout the year. This year we had teachers attend the AASSA conference, a Google conference, counseling conferences, Advanced Placement Institutes, and more.

5. How involved are the parents at ASA? Are they cooperative?

- Some parents are very hands off while others are overly involved. I don’t think there can be a generalization made about this other than from what I can gather parents are more involved with ES and tend to become less involved as students get older.

- In general, there isn’t a lot of involvement from the high-schoolers’ parents. There are some parents who are very involved and will request a meeting with their child’s teacher(s). There are other parents who won’t come to meetings even when all of the child’s teachers request it. Most of the parents are somewhere in the middle: they’ll come in, but only when the teacher requests a meeting. All of the parents I’ve met with have been cooperative though. I was expecting the parents to be very defensive of their children, but they have all been 100% supportive of me and want to know what they can do to help their child improve.

- At the elementary level the parents are extremely involved and always wanting to help out. Room mothers have been great if you want holiday centers and or celebrating birthdays. One thing to remember is to always state the positives before telling them what their child needs to work on. Keep them well informed through newsletters, progress reports, and conferences. Always being honest but in a tactful way has allowed me to have great relationships with the parents.
6. How big of an issue is classroom management? Are the students respectful?

- Each teacher must always find the classroom management style that works best for him or her. ASA is not unique in that students respond favorably to a teacher who starts out firm and slowly loosens the reins. Paraguay is a very social place, and ASA students love to socialize. Using this as a strength strategy and planning group discussions, group projects, and pairs work enables the students and teacher to find a balance between chatting and rigor.
- The students behave themselves as long as that is what you require. They will try to push the boundaries, but as long as you stay firm and consistent the students will behave well. From what I have heard from other teachers, most who have come from schools in the U.S. find the behavior problems here are minimal compared to their previous schools, but if you are coming from another international school the behavior issues may be more than you’re used to. The only common issues I’ve had are excessive talking and cheating, and those seem to be issues at all grade levels.

7. What is the best thing about working at ASA?

- I have great colleagues and the work load is very light in comparison to my other experience and this allows for a much more balanced life. I have much less stress about my job than I’ve ever had.
- The teachers and staff are great, everyone is very supportive of each other. There is a real sense of community. Also, the administrators trust the teachers as professionals and we have a great deal of liberty in the classroom.

8. What is the biggest challenge in working at ASA?

- Because Paraguay is a very laid back place, and because our students are smart and well behaved, it is easy to become complacent and to adopt a laze-fare attitude. Every year seems to start out strong and then slip into a mire of "good enough". The biggest challenge is maintaining the "do your best every time" attitude through the majority of the school year.
- The first few weeks transitioning to the culture of the kids and the school, I was too strict at first and was using the techniques I had learned from the inner city charter school I worked at. I learned to take it one day at a time. Implementing morning meetings allowed me to get to know the kids better and figure out what they needed.
Living in Asuncion/Paraguay

1. What type of housing is available/affordable?

- There are many types of housing available that fit inside the housing allowance. The neighborhood where school is will be the most expensive and you will probably be limited to apartments if living alone. With two or more housing allowances, you can live in a very nice place with a pool and a lot of space and probably afford to pay someone to clean the house once or twice a week. Living further away from school will allow your allowance to stretch even further. There are some very nice apartments and houses 10 to 15 minutes by bus from the school.
- Find a home that is within the housing allowance ASA provides if possible. As a single person who has both lived with and without roommates, much nicer housing options are available with roommates. The further away from school you live, the more economical housing becomes.
- We didn't realize that we'd have to buy a refrigerator, washing machine, oven, bed, plus pay 2 months rent upfront. This is something I wish I would have known about before getting here. The moving allowance goes fast.

2. How do most teachers get around/commute?

- Most teachers walk or ride bikes. Some teachers navigate the bus system. Buying a car can be expensive, but it is a great option. Resale value of cars is very good in Paraguay. Owning a vehicle enables newcomers to have freedom and to explore the lovely country outside of Asuncion.
- I bought a bicycle after my first month and it made my commute to work super easy. You have to be a very confident bicyclist as well as wear a helmet. People are more aware of cyclists now, but it’s not relaxing to ride a bike here. A lot of teachers also buy cars.

3. What is the climate like in Paraguay?

- If you are from a cool climate, summer here is unbearable at times. Having a house with a pool and AC in any room where you think you will spend any time will make it more comfortable. It’s over 100 degrees Fahrenheit for several weeks. This may be when we are on vacation from school, but the last few weeks before summer break this last year were very hot. During the Fall (April/May) and Spring, (September/October) the temperatures range from 75-90 degrees Fahrenheit. This is pretty tolerable and even pleasant. The winter is unpredictable. It may be in the 50’s or 60’s which can be problematic in a country where all the buildings are made of concrete (no insulation) and do not have indoor heating. It is cool enough for a down comforter at night and coats during the day. It rains frequently and it is a sight to behold, especially if you are not used to tropical style rain storms. The thunder and lightning are incredible and we’ve spent many evenings just sitting on the balcony watching them in amazement.
4. How necessary are Spanish skills in the day-to-day life and in travelling?

- It’s very difficult to function outside of the school community without some basic Spanish. The accent here is difficult to understand even if you do speak Spanish and people mix in words of Guarani, the indigenous language. There are many people here who speak some English, but most people you will encounter at the grocery stores, your hired help, the grounds and cleaning crew at school, and people on the street do not usually speak English. It’s rare to find an English speaker outside of the city. The school offers a free basic and intermediate class for teachers- take it! Hiring a private tutor (about $12/hour) will speed up your language acquisition. Many of the other teachers do this and it has been an overall positive experience. Knowing and understanding Spanish will greatly enhance your ability to get around and get things done, not to mention your cultural experience. It can be a difficult and frustrating experience at times, but people here are patient and love it when you try to speak to them!

- Knowing the basics one might need at a restaurant will get you a long way. However, the more Spanish you know, the easier time you will have settling in. Paraguayans are eager to help when a newcomer takes the first step, but many people here know little or no English and may be embarrassed to speak in English to you. Knowing even basic household words will facilitate hiring household help which is a cultural norm here. ASA students' English is quite high, but being able to exchange pleasantries with ASA community members goes a long way.

5. How affordable is Asuncion? Does the salary allow for travel/savings?

- It’s affordable depending on your priorities. You can save money if you are single person. Families with only one working adult will have a harder time. If you think you will buy a car, saving may be more challenging. Things like the doctor, the salon, and labor services are very affordable, even cheap.

- Asuncion can be very affordable, depending on your lifestyle. My husband and I are living here on only my salary and we have enough extra money to travel over the longer breaks, and we still save a good amount of money.

6. What are the health services like? Does our insurance cover our health care expenses?

- Having spent time in the hospital here, I can say honestly that the health services here are excellent and that our insurance will cover health care expenses. The insurance is excellent and you will be attended by the best doctors in the country. Also, I find the health care very affordable. I always felt comfortable with the health services available here, except for alternative/complimentary care which is not of the highest quality.

- The private doctors and hospitals in Asuncion are world class, especially for the cost. Our insurance covers all expenses. Currently we pay up front and are reimbursed upon filing the claim electronically. Finding doctors that speak English can be a trick, but the ASA community is a wealth of connections and networks.
7. What do teachers do in their free time?

- Depends on what you are into! Life is much slower paced here in general so people spend a lot of time cooking and eating with friends. Many people travel out of the city on the weekends and for vacations. We do the same stuff for fun we did in the US-eat with friends, exercise, watch movies and TV, go to movies, and spend time outside. We spend less time outside than before because of the heat, but in the cooler months there are some nice parks in and out of the city. On weekends, you can go out to clubs/bars in groups. Many people also find volunteer work and do that on a regular basis. There are several ongoing athletic events that you can join as well as a monthly Expat group meeting, usually at a local bar.
- Lots of travelling! Any breaks are spent out of town by a lot of the teachers. Every few weeks or once a month there’s an asado or some sort of get-together at a teacher’s house. There’s also a group that plays ultimate Frisbee, a group of runners who do races together, and some teachers who volunteer with different organizations around Asuncion.

8. Does the staff spend a lot of time together?

- This varies. Some teachers spend a lot of time together on the weekends and have traveled together in large groups for the weekend and even out of the country. However, there are plenty of different kinds of people here to hang out with, depending on what you are interested in. Everyone is friendly and welcoming and goes out of their way to help you get settled and comfortable.
- Yes, many do. Incoming teachers generally become especially close with the group of teachers that they come down with, as they all share a similar experience together. Many teachers “go out” together and also travel together on holidays.

9. How are the relations between the US and Paraguayan staff?

- Foreign staff and local staff each tend to gravitate toward each other. However, when foreign staff members take the initiative to extend their hand, the local staff members are some of the best resources for things to do, local events, and personal connections. The local staff members tend to have great perspectives on any issues that may arise, from where to find things at ASA to how to handle a student's family problem.
- Paraguayans are great people and more open than you think! Some of my closest friends are part of the Paraguayan staff. That being said there is also a clear division at social events or lunch of Paraguayans and Americans at school. Don't be afraid to break that mold, they always enjoy another person to talk to!
10. What is the best thing about living in Asuncion?

- The people are so super nice. Raising a family is awesome here.
- The best thing about living in Asuncion is the relaxed atmosphere of the entire city. I also think that Asuncion is very safe compared to other capital cities.
- Asuncion is a very tranquil city and not overcrowded like many cities. I love the beautiful weather and spending time in the backyard with the asado. The people here are friendly and generous. The cost of living is reasonable. I love being able to bike to work. My Spanish has improved significantly as well. The city is very safe compared to other Latin American cities. It is a very livable city and has a lot offer if you take the time to explore it.

11. What is the biggest challenge in living in Asuncion?

- There are not as many “cultural offerings” in Asuncion as in other major cities, although this is improving. Also, there are no “Home Depot” type stores, and sometimes finding items for purchase can be frustrating. The notion of punctuality has not fully caught on here — if a plumber says he will stop by at 8am on Saturday, take this with a grain of salt.
- You have to learn to compromise. Things are not done here as they would be done in the US, so don’t expect the same results. If you want something repaired, don’t expect it to be done right away, or done well necessarily. If you want a certain food, learn to make it with the ingredients that are around, or get some next time you go to the States. Certain things just won’t be how you would expect them in the States, so you just have to accept them and run with it.