



Friends,

Try to imagine 300 students, aged five through fifteen, sitting on a dirt floor in a building roofed with corn stalks. They have no desks or chairs or blackboards. They have no notebooks or pencils. They pass a few textbooks around. There are six teachers for all 300 children.

That is the situation in many public schools in Guatemala. Yesterday I met an American woman, Bonnie Dilger, who is trying to change the conditions in four public schools here in Santiago Atitlan. She has raised funds and provided a desk and chair for each child, and a notebook and pencil to most of the children, though on a recent visit she saw six children sharing one notebook to write their lessons. She contacted the wife of the Guatemalan President, who is known for her philanthropy for children, and through her got supplies to build one new school. The other three schools remain the same, dirt floors and corn stalk roofs, no heat.

Bonnie is just a person like any of us, who saw a need and her heart would not let her turn away. Her next goal is to provide a small meal to each child, because most of them come to school hungry and the schools provide them no food. I wrote her a check on the spot. She does not have her own nonprofit organization, but perhaps Vashon Sister City could become one and help her further.

Some of you asked me to investigate what the schools here need. As you can see, the answer is everything. Some of you have heard from me separately that even the Catholic school is in a desperate situation and may close at the end of March. If it does, the 300 students attending there will join their compadres in the public schools.

The government of Guatemala provides minimal financial support. They will provide six teachers for 300 students, quite a difference from the student teacher ratios we complain about in the U.S.! If a community has land, which is hard to buy and very expensive, the government will provide building materials and the community must do the construction themselves. That is it.

Most of the public school students are the poorest of the poor. Many are Mayan and do not speak Spanish when they start school, so they have to learn a new language. I cannot imagine how a teacher handles 50 students who don't speak the language in which she is teaching. . .

Peace be with you,
Laura

