

Teacher residency: A key piece of the puzzle

Building a viable teacher pipeline for public Montessori schools

BY **NCMPS STAFF**

Public Montessori is the growth sector for the Montessori movement. Precise numbers are hard to come by, although the NCMPS Montessori Census is working to change that—see p. 16 for more information. Still, new schools serving at least 2,000 children have opened in the last two years, and that number will surely be revised upward as new data come in. It stands to reason: there's a limit to how much of the mature tuition-paying market private Montessori schools can corner. But the public sector is still widely underserved, while families and policy-makers are realizing the appeal of a developmentally based model focused on human flourishing. Recent broad scale market research commissioned by the Trust for Learning and shared across the early childhood education community confirms that:



LUMIR residents in Memphis in supervised practice

Montessori is well positioned to extend its reach.

But (as you will read throughout this issue) public Montessori faces challenges, and school after school has told us that their greatest challenge is staffing: Not just finding teachers who have both state and Montessori credentials (see page 6), but supporting them through the struggles common to many public school teachers, and

many prospective teachers. Equity and representation are pressing concerns as well: If teachers have to leave their communities to go to training, they will either not get trained or we will continue to have a teaching force made of largely of middle class white women, which is not appropriate for schools serving populations that are not white and middle class.

Even in places with access to training, ideal conditions—such as fully prepared classrooms, full age groups beginning at age three, families who embrace the Montessori approach, leaders equipped to support high-fidelity practice, and children only occasionally affected by the challenges of income and food insecurity, learning differences, and systemic racism—are few and far between in the public schools that need Montessori the most.

So public Montessori schools that do find trained teachers report significant levels of turnover, as do traditional programs. In Montessori schools, which rely on the continuity that comes with three-year cycles

What we've learned is that finding and keeping well prepared adults is big work, and it requires a multi-pronged strategy

Parents wish their children to develop into strong, capable and morally responsible individuals, who are lifelong learners and doers, through a partnership with teachers in achieving this goal.

Needless to say, Montessori matches that description. As families and school leaders alike push back against a narrow, test-driven approach to education,

keeping them in the classroom. Teachers are scarce to begin with for two reasons. First, additional training for both credentials is costly and time-consuming. Second, high-quality Montessori training that prepares teachers for public practice is itself scarce, and leaving home and work for a nine months or multiple summers is a non-starter for

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and cohesive classroom communities, this churn is disastrous. In addition to the challenges of recruiting, hiring and orienting new teachers, constant changes in staffing means discontinuity for children, and, too many classrooms staffed by adults who are

While the concept of teacher residency is not original to us, the application to Montessori training is novel. (At the same time, NCMPS does not imagine itself as the sole or even principal implementer of this model. Existing Montessori training organizations

Why residency?

Developing our model, we first looked outside Montessori to an approach that began in cities such as Boston, Denver, and Chicago in the late 1990s. Inspired by medical training, urban teacher residencies provide practice-based training in real schools with real students, supported by experienced mentors. Most urban residencies are 15-month programs—two summers of coursework bookending a school year in which a resident works in a partner school. At the end of the process, the resident earns a state teaching certificate, a master's degree, and, in some cases, additional certification in Special Education or ELL.

These programs have aimed to prepare more novice teachers to succeed in classrooms characterized by high rates of poverty and special needs—challenges that, in addition to excessive testing, often drive teachers out of the profession. The most striking result of teacher residencies across the nation has been better teacher retention, which makes sense, given their emphasis on extended, supervised apprenticeship.

Several elements of the Montessori approach make the residency model a good fit. Montessori training entails mastering a large and subtle repertoire, which requires lots of practice. While most Montessori training programs include extended opportunities for “supervised practice” in prepared environments, confidence in the core skills of Montessori practice takes several years beyond training.

In addition, on-the-job training has been integral to Montessori teacher preparation since the beginning. In independent (and a few public) Montessori schools, new teachers have often started out as classroom assistants. Some newly trained teachers even

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The children can't always wait for the teacher to be ready

not properly prepared to deliver Montessori. Without more access to better teacher preparation, public Montessori can't grow as fast or be as effective as it should.

At NCMPS, we've not only been tracking these challenges since before the organization was founded in 2012, we've been experimenting with solutions. What we've learned is that finding and keeping well prepared adults is big work, and it requires a multi-pronged strategy. In addition to launching projects such as Teach Montessori (Teach-Montessori.org), which aims to expand the pool of potential Montessori teachers, and the Montessori Surround, a suite of courses addressing skills and knowledge critical to success in public schools, we've come to believe that the entire process of teacher formation needs to be substantially reconsidered. Our approach is the Montessori Teacher Residency (MTR).

could incorporate this structure into their offerings without compromising authenticity.) The MTR is a practice-based, school-wide approach to professional formation. It combines three elements: Montessori training, additional courses needed for success in public schools, and a school culture built around continuous improvement. This model addresses both supporting legs of the “Montessori triangle”, preparing the adult and the environment for the child they will serve.

On paper, that sounds simple. In practice, however, as work in the field has shown, turning schools into laboratories for professional formation is complex. Yet, what we've learned has only strengthened our belief that the relationship between Montessori training and real school practice is the most important element of a sustainable model of teacher preparation.

choose to begin their classroom careers as assistants before taking on a lead role. In the best cases, teachers who are either in training or newly trained have several years to practice with the support of more experienced peers.

This type of extended apprenticeship is clearly ideal. It's also extremely rare in public schools. In fact, the need for new teachers is so acute and budgets for staffing so tight that we more often find a vicious cycle of underprepared adults who do their best but fail to succeed in high-need settings. Failure and frustration drives them out of the profession, new novice teachers come in, and the cycle repeats.

Breaking that cycle requires not just a re-imagined approach to training, but a more active, affirmative role for schools. In our model, residency is not just about the trainee or prospective teacher: it's about the whole school. The school must cultivate a community of practice within which everyone, but especially novices, can grow. By growth, we mean strengthening Montessori practice for the children and families who are served by the school.

Training: necessary but not sufficient

In nearly a decade of studying the challenge of the Montessori teacher pipeline, we've learned two key lessons. Great public Montessori requires great training. And, great training is not enough. Great public Montessori teachers must be able to deploy the knowledge and skills they learn through training in a manner that is flexible, personalized, and sensitive to the goals of equity, inclusion, and the dignity of all children and families. They must be, like all Montessori teachers, experts on human development, environment preparation, and lesson presentation. Great public Montessori school teachers must also understand the cultural, social and regulatory environment of public schools in order to

help themselves and their communities to serve all students, meeting external expectations while holding themselves accountable to the higher standards of curiosity, perseverance, creativity and compassion.

Helping all members of the school community understand what this means requires substantial investments in both structures and cultures

(or group of schools) and center work together to support the deepening of Montessori practice for all members of the schools' communities. This is our model in Washington, DC, with the DC Montessori Teacher Residency (page 3). Training centers aiming to support teacher formation beyond pre-service have begun to offer events such as professional development workshops,

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that allow Montessori practitioners to examine their practice honestly, openly, and with a constant eye to core goal of the approach: realizing the human potential of every member of the community.

From training to formation: getting proximate

Bryan Stevenson, one of our heroes, tells us that to be agents of change, we must "get proximate," meaning get closer to the issues and circumstances we are trying to affect. And while there are many discrete elements of the teacher preparation process that need to change in order to better serve the public sector, the overall goal of getting proximate captures the most important principle guiding the Montessori Teacher Residency.

In some communities, proximity means training centers that are geographically close to schools. Where that exists, we find the strongest teacher pipelines are built collaboratively between schools and training centers. This means the training center becomes much more than a producer of new teachers. Rather, a school

targeted lectures or programs, and informal gatherings for teachers and prospective teachers. The more Montessori and public-sector expertise interact, the better for the well-being of the public school.

In other communities, proximity means bringing training to the school, as we did in partnership with Libertas School of Memphis. Libertas Urban Montessori Institute and Residency (LUMIR) responded to the need for rigorously and relevantly prepared adults who are members of the community they serve by creating a training course embedded in the school itself.

Along with physical proximity, LUMIR also blurs the line between pre-service training and ongoing professional development. By situating the course inside the school, and by instituting structural elements such as ongoing coaching, lesson study, and child study, experienced Libertas teachers play an active role in supporting the LUMIR novices. Likewise, the novices, who spend their summers in a practice room prepared for pre-service

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training, are fully integrated into the fabric of school. They are learning on-the-job, both from their students and from their peers.

The experience of training, in other words, is not bounded by place or cohort or even time. Rather, because LU-

that distinguishes trainers from teachers. We urge caution in staffing residencies. Even more, we acknowledge that building a viable infrastructure to prepare and sustain people who support teacher development across the career trajectory remains a major chal-

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MIR novices are in constant contact with one another and with their more experienced peers, formation is continuous.

It’s important to note that LUMIR is completing its first courses this year, and is still in the pilot phase of implementation. That means we’re still making sense of the design and outcomes of the program in order to derive usable lessons for the wider public Montessori community. While we’re extremely encouraged by the results for the residents who are completing the program while leading classrooms, we still have questions, and it would be a mistake to attempt to replicate this program without further consideration.

We don’t, for instance, recommend that every public Montessori school start its own training center. As tempting as that can sound to schools struggling to find or afford appropriate training, the logistical and pedagogical challenges of supporting what amounts to an entirely additional business threaten to deplete rather than support the overall mission of the school. Likewise, while we were able to recruit and support a team of experienced public Montessori practitioners to serve as instructors for the courses, we are deeply respectful of the years of study, mentoring, and self-reflection that go into developing the theoretical and practical expertise

associated with building a viable Montessori teacher pipeline.

We can, however, share promising insights drawn from our work with LUMIR, the DC Teacher Residency, and other programs.

Proximity: Bringing teacher formation into the school is key not just to finding and keeping great teachers, but to strengthening the entire school’s capacity to realize its mission. Residencies help schools build and maintain a staff of knowledgeable, skillful, sensitive teachers, by putting professional formation and continuous improvement at the center of staff development.

At the same time, every school can’t start its own training center. But schools can support “practice rooms”—spaces prepared for adults to hone their practice—as well as other structures in space and time, which could play a part in training while supporting continuous reflective practice.

Expertise: Montessori practice is complex, detailed, and distinguished from other approaches by its coherence between theory and practice. At its best, Montessori is supremely responsive to the needs and interests of all learners. At its worst, it can show an unruly mix of rigidity, disorder, and exclusionary behavior. Achieving well-functioning Montessori practice requires deep and wide investments in

Montessori expertise. Residencies need strong links between schools and centers of deep Montessori knowledge.

Equity: If public Montessori schools are to serve diverse populations of students well, their staffing must reflect the communities they serve. Residencies can attract and retain a much more diverse teaching force, by offering formation programs which are accessible, affordable, and appropriate to a much wider swath of the potential universe of Montessori teachers.

Our work with Montessori Teacher Residency is just beginning, and we continue to learn from our successes, our struggles, our explorations, and even paths which turn out to be blind alleys. But we are confident that Residency plays a key role in extending the reach of high quality public Montessori to many more families.

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