

Major Montessori landscape report from ETS

A new analysis points to opportunities and directions for research



BY **DAVID AYER**

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) has released a “Policy Information Report” on The Montessori Preschool Landscape in the United States. This comprehensive, detailed report is loaded with insights and recommendations for anyone interested in expanding access to Montessori early childhood education in underserved communities. (The ETS is “the world’s largest private nonprofit educational testing and assessment organization,” per Wikipedia, associated with the PSAT, the SAT, the GRE, the TOEFL, the PRAXIS, and numerous state assessment programs.)

One such person interested in early childhood Montessori is Jeff Bezos, with his Day 1 Academies Fund announced last fall: a \$1B fund to support “a network of high-quality, full-scholarship, Montessori-inspired preschools in underserved communities.” This is of interest to ETS partly because of the scale of the proposal: \$1 billion is roughly equivalent to the 2016-17 pre-K spending in four states (Florida, Oklahoma, Vermont, and Wisconsin, plus DC) which enroll 70%+ of their four-year-olds.

The report is pretty clearly directed at the Fund, offering to provide

“insight into the fund’s pedagogical inspiration,” and help in defining “‘high quality’, ‘Montessori inspired’, and ‘underserved.’” But it will be useful to anyone who shares the broader mission.

Overview and inputs

This “high-level overview of the Montessori preschool landscape in the United States,” does a pretty good job, accurately, if broadly, identifying key elements of Montessori early childhood education, and the availability and demographics of programs. For context, it analyzes state-funded pre-K and federally funded Head Start programs. The report also reviews Montessori outcomes research and suggests useful directions for further inquiry.

The report begins with a concise yet detailed history of Montessori up through its recent growth phase in the public sector. This out of the way, the report analyzes “programmatic inputs” that may drive quality in Montessori programs, and compares them to public non-Montessori classrooms. Programmatic inputs can be “structural,” such as instructional time and class size, or “process,” such as curriculum and interactions.

Structural inputs

Classroom composition (including three-year age groupings, larger class sizes, and higher child-to-teacher ratios) is identified as an essential Montessori practice promoting self-paced and peer learning, and strong adult-child relationships. This contrasts with smaller, single-age classrooms in state pre-K and federal Head Start programs, intended to support differentiated instruction and small-group

instruction (which occur in Montessori classrooms as well).

Montessori **teacher training**, typically from non-degree-granting institutions, can focus exclusively on child development and the substantial body of specific skills required for implementation. But additional schooling is often required for teaching in public programs. Teachers trained in university settings, especially with special education coursework, felt more able to support special needs students. In addition, “the limited number of university-based Montessori teacher training programs has been cited as a challenge to training a more culturally and linguistically diverse teacher workforce.”

Process inputs

Both Montessori and conventional early childhood programs use **hands-on materials** to support learning and development—books, blocks, and easels in conventional models, and the Montessori materials in those classrooms. These are highlighted as meriting their own report, but are noted for “the manner in which these didactic materials are used to sequentially teach concepts and work together as preparation for young children’s future development and learning.” The report traces the progression from Knobbed Cylinders through Metal Insets and Sandpaper Letters to writing in a way that will be recognizable to Montessorians and comprehensible to outsiders.

Student choice of activity within the Montessori environment is gathered under **the role of the teacher** as

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a process input, identified as a “pedagogical focus on following an individual child’s lead,” where “the teacher’s role is intentionally decentered in the learning process and thus limited to implementing the appropriate Montessori lesson that supports each student’s personal learning trajectory within a specific content area.”

This is a bit of a conflation of the adult-child-environment “triangle” model from within Montessori, minimizing the adult’s role in mastering and guiding a child through the deep, comprehensive Montessori curriculum. Still, it’s nice to see some reference to independent choice in children’s work. And the report does a nice job differentiating Montessori from other curricula, which are aligned to age-specific knowledge and skill goals, rather than being derived from observation and developmental models.

Finally, the **use of data** is highlighted and as process input common to all the early childhood models in question. Montessorians might have preferred direct reference to observation and record-keeping as a primary data collection mode for our classrooms, but it’s good to see our data-aware approach recognized and validated.

Who has access?

Availability: The report explores what “underserved” might mean in the context of Montessori and other ECE programs. Using Montessori Census data, the study comes away with several key insights:

- Every state has at least one private Montessori primary program.
 - Half of all 3-6 programs are in seven populous states: California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas
 - Eleven states have just one or two public 3-6 programs.
 - Thirteen states have none.
- The Montessori Census lists 326

public programs (out of 518 total) serving ages 3-6, but it’s difficult to tell how many of these actually serve three and four year-olds—only 71 of these schools have confirmed serving the full age group. (This is another important reason for schools to claim and update their Census profiles at montessoricensus.org.) Although some states have

level. (This suggests that some or most Montessori schools in a given state maybe more affluent than average, and that a few larger ones are less so, making the districts less equitable but keeping the state average flat.) A new book by Mira Debs, *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools*, goes into much more detail on this subject.

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approved a Montessori curriculum for state funded pre-K, and it is theoretically available to Head Start programs, the report notes that “Montessori programs have been constrained from greater participation in state-funded pre-K initiatives,” citing class size, teacher-child ratio, and teacher degree and licensure regulations.

Enrollees: How many children might be served by an expansion of Montessori ECE, and who are they? The report had difficulty in counting current enrollees, but extrapolating from the Montessori Census data so far collected, the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector estimate about 45,000 children are enrolled in public Montessori 3-6 programs.

By contrast, state pre-K enrolls about 1.5 million children nationally, and Head Start another 700,000. Demographic data are hard to come by, although they are most likely from lower-income, lower wealth families.

The data are similarly elusive for Montessori, but generally the population in public Montessori has been reported to be similar within states to other public schools, but a bit whiter and wealthier on a district-by-district

The takeaway here is that there are many, many eligible children, quite a few of them in states with little to no Montessori availability.

Research

Research supports the value of high-quality preschool for so-called “at-risk” children. Research specifically on Montessori has been scarcer and harder to evaluate. The report’s exhaustive review came up with conclusions we’re familiar with—if there was really solid evidence out there, we’d already know about it. Here’s what the report found:

- Montessori programs have the potential to enhance young children’s learning and development
 - But, results did not demonstrate a consistent advantage.
- The issues in the existing research were:
- Most studies used simple comparison samples instead of more rigorous random samples.
 - Research including low-income families was limited.
 - Some studies focused on school

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readiness, academic achievement, and executive function, while others focused on fine motor skills and activity levels.

Fortunately, two new large scale studies (see page 4) are addressing precisely these topics, so better support for Montessori should be available when they are completed. But it's not surprising that the review concludes, "there appears to be a significant range of Montessori-related studies to be conducted through future short- and long-term."

Conclusions

The report concludes with two observations and two recommendations.

First, both Montessori and high-quality state-funded pre-K and Head Start classrooms include programmatic inputs aimed at supporting young children's learning and development.

Next, existing research does not yet unequivocally demonstrate the benefits of enrollment in traditional Montessori classrooms for children from families with low incomes.

Finally, access to public and private Montessori classrooms serving preschool-aged children may be uneven among states

Therefore, the report suggests directly to the Day One Academies Fund's stakeholders:

- Short-term research examining current early education options of low-income families in potential low-access-to-Montessori states.
- Long-term research to expand the research base on the effects of Montessori programs aimed at preschoolers.

These seem like two of the right questions to be asking.

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