

Public Montessori gets its start in Ohio

A roll call of famous Montessori names



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Cincinnati, home of the first U.S. public Montessori school as well as the first public Montessori high school, has a history with roots in the earliest days of the Montessori resurgence in this country beginning in the 1950s.

The first Montessori school opened in the U.S. in Tarrytown, New York, in 1911, and the method was met with a rush of enthusiasm. Maria Montessori herself visited the country in 1913, and in 1915 famously presented a “glass classroom” at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco as well as offering an international training course. After 1915, however, the rush subsided in the face of criticism and conflict, and from the 1920s to the 1960s the approach persisted mostly in a few private Catholic schools. Maria Montessori herself passed away in 1952 without seeing the movement reawaken in this country.

In 1953, however, Nancy McCormick Rambusch, then a new parent in Greenwich, Connecticut, traveled to Paris to attend the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) Tenth International Congress. She became friends with Montessori’s son Mario, then the Executive Director of AMI, took a training course in London, and worked to bring the model home. It was a period of change and conflict in

the American Catholic Church, but as a member of the church, Rambusch felt a Montessori education would offer children more than the traditional parochial experience. It wasn’t long before she convinced others of the same, helping to open the Whitby School in Greenwich in 1958, launching a training program, and founding the American Montessori Society (AMS).

Soon hundreds of nuns and lay teachers were studying Montessori on their own, and opening schools in parishes and private institutions. In Cincinnati two Catholic schools opened: Summit Country Day (1962) and Mercy Montessori (1969). Cincinnati Country Day also began in 1962, with Hilda Rothschild as lead teacher. Rothschild, in her 50s at the time, had trained with Maria Montessori herself in Europe in the 1930s and was already a prominent Montessorian and an early childhood, special needs, anti-poverty advocate. In 1965, as a faculty member at Xavier University, she helped use a Carnegie grant to establish the country’s first University-affiliated Montessori teacher training program. Rothschild’s name became synonymous with Montessori education in the city.

In the 1970s, Montessori preschool education flourished in Cincinnati due to the program at Xavier, as many teachers earned AMS credentials and opened schools throughout the region. These schools and the families they served would be the societal support for the future establishment of public Montessori elementary programs. The nascent private elementary programs could only serve a small number of children. Tuition was a barrier for many families who could not afford private school, but believed in public education and wanted Montessori for their children. Still, it was ten years



Nancy McCormick Rambusch

before the first public program could be realized.

Establishing the first public Montessori school was no small feat, and credit is due to the determination of four inspiring women. Hilda Rothschild had brought Montessori’s vision to Cincinnati in the 1960s. In 1974, Ramona Drennan, director of the Montessori Education Program at Xavier, garnered grants from the Jergens and Martha Holden Jennings foundations to develop a public school. The generous funding provided an opportunity for Nancy Rambusch to join Xavier’s faculty for over a year. Rambusch’s earlier work had fostered myriad private Montessori schools, but in 1975 her work signaled a new movement, bringing Montessori to the mainstream. She participated in the teacher training, worked on-site, and taught at the new Montessori school in Cincinnati. Her presence brought national interest and local enthusiasm to the project.

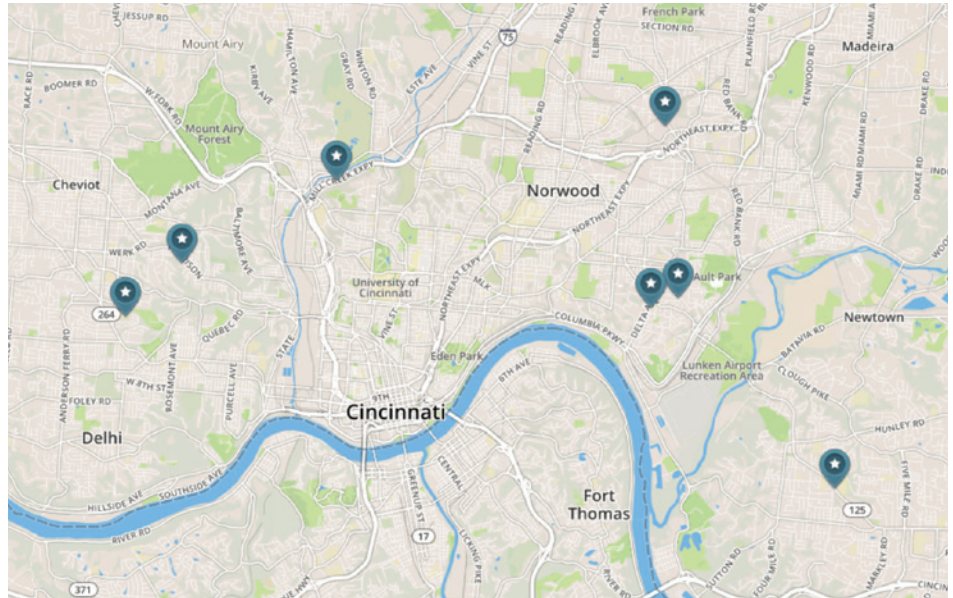
Rambusch was joined by Martha McDermott, a Scottish native who had

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trained in London in 1959 with Claude Clermont and Muriel Dwyer, and had worked with Rambusch and Margaret Stephenson in the U.S. She had joined the Xavier faculty in 1968, collaborating with Rothschild. After serving as the Children's House lab school guide and professor, McDermott traveled to Bergamo, Italy in 1973, where she earned her AMI elementary teacher credential. Upon her return to the US in 1975, she created the first elementary class for the Xavier lab school, and began teaching elementary Montessori graduate students.

In the mid-1970s, Cincinnati, like many U.S. cities, still had largely segregated schools, and were under increasing pressure to integrate. In fact, 1974 saw the filing of the "Bronson case" by legendary activist, NAACP leader, and City Councilwoman Marian Spencer, which drove further Montessori expansion in the 1980s. Spencer had earlier been a leader in the fight to desegregate Coney Island, an amusement park in Cincinnati.

Public school systems saw the potential for avoiding the upheaval of bussing by offering "school choice." "Alternative" or "Magnet" schools gave parents the opportunity to send their



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the model continued to grow, and by 1979 the three programs were moved to the West End of Cincinnati and renamed Sands Montessori School after the original Sands School, itself originally opened in 1913 and named for 19th century teacher George F. Sands.

In the mid-1970's demand for Montessori teachers soared. Cincinnati public schools contracted with the teacher education program at Xavier for training. Classes were held at the lab school in the evening, on weekends

Montessori School opened in 1981 and now serves more than 500 children from Pre-K through 6th grade. Carson, now renamed Dater Montessori School, launched in 1986 with fewer than 200 students and now serves more than 750 through 6th grade. In 1994 Winton, now Parker Woods Montessori School, became Cincinnati's fourth magnet Montessori school, now serving more than 500 children through 6th grade.

Montessori High School

In 1992, after drop-out rates in Cincinnati public Montessori schools had increased to over 50%, the Board of Education entertained the possibility of opening a Montessori secondary program. Bob Townsend, head of magnet schools, gathered parents, teachers, and administrators to create a philosophy statement for the program.

Within a couple of months, philosophy statement in hand, Montessori elementary teachers across Cincinnati collaborated to create a program proposal. The team visited private Montessori adolescent programs, and took a NAMTA Summer Erdkinder Course (then called the "Urban Experiment"). Larry Schaeffer of Minneapolis, and Pat Ludick and John Long of Cleveland's

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children to schools outside their neighborhood districts, in order to draw white families in to predominantly black schools. In 1975, in response to a desegregation lawsuit, the new Children's House in Mount Adams, serving kindergarten through third grade, opened its doors. Integration efforts were successful and two more schools opened shortly thereafter. Interest in

and during the summer. Student teaching took place in the teachers' own classrooms. The training was offered at little or no expense if teachers agreed to teach in Cincinnati public Montessori schools for three years.

The 1980s and 1990s saw several more schools open, driven both by the 1984 settlement of the Bronson lawsuit, and parent demand. North Avondale

Ruffing East Montessori, pioneers in Montessori secondary work, helped support the program and Betsy Coe, director of Houston Montessori Center provided training.

In 1994, the board of Education accepted the program proposal. That fall, the program began as a school-within-a-school with an enrollment of about 60 seventh graders. It was the beginning of what would become a full six-year secondary school and the first Montessori high school in the country. Marta Donahoe was the program coordinator, and Brandt Smith and Bruce Weil were the first teachers hired.

The following year, the Montessori Secondary Program was renamed Clark Montessori after Peter H. Clark, a pioneering African-American educator. Most of Clark's students come from four of Cincinnati's public Montessori elementary schools, some from private Montessori schools, and others from public schools. There are no academic requirements to enter the program, but students and families must sign an agreement to attend Clark. Of the students, 95% have previous Montessori education. Because students come from many parts of the city, the school is rich in diversity.

In 2005, demand for more Montessori secondary education drove the creation of another high school at Westside, later renamed James N. Gamble Montessori High School after James Norris Gamble, son of the founder of Procter and Gamble and the formulator of Ivory soap. The school launched as two 7th grade classrooms in the basement of Dater and now serves 500 middle and high school students.

Another elementary program, Pleasant Ridge Montessori, opened in 2006 as Cincinnati's first "neighborhood" public Montessori school, now serving 600 children through 6th grade. Enrollment is open to any family living within the school's catchment area and. A new program, Gamble Elementary, is opening this fall with five classrooms through 6th grade.

Today, Cincinnati public Montessori schools, in partnership with Xavier University, continue to guide students from early childhood through the passage to adulthood. These programs honor the dignity of each child, instilling in them a great sense of humanity and hope for the future.

Marta Donahoe has worked in public and private Montessori schools since 1979. She was named the 2019 AMS Living Legacy for her contribution to the larger Montessori community.

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