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Public Montessori resurgence in Cleveland

One school is closing but a new model emerges



BY **JACQUI MILLER**
WITH **NCMPS STAFF**

Public Montessori in Cleveland, Ohio, has a long history going back to the early 90s, when the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) included six public programs. Since that time, all but one (Tremont Montessori) has closed. In 2015, a new Montessori charter school, Stonebrook Montessori, opened its doors. This year, CMSD decided not to renew Stonebrook's charter, but to absorb it into a revitalized district-wide Montessori portfolio (currently consisting of two schools). Jacqui Miller served as the founding Principal at Stonebrook, and has moved to a new district role as "Director, Montessori Programming and Operations". MontessoriPublic sat down with Miller to hear the story.

Stonebrook was conceived in 2012 when Miller was in Ohio, working at the NAMTA-AMI Orientation to Adolescent Studies. David Kahn, at the time Executive Director of NAMTA and a longtime public Montessori supporter and Montessori project instigator, helped organize the plan along with Montessori Development Partnerships (MDP), a non-profit dedicated to increasing access to Montessori in North America. The charter was written in 2014 and approved for five years by CMSD in 2015, launching as a pilot program in March with a full opening in the fall.

Although CMSD had one public Montessori program still going at that time, the organizers chose the charter model for the greater autonomy it offered, "to take some bold steps with Montessori fidelity—to create a model as close to Montessori's ideals as possible," Miller said. At the time, Ohio charter law allowed schools to serve children ages five through 21, so she and MDP successfully pushed for legislation (2015's HB 487) to allow Montessori charters to enroll three-year-olds.

"That first year brought so many surprises," Miller said. Stonebrook



A new game in town in Cleveland

was ambitious and intentional from the beginning. The whole point was to create access for the low-income, low-wealth, mostly Black community on Cleveland's east side. They found and renovated a beautiful building in Glenville, and wrote an admission policy to enroll specifically Cleveland city

residents—"which is virtually synonymous with low-income, low-wealth Black kids." In addition, the east side of Cleveland is the poor infrastructure, low-investment side of town typically found in big American cities. The other

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Learning COVID lessons at Lee

Family engagement and coaching became essential



BY **RACHEL KIMBOKO**
WITH **NCMPS STAFF**

Rachel Kimboko is the Assistant Head of School at the East End campus of Lee Public Montessori Charter Schools in Washington, D.C. Lee's two campuses serve more than 350 children from three years old through 6th grade. The school is named for Tahiira Lee, a long-time

Black Montessori teacher and advocate for public Montessori. The school was founded in 2014 in the Brookland neighborhood and expanded in 2019 to the East End, becoming the first full public Montessori school east of the Anacostia River, in the predominantly Black, historically underserved Anacostia neighborhood. In their opening year, the East End campus served 72 three- and four- year-old children, with plans to expand mostly with new young children and a bit of "backfilling" at upper levels. MontessoriPublic sat down with Kimboko to talk about Lee's experience in the spring and their plans for the fall.

This first year for the East End campus went well enough in the fall, with the occasional hiccup—one teacher leaving early, and another moving back

to China the very day in March when the school shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, Kimboko thought the school might be returning face to face as early as May, so the immediate plan, while workable, was perhaps "not bad—but not the best. Not a sustainable plan."

In the spring, days began with 30-minute whole-class community meetings. At first, teachers were trying to deliver some academic experiences as well as social-emotional connection in that half hour. This proved challenging, especially with three-, four-, and five year-olds on the same call. The East End groups only included younger children, but kindergartners at the Brookland

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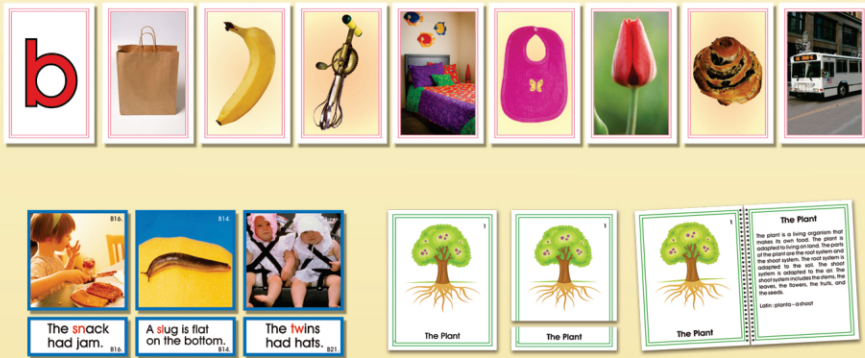


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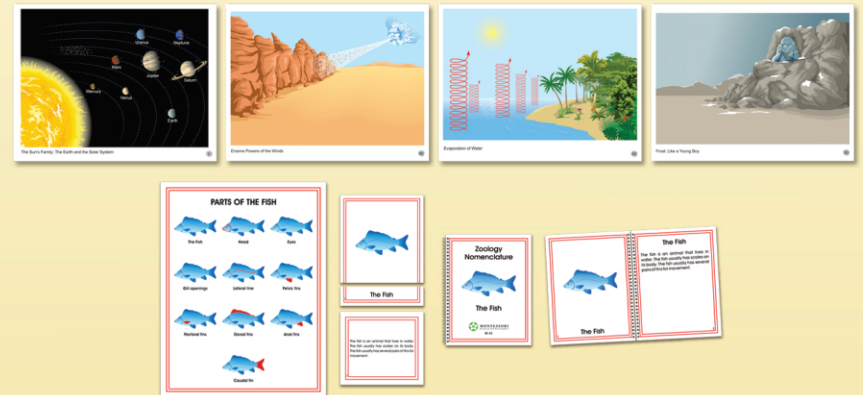
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Kansas City Montessori adapts

Applying the lessons of spring to the challenges of the fall



BY **KALINDA BASS-BARLOW**
AND **NCMPS STAFF**

KaLinda Bass-Barlow is the principal at Harold L. Holliday, Sr. Montessori, one of two public Montessori schools in the Kansas City Public Schools District (Kansas City, Missouri). In August, MontessoriPublic spoke with Bass-Barlow about Holliday and the school's adaptations to COVID-19.

Bass-Barlow came to Holliday in 2016. At the time, the school had Montessori in the name, but the practices were not as strong as they could be. "The principles of Montessori were not in place," she said. Bass-Barlow worked with the Montessori Training Center Northeast (CREC), Montessori Institute of North Texas and her school team to understand and implement the necessary elements, such as the three-hour work cycle, fully trained teachers, and

well-oriented assistants. "As you can imagine, in a public school, this took a balancing act."

Four years on, the Montessori program is well-enough established that Holliday has become one of a dozen or so public schools to achieve Association Montessori International (AMI) recognition. Then the pandemic arrived, and everything had to change. Missouri closed its schools on March 23rd, and Holliday, like schools across the country, made an abrupt transition to distance learning. "This spring, like the rest of the world, we jumped right in there."

The transition was challenging for families and staff. Educators and caregiv-

engage an entire classroom on a video call. Aside from being exhausting for the teacher, this approach proved difficult for children as well. "It was hard having ten, twenty children on a screen and they not do what children do."

Families were challenged as well. Many families had chosen Montessori precisely because they didn't want their children on screens all day, and now here they were having exactly that. Still, Bass-Barlow experienced a lot of what she termed "grace" from her school community, as teachers and staff adjusted their practices. But she doesn't expect the same grace in the fall, which is why she and her staff used the spring

This spring, like the rest of the world, we jumped right in there

ers had to adapt to new, often unfamiliar technology. Like educators everywhere, teachers were experimenting with different ways of providing remote instruction, and while they did their very best, and Bass-Barlow is proud of her staff and what they accomplished, it's fair to say that there were lessons to be learned for the fall. Some teachers struggled to

and summer to reflect and refine their online practices and expectations; offer critique, eliminate some practices and support others, and develop more sustainable, developmentally appropriate plans for the fall. "I always say, we as educators don't get to gamble with

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COMING WINTER 2021:
Technology

Technology has played a pivotal role this year. What works, what doesn't, and what's right for children?

Contributions, observations, and letters, on this or any public Montessori topics, are invited at editor@montessoripublic.org

Your deadline is **Dec. 31, 2020**.
More guidelines on page 23.

In this issue: Adaptations

This issue of *MontessoriPublic* was originally slated to consider the prepared environment. Now, that focus has sharpened to the ways schools, teachers, and families are adapting to pandemic conditions.

David Bagnoli reflects on the characteristics of Montessori school buildings that lend themselves well to pandemic adaptations, and shares Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School's program adjustments.

Irene Baker interviews **Ann Epstein, Elizabeth Slade,** and **Keith Whitescarver** about a new collaborative anthology about inclusion.

KaLinda Bass-Barlow shares the story Holliday, Sr. Montessori School's adaptations to COVID-19, in the spring and now for the fall.

Katie Brown, Angela Murray, and **Patricia Barton** report on their research on teaching and learning outside of the context of the prepared environment of the classroom.

Sonya Hemmen shares the adaptations undertaken at Ross Montessori School in the Roaring Fork Valley in Colorado.

Rachel Kimboko speaks with MontessoriPublic about the challenges and unexpected benefits from Lee Montessori Public Charter School's pandemic adaptations.

Jacqui Miller joined *MontessoriPublic* to tell the remarkable story of Stonebrook Montessori's role in the re-growth of public Montessori in Cleveland, Ohio.

Katherine Miranda gives us an update on public Montessori in Puerto Rico.

Kathryn Picanco reports on how Montessori Northwest, and their partner, Whitworth University, adapted teacher training to pandemic conditions.

Letty Rising shares her observations about how COVID-19 adaptations have raised the importance of family engagement.



Breakthrough Montessori plans for COVID-19

Montessori design brings natural advantages



BY DAVID BAGNOLI

Schools across the nation have started the school year in unprecedented circumstances. While questions remain regarding immunity and reinfection, infection rates and outcomes in children, and the pandemic's likely duration, the safety and well-being of students and school staff remains paramount.

While teachers are busy innovating and adapting to online platforms, administrators are juggling budgets and scheduling, and parents are engaged in a juggling act of their own, managing work responsibilities—perhaps even joblessness—while caring for and educating their children. Students are faced with isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty. The circumstances are complex, and everyone is aware of what's at stake.

Because physical structures and school communities differ, schools' responses will vary as well. From 100% distance learning to hybrid models, educators can learn a lot from one another within the Montessori community and the wider educational community as well.

Montessori: A strong start

The purposeful design of Montessori schools to support the pedagogy includes features that also happen to be helpful in a pandemic-conscious world:

- **Wider hallways:** Because “learning happens everywhere” in Montessori schools, corridors and hallways are often designed for both circulation and as additional workspace. These wider hallways can now allow more space for social distancing.
- **Bigger classrooms:** Montessori students need freedom of movement, so classroom size already tends to be more generous than conventional environments. Larger rooms can provide the space needed for social distancing.
- **Dedicated bathrooms:** Because Montessori encourages independence—including in the bathroom—many Montessori classrooms have

built-in or nearby bathrooms. This supports efforts to limit interaction between student groups by discouraging different cohorts from sharing the same bathroom.

- **Outdoor access:** Pandemic recommendations include increasing circulation of outdoor air into indoor spaces by opening windows and doors and using fans. Montessori has a foundational emphasis in connection to the outdoors, so classrooms often already have operable windows and direct access to outdoor areas.
- **Individual and small group work:** The Montessori classroom, with its emphasis on independent individual and small-group work, lends itself to social distancing.
- **Independent learning:** Montessori's focus on self-motivated and self-directed learning can be more readily adapted to a remote-learning environment.

Challenges to tackle

Montessori schools also face specific coronavirus-related challenges:

- **Didactic materials:** These materials are designed for children to independently select, use, and replace when done. Schools will need strategies for in-person students to safely retrieve and interact with hands-on learning materials.
- **Hands-on engagement:** Particularly for younger students, Montessori emphasizes hands-on tactile interactivity and encourages children to move, explore, and manipulate the world around them in order to understand it. So what happens when technology becomes a central point of instruction?
- **Technology for virtual learning:** Virtual learning is a defining characteristic of education during the pandemic, but technology isn't traditionally part of a high-fidelity Montessori classroom. The rapid shift to distance learning has catapulted schools into a virtual-learning experiment requiring a steep learning curve and sparking concerns about equitable access.
- **Multi-age classrooms:** Mixed-age classrooms are a challenge during distance learning. Peer teaching and learning don't easily translate to a distance learning environment.



Learning happens everywhere

The Breakthrough plan

Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School, a Washington, DC charter school offering a high-fidelity Montessori experience for PK3 through third grade, has developed policies and procedures for in-person learning. The school has pivoted to online learning for now, but will be ready to provide a safe environment when in-person classes are possible.

Breakthrough's Executive Director, Emily Hedin, says the school's ability to offer in-person learning depends on several key factors, including state policies, the health of staff, and access to cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves.

Staff researched best practices and stayed up to date using resources including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization websites to help inform the school's 2020-21 school year plan.

In-person considerations

Health policy: Before school started, Breakthrough shared a complete health policy with families and staff, and invited families to contact the school with questions or concerns. If a child exhibits symptoms while at school, Breakthrough will isolate that student and contact the family to pick them up immediately. Children and adults with symptoms may return on-site once they receive a negative COVID-19 test, get clearance from a health care provider, or have completed the required quarantine period.

Limited access: Access to school buildings will be limited. Only essential visitors—parents and guardians who need to pick up an ill child, special education and mental health providers, first responders, Child and Family Services professionals, janitorial and maintenance crews, and meal service providers—may enter school buildings. Parents and guardians won't be allowed inside for routine drop-off or pick-up. All meetings between families and school faculty will occur virtually.

Cohorts and physical distancing: For in-person learning, Breakthrough has set a strict limit of 12 people per classroom, including students and faculty. Students will be divided into cohorts and will interact only with their cohort, with staggered arrival, recess, and dismissal times. There will be no in-person conferences, classroom performances, potlucks, or classroom observations. Classrooms will be arranged to support physical distancing of six feet between students.

Daily health screening: Before entering the school, students and faculty will confirm that they don't present symptoms and haven't been in close contact with anyone who has tested positive for the virus. Non-contact thermometers will be installed at each school entryway, and while parents will be required to take their child's temperature prior to coming to school, Breakthrough will also check upon arrival.

In addition to promptly identifying possible COVID-positive students, Director of Student Support Allison

Jones says these steps serve to boost community confidence and reassurance: “It’s about the perception of safety, too,” she points out. “The psychological and emotional aspects of COVID-19 are an important consideration as well.”

Masks, shields, and gloves: All school staff will wear face masks and face shields and will have access to gloves and other personal safety equipment. Students will be required to wear face masks, with masks and shields provided to any staff member or student who needs them. Staff members (both special ed and general ed) can wear a mask with a clear plastic window so children can see the adult’s mouth.

Cleaning and sanitation: Cleaning will occur throughout the day on campus. Deep cleaning will be done twice a week, with the campus closing on Wednesdays, during which time all students will learn virtually.

Hand sanitation stations have been installed throughout the campus and hand-washing routines and protocols for all staff and students have been developed.

“We’re paying attention to the specific flow of lesson materials in the classroom,” Jones says. “Students won’t return materials to the shelf they got them from, but to a designated shelf where they can be cleaned before the next use. We’ll also be using individual rugs for each child, which will be laundered periodically, and individual chairs and tables for students. So, basically, there is far less sharing.”

Over the summer, Jones has been creating work packets for the coming school year and planning for home delivery of a weekly themed series of boxes containing objects and learning material. Children will be able to engage with materials that can be handled and manipulated.

Indoor air quality: During the pandemic, schools should aim to improve central air filtration. Options include using portable HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filtration systems, especially in higher-risk areas, and using UVGI (ultraviolet germicidal irradiation) as a supplemental means of destroying the virus. Schools may be advised to increase outdoor air supply to occupied spaces to as high as 100 percent. Breakthrough is working with campus architects StudioMB to review the school’s HVAC systems, with outdoor ventilation air maintained at or above design minimum values and additional filtration being provided.

Distance learning

Virtual learning and equity: All Breakthrough students will engage in some virtual learning during the 2020-21 school year. Hedin points out, “Breakthrough’s model won’t require hiring more staff, but what no school can really answer is whether all staff are going to be willing to return to school. That’s really tough. We may need to go full virtual.”

After feedback from faculty and families, staff are focusing on making virtual learning more standardized, and the program will include both asynchronous (pre-recorded content or pre-assigned activities or assignments) and live elements for students’ school hours, from 8:00am to 4:00pm.

“Pre-recorded video lesson sets are good because children see their teacher on the screen delivering a live lesson, which provides more personal connection in addition to live time spent interacting with students,” Jones says. Breakthrough has been taking steps to orient guides and staff to using technology for virtual learning. “Teachers have had to rapidly learn new skills and pivot to producing their own instructional videos for students, so learning on the part of educators to retool their curricula is also a defining characteristic of education during this time.”

Jones adds, “There also needs to be follow-up with the family.” Families received clear information about what their child is expected to learn each week and over the course of the year, and the school has made virtual learning schedules standardized and predictable. Breakthrough provides family education to support virtual learning, and families will have a virtual learning point of contact at the school who can help troubleshoot and answer questions. Online safety and security policies (such as not sharing Zoom passwords, etc.) have been made clear to all families, students, and staff.

Guides at Breakthrough are working to identify what material is best taught virtually and which is not. And, Hedin says, “while the technology doesn’t necessarily lend itself to greater outcomes for learning, it may offer benefits when it comes to testing.

In addition to online learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Seesaw for interaction during virtual learning, staff are also exploring other resources, such as Khan Academy for math. To help foster connection and community, guides can link students across different platforms so children

in different cohorts and age groups can see what their peers in another group are doing.

In addition to lesson quality, Breakthrough is considering equity—ensuring that all students have access to computers, tablets, and a reliable internet connection. The school usually needs about 30 to 40 Chromebooks for its students, but with all students potentially engaged in virtual learning during a virus outbreak, closer to 200 Chromebooks have been deployed.

Educators must also ensure the students with special needs are supported, since providing opportunities for individualized learning can be a challenge with distance learning. Breakthrough is keenly aware of issues regarding equity and will continue providing the services listed in individualized education programs.

School schedule: As of this writing, the school is working with a “hybrid” schedule, where students are in person two days a week and virtual for three. Asynchronous virtual learning will be available to students in the morning, offering a Montessori three-hour work cycle. The afternoon work cycle has also been shortened to one hour, and the

in-person school day ends at 1:30pm. Live virtual learning sessions are offered from 1:30 to 4:00. Lunch and recess times will be shortened, with 30 minutes for lunch and 1 hour for recess. Recess will still take place at public parks, but students won’t be allowed to use playground equipment.

Quick pivots and more flexibility

The true, lasting effects of COVID-19, not just educational but psychosocial, can only be anticipated. This new learning environment is asking everyone to stretch their limits, demanding new levels of flexibility and adaptability on the part of educators and schools. Hedin says, “Ideally, we would start carefully and cautiously and confirm that our initial plans for on-site and distance learning models are successful before making changes. That way, we could adapt our programs incrementally. The problem is that with COVID, this isn’t the case. Arriving at solutions has to be rapid.”

David Bagnoli is the Founding Principal at StudioMB, a Washington, D.C.-based architectural design firm.

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Follow the child—and their family

The pandemic has changed the meaning of family engagement



BY LETTY RISING

Educators who have been heavily steeped in Montessori philosophy and pedagogy are passionately prepared to uphold Maria Montessori’s undeniable directive to “follow the child.” For many, this phrase has been discussed, debated, and teased out endlessly in training centers, conferences, and staff meetings alike. But what does this phrase exactly mean? Do we follow the child’s developmental needs? Do we follow their wants? Do we follow them off the proverbial cliff?

There have been many rich and engaging conversations about this topic, and Montessori educators far and wide are in agreement regarding following the child’s developmental needs as well as their interests, and also that there are some guidelines and limitations to this “following” that we do. Maria Montessori’s ideas are rooted in balance, and so the notion of following the child while at the same time attuning the child to the needs, desires, and even limitations of the community of people and the surrounding environment is in alignment with her thoughts around balancing freedom with responsibility.

The Montessori approach centers on the relationship among the child, the guide, and the prepared environment, and the lectures given in Montessori training centers around the world focus on this crucial systemic triad and the ways in which these three aspects interact to support development. However, in all of this grand work that Maria Montessori accomplished in regard to the needs of the child, there is less published work on what her thoughts might have been regarding the child in the context of their family.

This is perhaps due to the fact that her focus was on schools that would mimic the best aspects of a home environment, and that Montessori schools were designed as communities for children. It was no accident that the earliest classroom was called the “children’s house,” or *“casa dei bambini,”* as there was much work done to integrate the more salient aspects of the home into classroom life.

Whether this absence of family in this equation was intentional or accidental, it resulted in a certain kind of culture that developed in Montessori schools that created a clear separation between home and school. Unlike the play-based preschool co-op down the street, parents of children attending Montessori schools were asked to drop off their children at the front gate, schedule observations at convenient times for the school, and were discouraged from being “classroom helpers” unless the help involved taking home materials to cut (after a tutorial from the school or teacher, of course!), sewing costumes for the class play, donating items, and maybe accompanying children on a field trip or “going out” experience. One parent, upon hearing a speech from an admissions counselor which ended with the proclamation “just trust us!” when she asked if she could walk her anxious 3-year-old daughter to the classroom on her first day, made a beeline for her car and never looked back. While these practices have raised both questions and

Montessori is a pedagogy based on adaptation

Montessori education has quickly evolved from an environment where teachers with specialized training work with children whose parents come for an occasional observation and yearly parent conference, to a more active and continuous level of family involvement. Children are now learning at a distance, their parents within earshot, or at the child’s side. Teachers are giving lessons via videoconferencing, while parents listen in, trying to figure out how to extend what is happening online at home, frantically cutting out paper DIY Montessori materials, and scouring the internet for any and all Montessori lessons to show their children. Teachers are seeing parents hand-deliver their child’s paper and pencil to the lesson—the very same children who were independently gathering materials for lessons in the classroom! Siblings interrupt to show their favorite plastic dinosaur toy; pets bark, meow, and jump onto computer consoles; and parents invite themselves to lessons to

period is designated for videoconferencing—a different kind of observation than what can be conducted in an environment where children are working independently. Therefore, the eyes of the parents will be your windows of observation. You’ll need to connect with them on a regular basis to ask how things are going, and also let them know to contact you regarding observations in the home environment that they think might be important to share.

What can teachers do to include the family in distance learning/home learning?

- *Send out a memo to parents regarding your expectations.* If you want to make sure that the children aren’t interrupted during your lessons, let them know! If you want the children to gather their own materials and supplies as they ready themselves for lessons, let them know! Teachers can get frustrated with parents about things that parents would willingly and happily adjust if they had the communication about expectations.
- *Collaborate with parents as much as possible.* Brainstorm; share ideas; get their insight, opinion, and advice. Ask them about their expectations. This will lead to a better functioning classroom as well as a closer bond with parents.
- *Be flexible.* Remember, many of your families are not choosing this kind of schooling, and many might be overwhelmed. Parents have reported that long videoconferencing sessions are not easily incorporated into family life, especially if there are multiple children. However, daily videoconferencing for connection, collaboration, and working on things together can be vital for your students to maintain a connection. If possible, sending recordings to parents so that they can opt-out from online if need be, would be ideal for families who need greater flexibility.
- *Adjust your mindset.* Even during non-pandemic times, so many teachers express that they had no idea before becoming a teacher just how much interaction with parents that they would be having on a regular basis. Now, during times of COVID, parent interaction has increased, both directly and indirectly, as teachers are finding themselves in their students’ homes.

The need to partner with parents is more essential than ever

eyebrows, the idea of having the parent on the periphery generally became the norm, and Montessori schools continued to be somewhat mysterious places for parents.

Now, let’s fast-forward to the year 2020. During the seemingly continual reorganization and rearranging that happened during the outset of COVID, and in midst of several educational pivots in the span of weeks and months, Montessori education made an unparalleled shift that felt, to many, like nothing short of a monumental earthquake. During this shift, Montessori educators discovered that it is no longer an option to simply follow the child. We now have no choice but to include and integrate parents, siblings, and even grandparents. Just as the red line at the end of the long “black strip” in the elementary material denotes a new period in time, we are now entering into a new phase in the history of how we approach the child within the context of their family. We have transitioned from a focus on “following the child,” to embracing the wider lens of “following the family.”

give their own thoughts, insights, and feedback.

If Maria Montessori were alive today, she might be pulling her hair out along with all of the Montessori teachers who are exclaiming “Montessori is not supposed to be delivered online or from a distance!” Or, more likely, she would put on her scientific hat, observe what is happening, and identify ways to adapt so as to be as developmental as possible in the current reality. She would notice that the family is a part of the everyday equation, and would expand her horizons to include the bigger picture. We need to evolve from “what does the child need” to “what does the family need?” Relegating parents to the sidelines is no longer an option.

The partnership between home and school

If you are teaching from a distance, the need to partner with parents is more essential than ever. You no longer have many informal and spontaneous opportunities to observe the children in action. Instead, you have whatever time

What happens if we don't follow the family?

Whether you are teaching at a school that is learning from a distance or back on site, the landscape of education has changed. Parents have either been intimately working with their children on projects and activities at home, or have been listening to teachers via Zoom, and they have become accustomed to being more integrated into classroom life.

Although many parents will find it a welcome relief when it is deemed safe for students to return on campus, many parents and children have also enjoyed aspects of this integration of their child's education into their home life. One parent recently remarked that this has been an opportunity for parents to feel more involved in their child's learning experience, to see more clearly how their child thinks and responds, and that the bits and pieces of lessons they hear become fodder for dinnertime conversation. "What did you do today?" has been replaced with "I heard you talking about the population density of different states in your geography lesson, and your teacher mentioned Colorado. Did you

know we are going camping in Colorado next month? Do you want to look at the map and see how many people live in Colorado?"

Parents who have come to enjoy this kind of involvement may feel some disappointment as children return to classroom life, and there will need to be a way to continue some aspects of this blending of family and school. If we don't do this, we risk creating a division between parents and schools during a time when the world is feeling heightened mistrust and uncertainty. If Montessori education is a pedagogy that is built upon the idea that humans are adaptable, then now is the time for teachers and school leaders to embrace flexibility and collaboration as strategies to employ not only for the whole child but for the whole family.

Letty Rising has been a Montessori teacher, Homeschool Education Specialist, Head of School, Principal, and a Montessori Coordinator for a network of Montessori schools. She currently serves as a Montessori Consultant, supporting public and private schools and organizations in the US and worldwide.

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Hybrid learning in a rural setting

Optimism and flexibility drive adaptations



BY **SONYA HEMMEN**
WITH **NCMPS STAFF**

We sat down with Sonya Hemmen, Head of School at Ross Montessori School in Colorado, to hear about their pandemic adaptations.

MontessoriPublic: To get started, can you tell us a little about Ross?

Sonya Hemmen: Ross Montessori School is a public charter school located in the Roaring Fork Valley of Colorado, in Carbondale. We are a rural resort community and draw students from four local counties. As a charter school committed to access and equity, we're proud that our student demographic, 70% white and 30% Hispanic, reflects the counties we serve.

Ross opened in 2005 as one of the first two schools authorized by the Charter School Institute of Denver and not by the local school district. Ross was founded by parents and teachers who wanted their children to be able to continue on beyond preschool at Mt. Sopris Montessori Preschool, founded by Mark and Kathryn Ross in Carbondale.

As a charter school committed to access and equity, we're proud that our student demographic, 70% white and 30% Hispanic, reflects the counties we serve.

Here's our mission statement:

Ross Montessori School Mission 2045

The mission of Ross Montessori School is to prepare compassionate life-long learners to have a positive impact on the world.

Core Values

Children, Joy of Discovery, Dedication to Mastery, Compassionate Love, Community

Vision

We envision a time when Ross Montessori School will be an exemplary educational institution and recognized as such all over the world. Educators from all backgrounds will observe and

learn from our model, grounded in the Montessori Method. Parents will choose our school over any other with a steadfast belief in the value we create for the children, families, and communities we serve.

Our children will be immersed in the joy of discovery. Programming will be enriched with art, music, and drama through all the seasons. Students will actively participate in community service projects and conservation programs, and every child will emerge as a creative and competent problem solver.

We will send citizens into the world who have a profound impact on their communities. They will face adversity and challenge with humility, grace, and compassion. They will inspire others to better the Earth and its inhabitants. All who know them will be better for it for generations into the future.

Ross will be a place to train to become a Montessori teacher.

MP: That sounds like a school I would want for my children, to be sure. What was that about training teachers?

SH: According to the North American Montessori Teachers Association, approximately 200 available jobs remain unfilled each year. The demand is so great that some schools even sponsor candidates to take Montessori training in exchange for a contract to teach at the school for a certain number of years. If you're a teacher trained by a respected Montessori program, you'll have no trouble finding a job. It's a fairly secure career to get into as well since the demand for teachers isn't going away any time soon. Part of our Strategic Accountability Plan accounts for this program. We are constantly looking for, recruiting, and vetting appropriate candidates into this program at Ross Montessori. Furthermore, Ross has started to engage with the Center for Guided Montessori Studies for online teacher training with the support of a skilled Teaching Coach on site.

MP: How did your school respond to the pandemic in the spring? What was your experience with distance learning?

SH: We opened online exactly ten school days after being sent home by the Governor. Spring break had been scheduled for the five days afterward and Mandi Franz, our Teaching Coach and

a Ross founding teacher, spent her entire week getting research done and preparing us for the new normal of online Montessori instruction. We continued on with the online learning model until the end of May. Lead teachers and teacher assistants billed about 4 hours per day online and school leaders attended close to all online sessions to support Montessori education with our children and adults (staff members and parents).

All students with plans such as 504, ALP, and IEP continued to receive online and phone calls to continue to guide them in their learning. Weekly optional online sessions to talk and process through what was going on were offered to children and parents from the Head of School through the end of May. Technology support was figured out with everything from a mass pickup of Chromebooks the first week of instruction to several local pickup and drop off sites for the parents of Ross who live in the local four surrounding counties. Phone and email support were also widely available.

MP: How was that received by your community?

SH: Overall, parents and children indicated high levels of satisfaction and perceived support. We all still know, however, that the best option is face-to-face learning model and are so happy to be back and in our second week of this!

MP: How are your children and families doing now? Have you had much engagement with them over the summer?

SH: I would like to think that we engage informally all of the time and I know this to be true in the small area in which we live. We did not have any formal all-school gatherings from March 15 through the start of school in the fall. We postponed 8th-grade continuation until November because the adolescents asked for this and want to meet, again, in-person one last time when it is possible and allowed by the Department of Health. We did operate three separate summer camps (one CSA Garden and Play, one art, and one theatre) serving about 100 or so students in K-8. All were following all the guidelines and we had no one get ill during the whole summer.

MP: What's the situation now that school has started back up?

SH: We are open, full-time with all students. 85% are face-to-face learners and 15% are learning at home. We have one teacher online to serve grades 4-8 and a part-time teacher online to serve grades K-3. We use Guidepost Montessori online, Google Classroom, and Kahn Academy. We also sent home some hands-on manipulatives for student use this fall as we knew this was a downfall from last spring to not have these ready. We are also working on getting more works ready to grab and go for At Home Learners.

MP: What were the biggest challenges?

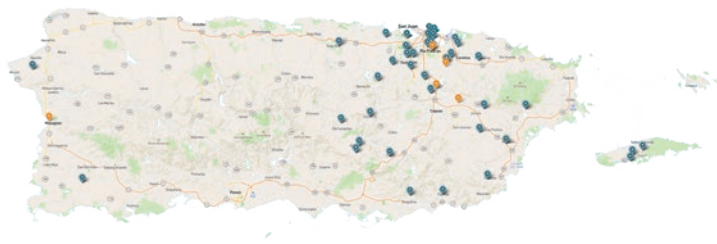
SH: The decision, itself, was a challenge to talk about and plan for as we kept 38 staff members in the loop and a volunteer board of seven members. Working all summer to prepare for the hopeful eventuality of opening in-person was time-consuming and good work. Zoom calls, webinars, conference calls, always waiting to find THE ANSWER. It never came. Staffing two models is a challenge. Answering the same questions about COVID is a challenge. Just being so much more attentive to cleaning and disinfecting, making sure everyone is masked and washing hands, and adults all have new protocols and procedures to guide students through like lunch in the classroom and a lot of different techniques to keep cohorts together and separate from other cohorts.

MP: What do you expect for later in the year?

SH: We expect on one hand that we will have to follow the local Health Department guidelines and the geographic district for the decision to switch to At Home Learning for All or Hybrid Learning for All. However, I personally believe that with the mask-wearing, hand-washing, and social distancing, we might have one of the healthiest fall/winters we have seen since opening 15 years ago. Seriously, our local COVID stats are really good and the fresh Colorado air, our outdoor learning spaces, and our increased cleaning could be the variables in this experiment that allow us to continue on with the current and best model of Face to Face learning.

Sonya Hemmen is Head of School at Ross Montessori School.

Puerto Rico update



BY **KATHERINE MIRANDA**

Los casos de COVID se disparan en Puerto Rico a medida que la pandemia continúa paralizando el Departamento de Educación (DE). La agencia, que ya enfrentaba problemas burocráticos y una severa falta de recursos, no ha logrado garantizar las condiciones necesarias para proveer una educación a distancia exitosa desde que reiniciaron las clases el 17 de agosto. La red de escuelas públicas Montessori, que cuenta con 50 escuelas encabezadas por la organización sin fines de lucro *Instituto Nueva Escuela* (INE), se ha movilizado para atender las necesidades de sus estudiantes, maestros y comunidades escolares, entre ellas la seguridad alimentaria y la distribución de materiales.

Sin embargo, el futuro de este movimiento con más de 30 años de trayectoria en Puerto Rico sigue en juego. Aunque una ley de 2018 estableció la creación de la Secretaría Auxiliar de Educación Montessori adscrita al Departamento de Educación, la aprobación de un reglamento requerido para su implementación dentro de la agencia está paralizada. La versión del reglamento propuesta por el DE fue rechazada por el grupo comunitario Montessori para todos, que elaboró su propia versión para asegurar la autonomía académica y administrativa necesaria para que el proyecto sea viable.

El grupo presionó exitosamente a la gobernadora Wanda Vázquez para que ordenara al secretario de Educación retirar el reglamento propuesto y buscar el visto bueno de la comunidad. Sin embargo, ante el inminente cambio de gobierno en enero, debido a la derrota de Vázquez en las primarias, queda por ver cómo procederá el DE con el reglamento. Los candidatos a la gobernación de todos los partidos políticos han expresado su apoyo al movimiento público Montessori, por lo que esperamos tener noticias más concretas y positivas después de las elecciones.

COVID cases are soaring in Puerto Rico as the pandemic continues to cripple an already under-resourced and bureaucratic Department of Education (DE) that is largely failing to ensure conditions for successful distance learning, which began on August 17. The public Montessori network, which consists of 50 schools and is anchored by the non-profit organization *Instituto Nueva Escuela* (INE), has mobilized to meet a range of student, teacher and school needs, including food security and material distribution.

The 30-year old movement's long-term stability nevertheless remains compromised. A 2018 law that enshrined a Montessori Secretariat within the DE has still not been operationalized, as the passing of a bylaw necessary to establish the specific processes for the Secretariat within the agency is at a standstill. The DE's proposed version was rejected by the community group Montessori para todos, which has drafted its own version to ensure the levels of academic and administrative autonomy necessary for the project's viability.

The group successfully lobbied Governor Wanda Vázquez to order the Secretary of Education to withdraw the proposed bylaw and seek community buy-in. But an administration change is imminent in January, as Vázquez lost primary elections, and it therefore remains to be seen how the DE will proceed with the bylaw. Gubernatorial candidates from all political parties have expressed support of the public Montessori movement, and there will hopefully be more concrete and triumphant news to report after elections.

Katherine Miranda has worked in education for over fifteen years, including teaching at the middle school, undergraduate, and graduate levels, and designing and implementing professional development programs.

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Cradle to career in Logan Heights

A new program hopes to transform a historic neighborhood



BY **DAVID AYER**

An ambitious new public Montessori school launched in San Diego this year, opening its doors on August 31st, Maria Montessori's 150th birthday. Logan Memorial Education Complex will be a comprehensive "pre-natal through high school" program, ultimately serving up to 900 children through their public education trajectory. I spoke with the Program Director of the campus, Nicola Labas, and Strategy and Instructional Support Officers Adriana Chavarín-López and Michael Veá about the program and how it came to be.

Logan Heights is one of San Diego's oldest neighborhoods, named for

Congressman John Logan in the 1880s because of his plans for a transcontinental railroad ending there. The railroad never arrived, but the name stuck, although "Heights" is a bit of a false promise as well—the local elevation tops out at around 100', and the area lies in the shadow of several neighborhoods with "Hill" in their names.

After 1910, refugees from the Mexican Revolution flowed into the neighborhood, and part of the area became known as Barrio Logan, later home to Chicano Park, the location of the country's largest collection of outdoor murals and a site of deep cultural significance to the Chicano movement. The population is predominantly Mexican in origin and culture—31% are not U.S. citizens, and of these more than 90% are Mexican.

Given these demographics, and the written and unwritten segregation rules (primarily aimed at Black families, but affecting Mexicans as well) that have shaped south central San Diego, it's not surprising that there was an appetite for school improvement in the area. "Just like in other big cities, there's been a



Architectural rendering of the Logan Memorial Education Complex

historical situation in which marginalized communities attend schools with low academic outcomes. The district really wanted to change that trajectory," Chavarín-López said.

Voter-approved bonds in 2008 and 2012 provided funding for a bold vision in 2015. Two existing schools, Memorial Prep for Scholars and Athletes (a 6-8 middle school) and Logan K-8, nearly adjacent on a 20-acre parcel, would be combined into a new middle and high school. Memorial Prep had been identified as racially isolated and substandard since 1977, and had been restructured three times. This was "just the latest in a decades-long effort to address issues at the school," according to a 2015 article in the Voice of San Diego.

By 2017, the vision had expanded to a full "TK-12", or "cradle-to-career" program. (TK refers to Transitional Kindergarten, a year before kindergarten which may or may not count as preschool.) During the planning phase over the last two years, the district settled on two choices for a guiding education model—International Baccalaureate (IB), for its reputation and rigor; and Montessori, for its whole-child, developmental approach. These models were then presented to the community.

The concept of a transformational model appealed to local families who would attend the school, as the desire to bring a new and successful model to the area was very strong. The "cradle to career" approach was already settled, and with both these ideas, according to Labas, "Montessori kept coming to the forefront." In the end, to summarize a long process very briefly, Montessori was chosen as the pedagogical model.

With that guiding principle, the leadership and design team for Logan has partnered with the Montessori Institute of San Diego, the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, and First Five California (a powerful state commission funded by tobacco taxes to improve the lives of California's children) to plan a comprehensive, truly cradle-to-career Montessori experience for 900 children, mostly from the neighborhood. The school opened with five three-to-six classrooms serving about 100 children, five lower elementaries serving just first-graders, and third through eighth grade in conventional classrooms. Next year, the school will launch a Montessori zero-to-three program, or "nido", and the Montessori grades will replace conventional grades a year at a time until the whole school is Montessori. (This gives them four or five years to plan the middle school level, and seven or eight for the high school.)

Dr. Veá spoke passionately about the vision for Logan. "We thought deeply about what it really means to return to Montessori's vision to serve the working poor. This is a community for generations has largely been ignored and disenfranchised, with the majority living at or below the poverty line. The goal has always to get out, to get educated elsewhere. We're really living into Montessori's original mission, serving indigent mothers and families. That's what we're aiming to do 150 years later."

David Ayer is the Communications Director for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.




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Public Montessori resurgence in Cleveland

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public program, Tremont, happens to be on the west side, so Stonebrook represented an investment in parity and equity.

Stonebrook's planners believed they had tackled the two main issues around access to Montessori: location in the neighborhood to be served, and zero tuition. "We thought we had done what needed to be done." They opened their doors with a beautifully renovated building, fully-equipped class-

flourishing would emerge. But that didn't happen as quickly as expected, and the school began to ask why.

Several reasons emerged. New kindergartners without Montessori proved harder to integrate into children's house classrooms than expected. Also, budget requirements and responsiveness to the urban community (such as children starting school at age five, high mobility, etc.) made it necessary to add children at that level every year, so the classes never really got settled. Children from those classes continued to advance into, and

development on trauma-informed practices, and supporting children whose normal executive function development had been slowed or stalled. Montessori anticipates that these skills develop over time and aren't all present at the beginning in every child. "But it was a matter of scale and a matter of quantity—if you have just a few children—it was just the numbers—so many and so much!"

The school realized that while one teacher or another might have the skills needed for a challenge, a system-wide approach was needed for supporting and managing "behavior"—really a whole domain of learning and development. "We expected them to be further along than they were." The school needed to scale up for those needs and make it a part of the whole environment.

I asked Miller if the school, as a new charter, had more than its share of special needs or "behavior-challenged" children, but she said no. "The needs are high in all CMSD schools." If anything, Stonebrook had a *lower* percentage of IEPs than the district as a whole, but that was due to a conscious effort to resist over-identifying Black boys for SPED, and to redirect them to the Montessori environment. "Emotionally Disturbed" was seen as a particularly damning label, and a ticket to the school-to-prison pipeline. But what if a child doesn't have an "anger-management problem," but is coming to school legitimately angry?

Still, Stonebrook made it through its first year, with a lot of new learning, new decision-making, new structures, and new adaptations. It might have been rough, but it was easy to chalk it up to new beginnings and hard lessons. But the problems didn't go away in the second and third years, and "in the process of working to solve them, we con-



Stonebrook Montessori School

A model where children could move around, maybe even work in the garden—that was attractive

rooms, and trained teachers for three primaries and two lower elementaries enrolled through second grade. The school needed to start big to make the budget work, since the law allowing three- and four-year-olds did not actually provide funding for those children. So those costs had to be absorbed into the school's general budget.

New charter schools and "schools of choice" have a tendency to attract families who aren't happy with their current schools and children who aren't successful there. And Montessori wasn't necessarily a familiar or even attractive model for the neighborhood's families. But Miller herself worked hard and with deep commitment to be part of the community, showing up at festivals, farmers markets, and churches, involved and meeting people and talking about Montessori. What families who came to the school had in common was not so much that their children weren't successful in their schools, but that they weren't happy there—"they didn't like the way school worked." A model where teachers really understood children's developmental needs, where children could move around, and maybe even work in the garden—that was attractive. And the ones who did know about Montessori were thrilled to have a free option.

Miller knew that the school was opening big, serving children without prior Montessori experience, which can create challenges for new schools. She believed that after a period of adjustment, children would settle in, and Montessori

in some cases disrupt, the lower elementaries. In the last year of the program, the school experimented with a separate transition class for new five-year-olds, and that was surprisingly successful—the other primaries flourished, and the kindergarten-only "transition" class was better able to adapt to Montessori. Unfortunately the pandemic interrupted the experiment, and the school is not able to see the full effect.

Special needs students presented an additional challenge. Stonebrook launched with intention to be a "full inclusion" school, and in retrospect the school was "naïve" about what would be needed to prepare adults to fully support inclusive classrooms. The range of special needs far exceeded anything the mostly private-sector staff had experienced. "There was a huge learning curve." A Montessori-trained "inclusion facilitator" role developed on in the second year, working with a "Montessori-informed" interventionist, and now one of the interventionists herself is Montessori trained, but these adjustments took time and classroom teachers are still adapting their practices to support inclusion.

A third area where Stonebrook staff had to learn, adapt, and understand was what is often termed "behavior", but which they came to understand as self-regulation and the development of executive function. They knew they were working with a community which experienced ongoing trauma and toxic stress, so they did a lot of professional

started in second grade) took the test, and they didn't do all that well, giving the school baseline data. In year three, scores stayed low (again, for children with just one two years in the program) and the school knew it had a serious literacy problem. Interestingly, years of exposure to Montessori seemed to matter less than exposure at three years old (younger children were tested as well). This year, testing was suspended, so the school was not able to further support the trend suggested by the data.

Going into year four, the school was on a school improvement plan, and a literacy consultant was hired, who worked to build capacity in the teachers for deeper understanding of literacy development. This allowed the school to focus not just on technical skills such as decoding, but on background knowledge, rich oral language, and phonemic awareness. It also led to internal conversations around academic language versus home language, code-switching,

Trauma-informed support and culturally-responsive, healing-centered teaching, without a doubt

tinued to understand them better and additional factors/complexities came to bear," Miller said.

And external accountability measures began to come into play. Ohio has a high-stakes reading test for third-graders—if you don't pass, you don't move up. In year two, those children (who had

linguistic dominance, etc. Miller's hypothesis, which she is keen to pursue, is that English Language Learner (ELL) work might have some insights here. What if these children took an ELL assessment—might they not qualify for

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Public Montessori resurgence in Cleveland

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ELL support, because they are essentially non-native speakers of the dominant language? This obviously has ramifications and complications in lots of different directions, but Miller frames it in terms of inclusiveness and access for all children. “If what you’re hearing at home is not what you’re going to hear when you get to school, how are we addressing that?”

September 2019 was the beginning of year five for Stonebrook, still under the SIP but with the literacy coach and other resources in place for “peace literacy” and trauma-informed teaching. It was also time to renew the charter, which included site visits by external reviewers. Stonebrook was actively engaged in getting support, working with NCMPS and other partners. Fall reading scores were still not good, and the school did not expect a full five-year renewal, but with the improvement measures in place, they hoped for a two-year extension.

Instead, a new opportunity was presented by the district. A neighboring

school, Michael R. White, was scheduled for closure because, although academic scores were increasing, enrollment was down. Stonebrook had the opposite problem: growing enrollment but low scores. What if the schools could be combined, keeping the neighborhood school open and offering a Montessori option to the east side, to give parity with Tremont on the other side of town?

“We thought we had done what needed to be done.”

That’s exactly what happened. To their credit, Miller said, “the district stepped up, to actualize the vision of an east side Montessori campus.” The two schools will merge, with the intention of offering more Montessori to more children. This year, the schools were to continue functioning separately for a planning year (although COVID-19 and distance learning have altered those plans somewhat). The schools have one principal,

operating separate programs, but in 2021, they will begin the consolidation into a full, “high-fidelity” Montessori campus.

And this has potential for growth within the district. Under the new arrangement, Stonebrook, the charter school, has closed, and Miller has taken on a new district-level role, supporting CMSD’s Montessori schools, of which

overlap with the Advisory Board) will support and guide all the Montessori schools in the district. Miller is excited and optimistic about the growth of public Montessori in Cleveland.

I asked Miller about reading scores and educational achievement generally in public Montessori. With good Montessori, children starting at three, and the appropriate level of trauma-informed care, could we make this work? “Without a doubt,” she said. Trauma-informed support and culturally-responsive, healing-centered teaching, without a doubt.”

And more Black teachers, I asked? “Yes ... and even that isn’t fail-safe. It’s about how teachers are educated, and about how they show up in the classroom, and about what they ask of children in the classroom. It’s about the way education happens.”

Jacqui Miller was Founding Principal of Stonebrook Montessori, and now serves as Director, Montessori Programming and Operations for Cleveland Metropolitan School District.



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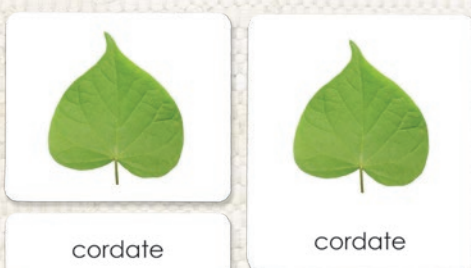


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Learning COVID lessons at Lee

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campus also had 30 minute one-on-one lessons and weekly check-ins with their teachers. Three and four year-olds started with a few “specials” classes—music, gardening, and a read-aloud—and added a once-per-week group lesson with their teachers about a month into the new arrangement.

The school also sent home weekly packets with simple activities (cutting, counting, letter recognition) for younger children and targeted academic practice for the elders. Generally, not much new content was introduced in the spring, although some children responded well enough to engage with new material. As a matter of policy, Kimboko explained, “We didn’t say, ‘you must move the children academically’—it was more, let’s keep them from losing anything if we can, and keep them engaged.” The school kept this up to the last week of May, ending two weeks early to allow for preparation for the fall.

Amidst the challenges of distance learning, a valuable new practice emerged for Lee. An outside coach at the Brookland campus began to meet weekly with leadership and student support staff to calibrate adaptations and procedures across ages three through third grade. Kimboko and the East End Student Support lead joined the meetings to expand coordination across the campuses, and these “academic team” conversations will continue, “pandemic or no pandemic.”

Lee ended the year in June thinking they were heading for a hybrid opening in the fall, with alternating groups of children in classrooms for a few days at a time. When they decided in May to move forward with full closures, it was time to re-orient. Kimboko knew they needed a plan to keep children moving academically—just “keeping them where they are” wasn’t going to cut it.

The Lee team, including Primary and Elementary teachers and coaches, got together over the summer to scope out the first 12 weeks of school. This will take the school through November, with the possibility of a few weeks in December to pilot the hybrid model. This level of planning has given parents an idea of what to expect, and allowed assistants to step up their role from the spring, being stronger partners and supports to be sure children are getting multiple touchpoints throughout the

week. It also pushed teachers to sit down and detail a more prescribed curriculum framework they can live with and implement, just for this particular time. “It’s a bit of herding cats—we don’t come to Montessori because we want to teach a scope and sequence. But we needed to make sure there was going to be consistency across classrooms around expectations.”

Testing was waived for the spring in DC public schools, which took away a major compliance requirement. For the 20-21 school year, though, there are academic expectations. “We’re going to benchmark,” Kimboko said. The school has dropped the DRA assessment for the time being, but they are keeping the NWEA-MAP as a benchmarking tool and to assess growth, and they will administer it at home, in the first six weeks, with parents’ support. The thinking is that the school will not be required to report results, but that they will be useful to give staff an idea of where students are and where they might need support. The school will also be using Raz-Kids, an online reading platform, to assess reading, and the DESSA, a social-emotional tool to identify children needing support in that area and to monitor progress throughout the year.

Family engagement has been crucial, and has grown and developed over the last six months. In the spring, families mostly needed emotional support—“you’re doing great, we’re all in this together.” As families settle in to the new normal, expectations are rising, and they are asking more detailed questions. Lee is working to provide clear and detailed expectations, and to work with a range of families with different levels of access to and engagement with the program. “We’re trying to be empathetic and supportive, and to give people a lot of grace.”

So what will the fall look like? Teachers are setting up their classrooms as “virtual studios,” with new, upgraded Chromebooks, Bluetooth headsets, and document cameras. They can broadcast lessons from their classrooms, or record them and share from home. Classes, using Google Meet, still begin with 30-minute whole group morning meetings, and at least two per week include a pre-planned social-emotional activity. Elementary teachers have grouped students into three or four ability groups, and set up a schedule where each group gets two math/geometry lessons and



Learning the lessons of 2020

two language lessons per week, while science and history stories will be given to the whole group before breaking into smaller assistant-led groups for follow-up work and support.

Google Classroom serves as “mission control” for schedules, lesson plans, follow-up work, and interactions with other remote learning tools. Follow-up work may be paper-based for elementary children (such as a math problem set or a writing prompt), and some activities are embedded in SeeSaw to allow for interactive work. The school has also adopted two asynchronous learning platforms for math and reading instruction platforms, Headsprout and STMath. In addition to Montessori lessons from teachers, children will have from 30 to 60 minutes a week on these platforms, while teachers will be able to assess their work and progress on the back end.

Family engagement, always important at any school, will be more critical than ever. Typically, Lee starts off with face-to-face “Montessori 101” sessions in the first few weeks of the year, and plans a Silent Journey and Discovery (where parents and caregivers can explore and interact with the Montessori materials and environment) once or twice a year. Obviously, things will have to be a little different now. In the week before school started, Lee offered one or more daily Family Orientation sessions, focusing on the pandemic adaptations. Sessions included a general introduction to the school, social-emotional learning support, special education, orientation to the learning apps and technology, and

guidance on preparing the home environment. In September, Lee began a series of weekly virtual parent education strands covering Montessori at home, social-emotional learning, special education, equity, and more. Sessions are live and also recorded for later viewing. On the first Friday of every month, both campuses have admin available to address questions and concerns parents have sent in. This follows on three similar events over the summer which have been well received by parents. Teachers are providing regular virtual office hours as well.

I asked Kimboko about her “roses and thorns”—the biggest challenge the school is experiencing in this season of big challenges, and the greatest opportunity. “I think the biggest challenge is sustainability,” she told me. “It is, all around, difficult to maintain.” Regardless of where you are, and what your school’s resources might be, this is going to be a long haul.

And the roses? “The rose of it is, this has forced us to step up our coaching and family engagement game.” Strong coaching around having a good team, and around communication with families has helped the school stay consistent, thoughtful, and intentional within each campus and across locations. “The crisis made it necessary but we’ve all learned how great it is. It’s going to strengthen us going forward.”

Rachel Kimboko is the Assistant Principal at the East End campus of Lee Public Montessori Charter School in Washington, D.C.

Holliday Montessori rises to the occasion

continued from page 3

children's lives. We did the best we could with what we had—now that we know better, we must do better by the children we're entrusted with serving."

On July 28, Kansas City Public Schools approved a plan to start school two weeks late, on September 8th, and to open with 100% online learning. Families can choose between the KC Virtual Academy, a technology-based, self-paced platform with video check-ins from teachers, and Distance Learning, which will involve live lessons and direct interaction with teachers. Families who choose the Virtual Academy must commit to the entire semester, as phased-in in-person learning will be designed around smaller class sizes.

At Holliday, distance learning will take the form of short small-group differentiated lessons daily—shorter periods for younger children, longer for elementary. While teachers are providing differentiated lessons, assistants will be available to assist students as needed with asynchronous tasks. This plays to Montessori's strengths, as the pedagogy is already structured around individual or small-group lessons and independent work, and differentiated instruction is built into the model.

The breakouts themselves, especially for younger children, might consist of a 5-10 minute "academic" presentation bookended by 5-10-minute social-emo-

For work with Montessori materials, there is a range of adaptations. Teachers have the option to present remotely from their classrooms, or to bring materials home. Each child will receive a binder prepared for their level, including some "reproducible" materials as well as assignments and follow-up work. The binders were produced over the summer by teachers generously volunteering their time. Bass-Barlow told me that school leaders "put it out there to the staff"—the importance of getting it right, even if that meant doing some unpaid work. "The longer we're not there in the building doing Montessori, the more our model is under threat." Teachers responded by divvying up areas of Montessori and KCPS' curriculum and working on separate sections to provide developmentally appropriate Montessori lessons and standards-aligned tasks for asynchronous work. "Montessori principles will be maintained during this time as teachers have thoughtfully thought about the 'why' behind what they do and adjusted the 'how' to carefully meet the needs of the children." State testing was waived for last spring, but the state may well reinstate it for 2020-21, and Bass-Barlow wants her students to be well-prepared.

The technology requirements have been challenging as well. The rollout was slow in the spring, with devices not reaching all families until late April. For the fall, the district will be providing

We need to use 'partner' as a verb. This time, the families are in control of the prepared environment

tional activities such as sound games or grace and courtesy lessons. Caregivers will be engaged as well when working with the younger children.

Classroom assistants will remain in the main session to answer questions and provide support, but children are not expected to be actively engaged with the screen for long periods of time. After a lunch break, the cycle repeats in the afternoon. The "assistant monitors the virtual classroom" model allows caregivers to arrange their childcare and work-from-home schedules to accommodate both family life and children's learning.

or has provided iPads for children P3 through 4th grade and laptops for 5th through 12th. "KCPS understands the importance of equitable practices and worked relentlessly to assure every child had the necessary technology to begin school."

To make this work, it was essential to work closely with families. "We often talk about education as a partnership," Bass-Barlow said. "This is a time where we need to use 'partner' as a verb. This time, the families are in control of the prepared environment." The school held a series of virtual "Town Hall" style meetings to really hear from families



Montessori by any means necessary?

what worked and what didn't, beyond just answers to surveys. Holliday also hosted and will continue to offer Caregivers as Partner Sessions (CAPS). CAPS are yet another manner in which families are engaged and empowered at Holliday. During these sessions, administrators and various other educators engage families by sharing meaningful nuggets in digestible bites. For example, one session was about preparing learning environments within the home.

A big part of this was collaborating with caregivers to prepare their home learning environments while respecting their privacy—not every family is ready to welcome the school into their living room. And they may not be able to run out and buy a \$100 table—but they might be able to get a \$5 floor table and some cushions from the bed to make a cozy reading corner.

How long will this last? Kansas City Public Schools has made a commitment to be guided by science and data, and won't re-open classrooms until they see a 14-day consecutive decline in new cases. As of August 26th, the 7-day statewide average hadn't been below 950 in more than a month, and Bass-Barlow doesn't expect to be back in school buildings before January. When the Distance Learning phase-in begins, the school envisions physically dividing classrooms in half and having the teacher and the assistant spend half their day with each group of children, switching at midday. It's not ideal from a Montessori perspective, she acknowledges—"But then, what is during a pandemic?"

I asked Bass-Barlow what she saw as the greatest challenges and opportunities emerging from these unprecedented

circumstances. The biggest challenge she sees is connecting with every child, family, and caregiver. "What do you do when you just can't reach a child?" she asks. The district has "wraparound" services including meal delivery, clinicians, social workers, etc. but even then, she's concerned about the families and children who may slip through the cracks. Would that include driving to a family's home, I asked? Indeed, it could. If a child misses three days in a row, those wraparound services will be deployed, which could entail a wellness check at home. The children with Individualized Education Plans will be at even greater risk of losing ground under distance or virtual learning, not just in Kansas City but nationwide.

The opportunity here are those family partnerships. Educators often say they want caregivers as partners, but now those partnerships are essential, as caregivers are in effect deputized as co-teachers and as gatekeepers for the prepared environment. "This is an opportunity for educators across the globe to truly, organically, partner with families, and to validate that we need them and value their expertise and their knowledge of their children. Does education need to go back exactly like it was? We have to seize this moment and maximize the opportunities. One of the biggest opportunities is to bring caregivers into true partnerships. That's one way to bridge the gaps nationwide."

KaLinda Bass-Barlow is the principal at Harold L. Holliday, Sr. Montessori, and serves on the AMI-USA Board of Directors.

Teacher training goes remote at MNW

Challenges, opportunities, and innovations



BY KATHRYN E. PICANCO

Change brings opportunity for innovation

Spring of 2020 brought change to all facets of our lives. COVID-19 restrictions necessitated all schools to adjust delivery models to ensure students were able to complete the semester, while also creating a plan for the future in a time of great uncertainty. Spring course adjustments also led to new processes and formats that have strengthened programs at Montessori Northwest (MNW), an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) training center in Portland, Oregon that prepares Montessori guides and assistants at the Assistants to Infancy, Primary and Elementary levels. Challenges, opportunities, and innovations all emerged from the need for change.

Remote learning

When school closures happened, continuing instruction and keeping in contact with students became the focus. For the past two years, Montessori Northwest had been using the Populi Learning Management System for many aspects of course delivery and management. Ultimately, a combination of Zoom and Populi proved to be the most viable for consistency and a comprehensive course delivery approach. Program Director Sarah Werner Andrews said, “Although all of the students and faculty were saddened to not be able to finish the programs in person with their cohorts, the transition to remote learning was generally quite smooth.”

Class time

Previously, classes had been full-day sessions with mornings reserved for lectures or presentations and the afternoons for supervised practice. In March, there were just a few required online synchronous course sessions weekly with the majority of time for independent work on album completion. When it became clear that classes would not be able to resume, a more consistent

schedule of synchronous class sessions was scheduled to complete lectures, practice lessons, and prepare for exams.

Supervised practice and practice teaching

School closures limited the amount of practice teaching opportunities and work with the materials, both in the Montessori classrooms students were placed and also in the training center. Some elementary students continued their placements and ongoing work in classrooms, often taking responsibility for developing and delivering content for children online. But most MNW students had to shift to practice at home or in small groups via Zoom. Primary faculty member Rochelle Holmberg noted that, “Students watched recordings of Montessori communities. These were followed up with personal reflections and group discussion about the adult’s role as a guide in the environment.” Director of Training for the Bay Area Primary course, Polli Soholt, developed creative alternative assignments related to practice teaching designed to support classroom implementation. These methods allowed students to continue refining their practice and understanding of instruction.

Exams

Written and oral exam preparation proceeded in the online environment through the class Zoom sessions and small group breakouts. In the academic year elementary program led by Elementary Director of Training Elise Huneke-Stone, students chose breakout rooms based on content to be discussed or practiced; faculty circulated to join conversations. Primary courses followed a similar format. With the training center closed for in-person practice, students found ways to remain connected to the materials and presentations as they prepared for exams, including using handmade materials prepared earlier in the course, printing out paper versions of materials, and visualization.

Oral and written exams were conducted online in an AMI approved format. Written exams were proctored on Zoom. Oral exams were done through scheduled synchronous sessions with the examiners and students. Overall, the online exam preparation and delivery was a success.

Professional development

Montessori Northwest also serves the broader community with professional development workshops. In-person sessions moved online for the spring and summer, in real-time or recorded sessions. Many participants in the online workshops expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate, which they previously would not have been able to join had they not been online. Michelle Becka, instructor of the two-week AMI Primary Orientation course said, “Because this course was online, it allowed for a much wider diversity of students than one would typically encounter on a two week course. For example, this course had five students from Africa, one from Chile, one from Spain and others from across Canada and the USA.” Participants in the online sessions were pleased with the richness of the discussions and diversity of perspectives provided.

From challenges to innovation

The challenges and successes from the spring led to new ways to offer courses. Huneke-Stone’s three-summer elementary program had piloted a modified blended format throughout the course with some work between summers offered online, which helped the students to transition to summer completely online. All four Primary and Elementary courses used a full-time blended format of morning synchronous sessions and breakouts for practice and assistance to ensure students completed the course and exams successfully. The three-summer Primary program led by Director of Training Becka had many students from Taiwan and China, and so review session and exams were conducted at different times and in translation to support all the students from the USA, Taiwan, and China.

A new Primary Blended Course led by Director of Training Andrews began over the summer. While the first block was intended to be in person in Portland, continuing COVID-19 restrictions necessitates placing the course online until spring. Becka’s academic year Primary course will also start online. Director of Training Nancy Lechner’s two-summer Assistants to Infancy course began online and is planning to be in-person for the second summer. The Bay Area academic year block format Assistants

to Infancy course is set to start online in January and will also include on-site face-to-face blocks.

While all of the current courses at Montessori Northwest are designed to be taught principally through in-person instruction, the spring and summer modifications demonstrated the viability of high-quality remote teaching and learning. All programs are holding synchronous instructor-led sessions for three hours each morning with the afternoons available for independent work and time to meet with the trainers. Presentations are often pre-recorded by the trainer in the classroom environment and reviewed together with the class, providing opportunities for the students to revisit the model lessons during their independent study and practice time and to allow more time for discussion. Course modifications also include the intentional and systematic integration and application of anti-bias anti-racist and diversity, equity and inclusion practices. Supervised practice will be integrated into the afternoon sessions as the courses continue. Although questions still remain regarding practice teaching with children, video analysis of classrooms are available for the observation assignments. For students that are enrolled in the MEd in Montessori program at Whitworth University, the additional coursework offered in partnership with the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector is available online.

The new remote learning formats have been well received by students. Enrollment is strong in all four new courses and increased significantly once it was announced the first portions of traditionally in-person classes were to be online. Overall, Montessori Northwest is positioned to provide not only high quality programs for the 2020-2021 year to meet COVID-19 restrictions, but to utilize these formats for years to come for greater access to training and in turn, greater access to Montessori.

Kathryn Picanco, M.Ed, Ed.D, is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Center for Gifted Education and Professional Development at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington.

Montessori inclusion: an interview

New anthology offers support for all learners

BY IRENE BAKER, ANN EPSTEIN,
ELIZABETH SLADE, AND
KEITH WHITESCARVER

This interview was first published on MontessoriServices.com in their Ideas and Insights section (montessoriservices.com/ideas-insights/montessori-inclusion-an-interview). It has been edited for length and clarity.

Montessori Inclusion: Strategies and Stories of Support for Learners with Exceptionalities is a collaborative anthology featuring the voices of 20 distinguished contributors, offering a roadmap for accommodating children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. Irene Baker, a veteran Montessori teacher, consultant, and teacher trainer, interviewed three Montessorians who have been instrumental in advocating for children with exceptionalities: the editor of the book, Ann Epstein, a Montessori teacher educator for nearly 40 years; Elizabeth Slade, the founding coach of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS), recently a founder of Public Montessori in Action; and Keith Whitescarver, who along with his wife, Jackie Cossentino, cofounded NCMPS.

The book is dedicated to Jackie, who passed away in 2019. She firmly believed in the ethical mandate of Montessori classrooms to include children with special needs. Jackie said, “Too many children are labeled, isolated, and served in ways that impede rather than release their potential. And too many of those children are black, brown, and low income. Activating the best of Montessori education so that all of us can follow all of the children is an urgent need.”

Irene Baker: What was the impetus for this book?

Ann Epstein: We wanted to gather the most current information to assist Montessori teachers, administrators, and family members looking for ways to include and support kids with a wide range of exceptionalities.

IB: Are there particular chapters that would be most useful for new teachers?



AE: Yes, the first chapters do a wonderful job of bridging the world of special education and the world of Montessori, including the terminology.

Later chapters look at inclusive Montessori schools, including Raintree in Lawrence, Kansas, a Montessori program that was launched in the 1980s. There are miracles told in that chapter. Chapter 11 highlights the Elizabeth Academy, an inclusive Montessori School in Salt Lake City, discussing what worked, what the pitfalls were, and where they struggled. Both of those chapters include very practical take-aways for all teachers.

My chapter, “Montessori Teacher Supports for Children with Exceptionalities” focuses on supports for children struggling with academic and behavioral difficulties. I discuss

KW: Jackie and I came to Montessori through our child. We were astounded by the pedagogy and the impact Montessori was having on our child. Soon we were both devoting our professional lives to promoting Montessori education.

Elizabeth Slade: I found the Washington Montessori Institute in the phone book, joined the elementary teacher-training, and did my student teaching in public Montessori. When I met Jackie, our conversation wound around to our underserved children. I shared what we were doing in the Springfield, Massachusetts’s public Montessori schools and she was intrigued.

I was a very atypical learner and dyslexic. I would have thrived in a Montessori school. I have big connec-

Child Study is a way of thinking about children that involves a language of reverence with the child at the center

variations and extensions of lessons that can support kids who have trouble understanding sequence, or maybe can’t figure out associating letters with sounds. I also encourage teachers to help children struggling with behavioral difficulties to find new ways to fulfill their unmet needs, such as practicing alternative behaviors with a peer.

Keith Whitescarver: The book is thought-provoking for leaders handling special education at Montessori schools, particularly how to be fluent in both the language of traditional schools and the language of Montessori.

Discovering Montessori

IB: How did you get involved in Montessori education?

tions to those children who have so much potential, but a number of obstacles, not the least of which is often the educational system itself.

AE: I was fortunate to find Montessori early in my career. I was going to be a speech and language therapist but felt pulled towards a career that would allow me to work with the whole child, rather than just one part of their development. I completed my Montessori early childhood certification and my doctorate in early childhood special education.

Child Study

IB: How does Child Study, a Montessori early intervention program work?

ES: Child Study has three components: the family, the team (teachers by level),

and if needed, the transition to special education. Child Study is both a mind-set and a method. It’s a way of thinking about children that involves a language of reverence with the child at the center. The indirect aim of Child Study is about building professional development. It’s wonderful for novice teachers to learn from more experienced teachers on the team.

It begins in conversation with the family when there’s a concern. An action plan details what we can do at home and at school, built around the strengths and interests of the child—not what’s wrong with this child or how can we fix or make the child conform.

The team comes together weekly to ask questions, discuss data collection, and evaluate whether they’ve met the goals. This is a collaborative journey. If the child needs special education, we transition the child and family with dignity into the next level of services, where there’s more expertise to meet the needs of the child.

I’ve been in many schools implementing Child Study and I see things calming down immensely. What if we had a consistent way that we responded when there’s an upset, with a shared approach throughout the school or even throughout many schools?

KW: When done right, Child Study is effective in limiting the number of children identified as being in need of special education. For a public Montessori school this is a blessing and a curse. Critics say, “Well, of course, you’re doing great in assessment outcomes. You have cherry-picked students and don’t have the same percentage of children with special needs as those in traditional public schools.” But Montessori is good at addressing children’s individual needs at an early age and that’s why our percentage of children with special needs is lower!

IB: I loved the case study in Chapter 3 of Serena, the three-year-old who entered a Montessori school with few language skills, unable to focus, disturbing others. The team met and learned that Serena wore princess clothes, loved the cat, Arlene, from the Garfield cartoon, and was only interested in the Pink Tower. One team member realized that all three of those items were pink, including the cat! They created a series of Practical

Life activities using pink items that successfully engaged Serena's interest and focus. They also created high-interest language work around cats.

ES: Yes, it's amazing how attuned Montessori educators are to children, inspiring them towards their natural love of learning. Having the interests of children lead the way to a strong action plan is an important element of the process.

AE: Elizabeth, can you discuss the role of the coach in Child Study?

ES: The Montessori coach's role is in helping us stay on the constructivist end so that we don't so quickly devolve to sticker charts or other behavior modification, rather than getting at what's going on with the child. We want to be sure there's that healthy tension between the behaviorist and the constructivist approach to working with children experiencing challenges.

Virtual Learning

KW: Everything is virtual now; the learning is done at home. How do you involve parents in Child Study now?

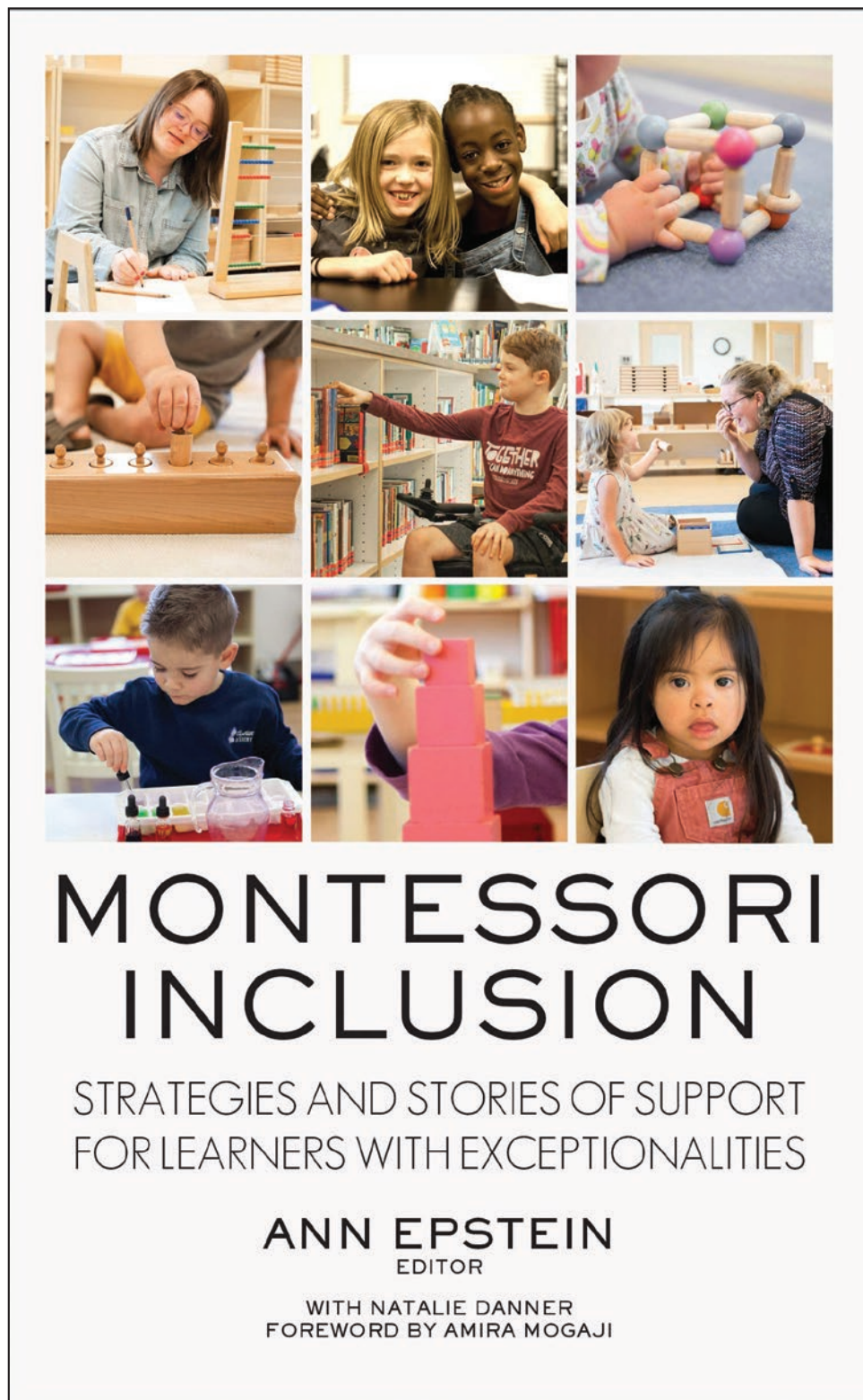
ES: COVID has asked us to develop things that we might keep after we return to school. One school started a weekly coffee hour with a Child Study lead, where parents could drop in and support each other. Parents ask how to encourage their child's focus and concentration, discussing strategies like delayed gratification, instead of punishments and rewards.

When home and school became the same place, we noticed a new appreciation by parents for the challenges and efforts at school which had been fairly invisible. The extra above-and-beyond that schools had been doing, the extra love to support children being their very best self is more appreciated now by families. This was fascinating and very unexpected.

AE: It's challenging not to be face-to-face, but there are opportunities too. We need to find out what kind of assistance families need. A lot of that is based on communication and a feeling of "I got you. We are in sync here."

Serving Diverse Communities

IB: A theme throughout the book, including the chapter, "Trauma-Informed Montessori" addresses the impact on children of racism, prejudice, and



poverty. How is the Montessori community responding to these issues?

ES: A big part of the passion for me around public Montessori is that it's for everyone. It's wildly diverse. There's no picking and choosing who is and isn't in Montessori. One of the projects we're developing is a System of Justness. We use the word "just-ness" to capture the point of a just and fair experience for every person, rather than "justice" which brings to mind the criminal justice system.

We're working really hard on the Nautilus approach, to replace discipline policies, police presence, and the over-identification of black and brown

children for suspension. The number of minutes that those children are out of class, compared to their white peers, is unforgivable.

It's called Nautilus because at the center is the child's work and we're always looping back. Even if we take a few steps away, and it's a wider arc, still, it's right back to work, where children can focus and concentrate. Montessori education understands that normalization happens through work. When there's an upset we do our best to not have children leave the classroom, taking them away from their work, the very thing that will help them re-center.

KW: When I used to go to conferences and give talks, I was always amazed by the number of education reform types who talked about their own children being in Montessori schools, but how that approach wouldn't work for the black or brown children they were serving. This book could help open up their eyes.

There's a natural affinity with Montessori's larger picture of the cosmos, peace education, and the child's place in it, that should lead Montessorians to take a leadership role in social justice and to examine widely-held assumptions, both within the community and within their own schools.

Montessori and Special Education

IB: What can Montessorians learn from special education teachers?

ES: Special educators are expert data collectors and Montessorians are not. I've seen wonderful collaborations where Montessorians learn tips and tricks from special educators for how to write SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely) goals and how to collect data to support those goals.

KW: What I find really exciting is when it goes in the other direction: the traditional special educator who picks up ideas from the Montessori approach. If that person is in a Montessori school long enough, it begins to rub off and hopefully filter out into the broader world.

AE: Montessorians and special educators have in common that every child is unique. How can we best support that uniqueness and figure out what's going to be successful for children who are struggling?

ES: I hope this book will be the beginning of shaping our thinking around Montessori classrooms as an inclusive place for all learners.

IB: Thank you. It's been an honor to talk with all of you.

Irene Baker, MEd, is a Montessori Educational Consultant at Montessori Services.

Equity developments in Montessori

A long-delayed conversation has spread through the Montessori world



BY DAVID AYER

The past six months have brought this country's deeply embedded structural racism and inequity to the top of our national conversation, even in competition with a global pandemic and a growing political crisis. The racial equity conversation has permeated the Montessori world as well, and there have been a wide range of equity and anti-bias, anti-racism statements and messages from schools, training programs, and Montessori organizations, as well as some substantive actions and developments.

AMI/USA



At the February Association Montessori International USA (AMI/USA) Refresher Course, a group of Montessorians of color experienced a racist incident and shared their experience, which sparked a response from AMI/USA and intense discussion on social media and in online forums. Since that time, AMI/USA has announced a number of steps, including:

- Formation of a Human Rights and Social Justice Committee to advise the AMI/USA Board
- Solicitation for a Human Rights and Social Justice Adviser
- A four-part Social Justice Webinar Series, free to attend, with suggested donations going to the Black Montessori Education Fund

IMC

In June, the International Montessori Council (IMC) and the Montessori Foundation began hosting a weekly, virtual Montessori Town Hall on the topic of "Standing Together—Our Role in Ending Systematic and Internal Racism," and these meetings have continued through September.



AMI/EAA

This summer, the AMI Elementary Alumni Association (AMI-EAA) contracted with NCMPS to provide a six-week online Culturally Responsive Montessori Environments course to its membership in lieu of its annual conference.



BMEF

In July, the Black Montessori Education Fund (BMEF) was launched "with a mission to increase engagement and support positive experiences of Black children and adults in Montessori education," according to co-founder Dr. Ayize Sabater. The fund has a goal of raising \$1 million to support scholarships for teacher training and children's school attendance, and for school start-ups. On August 31st, Montessorians all over the world celebrated Maria Montessori's 150th birthday with a virtual Montessori Everywhere event, which raised more than \$20,000 for the fund.



As of October, 2020, the BMEF has awarded nine grants totalling more than \$30,000.

AMS



In August, the American Montessori Society (AMS) was awarded a major two-year grant from the Wend Collective to support Montessori diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and announced a search for Senior Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and a Director of Anti-Bias, Anti-Racist Education. AMS also hosted *Black Lives Matter, a Virtual Montessori Rally*, with presentations from Black Montessorians across organizations, attended by 8,000 viewers.

NCMPS

NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

As we stated in our February letter in response to the Refresher Course events, "NCMPS joins in the acknowledgement of the role of unconscious bias, systemic racism and white supremacy in our lives, our work and our society. We stand with all who work to constructively interrogate and improve our community's practices. We commit to ongoing examination of structural racism, in our community and within our own organization."

NCMPS has undertaken ongoing whole-staff, professionally-led Race and Equity readings, conversations, and explorations, and has contracted with Embracing Equity for a four-month board and staff Anti-Bias, Anti-Racist training and workshop.

David Ayer is the Communications Director for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

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Montessori research update: COVID-19 edition

The pandemic has called for flexibility and patience

BY NCMPS STAFF

2019-2020 was supposed to be a banner year for Montessori research.

A \$3.3 million federally funded study led by Ann-Marie Faria and Karen Manship at the American Institutes for Research and Angeline Lillard at the University of Virginia was entering its second year, and the Brady Education Foundation's \$3 million research initiative had pivoted to a three-pronged project to examine the underlying issues of equity and access in Montessori.

The pandemic has obviously made it challenging to continue collecting data in schools. Dr. Lillard and the Brady Foundation have provided *MontessoriPublic* with updates on the state of these projects.

From Dr. Angeline Lillard:

Parents and districts frequently ask of Montessori: What is the evidence that this school program works? Does this program help address racial and income achievement gaps? And what changes to the school program are allowed that augment or at least do not interfere with any benefits? In July 2018, *MontessoriPublic* reported on our \$3.3 million federally funded Montessori research project ad-



Dr. Angeline Lillard

dress these issues using a rigorous research design, taking advantage of existing school lotteries. Work began that fall on recruiting schools, and the first round of data collection was completed in the fall of 2019.

The pandemic has thrown a wrench

in so much, including children's schooling, and therefore also in the study. With widespread school closures, few children are attending school in person. Flexibility is key during the pandemic, and so the study leads and the US Department of Education decided to shift gears and wait until children are back in Montessori classrooms to relaunch the study. The plan is to begin again with students and families who enroll in high-quality Montessori sites

The pandemic has thrown a wrench in so much, including children's schooling, and therefore also in these studies

across the country for the 21-22 school year. To do so, the study team will recruit a new cohort of children at many more schools in spring 2021, and follow them as long as funds are available—at least through spring of 2023. The study will still survey teachers, observe classrooms, and collect direct assessments with children. It will describe the range of public Montessori experiences, and document if and how attending a high-quality Montessori preschool changes children's academic and social-emotional outcomes. As the first major federally funded study of public Montessori, it promises to provide crucial information about Montessori preschool, if participation rates are sufficiently high.

Six public Montessori schools participated in the study this first year, and several others tried to participate but were unable to due to district restrictions or insufficient wait lists for their PK3 classes. A group of teachers filled out a survey showing the range of Montessori practices offered at these schools. All of the information gathered from this initial run will be very useful as the study goes into high gear post-COVID.

The study's biggest challenge has been getting enough Montessori schools to participate; large numbers of children are needed to accurately address the study's questions. To be successful in the project's mission to better understand whether Montessori and its different iterations impact child outcomes, they need over 650 participants who applied to a Montessori school for their 3-year-old year and were randomly selected to

attend or not, based on a lottery. The study team is excited to continue partnering with current schools and with additional schools that are needed for this important study. If your school qualifies (random lottery at age 3, and children on the waitlist) and you would like to participate, please contact Angeline Lillard (lillard@virginia.edu) or Karen Manship (kmanship@air.org) as soon as possible; planning will go into high gear early in 2021.

From the Brady Education Foundation:

In early 2020, the original design of the research initiative was revised to focus on three related topics led by teams from three separate institutions: Child Trends, the Riley Institute at Furman University, and the University of Kansas Center for Montessori Research.



Child Trends: The focus of this grant is to conduct a policy study investigating the extent to which access to public Pre-K Montessori programs is equitable. The timing of this work has been impacted by COVID because in addition to using administrative data sets to explore equity and access, the work includes gathering data from school administrators about their enrollment practices as well as from parents about their experiences concerning access to these programs. They have restarted data collection with school administrators (after halting last spring when the pandemic hit) but have not yet started the work with parents (at this time, it is not clear when it will be possible to pick up that aspect of the study). Concerning the school administrators, given everything going on right now, they have modified the survey to include questions concerning COVID (such as whether they are delivering

their program in person, on-line, or some type of hybrid approach) as well as whether they are considering making any changes to enrollment practices given the national focus of social justice and equity issues.

Riley Institute at Furman University: The focus of this study is to use administrative data sets from states and school districts to conduct a quasi-experimental study investigating the impact of Montessori in the public sector on BIPOC students and those in low-income families. Although the study does not involve data collection, it has been impacted by COVID as well as many states and districts are not accepting research applications at this time. However, they have been able to obtain a good amount of data and plan to conduct some analyses at the state and district levels as they wait until they are able to submit applications for the other data sets.

University of Kansas Center for Montessori Research: There are two main aims of this work: 1) to continue development of a measure of Montessori implementation in the classroom, and 2) hold a Montessori research retreat with an enhanced focus on equity. COVID

has impacted both of these as well. Concerning the measurement development, this has been put on hold for now since schools are either not in-person or are open but using many measures to mitigate transmission of the virus. The hope is that this work we be able to restart in the fall of 2021. Concerning the research retreat, given COVID, the retreat cannot take place in-person as originally planned. However, the good news is that they will instead hold a virtual conference on equity and justice issues in Montessori research in January 2021 hosted by the AREA Montessori SIG (special interest group), co-chaired by Dr. Angela Murray (University of Kansas, Center for Montessori Research) and Dr. Stephanie Currenton (Boston University).

Hands-on learning goes virtual

How did Montessori schools adapt to distance learning?



BY **KATIE BROWN, ANGELA MURRAY, AND PATRICIA BARTON**

As early as January of this year, “doing” Montessori online would have been unthinkable to many Montessorians. Hands-on learning; learning within and from a diverse, multi-age community; practical life—these hallmarks of the method simply don’t transfer to the screen. How could one begin to think about Montessori teaching and learning outside of the context of the prepared environment of the classroom? Even as SmartBoards and iPads have become ubiquitous in traditional classrooms around the country, Montessori schools, by and large, have remained steadfastly analog.

Then came the pandemic. As COVID-19 took hold in the US, schools and districts around the country were forced to close their doors. Closures that were originally scheduled to last days or weeks stretched into months. But even as school buildings remained shuttered, schools had a legal, and moral, obligation to educate children. Educators sprang into action to develop distance learning plans—including public Montessorians.

Watching these events unfold, researchers from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, the Center for Montessori Research at University of Kansas, and the University of Buffalo came together to document and try to understand this unprecedented translation of Montessori pedagogy to distance learning. The fundamental question driving our research was, “How are Montessori educators interpreting and applying Montessori principles during distance learning?”

To answer this question, we created a survey, using the Montessori Logic Model as a framework for the fundamental elements of Montessori. We asked participants both how they thought about principles like freedom and discipline, and what they actually did while schools were closed in the spring of 2020. Montessorians from all over the world responded, including 50

public Montessorians in 23 US states, as well as 5 from Canada.

Respondents were mostly self-identified white women over 35, located in medium- to large-sized cities. Most (92%) were classroom teachers; the rest (8%) were school leaders. Two-thirds work with elementary-aged children, and one-third work in early childhood. All reported engaging in distance learning during school closures this past spring.

What did distance learning look like for these folks? Many of them reported that they were largely left to develop practices for themselves; only a quarter of participants reported receiving “a great deal” or “a moderate amount” of guidance from their school’s administration about what strategies to employ. More than 20% reported receiving no guidance whatsoever. Respondents identified three top approaches:

- videoconference interactions with students
- electronic learning management systems such as Google Classroom
- directly providing families with digital devices and/or access to technology for learning.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these are all digital strategies. Only 15% of respondents provided physical materials or paper packets to families.

Nonetheless, respondents reported striving to achieve a balance between digital and analog activities—and for the most part, they seem to have succeeded. On average, participants report that children were spending about 50% of their distance learning time on screen-based activities and 50% on non-screen-based ones. As the research base around distance learning during this pandemic develops, it will be interesting to learn if Montessori practitioners were perhaps more committed to, and more successful in, achieving this balance compared to their counterparts in traditional schools.

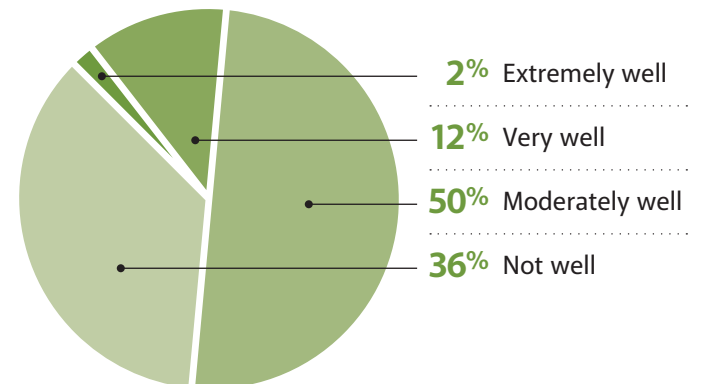
Montessorians generally have a reputation for ambivalence toward technology, so we were curious to know how this tech-heavy teaching experience was affecting their attitudes toward technology—especially given anecdotal reports of widespread login problems, unstable Internet connections, etc. A quarter of respondents said that the experience of distance learning has led them to a more favorable attitude toward the use of technology in Montessori classrooms, while 59% say their attitudes are unchanged.

Only 16% report a less favorable attitude toward technology in the classroom as a result of their distance learning experience. The long-term impacts of this experience on Montessorians’ relationship with technology, once the pandemic ends, remain to be seen.

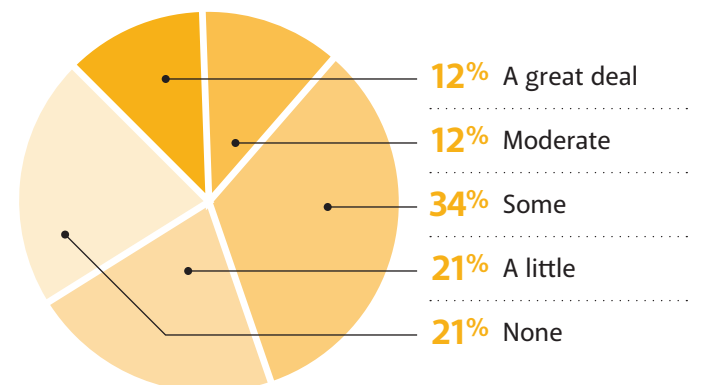
The individualization so integral to Montessori learning seems to have suffered somewhat with students learning from home. One-third of respondents distributed assignments and materials to students according to their grade level, while only 17% personalized these for individual students. Certainly, there are a number of very good reasons why public Montessorians may have struggled to personalize instruction effectively. Schools and teachers had very little time to plan or prepare for distance learning, and the pandemic took a psychological toll on children, families, and educators alike. Our survey suggests that many teachers received what they felt to be inadequate guidance and support from their leadership on how to implement distance learning. Schools may well be better prepared going into the fall term, with the benefit of experience from the spring and preparation time over the summer.

Participants indicated that preparing the environment for learning remained a key element of their role as a Montessori teacher, albeit one that looked different during distance learning. Many spoke

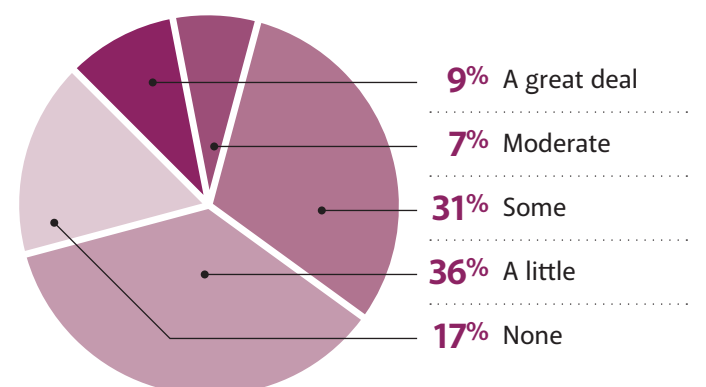
How well did you uphold Montessori principles and values during distance learning?



How much guidance did you get from administration for choosing distance learning strategies?



How much support did you get from administration for developing distance learning strategies?



to the need to thoughtfully prepare the digital environment for children by selecting appropriate and engaging activities that children could do at home, both online and off. Some described their learning management systems as virtual Montessori environments. It’s clear that teachers came to view families as partners in the work of preparing the environment; respondents spoke of the need to form closer and deeper relationships

with families in support of children, and the powerful learning that can take place as a result.

As one participant put it, “The parents, teachers, and children truly must be a team. We support the parents as well as the child. The better connection we have with the parents, the better we can work together to help the child.”

How are Montessori educators interpreting and applying Montessori principles during distance learning?

This included support for establishing routines and procedures for distance learning in the home, as well as support and encouragement for practical life activities. This collaboration may have lasting implications for home-school relationships, as 65% of participants indicated that they are now interested in engaging with families more in the future.

Ensuring equitable access to the learning environment was also part of this preparation. In some cases, this meant physically connecting with families to provide technological devices and wifi hotspots, or supporting them remotely through technical difficulties. Some teachers expressed frustration with the technological barriers they encountered in distance learning; many never expected to find themselves in the role of “tech support,” and others struggled to learn the ropes of the various learning management systems and digital tools they employed.

When teaching from home, teachers indicated they also thought about preparing their own workspace. One respondent described the process of “prepar[ing] a peaceful, uncluttered space” to video lessons from home. Others described the process of “staging” for both live and recorded video presentations, making sure they had adequate lighting, all necessary materials, and the proper camera angle to provide a clear view of the lesson. These considerations reflect the traditional Montessori attendance to precision, clarity, and beauty.

Finally, teachers thought about nurturing the social-emotional connections with and among students as part of creating an environment conducive to learning. One-fifth of participants reported that they met one-on-one with each child regularly. The vast majority (80%) felt that they were able to create a positive emotional climate for learning

in the virtual environment.

Several respondents indicated that they came away from this experience with a newfound appreciation for the importance of the relationship between teacher and student. Teachers found creative ways to build community in classrooms, including virtual social time, such as having lunch to-

gether over Zoom and online circle time. Some reported explicitly teaching techniques for stress management and self-care, recognizing the need to care for the whole child. These responses reflect a desire to honor the constructivist roots of Montessori by creating an environment where learning happens in relationship with others—albeit at a distance.

Overall, the Montessorians who participated in this survey seemed to feel pretty good about how they translated Montessori to distance learning. When asked, “How well do you feel you were able to uphold Montessori principles and values during distance learning?” 64% responded “moderately well” (50%), “very well” (12%), or “extremely well” (2%). This suggests that perhaps Montessori and distance learning are not as incompatible as previously thought. As one participant put it, “Montessori is more than our materials.”

The research team has plans to publish and present findings from this research project in its entirety in scholarly journals and conferences. A follow-up study is also planned for the fall.

Katie Brown is the Director of Professional Learning at NCMPS. Angela Murray is the Director for the KU Center for Montessori Research. Patricia Barton is the Coordinator of AZ Montessori Teacher Education Program, Director of Desert Shadows Montessori, and a doctoral student at University of Buffalo.

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