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Cradle to career in Logan Heights

A new program hopes to transform a historic neighborhood



BY **DAVID AYER**



Architectural rendering of the Logan Memorial Education Complex

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, ans Strategy and Instructional Support Officers Adriana Chavarín-López and Michael Vea 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 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

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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. Vea 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."

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