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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.

The Breakthrough plan

Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School, a Washington, DC

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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.



Learning happens everywhere

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 preassigned 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."

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