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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 caregivers 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 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 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 children's lives. We did the best we could with what we had—now that we know better, we must to 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-emotional 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

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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.

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.



Montessori by any means necessary?

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 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 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.

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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.

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