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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 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

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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 thorughout 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 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.



*Learning the lessons of 2020*

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."

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