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Public Montessori resurgence in Cleveland

One school is closing but a new model emerges



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



A new game in town in Cleveland

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 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 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

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classrooms, 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 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 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.



Stonebrook Montessori School

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 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

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further along than they were." The school needed to scale up for those needs and make it a part if 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?

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

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 continued 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 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, 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 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?"

"We thought we had done what needed to be done."

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?

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

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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 there are only two, so far: Stonebrook Montessori at Michael R. White, and Tremont. She will also, as a CMSD employee, have a position on a new advisory board tasked with facilitating the development of Montessori into a full-fledged "model" within the district—the district already offers Arts, Tech, and IB models, among others. The policies and practices developed by the District Design Team (which has some 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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