

Pandemic lessons from Kansas City

MontessoriPublic
checks back
in with
Holliday
Montessori



BY **DAVID AYER**
WITH **KALINDA BASS-BARLOW**

Last fall MontessoriPublic spoke with KaLinda Bass-Barlow, the principal at Harold L. Holliday, Sr. Montessori, a district school in Kansas City, Missouri, about the school's pandemic response in the spring and her plans for distance learning this fall (*Kansas City Montessori adapts*, MontessoriPublic Fall 2020). We were fortunate to catch back up with Bass-Barlow for a look at how things went.

MontessoriPublic: So, it's mid-December now—how are things going? Are you still in school or have you shut down for winter break?

Bass-Barlow: We're back in school; our students have continued with distance learning with the exception of our high needs students. Students with IEPs in self-contained classrooms had the option to come back to school.

MP: How did that come to pass, and how did it work out?

BB: Unfortunately, we were not able to sustain the option due to staffing issues. Subs are hard to come by during this season. Our teachers did the best they could.

MP: There's a piece in this issue of the paper about a teacher in Denver who

found that having a small group of higher needs students face to face was the best thing she'd ever done with them—was it like that for you?

BB: It depends on the community, and how much COVID is present—staffing and logistics-wise.

MP: Last time we spoke, we talked about your plans for the fall, with full class sessions, breakouts, and teacher-made binders of materials distributed to families. How did all that go in practice?

BB: In comparison to the spring, our services have improved! My staff is very resilient, “showing up and showing out” as I like to say. The binders are really paying off in terms what we are able to give children.

The biggest issue we're having is the children we're not able to connect with. It's a small population at Holliday, but across the district it's a larger sum. There are many variables. For example, families have to go to work, and they're not able to get their children connected.

MP: So what can you do about that?

BB: To resolve that, we're thinking outside of the box— For example, we're considering working with children during the evening hours. For a young child, it might be two 30-minute sessions per week. I have three staff members who have volunteered their time, so we're considering creating a schedule for next semester. All children need support, the caregivers need support, so we continuing to challenge ourselves by thinking outside the box to meet those needs

MP: Was there a demographic that was harder hit by these challenges?

BB: This is difficult for working families. If caregivers have multiple children in the household and they're balancing when they need to be on, that's an issue, but even more, those families have to go to work, and the flexibility isn't there for them to coordinate the demands of online school.

MP: Are you seeing differences in effectiveness with distance learning across the age levels?

BB: The interactions are better across the board, compared to the spring. Children are learning. Most interactions are engaging. The staff at Holliday are giving their all!

MP: How did the various software platforms work out?

BB: We have acclimated to Microsoft Teams and Seesaw. Zoom is not an option for instruction with students. Teachers crowdsourced a lot of lessons and activities for Seesaw, and everyone—children, families, and teachers—are getting more fluent with the different tools.

MP: Are you continuing with distance learning through the end of the year?

BB: We're anticipating a March return, contingent on vaccinations.

MP: That's great! This takes us to something I think we'll be talking about a lot over the next year—what will children need after this year to get back “on track”, whatever that means?

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BB: I think you're being generous saying just one year—I think we'll be feeling the impact of COVID for years to come. But I'm optimistic, as children are resilient.

Our district is working to become trauma-informed, and our board has approved accelerating that process. When children do return, we plan to focus on their social-emotional well-nesss in addition to academics. Of course, as Montessorians, we know that when we do that well, everything else falls into place. Therefore, we want to be proactive as a school and a staff to have the proper tools in place. And this applies to all homes—resourced and under-resourced. We're doing that now, offering "Caregivers as Partners" programs, one of which was on recognizing and responding to the signs of anxiety. Families have appreciated these types of sessions.

MP: We may see the effects in high school graduation rates twelve years out.

BB: Definitely, especially in urban districts, where we know some children will be impacted more than others. The longer we're out, the more tremendous the loss is for our children. With a child who was already a year "behind", now that's almost two years.

MP: So will you be jumping back into testing and test prep this year, or do you have waivers from the state?

BB: No, no waivers! As for spending a lot of time on prep, that's not something we would do or have ever done at Holliday. What we have been doing is being very intentional about interventions and exposing children to grade level content. Holliday is fortunate to have assistants with great experience and credentials, so we've been able to meet one-on-one with children who need it. In our RTI system we have



Face to face with counting work

Tier I, Tier II, Tier III but we're beyond that—we have a Tier IV now where we give very direct support remotely, one-on-one or in small groups.

Next year, we plan to start interventions in the fall. Prior to the COVID slide, those might have waited until spring. As a public Montessori school, we've figured out how to navigate state standards without taking away from the Montessori.

MP: What else are you thinking about for the fall? Are there "lessons learned" from this experience that will inform your work for the future?

BB: We will continue to honor Montessori principles as we did prior to COVID. One thing we have come to appreciate is how we've shared students. Doing so has allowed for shared responsibilities and ownership of student learning. Teams are working more collaboratively.

MP: So it validated the mixed-age grouping, but at the same time opened up some flexibility and brought more adults in contact with more children?

BB: Exactly.

MP: OK, one last thing—what can we do for teachers who have been through

this? You speak so highly of your staff—how can we all recognize them:

BB: I really hope that as a society, that one of the learnings that comes from this is respect for what educators do. We're not always respected or appreciated. Our work is often times taken for granted. Educators deserve to be respected and honored.

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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