

Erdkinder in public Montessori schools

How does Montessori's radical land-based model work in public settings?



BY **HANNAH EWERT-KROCKER**

Dr. Montessori's vision for the prepared environment for adolescents was a farm on which the *erdkinder* (children of the earth), as she called them, would live together, care for themselves, their community, and the land, and run income-generating businesses. The land, residence, and micro-economy provide integrated opportunities to learn about all areas of human knowledge: science, math, history, reading and writing, language, and even division of labor and collaboration between human groups.

The work of the physical prepared environment necessitates deep understanding in all these traditional subject areas. In other words, students need to know their historical context, understand natural and human-made systems (including mathematical ones), and global languages in order to communicate with international communities. Dr. Montessori called for, above all else, sharing with adolescents the understanding that human beings and the natural world are interdependent, that we must utilize and critically evaluate our technology, and that each individual being has a valuable contribution to make.

As with so much of Montessori's work, her assessment of the needs and characteristics of adolescents could not be more relevant in our contemporary, interconnected world and, in many ways, could not be further from our existing public education standards



Erdkinder—children of the soil

and systems. Despite the challenges present in marrying Montessori pedagogy and the American approach to public education, there are innovative public schools working to implement a land-based approach to adolescent education, according to the vision Dr. Montessori described in the "Appendices" of *From Childhood to Adolescence*.

Compass Montessori School is a PreK-12 charter program in Golden, Colorado founded over 20 years ago. Compass' Farm School (grades 7-9) has a working farm that includes a productive vegetable garden and animals including chickens, alpacas, goats, and an aquaponics system. The operation of the farm is wrapped into the study of biology, marketing, data collection and analysis, and product and cost analysis for produce. The adolescents at Compass also operate an active "microeconomy" (small business) both collaboratively and independently as Student Business Operators. Products in the microeconomy include vegetables, cut flowers, and honey for the Farm Stand and the Farm School CSA, canned goods (pickles, jams, and relishes), baked goods (breads, cookies, granola,

and dog biscuits) and handmade craft items (jewelry, soaps, candles, wreaths, greeting cards, t-shirts, etc.).

Compass has a unique approach to guiding students in an understanding of their participation in the economy: students perform "shift work" in the income-generating sale of goods. These shifts are recorded over the course of their three years in the program and paid out as wages to 9th year students to fund school-related travel opportunities, Valorization Projects, and to purchase products for sale through the Farm School Microeconomy.

Also in Colorado, **Denver Montessori Junior/Senior High School (DMHS)** is an innovation school in Denver Public Schools (DPS) whose population, much like many DPS schools, is primarily composed of students of color. DMHS has two programs: a Farm School (grades 7-9) and a High School (grades 10-12). DMHS is in central Denver and operates a small, flourishing urban farm that includes raised beds for vegetables, cut flowers, and herbs and chickens, angora rabbits,

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and an aquaponics system.

Students in the Farm School rotate through a series of four Science Occupations throughout the course of the school year, each of which focuses on a different area of middle school science: Horticulture (botany and ecology), Animals (biology), Culinary (chemistry), and Structures (physics). Students take on small group projects in each occupation, depending on the needs of the farm and community and student interest. In the Animals Occupation, for example, some students might plan

6-day, 100+-mile, end-of-year bike and camping trip. The students also run a robust theater program and operate the business of ticket and concessions sales.

In all three programs, students integrate chores and care of the environment into daily life. Students also participate in studies that fit into more traditional discipline categories, such as math and foreign language. Students also experience opportunities for self-expression in the study of History and Humanities and in the visual and

like Colorado and Minnesota.

Despite the challenges, these three programs are leading the way in demonstrating that, with some creative structuring and innovative thinking, the *erdkinder* design is possible in the public sector, and it is growing. With the newly approved AMI diploma at the adolescent level and the first cohorts of trained teachers completing the diploma course in 2022, new schools are being envisioned in several states across the country. With the commitment to expanding Montessori into adolescence growing and the establishment of training centers in multiple states, we can expect more collaboration and connection between programs, regional conferences, and increasing professional development opportunities for Montessori guides.

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the repair or upgrade of the chicken coop, another group researches and develops a proposal to purchase goats, while another group cares for the rabbit and learns to spin wool. Students in the Culinary Occupation study the chemistry of food or light and waves, all while assisting in the kitchen to prepare lunch for the entire school community and generating their own Culinary projects, such as a solar dehydrator or a Chef's Table competition. Each Occupation focuses on the same sub-discipline of science from year-to-year but the specific topics and standards change, allowing for students to experience a broad range of middle school science lessons.

Great River School, a charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota, also operates a small urban farm with gardens, an orchard, goats, chickens, and fish, integrating the study of traditional disciplines into Occupations. One of the Occupations at Great River focuses on the school's active bicycle shop, which is a significant contributor to the school's Microeconomy. The bike shop provides tune-ups and repairs and raises \$4,000 annually to help fund a

performing arts. Given the interconnected nature of our world, studies in the *erdkinder* program design are as integrated as possible. When studying history, for example, students must also study climate and the environment, economics, language, and scientific and technological innovation.

Public Montessori adolescent programs, regardless of innovation or charter status, face a number of challenges. As publicly funded institutions, public Montessori middle and high schools are required to administer state-required standardized testing on at least an annual basis. Montessori curriculum at the adolescent level, like in other planes of development, is not linear but rather spirals over the course of a 3-year cycle and, as a result, students may not engage in learning or integrating standards in the linear way that these standardized tests measure. Additionally, public funding in many states presents structural challenges. Maintaining student teacher ratios that fully meet the needs of adolescents in a project-based, community-oriented program is challenging, particularly in states where per pupil funding is low,

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