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# Montessori on the move in Denver

## Putting Montessori on wheels and sowing seeds



BY **MONTESSORIPUBLIC** WITH **EMILY MADISON** AND **TATENDA BLESSING-MUCHIRIRI**

Last fall, *MontessoriPublic* spoke with Tatenda Blessing-Muchiriri and Emily Madison about a new PreK program at Stedman Elementary in Denver ("Adding Montessori primary to a District K-5", *MontessoriPublic*, October 2021). Since then, the two have been putting together a pair of linked initiatives focused on expanding awareness of, and access to, public Montessori early childhood programs in the Denver area. We caught up with them again to hear more about their work.

**MontessoriPublic:** So what's happening in Denver?

**Tatenda Blessing-Muchiriri:** What's happening in Denver? It's a good question! We're on fire! Where to start? So last fall, as you know, we launched the Montessori primary classroom at Stedman Elementary.

**MP:** How's that going?

**TBM:** It's going great! The kids are happy, the families are happy, and other teachers in the building are noticing our kids in the hall, seeing them rolling rugs and counting beads, and wanting to know more.

**MP:** And the new projects?




*Montessori comes to you*

**TBM:** It really goes back to the year before last, when Emily and I were piloting and planning for the classroom at Stedman. We were offering weekend classes on Montessori for families, to help them learn about Montessori and what to expect, and we had some Montessori materials in storage that we would push around on a cart. One day we were pushing the trolley back to the closet and we said to each other, this is Montessori on Wheels! That's where the name and the idea came from.

Then last summer, during an Iterative Space Residency Fellowship with Embark Education here in Colorado, I shared and developed the idea for a "mobile Montessori" outreach program. What would it look like if we could bring Montessori to the people rather than bringing the people to Montessori? Montessori on Wheels, the non-profit, was born.

**Emily Madison:** My project, **Montessori Collective**, also came out of our experience at Stedman. Getting Montessori PreK started there was so popular and successful that I thought about doing the same thing but on a larger scale. Montessori Collective was formed to help public schools with existing Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms convert them to Montessori classrooms by removing barriers such as funding for training,

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materials, and ongoing professional development. Our goal is to partner with schools that are already doing ECE, but are interested in doing it differently. Our focus is underserved communities as measured by more than 50% BIPOC population and/or more than 50% Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) eligible—that covers most of Denver Public Schools anyway, which is where we will be concentrating.

**MP:** How will that work?

**EM:** We're working with schools that have expressed interest, one classroom at a time, and making a lot of time and space for community input and feedback. If the response is anything like it's been for Tatenda's classroom, they're going to want more Montessori! So the idea is to start with one classroom and expand from there, if that's what families want.

The funding model is for Montessori Collective to offer $25,000 to a school to help with materials and training, to reduce the barrier of that initial investment.

**MP:** Denver has some public Montessori ECE already, correct?

**EM:** Yes, the four DPS public Montessori programs have primary that starts at three years old. But of course those are most available to families who live in those areas or who can manage transportation.

**TBM:** This makes us ask, "what does access and equity really mean?" In DPS and at Stedman, Montessori is a "choice" *[Ed: DPS is an "all-choice" district]*, allowing all families the choice of a school if they lottery in and if they can drive to it. But not all parents have access to transportation, or can get their kids to a distant school on time. Montessori on Wheels asks, "what if we brought the Montessori to them?"

Emily has really helped bring access into the design process. Right now, our schools are localized to neighborhoods, and we haven't really expanded Montessori beyond brick-and-mortar school locations. What if we could bring Montessori to families in their communities, in their homes, in their churches, in their local schools? Part



of the program is targeted intervention through Montessori experience. We acknowledge that opening a Montessori classroom can be expensive, and not all schools can afford it. But with Montessori on Wheels, we can come and do some math, some language, something Montessori-related. It gives some exposure to how we think of education and learning through the Montessori method.

**MP:** So children will benefit, but so will families, and they might see Montessori and like it and advocate for it themselves?

**TBM:** Emily really helped us think about parents and families, and to bring data from Stedman into the design process. The children in my class at Stedman are involved in Montessori, of course, but not so much the parents. We have to think about what this means? So how can we involve parents? We need to focus on partnership, which increases engagement. The proper way to think about parent engagement is through partnership, as we educate parents. We want then to understand Montessori practice so they can participate, and understand their role as their child's first teacher.

**MP:** So there's a bus...

**TBM:** Yes, there's a bus! When I was doing the fellowship, and sharing the big idea of sharing Montessori with families, I was thinking about a school. There is a mobile mental health organization that brings counseling and services to high schools in DPS, and they had a bus. But the bus didn't offer them the privacy they needed for counseling, so they were excited to give it to us to provide a learning space as we bring Montessori to DPS and Aurora communities.

The focus is not a classroom on a bus, but a space for kids to have fun, to dream of what education could look like—and then we as Montessorians can show them some Montessori. The bus is named Rungano, a Shona word meaning "our stories", because we are using the power of storytelling to bring our stories together—ours as Montessori educators, theirs as parents—to empower parents to be advocates for their children.

**MP:** Has the bus been out yet?

**TBM:** Not yet—we've engaged an architect to design the bus as a learning space, and we're working with a funder to help us build it out, so we hope to have the exterior done by this summer and have the interior done for fall to move out into communities and schools.

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**EM:** We're hoping to be in DPS this summer. The district is revising its summer school program to offer more hands on, "STEM-focused" enrichment, and we are workings. The bus will make its first venture out this summer, visiting 15 sites twice each, overlapping the end of the school day so children can experience it and families can engage at dismissal.

**MP:** So—architect, funders, a contract with DPS—this is starting to sound serious!

**TBM:** Yes, when we met with DPS, they were very positive. And we've had good success talking to funders—I'd like to mention and thank the Black Montessori Education Fund, the Margulf Foundation, Moonshot EdVentures, and the JML Foundation in particular.

**MP:** Is this primary or elementary aged children?

**TBM:** These are "lower el" children—entering 1st through 3rd grade in September, so as young as six. We offer a space where they can have exposure to some Montessori materials, where we can observe their interests in a space where they have ownership of their own learning. What happens when they see sandpaper letters for example, or other materials different from what they've seen in their classrooms? We'll use the power of storytelling, collecting stories of what they think learning should look like. We won't just introduce Montessori right away, but learn about the children first, who they are, what they think about their learning. Then we can introduce Montessori in a way that's respectful and responsive to these kids, to their communities, and they can learn about Montessori on Wheels, and our story. And hopefully we can help them learn what they want and how they want.

**MP:** Are you two the staff? Do you have elementary experience in the mix? I'm thinking of the importance of storytelling for the elementary child.

**TBM:** We are the staff, yes, and we have a non-Montessori educator to bring in that perspective. And we will tap into student teachers from the Montessori Education Center of the Rockies (MECR)—they can do some of their practice teaching with us.

**MP:** How does family engagement work in the summer?

**TBM:** When they come to pick up. It's very intentional. In the summer, they get to know us and the program. Later they may want it in their schools. We're also working on a healing space for this 50%+ BIPOC, 50%+ FRL population, sharing this history of education in Denver, and in the US, and their stories of how this has affected them.

**MP:** So this prepares the soil, so to speak, for Montessori expansion?

**TBM:** Part of this is giving families access to the Montessori materials and the ideas behind them. Materials are very costly. How can we dissect and extract the elements of the materials and share that with parents, so they can access the ideas without buying a Pink Tower? Help them learn the principles so they can apply them at home.

**MP:** And then the Montessori Collective's work comes into play in the fall?

**EM:** If all the stars align and the funding comes through, the goal is to send four teachers to training this summer. So right now we're working on building partnerships with schools which have teachers who are willing to give up their summers, and are excited about Montessori.

**MP:** You have four schools lined up, that want to convert their ECE to Montessori?

**EM:** We have five right now! Well, the principals are excited—but they're not the ones who have to go to training all summer. But if everything comes through, the goal is four new classrooms opening in September.

**MP:** Four new Montessori primaries in DPS—that's a big deal!

**EM:** Yes! And the hope is to drive that demand for Montessori. Once they see it, they'll want more—like what happened with Tatenda's classroom. Had we gone to families and asked, "do you want Montessori?" they might have been lukewarm. But now that they've seen it and experienced their kids loving it, they love it too. So the idea is to share Montessori with families, hear from them what they want, and hopefully offer something they're attracted to.

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*Emily Madison is the founder of The Montessori Collective.*

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