

Wildflower and charter schools

The micro-school model is pollinating the charter space



BY **DAVID AYER**

MontessoriPublic has been following the Wildflower story since 2016, when the network of Montessori micro-schools comprised just ten programs, seven in Massachusetts and three in Puerto Rico. Today that has spread to 47 schools in 12 states plus the Commonwealth, and they have begun to branch out into the charter school world.

Wildflower schools are by design independent, shopfront, one-to-two-room schoolhouses mostly independent of a larger organization but at the same time part of a network that includes the national Wildflower Foundation as well as other local Wildflowers that may be in the community. “Each school is an independent entity but sees itself as a node in a network, with substantial freedom in school-level decision-making.” (wildflowerschools.org/how-we-work)

So how does that mesh with the charter model? Does each school apply for and operate its own charter? That sounds even more challenging than each school operating as its own small business—and yet, Wildflower has succeeded with that model. Or does one charter cover multiple schools—in which case, how is that different from a charter school with multiple sites, or a charter school network? How does Wildflower charter schools retain their trademark autonomy?

This spring, the Washington, DC



The Riverseed team

Public Charter School Board granted a 15-year approval to DC Wildflower Public Charter School, a planned network of up to six micro-schools serving 225 students throughout the district. The first school, the Riverseed School, opened this year in DC’s Ward 7, east of the Anacostia river, and plans to grow through 5th grade. We put these questions and more to Wildflower’s communications team and the Founding Executive Director of DC Wildflower PCS, Rachel Kimboko.

MontessoriPublic: I think I understand Wildflower schools, but how do Wildflower charters work?

Wildflower: Wildflower’s charter schools operate under the same principles (wildflowerschools.org/our-beliefs/#our-principles) as all Wildflower schools. Wildflower public charter schools expand access to Montessori by offering free programming for PK3-5 students.

MP: Who applies for and holds the charter—is it per school, or is there some kind of overarching structure?

WF: Each Wildflower charter includes a cluster of autonomous, yet interconnected small schools that implement

continues >

Wildflower’s distributed leadership and decision-making structures to work together and operate the charter.

Just like any other charter, a local founding board of community members applies for a charter. Wildflower works with these community members to build the application in alignment with Wildflower Principles and shared purpose. The independent nonprofit board holds the charter and makes a purposeful decision to partner with Wildflower and become part of the network.

MP: So how do the schools in the charter self-organize and maintain their autonomy? How is this different from one large school with six campuses?

WF: The conversation about who owns decisions is active important within a charter community. We value Teacher Leader autonomy and keeping decisions as close to the felt impact as possible. So Teacher Leaders will often ask, “Is this a site-based decision?” The presumed answer to this question is always, “yes.” However, in a charter environment, a lot of decisions really do impact multiple stakeholders and/or sites, and when that happens, the decision (or a portion of that decision) moves outside of the individual school site and becomes a “charter-wide” decision. Each charter uses a collaborative leadership structure to make decisions on cross-site issues ranging from shared services around budgeting to reporting to the authorizer and/or state.

MP: What happens when something’s not working? Let’s say one of the sites is struggling to be successful and meet its mission. The charter board is accountable to the state or the district. How are the sites accountable to the board?


WF: The beauty of the Wildflower model is that it’s self-correcting. If a site was not performing well, peer sites

would engage with that site before it showed up as an authorizer concern at contract renewal. This allows for a hyper-local focus on accountability to the charter. Accountability is distributed and exists at all levels of the organization. Within a school, Teacher Leaders are accountable to each other; across sites and with charter support staff, accountability exists to the terms of the charter and site performance, within the board - in alignment with the role of the board. While this has never occurred, a site could proactively close individually, or peer sites or the board could determine that a site must close if it isn’t meeting the terms of the charter or the community’s mission.

MP: It sounds like the Teacher Leaders in a Wildflower Charter have roles beyond their individual schools.

WF: Just as in our independent schools, Teacher Leadership is a combination of administrative leadership at the school site and leadership in the classroom as a teacher. We believe Teacher Leadership expands beyond the classroom but still includes this most critical space. In a charter setting, leadership extends to the charter community, where Teacher Leaders come together to determine the path of the charter and share in the decision-making of the full community, alongside charter organization staff who are needed to execute on this vision and be responsible stewards of public funds.

WF: In a Wildflower charter, Teacher Leaders are co-constructors of the systems and tools that will support them as they administer their individual school. With each decision, we consider together whether or not the proposed solution is a sustainable one for individual schools’ teams and the charter team. What we develop together is a robust set of roles and responsibilities that are necessary for a successful



Wildflower Schools

Founded: 2014
Schools: 47
Locations: 12 States and Puerto Rico (California, Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Puerto Rico)
Ages served:
 19% Pre-preschool (0-3)
 62% Preschool (3-6)
 17% Elementary school
 2% Secondary school
Charters:
 Minnesota—3 sites
 New York—2 sites + 1 planned for 2023
 DC—1 site + 5 planned
 Colorado—2 sites planned

school and network. Just as we would hope for the children we’ll teach, each Teacher Leader is bringing their own strengths and opportunities for growth so their leadership path will be different and grounded in the needs of the school.

MP: The DC Charter sounds bigger than what you might call a “micro-school”, with six campuses, some (such as Riverseed) planning to serve PK3 through 5th grade, and combined enrollment of 225. How do you square that with the microschool model?

continues >

WF: All the DC charter sites will remain small one or two room classrooms. Riverseed will never serve more than 60 students but will have a primary and elementary classroom. All sites together can serve up to 225 students embedded in communities across the city but that growth will happen slowly over the next four years and be driven by the Teacher Leaders in each distinct microschoool.

MP: What else is happening with Wildflower and charters? I understand there's work happening in Colorado.

WF: The Wildflower Colorado team is pursuing applications for two charters, in Grand Junction in western Colorado and in Aurora, just east of Denver. Grand Junction is in rural Mesa County, an area that currently has few Montessori options. Aurora, one of the largest suburbs of Denver and one of the most diverse communities in the country, has one existing public Montessori school. Both charters would include an interdependent network of Montessori micro-schools, each led by a partnership of two Teacher Leaders, supported by charter-wide staff, and co-designed by a local coalition of community partners and prospective families. The charters in both regions plan to open their first micro-school sites in August 2023 (three sites total,

two in Aurora and one in the Grand Valley). We will learn if the applications are approved in November 2022.

MP: And beyond?

WF: We have a charter in Minnesota with three sites and capacity to grow up to 13 total, and in New York with two, with a third planned for 2023. DC has been approved for six sites, and the first, Riverseed, has just opened. The three sites in Colorado would bring the total to 15 if all open as planned. Currently six of our 47 schools are charters.

MP: Last question: I know that Wildflower seeks to serve as many low-income families as possible, consistent with sustainability. Obviously public charter schools meet that goal by being tuition-free. Does this expansion into the charter model indicate a new direction for Wildflower? Will we see greater expansion in the future, and possibly even collaboration with districts? What does this mean for the future of Wildflower?

WF: In the charter sites, Teacher Leaders use the same enrollment system—usually lottery based—as local public schools. Their student enrollment and family engagement is hyperlocal and usually involves activating families who are already enrolled or live nearby.

Since the schools are public, families don't pay tuition and the teacher leaders establish and rely on community members and community partnerships to reach the families they want to serve. We expect more charters will get established, as this pathway lends itself well to our purpose, and we will continue to explore innovative district collaborations as long as there are teachers who want to open public microschoools—which we believe is the case.

David Ayer is Director of Communications at the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2022 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector