

Integrating the science of reading with Montessori

How we made it work in North Carolina



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In the state of North Carolina there are approximately 60 public Montessori schools. Our school, Park Road Montessori, was the first. This year it celebrates its 30th year, not only surviving, but thriving. It is one of four public elementary Montessori schools in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School district, which serves a diverse demographic. The district also offers a secondary Montessori program for grades 7-12. Students can gain a seat through the lottery system from PK-1st grade, and after that there is an interview process. Being in the public school system has meant that advocating to stay true to the Montessori method has always been a necessity. Any time new leaders or new curriculums are introduced, the Montessori program finds itself having to prove what it does and how it meets state standards.

Several years ago, the Montessori administrators in our program returned from training with the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector. This training spurred discussions about creating cohesion amongst our schools. In 2021 the district's Magnet office set out to create a team of public Montessorians to do just that.

The team was tasked with developing a document that aligned the Montessori curriculum with NC state standards and the current district curriculums (ILC and Envision). Not only would this document serve as a way to inform district leaders about the Montessori program, but it would also be the foundation for consistency amongst schools in the district.

At the onset of the alignment process there were several factors to consider. The team's number one goal was advocating to put Montessori first. After that, it was to develop a model that could be used across the district's four schools to show how state standards are met and to utilize district curriculums as a resource. Finally, the team knew that the state was requiring all teach-

also advocated for a Peace curriculum section that would cover social-emotional learning requirements. Once the team had everything mapped out, it was evident that language was going to be the biggest undertaking of the areas that would be aligned.

First the team acknowledged the strengths and weaknesses in comparison to the Science of Reading, starting with the question, "what does Montessori do well?" The team recognized that in Montessori there is a strong phonics program, materials are multisensory, and lessons are taught from concrete to abstract. It was also recognized that vocabulary morphology, etymology and syntax are explicitly taught.

The next step was to ask, what are the weaknesses? Many Montessorians

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ers to complete LETRS training from 2021-2023. This came on the heels of the North Carolina State Improvement Project (NCSIP) and their 20 years of researching the Science of Reading and efforts to address dyslexia. The team knew this would be a challenge and also different from anything that had been done before in our Montessori schools. After many discussions understanding our district's expectations, the CMS Montessori Playbook was born.

The playbook would encompass PK-6th grade, spanning three levels of the Montessori curriculum. Each level in the playbook would include an alignment for language/ELA, math, science, and social studies. The team

still subscribe to the idea that students will "absorb language" without explicit instruction. Research shows that 45% of students will learn to read without difficulty, while the other 55% will have difficulty learning to read. Research has also shown that 85% of reading disorders come from the phonological processor and that phonological awareness is an excellent indicator of reading success. Phonological awareness is present in the Montessori curriculum, but how it is taught and practiced is often up to the individual teacher. These deficits are educational problems, not just felt in the Montessori community.

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Science of reading concepts	Montessori Extensions	Augmentations	Intentional planning
phonological awareness	poetry, nursery rhymes, and songs	use evidence-based resources	use evidence-based assessments to target underlying deficits
phonics	- Sandpaper Letters — hunts and knock-knock - use extensions so that the student is not just reading the pink, blue, green series or Waseca boxes - have students encode using the moveable alphabet - self-check with labels	- have students practice reading the targeted language lesson using decodable readers with reading comprehension questions at the end. - teach syllable types to decode and encode multisyllabic words	- integrate high frequency words with direct aim of language lessons for spelling tests - fluency
fluency	- syntax —Sentence Analysis - partner reading - reading to parent volunteers	use evidence-based assessments to target underlying deficits	- goal of 95% accuracy indicates a student's independent reading level 90-95% is considered an instructional level - give students partner reading opportunities
vocabulary	3-part cards extension - Montessori word study - etymology - morphology	language timeline	- tie to literature that will reinforce vocabulary students are learning through 3-part cards, science and Montessori cultural work in the classroom - present vocabulary before reading and lessons
comprehension	- book clubs - research and presentations	use evidence-based assessments to target underlying deficits	- Montessori is strong with syntax and vocabulary - be intentional through query question discussions

There is also the notion that if a student can read and decode then they can comprehend. This is not necessarily true, as students do not always comprehend even if they are decoding. In order to determine a student's independent and instructional reading levels, skills and any underlying deficits, it is necessary to use diagnostic assessments to determine instructional intervention.

Once strengths and weaknesses were addressed, a letter and language sequence was selected that was evidence-based and not tied to any particular Montessori teacher education program or training center. A "neutral" sequence was imperative for implementation, fidelity and sustainability. The team then developed a systematic approach that all four elementary schools would follow while still using

the Montessori materials and curriculum.

In our design, we used key takeaways from NCSIP. We used our Montessori curriculum and materials to support the children by working with them explicitly on a daily basis to ensure mastery of the content. We made the reading sequence consistent so

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that it flowed from the classroom to EC (Exceptional Children) and MTSS. Interventions should support and be consistent with work being done in the classroom.

Within the public-school setting and standards, our playbook is designed to ensure that instructional and MTSS goals are met. We use our normed data assessments and formative assessments in addition to classroom observations to determine our classroom instruction.

A big takeaway from the alignment process was that it needed to acknowledge that it was okay to go outside of our Montessori training and use additional resources that explicitly teach how to read and write. It was also clear that the Montessori curriculum had a solid foundation, but there were some areas where instruction needed to be more explicit. Any gaps were eliminated through the ability to add extensions to the Montessori method and materials. This aspect allowed us to incorporate the science of reading with

the Montessori curriculum by enhancing and not replacing.

The playbook is now in the implementation phase, with the four schools meeting periodically to provide feedback. While there is still work to be done and the playbook is considered to be a living document, the team ultimately was able to develop a “Montessori way” for our district. By aligning the Montessori curriculum with state standards, district curriculums, and the science of reading, the playbook has become an invaluable reference tool creating continuity in our program and clarity for district leaders.

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