

Montessori as an innovation model

A former superintendent's take on what districts want



DAVID AYER WITH MARGARITA RUIZ

Margarita Ruiz was a District Superintendent in Massachusetts Public Schools before she joined the NCMPS Board of Directors. *MontessoriPublic* sat down to talk about her background and Montessori story, and her perspective from the district side. Our conversation has been condensed and edited.

MontessoriPublic: Tell me your Montessori story—how did you first learn about the approach?

Margarita Ruiz: I had a nephew, now in his 40s, who attended a private Montessori preschool. Even though I was not in the classroom with him, I could tell that the education he was getting was different from what I was seeing in other schools. (By the way, my nephew right now is a highly successful restaurateur in New York City!)

Later, when I got married and had my son, as a parent I wanted my son to go to a Montessori school because I knew how rich the experience is.

The problem was that at that time the Montessori schools that I had access to were private schools and unfortunately my husband and I, first generation Hispanic/Latino immigrants—he worked the ramp for Continental Airlines and I was a schoolteacher—we were not in a financial position to pay for private



An innovative approach

school.

So my son ended up in conventional public school, and he had a good education, but I always had in the back of my mind that we didn't have access.

I stayed as a teacher in Boston public schools for close to 22 years, and then I became a Principal and then an Area Superintendent. In 2013 I was overseeing the schools in the area of East Boston and Charlestown under the leadership of the Superintendent, Dr. Carol Johnson. There was a district early childhood center with a very popular Montessori strand, and a group of school parents wanted to re-open a closed building as a full public Montessori school. Dr. Johnson said, "Yes! We're going to move on with this."

As Area Superintendent I was in charge of ensuring that that school opened up. I was really excited because it was a chance to give kids like my son an opportunity to experience a Montessori education without paying private school prices. Nobody needed

to sell me on how sound the Montessori method is in developing children and their learning. So I could be a kind of interpreter between the Montessori world and the school district world. And at times they came head-to-head. It was a bit of a struggle, and that's when I came in contact with NCMPS. We worked together to get the school set up, to get materials, to hire trained teachers, and to get training for the other staff and the principal. Sara Suchman, now the Executive Director at NCMPS, was a lead coach in the program.

After a few years I left to become Superintendent at the Salem public schools, which had a more of a dual-language orientation, so Montessori wasn't a priority. Then in 2019 I transitioned to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, working in the Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) program and directing the program's

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Residency.

After that, Sara reached out to me searching for board members for NC-MPS and I said, “This is my opportunity to continue to work around Montessori that I was passionate about!” I also bring the ability to speak the language of school districts, and I help the organization understand what it takes to start a school in a district. How do we talk about Montessori to school districts in a way that is actually doable and it’s actually understood?

Then, as you know, equity and access are near and dear to my heart, so helping children, especially in districts like Boston or Salem that have many children from underserved backgrounds, get access to Montessori is very important. Children that look like my son, or that speak like me with an accent, or that just can’t afford private school—those children also deserve access.

So that’s my trajectory, and I’ve come full circle with NCMP. I started out as a client of a very young organization, so to come back as a board member and to see all the fantastic work that the team has put together, especially the work around the standards and the alignment work, it’s really impressive.

MP: Can you say a little more about what you saw in your nephew’s class and later—what made you fall in love with Montessori?

MR: I got interested with my nephew, but as Area Superintendent I was actually observing in classrooms, not only in East Boston but during school visits with NCMP.

I think it was the honoring of the child—really meeting the child where they are and letting them direct and really own their learning, with the teacher serving as a guide.

It’s funny because in education we talk about that all the time—teachers as facilitators of learning, and how the

“sage on the stage” approach doesn’t work. But with Montessori you go into a classroom and you see children actively engaged in learning. There’s order, there’s peace, there’s a focus in the classroom, and you see children engaged in really substantial learning at their own pace and they own it. It’s like they’re the masters of their own learning and the teacher is there to orchestrate those learning experiences.

For me, those are the founding blocks for adults that grow up being able to think for themselves and be creative. That’s the other piece—it’s creativity and how children in Montessori are encouraged to use their creativity as opposed to in other educational set-

structure that allows for creativity, allows for the student to learn at their own pace, and it allows for the teacher to provide spontaneous opportunities that then maybe one student or group of students can experience together.

To me that pedagogy is fantastic, and it builds the students’ self-esteem, it builds their confidence, it builds their ability to think for themselves. Unfortunately in many traditional learning environments students are not often asked to think for themselves.

MP: Is that an outcome districts care about? What would you say is so great about that outcome?

Could we begin to talk about Montessori as a “school model”, that can be more easily understood and implemented?

tings where—”No, no! We’re going do it this way, it’s not what you’re thinking, we’re going to learn this way!” That really got to me. That, and the fact that the students were actually learning.

Sometimes you really need to get to know a Montessori classroom well in order to actually see the learning. You could be entering for the first time and see the engagement right away. But I’ve had the opportunity to spend time in classrooms and to see not only the learning but how children learn to take responsibility for themselves and for their environment, and how they treat each other.

With the traditional pedagogy you say, “OK, children, this is what we’re going to learn, and this is how we’re going to learn it, and you’re going to do this and that.” But with Montessori that learning happens, but it’s with a

MR: I would say, the Montessori method is an incubator for innovative thinking. This is why you see so many people that have had a Montessori education be so successful—Jeff Bezos, the Google founders, Taylor Swift, P. Diddy! And not only successful, but they have created things because of their experiences early on when their brains were developing.

Montessori provides the structure, the experiences, that allows kids to be creative, and to me, this is the seed of innovation. You’re given the freedom to learn at your pace, you know you are self-directed and you’re learning, and that is the foundation for creativity and later on for innovation.

And in education, we need innovation more than ever. You know,

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education is a little stagnant right now—we're still teaching kids in many schools like we did back in the 19th century. It's an outdated system that is no longer reaching our kids and we're wondering why our kids are not learning. So even though Montessori is not a new method, it can bring the tools and approaches that are going to get us more innovation 20 years from now.

And the kids that we graduate from these schools—we need to have kids from underserved communities, kids of color, kids that speak other languages, people that come with different backgrounds, people that don't come from privileged backgrounds. Those kids need to be included in this group so that we can have innovations happening for everyone.

MP: So how do we get this across to the districts?

MR: That's what I want to do at NC-MPS—facilitate a deeper understanding of the challenges and what it takes. Right away there are issues that have to do with enrollment, with unions, with classroom sizes, with materials—we need to be very aware, transparent, and forward with these challenges so we can develop strategies, tools, and approaches to address them. How do we bridge these gaps in a way that school districts can understand? What are the challenges and do we as an organization have a full grasp of what those challenges are? Knowing what those challenges are will help us enable a school district to overcome them.

I can provide some context as an insider to add more to that so that NC-MPS is in a better position to talk to school districts and help them understand.

You have to remember, when you're talking to a school district you're talking to more than one stakeholder. You're talking to the central office, to the leadership, to teachers, to parents

and to students, and the interplay of those stakeholders — and the school board! So there are layers of complexity.

One thing school districts understand well is the language of a school model.

MP: What do you mean by that?

MR: You have dual language schools, and Expeditionary Learning, and STEM or STEAM models and so many more. Could we begin to talk about Montessori as a school model, that can be more easily understood and implemented? Something that comes as a package, that makes sense next to those other models, that highlights the innovation and creativity but also tells the district exactly how they're going to implement it. I'm excited that NCMPS is doing exactly this work.

MP: Where does the research fit in here?

MR: Well I think it's part of the story. You know, I'm a practitioner—I talk about what I see and what I experience in the field. I know that there's great research about Montessori and that needs to be part of the narrative and it can be part of the toolkit. But a Superintendent, for example, who has the opportunity to open a new school in their district and they want something innovative, they want something different—they do want something that is going to provide students with all these great things. But they need a toolkit on how to go about this. They know the research is great—the question is, how do I implement this with all of these limitations?

MP: So there are other things we should be talking about?

MR: The research is important but in districts people are practitioners. Talk about what it looks like in the

classroom. Talk to me about what exactly this pedagogy is and how kids get to the outcomes. Find out what the district's biggest challenges are and explain how Montessori can overcome them. What are their hopes and dreams, what are they struggling with? I tell my graduate students all the time, you have to get granular. So find out their problems, tell them how Montessori will help, and tell them exactly how you're going to do it so they feel like they can really make it happen with all their real-world challenges.

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