

Public Montessori: What is essential?

The long story of a collaborative document

NCMPS **STAFF**

You have probably seen a document somewhere with the words “Montessori” and “Essential” in the title—maybe more than one. And maybe you’re wondering which one is the “*essential* Essentials”, and how this state of affairs came to be.

There are at least 15,000 Montessori schools in the world. Given that these schools spring from the same source, you might not think there would be that much variation across programs. Just about everyone who is “doing Montessori” is working from a program initially presented largely by one person—passed down, via oral tradition as much as in published writing, through what remains a relatively small community. Within our community, we may have furious debates about which side of the table the ten bars go on, or whether certain materials belong with five-year-olds or seven-year-olds, but surely we agree on the essentials?

At first glance, multiple documents may seem confusing, but in truth each serves a different purpose. This is the

story behind those documents.

As long as Montessori stayed mostly in private schools, this wasn’t too much of a problem. The different Montessori lineages, and sub-lineages, could make their own claims about authenticity and essentials, and people were free to choose the Montessori that suited them. In the US, a 1967 Patent and Trademark Office ruling put the word Montessori squarely in the public domain.

But when Montessori began to move into the public sphere, the stakes and the stakeholders changed.

Fifty-six years since the opening of the first public Montessori program in the United States, there are now 574 public Montessori schools operating across the nation in 42 states and Puerto Rico. Desegregation efforts in the 1970s and 1980s provided urban school districts the opportunity to create Montessori magnet programs, and from the 1990s to the present day charter and district programs have increased the availability of public Montessori schools to more of the nation’s children and their families.

This presented the Montessori world with a novel problem: Now, people outside of and unfamiliar with

Montessori cared about what it meant to have a Montessori classroom or school. And public programs had their own concerns: meeting state and district expectations, such as performance on standardized tests, that didn’t always align well with Montessori principles—independence, curiosity, focus and concentration, passion and joy - in short, human flourishing. Public programs were pressured to downplay Montessori principles and practices that seemed indistinct or unfamiliar in preference for the tried, if not true, standard practices, and to degrade Montessori, and its enormous impact on children, in the process. In response to this pressure in public schools away from Montessori and towards the norm, the Essential Elements were born.

1990s: “Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public Sector”

In the late 1990s, as public Montessori was undergoing its second wave of expansion, these concerns energized the Montessori world. The movement was somewhat fragmented,

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From the 2015 Essential Elements Rubric: Domain 1 – Adults

STANDARD	EXEMPLARY	SATISFACTORY	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	UNSATISFACTORY
Teachers have Montessori credentials, from a MACTE or AMI accredited training program, for the age group they teach, in addition to required licenses or credentials.	□ All teachers are fully trained at the appropriate level and hold required licenses or credentials. □ All auxiliary staff (special education, PE) are Montessori trained or oriented. □ Montessori principles are evident in the actions of all adults. Key actions include: speaking softly, clearly, and respectfully to children and adults, refraining from offering unnecessary help, inviting as opposed to commanding, and student engagement in meaningful work.	□ 90% of teachers are fully trained at the appropriate level, with the remainder in the process of earning an appropriate Montessori credential. □ Auxiliary staff have been oriented in Montessori theory and practice. □ Montessori principles are evident in many, but not all adults’ actions	□ 85% of all teachers are fully trained at the appropriate level, with the remainder in the process of earning an appropriate Montessori credential. □ Montessori principles are evident in some adults’ actions.	□ Less than 85% of all teachers are fully trained at the appropriate level. □ Absence of robust knowledge of Montessori theory and practice is evident in the actions of adults; key actions include: interrupting students who are concentrating, using a loud, intrusive voice, attempting to control rather than model respectful behavior.

and there was a concern that districts or charters might look into the model only to discover competing Montessori organizations each advancing their own claim to legitimacy and authenticity—and then throw up their hands and walk away.

In a move towards collaboration that was unprecedented at the time, representatives from the American Montessori Society (AMS), Association Montessori International/USA (AMI/USA), North American Montessori Teacher's Association (NAMTA), Montessori Education Programs International (MEPI), and the (now-defunct) Southwestern Montessori Training Center (SMTTC) met to develop a set of design parameters and core principles of practice they could all agree on.

The result of this effort was the *Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public Sector*, endorsed by each organization and distributed to their respective communities. This document offered 22 guidelines across six domains, giving district and school leaders a consistent, if minimal, set of parameters that elided differences among organizations and training traditions. It was broad in scope and application, presumed some level of prior exposure to Montessori, and generally emphasized *what to do* more than *how to do it*.

Implementation and advocacy

In 2012, the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS) was launched as a project of AMS to support the growth and sustainability of public Montessori programs in the US. With an original mission to “help public schools deliver high-quality, personalized education through Montessori”, the focus of NCMPS’ work was effective *implementation* with the research and policy to back it up. The following year,

the Montessori Public Policy Initiative (MPPI) was created as a joint project of AMS and AMI/USA to serve as “the unified voice in *advocacy* and platform for coordination of public policy efforts.” These two organizations serve complementary needs. MPPI “champions a policy landscape that expands equitable access to high-fidelity Montessori education,” while NCMPS focuses on growing and developing the public Montessori ecosystem through equitable, accessible, and sustainable *implementation* in public settings.

2015: “Montessori Essentials”

In 2015, MPPI produced the “Montessori Essentials”, a two-page document using the 1990s document as a foundation and presenting 11 “critical elements that must be present”, plus an introductory paragraph that characterizes an “authentic” Montessori school, without reference to a funding model (public or private). Although the document speaks of “successful implementation,” it’s clearly also a work of advocacy, and a kind of position statement, saying, in effect, “This is what Montessori is. This is what Montessori schools must do to count as Montessori.”

2015: “NCMPS Essential Elements for Montessori in the Public Sector”

At the same time, NCMPS recognized the need for, in addition to an authenticity guide, an implementation guide that gave clarity and specificity for the public sector. We worked from prior documents to create our own updated *Essential Elements for Montessori in the Public Sector*, with an emphasis

on public. This tool refined and expanded the essentials to 28 elements, keeping language about specialty programs, the “teacher pipeline”, and trained leaders, and adding elements about special education, multilingual learners, and school-home partnership, among others.

2015 Rubric	2023 Rubric
All adults, Montessori trained or not, embrace core Montessori principles, respecting the process of human development and supporting children’s independence, freedom, responsibility, and growth.	Adults embody and foster a school-wide culture supporting human flourishing which respects children, offers independence and responsibility, values racial, cultural, and social identity, and works towards fairness free from bias.

We also regrouped the original six domains into five, and presented them within larger domains of fidelity and sustainability, two crucial concepts when considering a public school:

- Fidelity:**
- Adults
 - Learning Environment
- Sustainability:**
- Family Engagement
 - Leadership and Organizational Development
 - Assessment

To further support implementation, we extended the Essential Elements Rubric schools could use as both a planning and evaluation tool. Each “Essential Element” was articulated into indicators across a gradation of implementation, from “Exemplary” to “Unsatisfactory”. A sample row is shown at left.

Schools used the Rubric for self-assessment and continuous improvement, and as part of a “school audit” with NCMPS.

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These two tools—the Essential Elements and the Rubric—have been available to download for free on the NCMPS website since their release. To date, these resources have been downloaded thousands of times.

Essential Elements Review

Since 2015, NCMPS has partnered with 25 public Montessori schools in an “Essential Elements Review” (EER) process. The EER is an intensive, multi-day site-based appraisal of a program’s strengths and opportunities, with NCMPS staff observing in classrooms using the *Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS)*, meeting with stakeholders, and reviewing documents, using the Essential Elements Rubric to give the school community a clear picture of where the school stands on Montessori fidelity and sustainability, and what can be done to move forward in continuous improvement.

From this process, we learned a lot about what makes a school strong, equitable, accessible, and sustainable—in other words, what’s essential. This includes:

- a clearly articulated school-wide vision, with outcomes-aligned values and strategies
- ongoing professional development, including Montessori teacher training, and ongoing coaching and pedagogical support
- consistent collaboration and calibration among and between levels
- lesson design and delivery rooted in Montessori
- data-informed practices, built on an assessment system that takes a holistic view of child development

Working side-by-side with schools through the EER process, we developed a deeper understanding of what’s required of public schools, and what is challenging, and a broader conception of who is included when we think about a school community, and how

they are represented.

2023: “Essential Elements for Public Montessori”

Over the last two years, we’ve undertaken a top-to-bottom, side-to-side review and revision of the Rubric, through overlapping lenses of equity, clarity and functionality. Among the many changes:

- Fuller recognition of the legal requirements and the social justice concerns around children receiving services, multilingual learners, and their families.
- Advocacy for Montessori coaches and appropriately prepared school leadership.
- Examination of how classroom assistants are described and included in schools.
- Pragmatic and productive guidelines around required assessments.

As an example, one key revision captures our process and values:

These and many other changes have been incorporated into the full 2023 Essential Elements Rubric, and from there into the two-page Essential Elements for Public Montessori.

2023: Foundational Commitments

There is also a role for a simpler document that tells public school leaders and policy-makers *what they need to know about Montessori before getting started*. What do I need to know I’m committing to if I want to get Montessori going in my area of influence?

For this audience, we created the *Foundational Commitments for Public Montessori*, a kind of “Ten Commandments” (although we couldn’t get it down to 10). Among them: You must have a commitment to equity. You must have Montessori-trained teachers teaching Montessori, and you must have extended work periods, mixed age classes, materials, and

student choice. If you won’t be able to implement these in your school or district, you still have some work to do to prepare the environment. That doesn’t mean it will never happen, and NCMPS, as well as other organizations, can help with that. But these are all the things that are better to know now than later.

What’s Essential?

Does all this leave us no better off than pre-1990, with competing visions of Montessori claiming legitimacy? We don’t think so. We see a suite of tools specifically designed for unique purposes and audiences. As an organization dedicated to serving *public* Montessori for all students, families, and communities, we don’t take a stand on what’s legitimately Montessori. We know appropriate developmental outcomes, and we know Montessori practices, thoughtfully and equitably applied, can drive them. And we know how to help public schools do this work, and how communities and leaders can work together to build and sustain these programs. If that’s not essential, what is?

Download the tools at:
public-montessori.org/tools/#elements

MontessoriPublic

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