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Public Montessori Education in Puerto Rico

News from the largest concentration of public Montessori in the U.S.



JUAN JOSÉ RODRIGUEZ FERNÓS
(TRANSLATION: KAREN SIMON)

Editor's note: Puerto Rico has a thriving public Montessori system overseen by a government department, the Secretariat of Montessori Education. We asked the Secretariat for an update, and they provided this article, translated into English by NCMPS MTR Early Childhood Coordinator Karen Simon.

Public Montessori education in Puerto Rico has gained ground as an innovative and effective alternative within the island's educational system. Every day there are more families searching for this education in the public schools of



A typical classroom in the largest concentration of public Montessori in the U.S.

our country. The guarantee of being active participants in decision-making on school matters, through shared governance, where families, school administration and teachers are immersed in a triad, together with the philosophical, methodological and curricula devel-

oped by María Montessori, make this education a priority when selecting a school for their children.

It is important to note that Montessori education has been made accessible in Puerto Rico to the entire community since the 1990s, when it was first of-

fered as a free and non-sectarian option within the public education system. It is an education for peace that shapes human beings for the world through student-centered, holistic development

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Educación Pública Montessori en Puerto Rico

Noticias de la mayor concentración de escuelas públicas Montessori en EE.UU.

JUAN JOSÉ RODRÍGUEZ FERNÓS

Nota editorial: Puerto Rico tiene un sistema de escuelas públicas Montessori, supervisadas por el gobierno bajo la secretaria de educación Montessori, que han progresado grandemente a través de los años. Le pedimos a la secretaria que nos actualizaran y nos dieron el siguiente artículo.

La educación pública Montessori en Puerto Rico ha ganado terreno como una

alternativa innovadora y eficaz dentro del sistema educativo de la isla. Cada día son más las familias en búsqueda de esta educación en las escuelas públicas de nuestro país. La garantía de ser participantes activos en la toma de decisiones en asuntos de la escuela, a través de una gobernanza compartida, donde se ven inmersos en una trilogía a las familias, la administración escolar y el magisterio, unido a los principios filosóficos, metodológicos y curriculares desarrollados por María Montessori, hacen prioritaria esta educación al momento seleccionar una escuela para sus hijos. Cabe destacar que, desde los principios de los años 90, la educación Montessori se hace accesible en Puerto Rico a toda la comunidad ya que es gratuita por ser pública, no sectaria y es una educación para la

paz, formando seres humanos para el mundo, enfocada en el desarrollo integral de los estudiantes, centrado en el niño y los adolescentes, en un ambiente preparado para ello. En lugar de seguir un currículo rígido y uniforme para todos los estudiantes, los niños y adolescentes tienen la libertad de explorar los temas, siguiendo sus intereses y capacidades únicas. Esto promueve un sentido de autonomía y autoestima en los alumnos, ya que son responsables de su propio aprendizaje, guiados por un adulto certificado en la educación Montessori, que los acompaña en su proceso. Los espacios físicos, llamados ambientes, están diseñados para ser ambientes preparados de acuerdo con la

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SARA SUCHMAN

We run a list of upcoming events on the back page of this newspaper (send us your information for next year!). Last fall, the North Carolina, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Georgia listed conferences, along with national gatherings from the International Montessori Council (IMC), and the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE). Winter 2024 included events from Massachusetts, the University of Wisconsin, and Illinois. And, of course, February and March bring two big annual events: the Association Montessori International-USA's Experience and the American Montessori Society's Event. NCMPs staff have presented at most of these events; we are always excited and proud to share our work with as many people as possible.

In April, we hosted the second NCMPs Public Montessori Conference and Retreat. Undertaking a conference is a big and risky lift, so we asked ourselves, with so many conferences on the calendar, why one more? What's special about a public Montessori conference—what need does it serve?

We go to conferences to learn and share. To find out what's new. To connect with old friends and to make new ones. To get away from our regular school routine and return reinvigorated.

And, perhaps most of all, to be with others who have the same experiences we do, folk who might otherwise be few and far between. Conferences provide an environment for us to feel part of something bigger than ourselves.

At most Montessori conferences, that something is Montessori. The experience of being with others who share this transformative, liberatory understanding of human development and potential is exhilarating.

For Montessorians working in public settings, these conferences can be both exhilarating and a bit isolating.

What's special about a public Montessori conference—what need does it serve?

Everyone around us is committed to the same view of childhood and approach to learning that we are, but not everyone is manifesting this view and implementing this approach within the context of large bureaucratic systems, required curriculum, district and state mandates, and public scrutiny. Many public Montessori schools are one-of-a-kind in their districts or regions. Even when we are fortunate, entrepreneurial, and collaborative enough to have other public Montessori schools in our area, we are still the outliers, proving our worth as we swim upstream against the flow of the system.

NCMPs acknowledges, validates, and supports the lived experiences, needs, and practice of Montessorians working in public schools – and all

that these elements entail. Two years ago, we held our first Public Montessori Conference and Retreat to create a setting where working within the demands of the public sector was a commonality rather than a differentiator; to create a shared time that could have all of the exhilaration of shared purpose with none of the isolation. Nearly 200 public Montessorians gathered to present, learn, and be together in the first public-focused conference in a long, long time. The learning was powerful, and the camaraderie was incredible. We knew we had to do it again.

As I write this, we're less than a month away from our second Conference, and I am confident in saying it will be a fantastic weekend. How could it not be when you are the community we are convening? Whether at the Conference, in online courses, on school visits, or through your emails, articles, and video calls, thank you for sharing your time, wisdom, friendship, and energy. When we are walking hand-in-hand in learning and love, dreaming and daring, there is no stopping what we can achieve. We are part of something bigger than ourselves, and I am honored to be with you in this work for a collective future.

Sara Suchman is the Executive Director for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

In this issue: Profiles in Montessori

In this issue we have profiles of several Montessori schools and programs: some just a few years old, some going back 50 years, some described by Montessorians and some as seen by outsiders.

David Ayer shares the news from a rising dual-language program in Phoenix, Montecito Montessori school in the Osborn school district.

Candice Collins speaks with *MontessoriPublic* about Maria Montessori at Marsh, a 40+-year-old program in Illinois.

Sara Cotner and **Sarah Kirby Tepera** share their lessons from 10 years at Magnolia Montessori for All in Austin, Texas.

Phil Dosmann reports on celebrating 50 years of public Montessori in Milwaukee Public Schools.

Juan José Rodríguez Fernós reports from the largest concentration of public Montessori in the U.S., in Puerto Rico.

Roc Ordman tells about his experience substitute teaching in a classroom in Illinois.

Sara Suchman makes the case for a Public Montessori Conference.

Julia Volkman tells us how to get involved in the Montessori Research Database.

Leslie Woodford shares the inspiring story of advocating for Montessori in Arizona.



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COMING FALL 2024:
**MORE VOICES
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Reach out to editor@montessoripublic.org
Our next issue will be in October, 2024.
More guidelines on page 23.

One voice *can* start a movement in Arizona

Coalition-building
and persistent
advocacy
prevail



LESLIE WOODFORD

“This is the sound of one voice”—the first line of *One Voice* by Canadian folk/bluegrass group The Wailin’ Jennys. One voice makes a choice, they sing. Then, “This is the sound of voices two.” Soon, three voices join, and then their song becomes the “voice of all of us.”

Recently, in Arizona, we witnessed one voice becoming two, then three, then a whole chorus of voices in support of Montessori education. One voice spoke up, starting at Khalsa Montessori School. Khalsa is a charter school in Tucson, Arizona, serving 350 students with a tuition-based early childhood program and a public K-8 school. We have been in operation for more than forty years. Our current charter for the public school program was established in 2001.

Arizona has several laws that shape literacy instruction in our public schools. The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) established a policy dubbed “Move on When Reading”

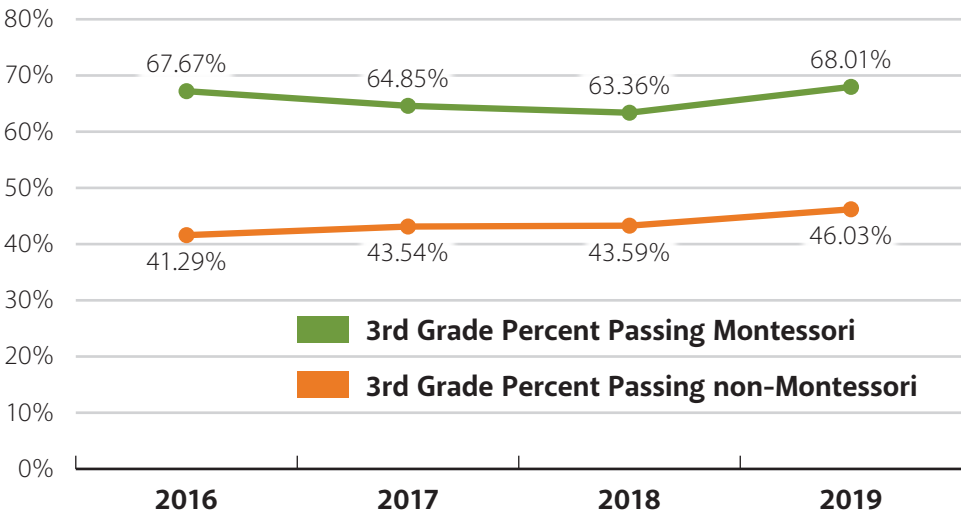
(MOWR) that encapsulates the requirements of these laws. The policy received its MOWR nickname because the policy states that third graders who do not pass a certain threshold on the annual state standardized reading test may not “move on” to fourth grade. To comply with the policy, school districts and charter schools must submit an annual literacy plan. MOWR policy stipulates that schools must use evidence-based reading curricula.

In the past, when we submitted our literacy plan, we selected “Montessori” from a drop down menu of approved reading curricula. Two years ago, Montessori disappeared from the list of approved curricula. We were shocked!

After checking with ADE, our head of school Nirvair Khalsa discovered that the Department of Education was reviewing the reading curricula used throughout the state to determine if they met specific criteria for evidence-based curricula as defined by ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act). Although a wealth of research documents the effectiveness of Montessori literacy instruction, none of the existing studies met the ADE’s standards. The representative at ADE suggested, “Just have your vendor do the research.” Many of the big publishing companies have money to “do the research.” However, since there isn’t a *single* Montessori publishing company, and many Montessori vendors are small family-owned businesses, we didn’t have a vendor to turn to for help.

The Arizona Charter Schools Association (ACSA) champions schools of choice. They lobby the state legislature, the Arizona State Board of Education, and the Department of Education on our behalf. When ADE suggested that we have our “vendor do the research,” Khalsa contacted Jake Logan, the ACSA

Proportion of Arizona 3rd graders passing
ELA 2-16-2019



president, explaining that the new requirements discriminate against schools of choice. She pointed out that for over a hundred years, Montessori educators have successfully taught children to read. She reminded him that when she submitted our school’s charter, the Arizona Charter Board said that they would judge the effectiveness of our instruction based on our state reading scores. Our scores are high, she explained, significantly higher than the state average. In 2023, 74% of Khalsa third graders passed the reading test compared to 41% statewide. Jake was sold. ACSA was willing to help us get Montessori education back on the list of approved curricula.

Khalsa also partnered with ADE and a number of other public district and charter Montessori schools. She established regular Zoom meetings with the other heads of school and a representative from the department of education. Representatives from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS) and the Montessori Public Policy Initiative (MPPI) also joined the meetings. After much discussion, the ADE representative granted Montessori schools a temporary exception to the ESSA standards while we worked to complete the research. It helps that we are an “A” school—the state assigns letter grades to schools based on a number of criteria, including state test scores.

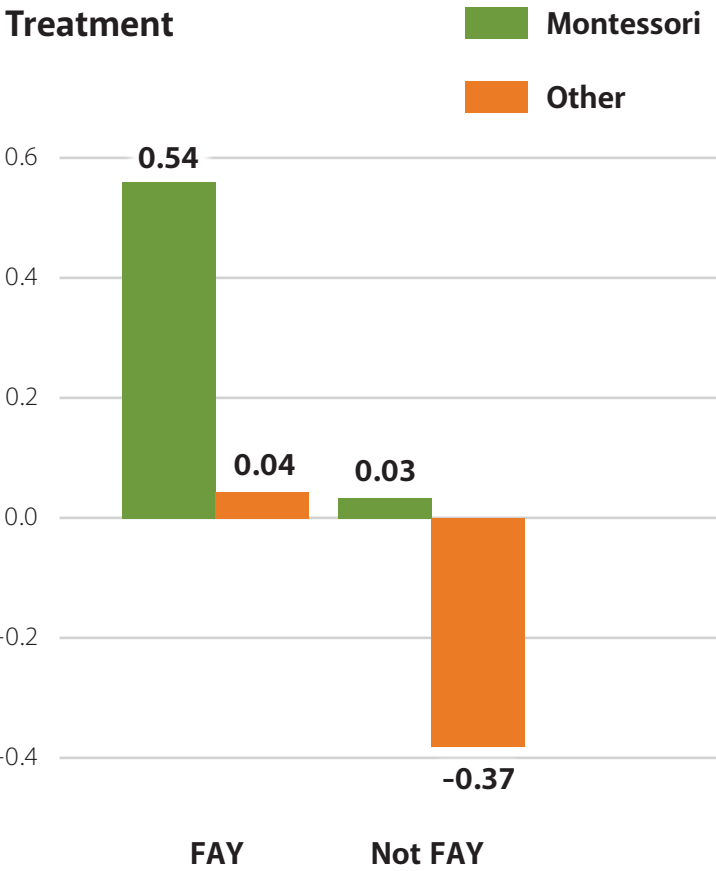
Kelly Powell—director of research at ACSA—offered to review existing state standardized testing data to identify evidence needed to show that Montessori

education successfully teaches students to read. He requested access from ADE to four years of pre-pandemic state test results. When he ran the numbers, Montessori students did much better than the state average. Over four years, Montessori 3rd graders surpassed non-Montessori third graders on the state ELA test by at least 20 percentage points, as shown in the graph above.

Powell took the research one step further by analyzing the pass rate of students who had been in Montessori for multiple years. Full academic school year (FAY) measures the number of years a student has been at a school. FAY 0 indicates that the student has been at the school less than one school year—i.e., they entered the school in the middle of the school year. FAY 1 shows that a student has been at the school for one full school year. Arizona measures the number of years a student has been enrolled at the same school for 1 to 3+ years. FAY is a way of representing school quality because it shows the cumulative effect of multiple years of instruction. A school with high quality instruction in most classrooms will show cumulative improvement. Effective instruction builds on itself, leading to higher achievement rates over time. Likewise, poor instruction leads to greater deficits over time.

While Powell was doing the research, Khalsa continued to hold regular advocacy meetings. Margo O’Neill, the head of school at Villa Montessori in Phoenix, and Khalsa both testified before the Arizona State Board of Education during its public comment period last summer. They shared their concerns

Treatment





Following the approved curriculum

that the rules for MOWR restrict our ability to teach Montessori with integrity. They pointed out that schools of choice, by definition, provide families with educational alternatives and those alternatives often do not follow the formula of traditional education.

This journey has been fraught with challenges. Shortly before Powell finalized the data, the staff at ADE changed. During the most recent election, the Arizona Superintendent of Schools incumbent, a Democrat, was replaced by a Republican and new appointments trickled down throughout the department. The woman who had been meeting with us regularly and had been supportive was reassigned to a new job, and a different person now fills her role. We have started afresh acquainting the new ADE representative with our Montessori methodology and our students' success on the statewide tests. The final step will be to submit the results of our data review to ADE and get Montessori approved as an "Evidence Based Curriculum."

This journey has shown that change can start with one voice. Khalsa lifted her one voice; it soon became two, then three, and then many more. She partnered with Montessori allies—other heads of school around the state—and with lobbying organizations in Arizona and the US. In the process, we discovered an ally in an unexpected place. The children of the executive director

of the State Board of Education attend a Montessori school. Khalsa noted, "Our advocacy has had the effect of educating them about Montessori as a different model of education. We are advocating for Montessori to continue doing what it does well, without having to change our tried and true methodology. They write rules around conventional models, and not everyone fits that mold." Advocacy can seem difficult or hopeless, but it really takes only one voice to start a movement.

Leslie Woodford is the Curriculum Coordinator at Khalsa Montessori School in Tucson, Arizona.



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MontessoriPublic is a digital and print communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori, presenting news and information about public schools, publicly supported programs, public policy, and relevant ideas and events in education.

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Dual-Language Montessori rises in Phoenix

A small district launches and sustains an important model



DAVID AYER

A small but growing dual-language district Montessori program in the heart of Phoenix, Arizona is poised for big expansion next year.

Osborn School District #8 is a district of 6 schools serving about 2600 students in the center of Phoenix. Over the last four years, a remarkable program has sprouted and flourished at the district's

there. Superintendent Michael Robert had a Montessori background, and was open to the idea.

Singh, who knew little about Montessori at the time, told me about speaking with him:

"When Robert, who used to be my principal, said he was 'thinking about doing this Montessori thing' I thought, 'Oh no, I'm not doing more, I'm not doing more!' And he just says, 'let's talk about it,' and I said 'I don't want to talk about because if we talk about it I'm going to want to do it.' But I sat down in his office and when I walked out I was thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to Montessori training.'"

Singh had taught kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade with Roberts as principal, and was a reading specialist and

that they are appropriately challenged because they're coming to me with this amazing set of skills already. I didn't know a whole lot, but I knew that the children really did a lot for themselves and just sort of guided themselves in a way through their learning."

The district sponsored two teachers for training at the Southwest Institute for Montessori Studies in Phoenix and Singh was slated to begin her Elementary training there. In the fall of 2019, the wheels were set in motion.

Then 2020 rolled around, bringing the global pandemic with it, and the wheels came off. "We tucked those ideas and that work aside." But Singh did go on with her training over the next three summers, and found it transformative. "It was the hardest work I've ever done in my life, and at the same time the most thrilling and fulfilling. It was literally blood sweat and tears but it was amazing. It was amazing. I feel like if I could have learned math via Montessori as a child, that would have been a different child."

The Montessori program launched in the fall of 2021 with a single Primary classroom led by a veteran Primary teacher who was already state-licensed. Arizona does not provide funding for three- and four-year-olds, so to have a full age-range, the program charges tuition for those ages. Some families are able to get support from state childcare subsidies. Entry to the program for five-



Small but growing

year-olds is by lottery, and younger children already enrolled do get preference in the lottery.

A lower elementary followed in 2022, and in 2023, a second, dual-language primary was added. Osborn school district operates a robust dual-language (Spanish and English) program, so dual-language Montessori was a natural fit.

Now, in the middle of the 23-24 school year, the program is poised for even greater expansion. Phoenix has a lot of dual-language programs but nearby Spanish immersion school is

When I walked out I was thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to Montessori training.'

Montecito Elementary school. To learn more about the story, I spoke with Abby Potter-Davis, District Chief Officer for Equity and Learning, and Jill Singh, District Preschool Coordinator.

It all started with some Montessori cross-pollination. In 2019, some Montessori teachers came to Osborn interested in expanding public Montessori

dual language teacher as well, but didn't know much about Montessori. "The only thing that I knew was that when I taught kindergarten dual-language I had children coming to me from another public Montessori and I just remember thinking, 'Wow, these kids are coming reading and knowing all of this stuff already. I just want to make sure

Reading at Montecito

DAVID AYER WITH JULIE SINGH

Montessori and the "science of reading" have been in the news all year, and Arizona in particular has been at the center of the action (see *One voice can start a movement in Arizona*, p4). The Montessori early childhood approach has a strong, phonics-oriented curriculum and Montessori children entering first grade after three years in a Primary classroom are often, if not always, sounding out words or even reading sentences and simple books. But Montessori elementary has been criticized for lacking materials and lessons that explicitly teach comprehension skills and strategies.

I asked District Preschool Coordinator and reading specialist Julie Singh about what she has seen with the Montessori program. Here's what she had to say:

Julie Singh: It's really interesting because I've seen some of our four-year-olds in action. And because I support the other preschools, I do see differences.

Three of our district schools have dual language preschool programs using the Benchmark Ready to Advance curriculum. Benchmark as a whole for preschool supports "kinder readiness" through prereading and literacy work as well as prewriting skills and fine motor skills that are so vital once we hit kinder. There is an abundance of oral listening

and speaking and comprehension work through the literature and nonfiction texts that are broken down into units. This curriculum also supports and includes numeracy skills and science and exploration.

There's an emphasis on learning letter names and letter sounds and oral syllabification, as well as leveled books to support concepts of print. Where a child is coming to us with more advanced skills the teachers will do individualized work in regard to decoding, phonics and other. Many students also do prewriting in the form of journal works, making pictures and scribbles, as well as stepping into letter formations to help tell their story. But it is not a requirement or expectation

that a child at the end of the year will be a reader as a 4 year old. The goal is to have reading readiness skills such as those mentioned so that when they step into kinder they are motivated and prepared.

The Montessori four-year-olds—many of them, through the presentations and the materials, are definitely reading. It might not be long full sentences, but shorter sentences, for sure. So they are showing me that what is happening in their curriculum is purposeful and is supporting literacy development.

When I started to do my elementary training, there were elements that I did think could use a little beefing up in general, and especially if we're taking a child who's coming to us without Montessori

closing and many of those families want to continue that model. Open houses have been “wildly successful,” Singh said, the school has been giving tours “non-stop.” The school will be adding two more dual-language primary classrooms and a second lower elementary, and if we can enroll enough elementary students we hope to start an upper elementary classroom, (The plan is to build to extend the elementaries to three-year age groupings as the school grows.)

Challenges remain as always. “Osborn is in the heart of central Phoenix where some amazing new developments are happening. But these high rise apartments are not always family friendly in terms of budget, so many of our Osborn families are just being pushed out of their neighborhood,” Singh said. New residents may eventually have children who could attend the school, but that doesn’t replace school-age children who are in the program now. Still, Singh added, “I just appreciate that there is Montessori, there’s an English option, there’s a dual-language option and it’s all in the public sector. It’s beautiful and we’re trying every night, and we know that there will be bumps along the way but we’re working hard to make it make it happen.”

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



Children do a lot for themselves

training or maybe without a strong literacy language background.

MontessoriPublic: So what did you do? Did you bring in additional materials?

JS: I did. I thought, “what can this look like—where can we get materials to support their learning?” We did borrow some from our Primary room. Not necessarily the sandpaper letters, but sound boxes and some other things just to start that process and keep moving. They do get a lot of phonics type things in Primary but when you have students who have not come from Primary you see where we might need to fill some of those holes. Being in central Phoenix we

have a wide dynamic of families and just diversity in general. Everybody comes to us at a different place.

And as you’ve said, there are some comprehension areas could also get beefed up. So we might do small group book groups based on level, and I have pulled children out for an intervention if I see a need. Susan Zoll’s book (*Powerful Literacy in the Montessori Classroom: Aligning Reading Research and Practice*, by Susan Zoll, Laura Saylor, and Natasha Feinberg) has been very helpful here.

I do have an intervention kit that has level books that and phonics readers even though that might not be strictly Montessori. Speaking personally and not for the district, if I see you drown-

ing and I have a life preserver I’m going to give it to you! And I think Maria Montessori would be OK with that, thinking about where she started and the children she was working with. So I appreciate that our Superintendent, who is Montessori trained, is OK with that too. If we have those tools in our central Phoenix school, we’re going to use those tools. That could include comprehensive strategy fluency work through different writing elements for example. As a public school, you know, we have state standards and our third graders are going to take that state writing test. We want to make sure they are prepared, and that they feel prepared, so we’re doing our due diligence.

School districts large and small

Osborn School District is a tiny district of six schools serving 2600 students in the center of Phoenix, a city of 1.6 million and the 5th largest city in the US. Why such a small district in the middle of a megalopolis? As it happens, Osborne is unusual but not an anomaly.



Most big US cities have one large “unified” district, consolidated in waves of unification between the 1940s and the 1970s in a process which was, naturally, shot through with both good intentions and structural racism. Many cities have additional smaller districts as well. The largest in the nation, New York City Public Schools, serves more than a million children in 32 subdistricts. Another 28 US districts serve 100,000 or more children. At the same time, the average district has only about seven schools and 3,700 students.

Since the 1970s, the value of consolidation has been increasingly questioned. Economies of scale have not given better-than-average results, and the flexibility and responsiveness of local control have become more obvious. Two studies suggest that the costs of consolidation outweigh the benefits for districts larger than 1,500 students.

Drawing on these and other studies, Arizona has considered and rejected consolidation several times in the last 20 years. Osborne as one of 30 Phoenix school districts is the result. And it’s possible that the small size and flexibility this affords are reasons behind the innovative program described here.

50 years of public Montessori in Milwaukee

A flagship district Montessori program celebrates



PHIL DOSMANN

Milwaukee has a history of Montessori education going back to at least 1961. On February 10, 2024, Milwaukee Public Schools celebrated 50 years of *public* Montessori. Over 2,000 current and former students and teachers, families, and staff attended the event. Students demonstrated Montessori materials, students from each public Montessori school performed songs and dances, school timelines were displayed, and proclamations were given by the Milwaukee mayor and state superintendent of schools.

Hildegard Solzbacher, AMI teacher trainer, helped establish Montessori education in Milwaukee by training Montessori primary teachers on nights and weekends while she opened Milwaukee Montessori School (1961), the first private AMI Montessori school in the city. Solzbacher also publicly ad-

vocated for Montessori, notably through a series of public lectures at Marquette University. Other private programs followed, including Highland Community School in 1968, Penfield's Via Maci program in 1968 and Downtown Montessori in 1975. These private programs became the grassroots motivation for Montessori education in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

In 1973, Solzbacher worked with Milwaukee Public Schools Early Childhood Specialist Grace Iacolucci to launch a pilot "kindergarten" program with four half-day classes of four- and five-year-olds at two separate schools, the first public Montessori schools in Wisconsin and among the first in the nation. Parents from all areas of Milwaukee came together to lobby and solicit the MPS Board for a Montessori program.

Desegregation and magnet schools

Milwaukee, and its school system, were heavily segregated up through the 1950s and 60s—"a 1960 report concluded that Milwaukee had the most pronounced pattern of racial separation in the nation," according to Wisconsin Lawyer, the official publication of the State Bar of Wisconsin. Starting in 1958, MPS began a program of "intact bus-



Two McDowell alumni stopped by for a quick snapshot

sing" from overcrowded Black schools, in which the district bussed groups of Black students intact with their teachers to white schools with available classrooms. In some cases, the intact class was bussed back to their neighborhood school to eat lunch as they were not allowed to eat in the school cafeteria with the white students.

In 1964, Black attorney, Assemblyman, and Milwaukee NAACP President Lloyd Barbee began a years-long campaign to desegregate and equalize MPS schools

through demands, negotiations, boycotts, marches, demonstrations, and ultimately a lawsuit. The case came to trial in 1973, and was decided in 1976, curtailing busing and providing federal funding for specialty "magnet" schools to attract and retain white students in Black neighborhoods.

As a result of this 1976 ruling, the four Montessori satellite classrooms were moved to MacDowell, at 17th and Highland, to become the first city-wide Montessori program. As a city-wide program students received bussing from any place in the city of Milwaukee.

Long wait lists to gain entry to MacDowell resulted in the community lobbying the school board for another Montessori school. Greenfield Montessori on the near south side was opened in the fall of 1983. Greenfield quickly filled the open seats and another popular MPS Montessori program was born.

For the remainder of the 1980s and into the early 90s, MacDowell and Greenfield were the only public Montessori programs in the district. In 1995, new MPS School Board members were elected who were seeking ways to expand quality programs and to stem loss of enrollment to charter and suburban schools. As a result, Craig Montessori was established in 1996. For the first time, a Montessori trained administrator was appointed as the Craig principal. Craig began with 200 PK3 and PK4 students and grew to serve over 550 students by 2010.

Also in the early 1990s, there was a growing movement to provide oppor-



Tim Duax, Kathy Hubbing, Carol Hicks, Allyn Travis, and Elaine Clay

tunities for voucher and charter schools in Milwaukee. Highland Community School, a private Montessori school with a parent board since 1968, was granted a charter in 1996. Highland's charter established the school as the first non-instrumentality MPS charter school.

In the late 1990s, school board members who saw the merits of Montessori education began lobbying for Montessori programs in their districts. Maryland Avenue Montessori on the eastside opened in 2001 as a school within a school while the traditional program was phased out over the next seven years. Maryland's location on the east side near University of Wisconsin Milwaukee was a popular program that quickly became oversubscribed. In the early 2000s MPS funded a Neighborhood School Initiative which moved Greenfield to Fernwood Montessori on the southside and established that all future Montessori programs would be PK3 to 8th grade, allowing the schools to keep 6-8th graders. Fernwood quickly became a very popular program serving students from the southeast side of Milwaukee. Over 1000 students were attending Montessori programs by 2003, but demand continued.

In 2006, with the use of funds from the Gates Foundation Teacher-Run Schools' initiative, the superintendent established the Montessori High School as an International Baccalaureate Montessori capstone program. Grant funds were used for teachers to receive NAMTA Orientation to the Adolescent training. The high school struggled at the original site in a multiplex with three other small school programs, so it lobbied and was moved to Juneau HS, a school that had closed a few years prior. A new superintendent who was not a fan of teacher-run programs closed the program, but allowed it to merge with MacDowell in 2011, establishing the first PK3 to 12th grade Montessori program under the direction of a Montessori trained administrator.

The next MPS program was a small partnership program at a church site in the Garden Holmes neighborhood an impoverished area of Milwaukee. The program was started by two Montessori teachers with the help of a board member who desired additional programs to serve all children in MPS. This program only lasted a few years, but paved the way for a program at a nearby neighborhood MPS school, Garden Holmes. This program was established in 2008 and renamed Lloyd Barbee Montessori in honor of the man that helped desegregated MPS schools.



Lloyd Barbee in a somber crowd at a memorial gathering for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Fernwood continued to have long wait lists. School board member and a Fernwood parent from the Bayview district, established Howard Avenue in 2012. The program was established at a small building on Howard Ave. on the far south side of Milwaukee. The program flourished and there was need for further expansion. A nearby MPS vacant school was quickly identified as a site for expansion. The small building on Howard Ave became a primary lower campus and the new building became the upper campus, serving students in the lower grades and grew to 8th grade in 2023. Both campuses were renamed Bayview Montessori.

The most recent MPS Montessori program was developed in 2012 when a group of current and retired Montessori teachers began to solicit board members to establish a bilingual Montessori program at Riley School on the near south side serving the Hispanic community. The initial proposal was for a district teacher-run charter Bilingual Montessori program, but that was modified to a district Montessori program at the Riley School location, opening in 2017 with two primary Montessori classrooms as a dual language Montessori school. Riley phased out the traditional program over a few years and is currently

6th grade top growing to 8th grade.

One of the most significant developments for the Montessori programs occurred with the formation of the Montessori Advisory Committee (MAC) in 2014. This group was led by a powerful parent group that was trained in advocacy. The outcome was a draft of a strategic plan that addressed several points that would support the current programs. Large groups of parents and staff attended school board meetings and gave public testimony about the merits of the Montessori experience for their children. Students even testified to how the Montessori program enhanced their love of learning.

The first MPS Montessori strategic plan was adopted and put in place in 2015, establishing outcomes and funding that supported the eight MPS Montessori schools. They included:

- creation of a unified professional development plan
- a mentor/coaching program for all new Montessori teachers
- marketing and branding the programs
- expansion plans for new Montessori schools
- cultivation of Montessori leadership, where all Montessori administrators become trained in the method

- identifying and financing Montessori teacher training, which established the first in-house MPS AMI Montessori training program in 2024
- train all Montessori middle and high school staff
- establish a central office Montessori coordinator to recruit teachers and support all facets of the Montessori programs

The eight Montessori programs in MPS support over 150 Montessori trained teachers and over 4,000 children and families. Montessori education is the only specialty program that was replicated in MPS from the initial magnet funds that were appropriated in the late 70s to stem families leaving MPS and Milwaukee. Montessori education has proven itself to create an opportunity for a high need, at risk population of low-income students to bridge the academic gaps that typically occur in public education. The Milwaukee community is grateful to all who have contributed to the expansion of Montessori education in Milwaukee Public Schools.

Phil Dosmann is a retired MPS Montessori Teacher and Administrator.

Maria Montessori at Marsh

Rockford, Illinois school celebrates 40+ years



DAVID AYER WITH
CANDICE COLLINS

Rockford, Illinois, a large city about 85 miles northwest of Chicago, is the county seat of Winnebago County, incorrectly named for the Native American people now known as the Ho-Chunk. By the time of Rockford's founding in the 1830s, most of the Indigenous people in the area had been forcibly relocated to reservations elsewhere, although some still remain. Marsh Elementary school was founded in 1872 and named for Jason Marsh, an early European settler and a colonel in the Union army during the Civil War.

The school was renamed Maria Montessori at Marsh more than 40 years ago with the idea that there might be other Montessori schools distinguished by the name of their buildings. So far, however, Marsh remains the only one. *MontessoriPublic* sat down with Principal Candice Collins, in her 10th year at Marsh, to hear the story and plans for the future.

MontessoriPublic: What's the story at Marsh?

Candice Collins: Rockford is a big school district with about 30,000 students and 41 schools, and we're one of six "special program" schools, which include creative and performing arts, Spanish-English immersion, STEAM, a gifted academy, and IB.

But we were the first special program! 40 years ago it was one classroom in the school, and then it became a wing, and then just grew from there.

MP: What ages do you serve?

CC: For a long time it was just PK4 through 6th grade—that was how they existed for over 20 years. But parents wanted middle school. It took years and years to but now we are PK4 through 8th grade. And we've gotten very large. Next year I think we'll have 653 students, which is wonderful. We're very popular!

We have wait lists that are ridiculously long.

MP: That is big—you're in the top 5% of public Montessori schools. What's that like?

CC: Well, it's a wonderful problem to have. Our families are very invested and very involved in our school but because we're so big that makes everything a challenge. We could use more parking, and we don't have a space that fits all 653 of us with parents as well. So we do some segmented things. For example, middle school has a dance tonight and it's just for them.

MP: How did you come to Montessori, and to Marsh?

CC: This is my 10th year here. I was hired as a PK through 3rd grade principal while 4th through 8th grades were in a different building. Then eight years ago we moved together under one roof. That's been really amazing, to be all together. You know, if we have a four year old who's having an issue or something we can pair him with a middle school student for mentoring. You can't do those things if you're not all in the same location.

MP: So PK4—do you have three-year-olds? Is there funding for that in your district? Or is four years old the main point of entry?

CC: The district funds PK3 for half days, but we're not set up for that so we start with PK4. Those four-year-olds are here for full days which can be a little rough. Four-year-olds can be tired in September but then they settle in and they do just fine.

We do bring in older students. Whether it goes well depends on the student's level of independence and motivation. We have a Review and Intervention plan to support struggling students. We throw everything we can at them as



The children are calm and settled.

far as supports and give them as much time as we can to turn things around. If they do, that's wonderful but if not they may go back to their neighborhood zone school.

Around the three-year-olds, one thing I've been talking about with the district is this: We send our teachers way for training to a MACTE-accredited center more than an hour away. So I've floated the idea of having a training center here. We have beautiful facility here and we're doing very authentic Montessori—I think, as much as a public school can be authentic. But we don't have the full age range and we would need that to be an accredited training center.

MP: Tell me more about how you get trained, state-licensed teachers. I know that's a problem for everyone.

CC: The district pays for training. It's about \$8,000 for the training and then another \$8,000 for housing and a stipend while they're there, because they go for five weeks during the summer and then there are institutes during the school year. Then they sign a 36 month contract saying if they leave within that time they will pay it back. But it's still very difficult, say, for a single person with children or even just a dog to be away for that long. So in terms of equity and inclusion we're picking from small group of people who can do that train-

ing. So we would really like to explore other options.

MP: And you have middle school now. What do you do for adolescent training?

CC: That's even more difficult because the training is in Ohio. We send teachers there but it can be very far away from home. I will have a lot of applicants for a job, because a lot of people hear good things about our school and they're interested in Montessori, but I have to call and say, "this is the training do you still want to interview?" Because they need to know up front.

MP: And this is taking state licensed teachers and getting them trained?

CC: Essentially, yes, but we're also working with an advocacy group here in Illinois that's trying to get a pathway for licensure for Montessori trained. But all of our teachers are state licensed. For some, though, they have their first summer of training and then go straight into the classroom. Or they are getting EL I and EL II certification and they've only had EL I but they're going right into an upper elementary classroom. So they may need extra support.

MP: What about you? What's your Montessori story?

CC: This is my 24th year here in Rockford. I started out as a traditional teacher and then went back and got my administrator's certificate. Back then you just kind of interviewed with a panel and they placed you where they thought you would be good. So when they placed me at Montessori I really had no idea what that was. I knew we were lottery and that's about all.

So I read and read, and spent a lot of time in classrooms at all grade levels. Then during COVID the training center shut down but we still needed teachers so we used an online, non-accredited training. We had to let a teacher go and she was going to have to pay that money back unless I could find a new adult learner, so that adult learner became me.

MP: And did you have that "falling in love" experience so many people have?

CC: Remember, I was just in the PK-3rd at the beginning and I just remember thinking, "This place is so darn quiet! Like where are the children?" The children were working and self-directed at the age of four, which was crazy to me, but there they were! And the classrooms were organized in such a way four-year-olds were doing practical life at the very beginning and they're just constantly working. And then the older kids are getting the presentations and the little ones are watching so they're learning too.

Then when we moved together I started watching upper elementary and middle school and observing how they work and how their classrooms are much more social but that learning was still happening.

I'm used to it now. But when I hear when people come to tour our building—I have a state senator coming next Wednesday—"calm" is the word I hear. The children are calm and settled and it's because they're engaged in their curriculum. It's the curriculum, it's the methods, it's the independence, it's the freedom to not have a teacher tell you, "Open your book to page 12..."

MP: So you feel that has an impact on learning?

CC: Oh for sure, absolutely. And I think our teachers, through their training and their way of thinking, they're more able to be constantly adapting.

Here's an example: We had a student in second grade getting off the school bus in the morning just very angry. He was disruptive in our community gathering every single morning, and he could ruin

the gathering because of his mood. And his teacher was able to say, OK, then let's move that gathering. Let's change this to adapt to his needs, and so for that entire school year and until he left they came in the classroom and they went right to work. No talking, it was just everybody went to work and it was the calmest environment and that worked so well for him. And they just did that community a little later in the day.

I never saw that in traditional school. It was, "No, this is what we're doing and this what you're going to do." I see it when I see teachers inviting kids to presentation and other kids looking on and leaving their work spot to watch and there's just a freedom here that is wonderful.

MP: So—and this is something I always wonder about successful public Montessori programs—the kids love it, your teachers love it, parents love it, sounds like the state senators love it, you have a giant waiting list—Why is it just this one school? Why isn't the school board saying, "We have to do this at every school in the district!"

CC: Well, if I'm being very honest—we are just one school in a big district. Within the past month I was rounding (a one-on-one conversation) with my superintendent and I think maybe he didn't know the length of the waitlists until I mentioned it. So with that and some other things that have happened, conversations about maybe looking for another site are starting to happen.

MP: But districts are big, and they have a lot going on.

CC: Exactly. And we can kind of fly under the radar, even with 600 kids. And we don't have someone at the district dedicated to Montessori, to help us with professional development and curriculum.

MP: Like they do in districts with more Montessori schools, such as Milwaukee or Tulsa.

CC: What's happening in Tulsa?

MP: Well, the story there is that they opened one program, and families liked it, and so they opened another one, and that went well, so they opened a third. So maybe that could happen here.

CC: That would be great!

MP: To people who are thinking about opening or growing a public Montessori program, what would you tell them, from your ten years of experience?

CC: Well, one thing is that it took eight years for us to complete our expansion to 8th grade, but we're really proud of what we've done, so stick with it. It can take time.

Then I would also highlight the importance of getting good training and doing really authentic Montessori. A lot of people don't know that the name isn't trademarked and all that. So it's import-

ant to have a clear mission that has real meaning and is guided in a way you can uphold. Our mission is to offer a world class Montessori education. But what that means is we want children to be learning, and self-actualized, and part of a community and we really feel that Montessori is a great way to do that for children and families.

Candice Collins is the Principal at Maria Montessori at Marsh in Rockford, Illinois.

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Public Montessori Education in Puerto Rico

Continued from page 1

of children and adolescents in an environment specifically prepared for this purpose.

Instead of following a rigid, uniform curriculum for all students, children and adolescents are free to explore topics, following their unique interests and abilities. This promotes a sense of autonomy and self-esteem in students, since they are responsible for their own learning, guided by an adult certified in Montessori education, who accompanies them in their process. The physical spaces, called environments, are designed to be environments prepared according to the student's stage of development, which invites independence and self-direction. These environments include indoor and outdoor spaces in contact with nature. This physical structure of the environment helps cultivate concentration and discipline, fundamental skills for the academic and personal success of children and adolescents.

Another distinctive aspect of public Montessori education in Puerto Rico, which makes it an attractive offering, is its focus on the holistic development of students. Through practical and sensory activities, the development of cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills is promoted. Students learn to collaborate with peers, resolve conflicts constructively, and develop a sense of empathy and respect for others.

In the context of Puerto Rico, the implementation of Montessori education in the public system offers a unique opportunity to address the educational challenges facing the island. The flexibility and adaptability of Montessori education can benefit a wide range of students, including those with special needs and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. In addition, Montessori education promotes an interdisciplinary approach to learning where concepts and skills from various areas of knowledge are integrated. This not only enriches students' educational experience, but also prepares them to face real-world challenges, where the ability to think critically and creatively is essential.

Within the public Department of Education of Puerto Rico, we have an Assistant Secretary of Montessori Education that enjoys curricular autonomy of school organization, to guarantee the reliable implementation

of Montessori education. This secretariat was created by law in December 2018 and operates, without intermediaries, in the Office of the Secretary of Education. Since then, five years later, public Montessori education has grown exponentially.

Currently, of 856 public schools in Puerto Rico, 60 of them offer various levels of Montessori education. This represents 7% of the territory's schools. It should be noted that, while some schools are closing, due to lack of enrollment or budgetary reasons, the Montessori community has rescued schools and has reopened several of them, at the request of surrounding families, and they have adopted this educational methodology and philosophy.

Another relevant fact is the growth of public Montessori education at the secondary level, belonging to the third plane of development according to María Montessori. When the school communities finished the elementary level, Elementary II, some of them did not find continuity in the educational philosophy that they had selected. Therefore, a growing movement has emerged from elementary schools to secondary schools with the implementation of the Montessori curriculum, philosophy and methodology. Currently, 23 schools show growth toward Montessori secondary education, and are represented in a total of 89 prepared environments.

On the other hand, growth has not been exclusive to the secondary level. The offering of public Montessori schools has also shown an increase in early childhood. Within this stage of development, we noticed an increase in environments within the same schools that were already implementing Montessori education. We can highlight that for the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, in the public education system of Puerto

Rico there are 12 infants environments, 25 toddler environments and 109 children's house environments in operation.

For the elementary level, which is reflected in the second development plane, we have 98 Elementary I environments and 72 Elementary II environments. In the coming years, a growth of these levels is foreseen, in order to continue Montessori education that just began in the previous stage of early childhood and satisfy the needs of families. We can highlight that, compared to previous years, we have had a sustained increase in enrollment at these levels, which represents a growth in prepared environments within Montessori public schools.

The successful implementation of Montessori education in the public system of Puerto Rico requires a significant commitment on the part of families, educators, school administrators and the entire school community, who together are responsible for making decisions. Public Montessori education in Puerto Rico represents an exciting opportunity to transform the educational system

and provide students with an enriching and meaningful learning experience. By adopting the principles of autonomy, individualization and holistic development, this educational modality has the potential to prepare students to be active and engaged citizens in an increasingly complex and diverse society.

Despite the challenges that may appear in the path of transforming school culture, the potential for change of public Montessori education in Puerto Rico is undeniable. By offering an educational alternative focused on the child, on autonomy and comprehensive development, without a doubt, can contribute to the creation of a Puerto Rican society that is more equitable, inclusive and prepared to face the challenges of our daily lives.

Juan José Rodríguez Fernós is the Director Educación Secundaria Montessori at the Secretaría Auxiliar de Educación Montessori in Puerto Rico



Educación Pública Montessori en Puerto Rico



Continued from page 1

etapa de desarrollo del estudiante, que invita a la independencia y la autodirección. Estos ambientes incluyen espacios interiores y exteriores en contacto con la naturaleza. Esta estructura física del ambiente ayuda a cultivar la concentración y la disciplina, habilidades fundamentales para el éxito académico y personal de los niños y adolescentes.

Otro aspecto distintivo de la educación pública Montessori en Puerto Rico, que la hace una oferta atractiva, es su enfoque en el desarrollo holístico de los estudiantes. A través de actividades prácticas y sensoriales, se promueve el desarrollo de habilidades cognitivas, sociales, emocionales y físicas. Los estudiantes aprenden a colaborar con sus compañeros, resolver conflictos de manera constructiva y desarrollar un sentido de empatía y respeto hacia los demás.

En el contexto de Puerto Rico, la implementación de la educación Montessori en el sistema público ofrece una oportunidad única para abordar

los desafíos educativos que enfrenta la isla. La flexibilidad y adaptabilidad de la educación Montessori pueden beneficiar a una amplia gama de estudiantes, incluidos aquellos con necesidades especiales o en situación de desventaja socioeconómica. Además, la educación Montessori promueve un enfoque interdisciplinario del aprendizaje, donde se integran conceptos y habilidades de diversas áreas del conocimiento. Esto no solo enriquece la experiencia educativa de los estudiantes, sino que también los prepara para enfrentar los desafíos del mundo real, donde la capacidad de pensar de manera crítica y creativa es esencial.

Dentro del Departamento de Educación público de Puerto Rico, contamos con una secretaría auxiliar de educación Montessori que goza de autonomía curricular de organización escolar, para garantizar la implementación fidedigna de la Educación Montessori. Dicha secretaría fue creada por mandato de ley, en el mes de diciembre del año 2018 y opera, sin intermediarios, en la

de desarrollo que nos dejó María Montessori. Cuando las comunidades escolares terminaban el nivel elemental, Taller II, algunas de ellas no encontraban continuidad en la filosofía educativa que a bien habían seleccionado. Por tanto, ha surgido un movimiento en crecimiento de las escuelas primarias hacia la escuela secundaria con la implementación del currículo, filosofía y metodología Montessori. Actualmente, 23 escuelas muestran crecimiento hacia la educación secundaria Montessori, y se ven representados en un total de 89 ambientes preparados.

Por otro lado, el crecimiento no ha sido exclusivo en el nivel secundario. El ofrecimiento de escuelas públicas Montessori ha mostrado también un incremento en la primera infancia. Dentro de esta etapa de desarrollo, notamos un aumento de ambientes dentro de las mismas escuelas que ya implementaban la educación Montessori. Podemos destacar que para inicios del año escolar 2023-2024, en el sistema de educación pública de Puerto Rico hay en función

12 ambientes de Infantes, 25 ambientes de Andarines y 109 ambientes de Casa de Niños.

Para el nivel elemental, que se ve reflejado en el segundo plano de desarrollo, tenemos 98 ambientes de Taller I y 72 ambientes de Taller II. En los próximos años se vislumbra un crecimiento de estos niveles, para poder darle continuidad a la educación Montessori que recién comenzó en la etapa previa de la primera infancia y satisfacer las necesidades de las familias. Podemos destacar que, comparativamente con años anteriores, hemos tenido un aumento sostenido en las matrículas de estos niveles, lo que representa un crecimiento de ambientes preparados dentro de las escuelas públicas Montessori.

La implementación exitosa de la educación Montessori en el sistema público de Puerto Rico, requiere un compromiso significativo por parte de las familias, los educadores, los administradores escolares y toda la comunidad escolar, quienes juntos son los responsables de la toma de decisiones. En conclusión, la educación pública Montessori en Puerto Rico representa una oportunidad emocionante para transformar el sistema educativo y brindar a los estudiantes una experiencia de aprendizaje enriquecedora y significativa. Al adoptar los principios de autonomía, individualización y desarrollo holístico, esta modalidad educativa tiene el potencial de preparar a los estudiantes para ser ciudadanos activos y comprometidos en una sociedad cada vez más compleja y diversa. A pesar de los desafíos, que puedan aparecer en el camino de la transformación de la cultura escolar, el potencial de cambio de la educación pública Montessori en Puerto Rico es innegable. Al ofrecer una alternativa educativa centrada en el niño, la autonomía y el desarrollo integral, sin duda alguna, puede contribuir a la creación de una sociedad puertorriqueña más equitativa, inclusiva y preparada para enfrentar los desafíos de nuestro diario vivir.

Juan José Rodríguez Fernós es el Director Educación Secundaria Montessori para la Secretaría Auxiliar de Educación Montessori.

Ten lessons in ten years at Magnolia

Where we started and what we've learned along the way



SARA COTNER AND SARAH KIRBY TEPERA

This year marks ten years since we opened the doors to Magnolia Montessori For All—Austin's first free public Montessori school.

We've faced a lot of challenges along the way—such as nearly closing down due to state accountability issues, losing high numbers of staff members during particularly difficult years, receiving lawsuit threats because we put a mask mandate in place during COVID, continuous flooding and relentless plumbing issues, and struggling with limited funding.

Luckily, the honor of serving children and their families in one of the city's most racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse communities outweighs all the struggles.

We still have a lot to figure out—even with a decade under our belts—but we hope this list of questions that we have grappled with and learned from in the past ten years will be helpful to anyone on a public Montessori journey.

1) What is our vision and how do we create a sense of shared vision among everyone?

We started with an intentional vision to build a strong sense of belonging for families from different racial, cultural, and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds. Toward that end, we recruited a Board of Directors from the broader community with expertise in culturally responsive education and lived experience of segregation and racism in our city.

We quickly realized, however, that maintaining a shared vision is hard! While we intentionally recruited teachers with both AMI and AMS backgrounds since the differences between Montessorians from different trainings

pale in comparison to the differences between Montessorians and conventional educators, the diversity in trainings has made the process of building a shared vision much, much harder.

Further, it's not enough to build a shared vision; we have had to figure out how to live it day in and day out. One strategy that has helped with maintaining a shared vision has been developing touchstone words that we use as anchors in everything we do: Purpose, Joy, Justice and Community. We've also learned that bringing our staff together not just for specific instructional PD but whole group gatherings in which we reflect on bigger picture questions and look at mission-aligned data is key.

2) Which structural elements should we prioritize in order to offer a full Montessori experience?

Early on, we had to decide how to use our limited funds in order to create the most high-quality Montessori experience possible for our children and their families. We prioritized investing \$30,000 in every classroom for a full set of Montessori materials and furniture, staffing every classroom with a full-time assistant (and additional helpers around lunch and nap time), welcoming three- and four-year-olds for a full-day even though we only receive half-day funding for them, and launching a fee-based infant and toddler program to prioritize a strong Montessori foundation. We also decided to provide each teacher a \$1,000 consumable budget every year.

We are grateful that we chose not to skimp in these areas, although we wish we would've had the financial padding to launch our school more slowly. Opening with six primary classrooms and six lower elementary classrooms was quite the challenge. We have also had to figure out over the years how to afford a more robust support staff, such as counselors, dyslexia support, interventionists, etc.

3) How do we keep all the plates spinning? Which new initiatives do we have time and capacity to prioritize?

One of the things we have always struggled with—and continue to struggle with—is how to keep all the Montessori pieces going. There are the



A culture of work and learning

Great Lessons and practical life and preparing the environment and tracking lessons—on top of progress reports, state assessments, conferences, etc.

In addition to all these basic things we want to keep going, there is an endless list of new initiatives that people within our community want to see moving forward, such as launching an Adolescent Community, a scratch kitchen, etc. Within a diverse community, it's even harder to make everyone happy. However, we've learned that we can't take it all on at the same time without stretching ourselves too thin.

4) How do we build consistent cultures of safety, connection, work and learning across all classrooms?

With 19 classrooms from infants through upper elementary, we've struggled with how to ensure a high-quality experience in every classroom. We've learned that coaching is imperative, and it's the most important way for administrators to spend their time. It also helps to pick your top indicators and align on them. For example, using the framework of the Four Cultures (Safety, Connection, Work, and Learning) has

helped us create more alignment among a staff of more than 70 individuals.

5) What does equity look like at our school?

Within a racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse community, we talk a lot about the concept of equity and how to apply it within our school. For us, it starts with unpacking the ways in which “White Supremacy Culture” shows up in ourselves and within our work and doing ongoing work to actively dismantle bias and racism.

It also means doing more and doing things differently for the children and families who need more or need something different in order to reach equitable outcomes. With nearly 500 children in our community, we have had to develop clear and systematic approaches to responding to behavioral and academic needs. It took years of trial and error to build systems that strike the right balance between being sustainable and being personalized enough to be effective.

6) How do we build a “second family”?

Even in our most difficult years, we've prioritized helping our school feel like a second family for children, their par-



It's not just the materials

ents/guardians, and staff members. We want to be a place where people can show up as their full selves. Some of the strategies we've used in order to build a second family have been articulating a clear Anti-Bias, Anti-Racist vision for our school, hiring people who want to connect, celebrating birthdays, using a weekly early release day to come together as a staff every week over snacks, and—most importantly—leading with “human” first as opposed to “employee” or “student.”

7) How do we measure what we treasure?

When you broaden the definition of success within your school, it's tempting to start measuring all the new things that matter—executive functioning, sense of belonging, etc. But it's incredibly challenging to balance all the mandated assessments with the more Montessori-aligned assessments without taking away all your time for teaching and learning. It's also difficult for individuals to process excessive amounts of information in a meaningful way. We have finally reached a balance after many years of trial and error.

Specifically, we administer normative academic assessments for all children at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to track overall growth. In elementary math, we also administer 10-question “unit” assessments every six weeks. In reading, we reserve the mini, more frequent assessments for the children who are below the typical window of development.

While we wish we had time for one-on-one assessments of the whole child (like the Minnesota Executive Function Scale), more frequent state assessment requirements and budget limitations have made this nearly impossible. We

have had to settle for beginning and end of year staff and family surveys to keep a pulse on culture and climate.

8) How do we put “Families as Partners” at the center of everything we do?

Many Montessorians have a tendency to hold families at a distance. They believe their job is to handle what goes on at school and the family's job is to handle what goes on at home. Or they want to protect the child's independence, dignity, and privacy. But we have learned that while guides are experts in child development, families are the experts in their children. And the more we can partner together in service of children, the better.

We have worked hard to try and pull back the “curtain” and welcome families into our Montessori communities. We regularly send home work records and other types of communications, and welcome families into the classrooms.

9) What is the number one key lever or area to focus your attention?

Within a large and dynamic learning community, there is always a proverbial fire to put out or issue to attend to. At the end of the day, however, we have learned that our teachers are the primary mechanism for the flourishing of our children and family satisfaction with our school. It's imperative to prioritize hiring well and retaining staff members who are vision-aligned and who are successfully removing obstacles for our children.

This doesn't mean that the culture should revolve around the adults—the children are at the center of our work—but since everything flows through the adults, it's worth focusing significant amounts of time and energy on them.

10) What does it mean to “follow the child”?

There is an inherent tension related to working within a model that was founded on empiricism and making adjustments in response to observations but which has now become very focused on preservation more than of innovation.

One of our teachers, Fabiola Ayala, says it best:

“While our Montessori training covers very specific principles, applying them to children with diverse needs has taught me the importance of adaptation. It's not just about the intricacies of Montessori practice, but our readiness to adjust, be it by introducing extra materials, altering the pace of lessons, or diverging from conventional methods, all in the pursuit of serving the children's needs effectively. Transitioning from a private school to the public sector has emphasized the need for continual reflection on my teaching methods, a readiness to embrace new approaches, and utilizing all available resources to enhance the learning experience for my students.”

We have come to embrace that it's not the materials; it's not the specific lessons. Instead, it's the foundational principles that we need to hold sacred, such as freedom with responsibility, learning by doing, respecting the child, moving from concrete to abstract, and honoring the human tendencies.

We are humbled every single day by what the children teach us and what we still have to learn on this journey.

Sara Cotner is the Executive Director of Montessori For All, the non-profit.

Sarah Kirby Tepera is the Executive Director of Magnolia Montessori For All, the school.



A sense of shared vision

Cultural relevance in teacher training

How we bring relevance and responsiveness to the MTR

NCMPS STAFF

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector's Montessori Teacher Residency (NCMTR) prioritizes culturally relevant and responsive education. This article was adapted from the NCMTR Curriculum Manual.

Three decades ago, Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed culturally relevant pedagogy, “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.”

The concept has assumed a central role in teacher education, inspiring a generation of teachers to enter the classroom with a renewed commitment to affirming students’ cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector’s Montessori Teacher Residency centers

culturally responsive pedagogy in its Montessori teacher preparation.

In *But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995), Ladson-Billings identified three features of culturally relevant pedagogy:

- all students are experiencing academic success
- students are actively developing and practicing cultural competence
- students are developing and practicing a “critical consciousness” that helps them challenge inequities they see in the world

In 2018, Geneva Gay, building upon the work of Ladson-Billings and others, called for a pedagogical shift to **culturally responsive teaching**. Recognizing that education in the United States has predominantly drawn on and affirmed Eurocentric values, experiences, and culture, culturally responsive teaching asks educators to transform learning by “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”

This means teachers should:

- learn about and appreciate cultures other than their own

- offer learning opportunities that draw upon the strengths of children’s home cultures
 - allow children to embody their full selves as people and as learners
- Montessori curriculum and pedagogy is conceptually framed to support culturally relevant and responsive teaching, although these elements need to be made explicit in teacher preparation.

Academic success

Montessori education has been shown to support the academic achievement of all children, by engaging children’s interest in a strong curriculum, and by fostering a safe, healthy learning environment.

A culture of success: “Success” in a Montessori education context means the fullest possible development of an individual’s human potential and interdependency with their social group. This is the expectation teachers should have for children and themselves. Teachers can work to observe and counteract biases, make sure to support children of all abilities, and keep Montessori’s inherent asset-based orientation in the forefront.

Relevant and responsive curriculum: By planning lessons based on observation and student’s acquired knowledge, Montessori teachers inherently respect and respond to each student’s individual strengths and approaches to learning. Teachers can review their lesson plans and records to ensure that a robust set of presentations is offered to all children and that all children are learning.

Learning opportunities that enrich children’s lives: Montessori, framed as an “aid to life” and an environment for supporting human development, designs all learning experiences to enrich lives, foster human flourishing, and provide a foundation for future learning.

An environment in which children develop and maintain a positive academic self-image: In a learning environment of engagement and discovery, rather than one of compulsion and competition, children in Montessori classrooms can find and share their unique strengths and celebrate those of others they work with. Multi-aged, individualized, self-paced classrooms support differentiated learning without negatively highlighting differences.

continues on page 18 >



All students are achieving academic success

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Cultural relevance in teacher training

Continued from page 16

Cultural competency

Cultural competency, “the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one’s own” (DeAngelis, 2015), is built into the Montessori curriculum, but needs to be consistently emphasized.

- Preschool-aged children are exposed to lessons with globes, maps, and culturally diverse materials to explore, and can be engaged in culturally diverse presentations and activities.
- The Elementary Cultural curriculum, loosely corresponding to Social Studies, uses a rich assemblage of stories, charts, and hands-on experiences to emphasize the unity, diversity, and interdependency of human cultures around the world.
- Children at all ages participate in circle times and community meetings which offer opportunities for children to engage with adults and with each other, speaking and listening, taking turns, and learning to see things from various perspectives.
- Montessori teachers should take particular care that diverse cultures are represented, affirmed, and engaged with in classroom décor, cultural materials such as art, literature, and music, and cultural practices.

Development of critical consciousness

Critical consciousness is “the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom, using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Montessori education helps develop this ability from an early age.

Student voice: Montessori education begins with authentic and respectful interactions with children. Even the youngest should have a say in their classroom and school.

Ownership and responsibility in their environments: Young children in the three-to-six age group undertake real-world tasks and solve real world-problems consistent with their abilities from the very beginning, taking active roles in cleaning, maintaining, and beautifying their classrooms. Teachers should take care that diverse cultural practical



Learning opportunities that enrich lives

life activities are included, building belonging and understanding. These lessons introduce children to responsibility and stewardship of community, foundations of critical consciousness that will extend beyond their classrooms into their homes and, eventually, into their wider communities and world.

Connecting learning opportunities to the real world: Young children interact with real-world cultural and natural objects that are brought into the classroom, and in appropriately scaled interactions with nature and culture in their school and neighborhood.

For elementary-aged children, interaction with the larger world is integral to Montessori practice through “Going Out” (learning expeditions sparked by child interest and planned and directed as much as possible by the children themselves). Children may also invite guests from their families and community, and from local Indigenous communities, to share knowledge, experiences, and stories. Teachers should not shy away from engaging with elementary children’s developmental sense of fairness and justice when real-world manifestations of inequity present themselves, and can foster age-appropriate yet critical conversations with children of any age.

Culturally responsive practices

Montessori classrooms provide ample opportunities for teachers to create environments that reflect and affirm each child’s identity, recognizing and valuing the knowledge and strengths children bring with them.

- Children should see themselves and their home cultures reflected, affirmed, and engaged with in the classroom’s books, lessons, and materials.
- Classroom decor should include works of art by artists representative of children’s heritages.
- Classroom rituals, such as greetings, meal time, community meetings, and clean up should be intentionally inclusive of the whole community’s cultural norms and practices.
- Practical activities, including Practical Life exercises in the Children’s House, should reflect a diversity of cultural approaches.
- Peaceful conflict resolution should be explicitly taught, along with respect for different cultures and norms. Kindness should be explicitly modeled, and children should see and learn that they can have agency and can advocate for themselves and others when unkind or hurtful things happen.

- Teachers should consider the myriad cultural norms children bring with them, take care to welcome them all without privileging one over another, and work with the group to build a shared understanding of community norms and expectations.

Teachers should welcome and support learners’ diverse communication and learning styles by:

- offering space for silent, independent work as well opportunities for collaborative conversation.
- providing seating options, allowing for children to work on a rug, on a floor height table, or at a table and chair.
- encouraging emergent bilingualism and translanguaging, including sign language.

Beyond the classroom

Montessori schools can enact cultural responsiveness beyond the classroom, by:

- building community partnerships, mentorship, and a dynamic connection between school and home.
- actively seeking input and collaboration with families and caregivers, and sustaining authentic partnerships that support children and families, build inclusive communities, and encourage mutual investment.

- participating in ongoing Anti-Bias Anti-Racist (ABAR) professional development, exploring how to support multilingual learners, and considering the experiences of children from minoritized communities.

The Montessori classroom can offer all children the opportunity to learn, to flourish, and to become their strongest selves. The materials and activities allow children to begin to understand their own and others' identities, cultures, languages, and backgrounds. Adults in

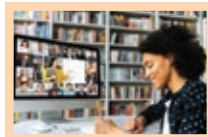
the environment can model the practices of critical consciousness and seek to dismantle the status quo, creating a strong partnership with caregivers and other mentors from the community. The more a school leans into considering diverse perspectives, being friendly with error within themselves, and getting comfortable with being uncomfortable as new, sometimes tough information is learned, the more the school and the learners within will thrive as the whole of the child is honored and responded to each day of the year.

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Observations on effective education

Montessori through a retired professor's eyes



ROC ORDMAN

The *Rockford Register Star* in Illinois printed a column that I wrote on January 11th that included praise for the Montessori Public School in Rockford, IL. The article described my experience as a substitute teacher in the Rockford public schools. That resulted in a request for me to write for this Montessori newspaper. So here is my story.

In 1977 I began teaching biochemistry at Beloit College. In college, I had been a mediocre student because I had an awful memory, yet teachers seemed to simply expect students to memorize things and regurgitate answers for tests. I wanted to be different than those teachers, helping students to develop a love of learning and a joy in asking creative questions.

As a professor, I encouraged students who did poorly on exams but clearly loved working in the lab: “You will be very successful one day! Keep trying and do not worry about exams!” One such student got a job in an entrepreneurial lab and called five years after graduation, saying, “Those stocks they gave me are worth a fortune now!” He retired at age 40. This taught me that love of learning mattered a lot. Grades measure only your performance by a standard. What is important to measure is your desire to learn and your enjoyment of the process. That desire and enjoyment will set you up for success in life and a career. I have encouraged many students who were doing poorly in other classes. In my class I see their excitement about a subject, and assist them to keep at it. Reassurance can have a dramatic effect on their tenacity.

I also realized is that students work better in small groups, discussing and finding hypotheses on their own. Sitting in class for lectures was boring for many of them, as much as I loved to lecture. But when given questions to discuss and figure out on their own, they were involved.

My favorite introductory chemistry text was written by the Dalai Lama, “The Universe in a Single Atom”. A highlight of my career was an invitation to lecture at the Dalai Lama’s Library in Dharamsala, India. Instead of giving a traditional lecture, I divided the audience, half Buddhist monks and the rest tourists, into small groups, and had them discuss the question, “Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?”

To my delight, in about 15 minutes, a group of 5 monks raised their hands, and said “Both!” I happily agreed, and explained that this is how I teach science, and how science is done – think of a hypothesis, gather evidence, discuss with colleagues. After my discussion was over, several monks approached me. “You are the best speaker we have ever had!”

During the decades teaching at the college level, I developed my ideas about how students learn effectively, and how teachers can influence young minds to enjoy and value education.

Memorization and regurgitation are boring and frustrating for many. During my own education, it seemed that the worst teachers had memorized information by reciting it for decades, and they expected us to memorize the same information even when it was out of date. When DNA became the hot topic in biology, most teachers did not know about it, and ignored it.

Questions are more interesting than answers. What makes a good scientist is not the ability to recite old information, but to ask questions and develop hypotheses. So in teaching, I ask the students what questions they have about a topic. In my first Advanced Biochemistry class, I asked the students what questions they had. We selected ten and spent a week exploring each of them.

One of the biggest questions in science for many years has been “what is consciousness?” I developed a course that I taught for eight years where we tried to develop and test hypotheses to find the answer, and explored current articles about what the answer might be. For real science, there is no right answer. There is simply the most accepted current hypothesis. Theories and even laws are periodically found to be incorrect. Once students learn they can advance knowledge with new ideas, science becomes thrilling.

Small group interactions allow student involvement. For developing questions, making hypotheses, finding evidence, and then seeking better hypotheses, small groups can get students involved.

Laboratory, hands-on, experience develops many useful skills beyond book, lecture, and discussion learning. My greatest success in developing Beloit’s biochemistry program was obtaining Federal funding to purchase modern equipment so students could learn the latest techniques for manipulating proteins and DNA. Actually seeing the DNA bands on a gel was thrilling for them.

Each child is an individual. I was fortunate that most of my classes have been small. But even with 30 in a class, I

In conventional public school classes I experienced in Rockford, the teachers have a specific lesson plan for every day, typically teaching the material that will be covered on standardized tests. Bright kids are often bored because they learn rapidly the first time. But for average students, the teachers review the material again, and students are not able to get support for their learning outside of school are sometimes lost and give up hope, often just staring at their cellphones.

So many of the students I saw were bored. Observing students at all grade levels, I found most high school students bored by class and engaged only with their phones. Junior high kids were wrestling with puberty, fighting and teasing each other, and sometimes

But in Montessori, I asked kids to explain their projects, and they proudly helped me understand.

remind students that each of them is an individual who learns in a different way. Some have great memories, some love math, while some are only there to fulfill a requirement. But I also tell them I expect them to help each other, cooperate, and respect their differences.

When I left the college and began teaching in the public schools, what a difficult change it was! K-12 teachers have so many demands on what they teach and how they teach it. It seemed like about half the teachers were still trying to reach their students, but half were discouraged and just surviving until they could retire or find another job.

Many of those teachers reminded me of my high school chemistry class. I had a substitute teacher for the entire year. Each class she would simply read the notes of the chemistry teacher next door. Whenever I asked her to explain something, she would get angry and yell at me to stop interrupting her. The only acceptable question was “will you please read that last sentence again?” After that experience, I hated chemistry. In college, I majored in biochemistry, and suffered through many chemistry classes. It wasn’t until my second year of teaching chemistry in college that I realized it was fun to learn.

sleeping during video presentations. In elementary grades, many students were far behind by third grade, antagonistic to math and unable to read.

But Rockford Public Schools has one Montessori elementary school. And the day I substituted there, it seemed so different. The children all walked in a circle at the start, opening space as each child joined the circle. They all sat quietly then, and each child had the opportunity to make a statement, if they chose. And all of the other students sat quietly and listened intently to what the other children were saying. They clearly cared about each other. Then they got to select which project area they wanted to start their explorations in that day.

The children were happy and engaged and respectful of each other. Students study what they want, they can take a break to something different when they choose, and they get to work with friends or be alone. The whole experience was dramatically different from what I had seen before.

I wandered the classroom, but I was really superfluous. In other elementary schools, I was policing children to see if they were working or if they understood what they were doing. But in Montessori, I asked kids to explain their projects, and they proudly helped

me understand. They knew exactly what they were doing and why. Occasionally kids changed projects. There were rare disagreements, as kids wanted to work alone, or with a special friend. But instead of screaming and tantrums, they went to me or the teacher to get assistance in finding a compromise. “I want to be alone now, but I’ll work with you when I finish this by myself.”

Many teachers in conventional classes are struggling. Many are devoted to the children, and see them suffering, especially when parents are not able to support their children with homework or to attend parent-teacher conferences. But many who have been at it for several years are looking to get out of teaching, discouraged by frustration with the system. However, in the Montessori class, learning looked like fun. The teacher and students were having a blast, and loved learning.

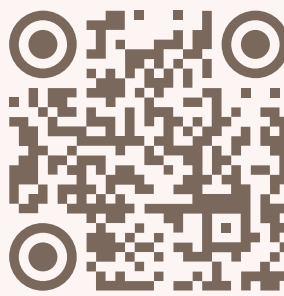
I wish that all adults in this nation, especially school board members, parents, taxpayers, and senior citizens, could have the opportunity to visit and observe a Montessori classroom. How wonderful it would be if everyone started their education enjoying learning, being kind and respectful of others

and themselves. Thanks to Montessori for showing us one way to get there.

Roc Ordman is a Biochemistry Professor Emeritus from Beloit College, and has studied healthspan for more than 40 years. His healthspan newsletter is available for free at nutritioninvestigator.org/newsletter-index. Since retiring, he has spent a year substituting at an elementary school, two years at a high school, and this year he is working for EduStaff substituting at 16 elementary schools.

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I have learned so much and made connections with other Montessorians, around the country and the world, that I would have never been able to do without this program.

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Jump into the Montessori Research Pool!

A new database of participants for researchers to explore



JULIA VOLKMAN

We hear all the time about how research needs to drive our teaching. Everyone is clamoring for evidence-based instruction. But what does that mean for Montessori practitioners? While we have over 100 years of experience with the Montessori method, there is still only a small body of research studies that directly analyze it. (Ed. Note: You can catch up on a lot of the latest research at public-montessori.org/research-and-resources.)

Now let's say you're a researcher who is ready to dive in and study something

about the method. Where do you begin? How do you find schools, teachers, administrators, and/or parents who are willing to participate? That's the question Dr. Kateri Carver, Dr. Susan Zoll, and I asked when we were discussing research projects in the spring of 2023.

The answer we came up with was to create a university-based database where Montessori researchers could look to find participants for their studies. This is different from a database housed with one organization or another. A university-based database reaches Montessorians from all denominations and can be maintained over the long-term. So, we spoke with the powers that be at Dr. Carver's University (University of Wisconsin, River Falls), did some testing and adjusting, and we set one up.

We're very excited to announce that the Montessori Research Pool is live and has already registered over 1,100 potential research participants! Here's how it works.

Anyone who is interested in partici-

pating in Montessori research can sign up by filling out the form linked from the QR code to the right. Signing up does not mean you will automatically be included in a study; it just gives researchers a way to find people who precisely meet their study's focus (e.g., people working with dementia, early childhood, adolescence, in public/private schools, etc.).

Not just any researcher can access the database. First, they need to have approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB). This is a group (usually at a university) that reviews each study to make sure it meets ethical standards and adequately protects the safety of potential study participants. Once a researcher has IRB approval, they can forward it to montresearch@uwrf.edu to gain database access.

I have personally already used the research pool to find Montessori guides to participate in a year-long research study I'm conducting with Dr. Ann Epstein, Dr. Heather Gerker, and Dr. Ian



To participate in Montessori research, point your phone or camera at the QR code above and you'll be linked to the form to fill out.

Thanks in advance!

Becker. We're evaluating the efficacy of an evidence-based approach to mentoring Montessori guides. Once we had IRB approval, it was quick and easy to filter the database and find people who matched our study criteria.

You can help

If we really want the Montessori Research Pool to be helpful in the long-term, we need people to continually spread the word. The 1,100 participants enrolled so far have all signed up because they saw this QR code at the end of a webinar or conference presentation or clicked on the sign-up link they saw in an email. If everyone starts including this code or the form above as a standard footer in their newsletters or closing screen in their presentations, we'll be able to keep the sign-ups coming in! So, please add the Montessori Research Pool to all your communications. Together, we can get the data we need to keep Montessori going strong well into the future.

Julia Volkman is the President and Founder of Maitri Learning and a guest lecturer at the Harvard University (Extension School).



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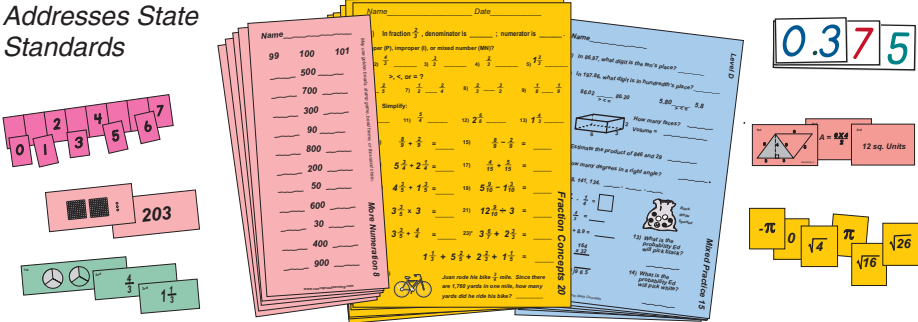


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More voices needed



Whose voice isn't being heard?

MontessoriPublic is a forum to have your voice for public Montessori heard. We have an editorial policy of lifting up perspectives and experiences of contributors from the full range of racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, gender, ability, and economic backgrounds.

In past issues, we have been more successful in this than in this current issue, so we are renewing our call for voices from historically marginalized groups to join us and be heard.

We are always excited to share stories from classroom teachers, coaches, school leaders, families, children in Montessorio classrooms, researchers, and more, reporting from their perspectives in the public Montessori world.

If you're thinking about an article, here are some general guidelines:

How long should it be? Most of the articles in this issue are between 1500 and 2000 words, so you can see how that looks on the page, and how much room you have to tell your story.

What's the deadline? The final deadline for the Fall 2024 issue is **August 31, 2024**, but we would love to get started working with you now—that gives us plenty of time to work together in the editing process.

What about pictures and a short biography? Every article looks better with a nice, high resolution photo helping to tell the story. We also need a high resolution "headshot" for the author images. "High resolution" usually means a file size of 1MB+. Add a short, one-line biography and we're all set.

We are renewing our call for voices from historically marginalized groups to join us and be heard

Will I get paid? Unfortunately not. We want to keep this publication free to the community. Ad revenue covers printing and mailing costs, which means we don't have a budget to pay writers at this time. We appreciate and thank you for adding your work and voice to this effort.

Send your submissions to David Ayer: editor@montessoripublic.org

The public calendar

April 12–14

National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector

EQUITY • ACCESS • SUSTAINABILITY
LEESBURG, VIRGINIA

September 28–29

Montessori Public Policy Initiative

ADVOVACY CONFERENCE
LEESBURG, VIRGINIA

October 24–27

Montessori Foundation/ International Montessori Council

28TH MF/IMC CONFERENCE
ATLANTA, GEORGIA

2025

February 14–17

AMI-USA

MONTESSORI EXPERIENCE
TULSA, OKLAHOMA

March 13–16

AMS

THE MONTESSORI EVENT
DENVER, COLORADO

Make sure your Montessori event is featured in our next issue – Send it to us!

Deadline for submission: **August 31, 2024.**

Be sure to include the date, organization, event title, city and state

Email to: editor@montessoripublic.org

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