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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 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 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 though, '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 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 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

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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-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 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

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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 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.

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 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.

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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 drowning 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.

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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

OSBORN School District #8

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.