

Ten lessons in ten years at Magnolia

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



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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?



A sense of shared vision

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

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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 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 parents/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.

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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.

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