

Public Montessori Education in Puerto Rico

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



JUAN JOSÉ RODRIGUEZ FERNÓS

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.



Un aula típica en la mayor concentración de Montessori público en los EE. UU.

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 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 developed 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 offered 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 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 ap-

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proach 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.

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