

One voice *can* start a movement in Arizona

Coalition-building and persistent advocacy prevail



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“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 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 at right.

Powell took the research one step further by analyzing the pass rate of students who had been in Montes-

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sori 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.

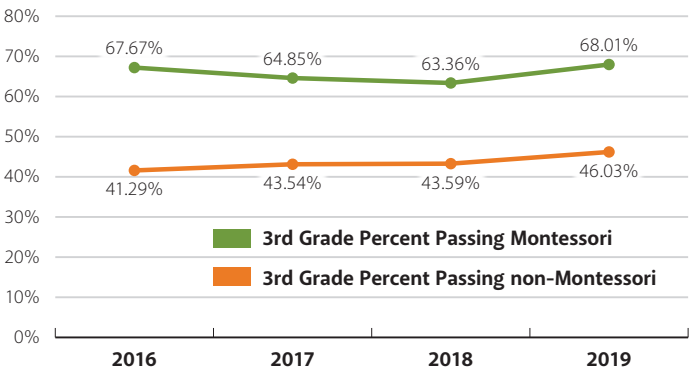
While Powell was doing the research, Khalsa continued to hold regular advocacy meetings. Margo O'Neill, the head of school at Villa Montessori in Phoenix, and Khalsa both testified before the Arizona State Board of Education during its public comment period last summer. They shared their concerns that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

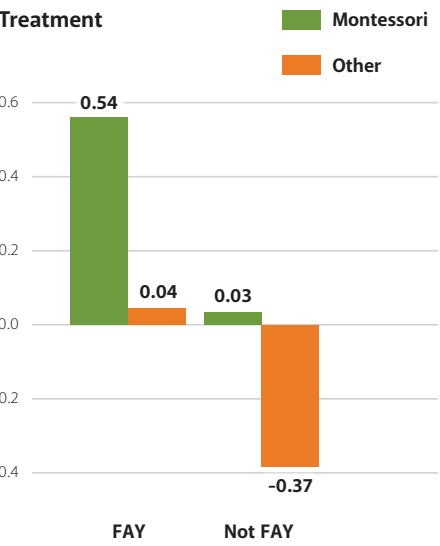
This journey has shown that change can start with one voice. Khalsa lifted her one voice; it soon became two, then three, and then many more. She partnered with Montessori allies—other heads of school around the state—and with lobbying organizations in Arizona and the US. In the process, we discovered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

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



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.

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