

# Access for all in the Research Triangle

## 30 years of public Montessori in Durham



**DAVID AYER WITH KENGIE BASS AND RITA RATHBONE**

Durham Public Schools (DPS) is expanding its 30-year old system of public Montessori schools, adding a new middle school this year. DPS is a diverse, merged city and county school district of about 30,000 in North Carolina's dynamic and growing Research Triangle area. *MontessoriPublic* sat down with the Director of Magnet and Choice Programs Dr. Kengie Bass and District Magnet Specialist Dr. Rita Rathbone to hear about where the program came from and where it's going.

**MontessoriPublic:** Tell us the DPS public Montessori story.

**Rita Rathbone:** Durham Public Schools is like a lot of southern school districts that integrated much later than people might imagine.

People know about integration in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. But true integration in the South was more complicated. There were often multiple school districts, at the city and county level. Those districts were ostensibly integrated, but of course they had mirroring demographics: The city schools were often 90% students of color, and the county schools were 90% white. So they both "integrated," but they were separate entities and the end result was functionally segregation.

In the 90s a lot of that broke down, especially in North Carolina. We have 100 counties and we're down to 115



*Delighted in Durham*

school districts—only 15 places where we still have that city versus county set-up. The merges were about redundancy and financial efficiency but with a strong undertone of racial politics, naturally. Magnet programs were created to maintain diverse, integrated schools in the new system. Leaders at the time looked at the research about Montessori and chose the model for two former city schools in Durham. These were small neighborhood schools with physical buildings well suited to a Montessori environment.

So we began this big experiment with Montessori in the 90s. Those two schools, Morehead and George Watts, survived the transition and grew and thrived and became extremely popular. Around 2010 there was a move to extend the program, and Lakewood Middle Montessori School opened. Last year we added Little River, an elementary program, and this year we're adding another middle school at Lucas.

Durham is a growing community—adding an average of ten people

a day every day for the last ten years. Last year, the district launched Growing Together, Durham's first reassignment plan in three decades—our district's attempt to solve a lot of issues with that growth. We reconsidered all our magnet programming. We expanded Montessori because we wanted every magnet program to offer a truly different educational experience and instructional approach. Not just window dressing, not just a "theme". You shouldn't have to go to a magnet school to get arts education or STEM—that should be available everywhere. Our community wasn't getting excited about that kind magnet.

So we're only going to have magnet programs that offer a truly different approach, where hard research shows student benefits. And the district is majority of students of color, so we wanted research that shows that it benefits the students we primarily teach. Montessori fits that bill.

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So that's where we landed: we narrowed our focus of magnet programming and we decided, based on everything our community was telling us, to expand our Montessori programs. We've expanded and added a third, much larger elementary school in a different part of the county. Little River Elementary will have twenty-seven classrooms when we're all finished—bigger than our other two elementary Montessori schools combined. The same thing with Lucas Middle School: it will be twice the size of Lakewood Middle. We are greatly expanding the ability to pursue Montessori because of that long track record of success. We know it's something that our community values.

**MP:** Anything to add, Dr. Bass?

**Dr. Kengie Bass:** Dr. Rathbone did a great job! I'm new in the district—it will be a year next month.

**MP:** And before that?

**KB:** I was previously in Wake County Public Schools, next door in Raleigh. That's where I started my education journey. And then I left and was in higher education, and then I've circled back to K-12 here in Durham.

**P:** Can either of you say more about the benefits of Montessori?

**RR:** Sure. There is a wonderful book that showcases a lot of that research (*Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*, by Dr. Angeline Lillard), and the National Center has a great summary of the outcomes research on their website. And we know that a lot of the benefits are social-emotional as well as academic.

One thing that speaks to me is understanding that Maria's Montessori's work started with children that were considered "cast-offs," if you will, at

the time—developmentally disabled and high-poverty children. So the Montessori method was built that way and specifically can benefit marginalized students or students that otherwise struggle to learn. And I value the fact that we now have science to back up what Maria Montessori came to understand simply by observing children and making note of what they do and what happens with them.

Them, with magnet schools, you have to make a program that's desirable. Durham is a very diverse community with high levels of education and high child poverty at the same time. We are home to Duke University of course, as well as North Carolina Central University, one of the country's largest HBCUs and the first public law school open to African American students. We have a high rate of advanced degrees, and we have students speaking 90 different languages in their homes. Montessori appeals to highly educated, progressive parents, but it also greatly benefits the other significant demographic of children we serve: students coming from very low-resourced neighborhoods or families. That makes it really powerful and a good fit for our community.

**KB:** For me, there are benefits that I see just going into the Montessori schools and observing. First is the hands-on learning that undergirds the entire philosophy. Students are rolling up their sleeves and really working, learning through their hands and through kinesthetic learning that benefits students from all ages. Then, the mixed-age classroom is a benefit in those soft skills because it allows students to build relationships with students at different ages. It allows our older students to be mentors. You learn by collaborating with others that are different from you, whether it's the age difference, or the diversity of our DPS classrooms.

And then that uninterrupted work

period: It allows our students to truly get engaged in their learning and not have to turn the page. They really get to start a task and see it to its end, as opposed to the regimented traditional school setting where after 45 minutes you hear a bell and everyone grabs their things and they go on to the next thing or they go on to the next subject. Our students can develop a passion, and fall in love with what they're learning about, and they get to see it to an end.

**MP:** You sound like you have a good handle Montessori! Did you know about it before you came to Durham?

**KB:** I did not! I learned because our teachers are getting trained on this and I wanted to learn more, so I sat in through several of their training sessions. And of course that piqued my interest so I started reading about it myself. Then you want to see it in action, and what better place than to go to any of our Montessori schools and see it, whether it be Morehead, which has been doing this since the mid 90s, or Little River, which started last year. Being able to see how it's working, how it's all functioning—I learned on the ground myself.

**MP:** You sound like a bit of a convert.

**KB:** Yes, I am. The traditional public education mindset is more teacher-centered or teacher-driven. Moving from just student-centered to student-led or student-driven can be tough for adults to relinquish that level of control. And then coming from an administrative lens, you know sometimes it might be difficult to say, "OK, teacher or adult in the room, how are you really measuring what's going on? How are you keeping control over that?"

But the students, once they've gotten used to it, it's self-directed, it's student-directed. They're going to their

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shelves, they're choosing the stuff they know they can do. They have these tasks and it's a well-oiled machine and it's really beautiful to see in action in a fully functioning Montessori classroom.

**RR:** My background is in visual arts education. And Maria Montessori indirectly is an important figure in the history of arts education because she inspired some key people to kind of build this idea of visual arts education. So I did have intentional study of her through that lens.

But my conversion process, if you will, had a lot to do with my own personal struggles. I'm dyslexic, so my first times observing Montessori math lessons and understanding, for the first time, math concepts that I had always struggled with—that was an “aha!” moment for me. I thought, “Wow, if someone had taught me math this way as a child, it would have saved a whole lot of tears and heartache and pain and suffering throughout my education.” It's hard to see Montessori in action by expert practitioners and not see the value.

**MP:** What are some challenges you found in implementing Montessori?

**KB:** There's the micro level, unique to DPS, and then there's the more macro level of doing public Montessori at all. On the micro level, those parents who know about Montessori, who have that social or cultural capital, or they have the neighbors that talk to them about it, they know about Montessori. It's not even a race thing, it's a socio-economic thing. So the program is in high demand because those who know, know. And they're flooding our schools trying to get those seats. So we might not be reaching all of the students that represent a cross-section of the district.

Then there are finances. Montessori can be expensive at the start, in terms

of the resources, the manipulatives, the tables and everything else. So that that's a challenge. Our Superintendent Dr. Anthony Lewis, who came here from Lawrence, Kansas, where they have a great Montessori program, was able to mobilize funding for two adults in the classroom. It's a big deal for a Superintendent to say, “this is a priority.”

**RR:** Digging a little more into that, sometimes Montessori structures aren't compatible with district funding structures or state expectations. The two adults, for example, or the fact that pre-K students don't count in our state funding allotment. North Carolina doesn't allow us to have three-year-olds, so we already can't do that. And funding for 230 or so Kindergartners has to cover 456 PK-K children.

Then, we're not getting any funding for an instructional assistant. It takes the ability to access local resources. And it doesn't fit within the other funding structures such as Head Start and other Health and Human Services funding streams. So we have to charge families, using a sliding scale, to help to defray those costs and we still have to use local funding streams

Ongoing costs after that point are actually not significantly more if you can put some strategic effort into physical materials, classroom furniture and some solid resources for capacity building, modest budget. You can maintain a Montessori program with a pretty small investment of maintenance over time. We did it for 30 years with just the modest resources that our district had available—we maintained two Montessori elementary schools without any outside funding. If it's done strategically, it can be a relatively small investment.

**MP:** For a district thinking of launching or expanding a Montessori program, what would you want them to know?

**RR:** You have to make sure you have to know your community. Wake County, right next door, a much larger district with similar demographics, has only ever had one public Montessori. So it's been really interesting to see the demand and interest for Montessori in our community.

Understanding your community and being prepared for a lot of parent education is key. You may need to gauge if the demand and interest is there, or build the demand and get parents to understand the model.

**KB:** When I think about lessons learned or things that other districts or schools should consider, you have to start with identifying what your non-negotiables are. What is part of the Montessori philosophy? What are we just not going to budge on? Folks have to realize, recognize, and understand that traditional public school isn't in complete alignment with the Montessori philosophy. There are a lot of ways to cut corners and you end up putting the name Montessori on something, but it's not true Montessori. You need to be able to identify principles that you are 100% all in on: multi-age classrooms, uninterrupted work time, and so on.

And you definitely have to build demand with parents by telling the story of what Montessori truly is. If you don't know Montessori, you may have an incorrect idea of what you think it might be. So you have to be very dynamic with your presentation and think about how you can build that demand.

In our district it was important to plan for equity of access, building in the policies, looking at transportation, and so on. How are you going to reach all your stakeholders, all demographics, all subgroups, giving them equitable access to a Montessori education? You have to be mindful about that in the forefront before you start anything else.

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Then the training is important as well!

**MP:** How are you handling that?

**RR:** We were lucky to find the right people and the right training center.

They came in person, and brought an understanding of what that journey is for a teacher. The real value of Montessori training is it re-professionalizes a teaching force that education policy has done a lot to de-professionalize. It brings back the decision-making aspect of teaching. The teacher is carefully crafting a prepared environment, assessing each student individually and making decisions and choices.

It is truly a transformational journey for an individual, and it happens in stages and steps.

Some of these teachers had a whole range of emotions of their beloved school being changed or being challenged. We included veteran teachers in the process even if they were near retirement.

We wanted anyone who wanted to take this journey and make this transformation to do it. And people came truly from so many different places. But having trainers that really treated it as a journey, and deeply understood that transformational experience—and us as a district having the patience to allow that to happen—I can understand why district administrators might struggle with standing back and allowing this at times messy journey to happen. But it's a complete change of who that person is as a practitioner and how they practice.

**MP:** What's next for Durham? You have waiting lists, you have people eager to get in. Will there be expansion?

**RR:** No, we have reached capacity. Lucas might be the largest Public Montessori middle school in the country once we get it fully enrolled at 700 students.

So I don't think we're expanding any further. We're focused on improving what we have.

**KB:** Exactly, and ensuring fidelity of programming so that each school gives the same experience. So that if I go to Watts, I have the same experience as I would at Little River. There's no, "Well, this Montessori school is better than that one." We're in full implementation of our district plan, and we want to see the outcomes. We want to be doing what we say we're going to do and then looking at how these students are performing based on what on what we think is a very strong philosophy and pedagogical style.

**MP:** This all makes me wonder: Why isn't there more Montessori? What keeps other districts from adopting this great model.

**RR:** I suspect that for district leaders, it's a struggle to understand. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of making square pegs fit into round holes, and I'm not sure they are convinced of the return on investment.

But in this post-COVID world, we're seeing the value of social emotional development for students and those other, "non academic" aspects of child development that happen in schools. And that sense of community. And how important those are, maybe even more important than just straight up academics.

So I think it's just painting a picture of how this could be the answer. But for district leaders, the way we sometimes think in education, we're looking at all these different challenges in isolation and not always recognizing that they're all related and connected.

**KB:** From a district perspective, the startup costs are high and so that's a concern. But the other piece is that the Montessori philosophy is different. And it can be tough for adults to let go

of some control. They're used to being in control of every aspect of it and not really trusting that students are going to get from A-Z. But we know that they may zigzag, but they're going to get there and probably have a deeper understanding.

It doesn't fit into a box and it's not supposed to. And so we just need to get the word out that this is the best way to be student-centered and to create a learning environment that is rich and powerful. It's so much better! You're going to learn a lot more than what you can measure by bubbling in an A on a on a bubble sheet.

But I like it. I'm a child of the 80s, so it reminds me of *Karate Kid* you know, where Daniel Sun had to learn the karate and learn all these different pieces. And then he put it all together. And he wound up going above and beyond.

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*Dr. Kengie Bass is the Director of Magnet and Choice Programs Durham Public Schools in Durham, North Carolina .*

*Dr. Rita Rathbone is the District Magnet Specialist for Durham Public Schools.*

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