

Innovation schools for Montessori flexibility

The model offers great power and calls for great responsibility



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What is the vision for Montessori in the Public Sector?

The Montessori model is rooted in an understanding of human development in which children grow, thrive, flourish, and learn in a specifically prepared environment, guided by adults trained to implement the method.

Montessori outcomes for children in executive function, academic achievement, literacy, love of learning, and general well-being are well-established. But to achieve these outcomes, Montessori schools need the sustained flexibility to implement their curriculum, teacher preparation, and educational approach.

Flexibility to implement with fidelity enables success and increases each school's control of its own destiny. The most effective Montessori holds to the model, with mixed-aged classrooms, materials in the environment, and trained staff.

Without the flexibility to make choices about its structure, a school may be limited in its ability to be true to the Montessori model. Without the flexibility to train educators, use Montessori materials and curriculum, and structure multi-age environments, schools wrestle with the question of when a Montessori school stops being a Montessori school. And without full implementation, schools won't be able to realize the outcomes research shows are possible.

District public Montessori schools can experience all-too-frequent changes within their districts. Shifts in superintendent, board members, central office staff, and district policy can affect schools' ability to consistently implement Montessori with fidelity.

Maybe a district releases a new staffing model that deprives a school of a key Montessori-certified teacher. Maybe a new common schedule, shifting curricular mandates, required professional development, or other district expectations don't support effective Montessori implementation. Throughout the country, schools are faced with a series of external pressures and expectations that press against the core of their work implementing Montessori.

Some adaptation is necessary for public Montessori schools, which must operate consistently with state law and state expectations. But the immediacy and breadth of potential district limitations on a school's flexibility can make it hard for schools to stay true to the Montessori model and thrive.

So how do public Montessori schools ensure they can implement true Montessori models? Right now, most schools operate somewhere on a continuum.

"Innovation School" is an emerging model that can mean different things in different states. Here we use the term broadly to refer to district schools that remain responsible for meeting district goals but have negotiated protected flexibility to implement their individualized models. They are typically district public schools supervised by a partner nonprofit with expanded and protected flexibilities allowing schools to make decisions about staffing, budget, scheduling, and curriculum.

There can be successful schools in each of those categories, but it is easier

to implement with fidelity and to practice continuous improvement if you have more concrete flexibility protections. And with those protections has to come great responsibility for outcomes.

What expectations should come with guaranteed flexibility?

Flexibility requires that schools hold themselves accountable to student outcomes. Schools must demonstrate that a fully implemented Montessori model leads to student success. With the district or authorizer, schools need to articulate clear outcome goals for a high-quality Montessori education.

Schools must consider the measures for academic achievement, of course, but also executive function, independence and engagement, social and emotional wellbeing, active citizenship, alumni success, and more. How will your school measure the academic growth and success of its learners both in terms of the Montessori curriculum and more traditional standards-based measures? How will you demonstrate the growth of the whole child and their ability to care for themselves and others? How will you provide data on how your learners care for their community and are agents of peace and justice? How will you help your district or authorizers understand the value of Montessori education through concrete measures of student success?

Elm City Montessori School, in New Haven, Connecticut, is a unique model of charter school with Innovation School flexibility. It is the only district-authorized charter in the state—the 19 other programs are authorized by the State Board of Education. Its teach-

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No Special Flexibility	Informal Flexibility	Policy Flexibility	Innovation School
District sets policy for Montessori school just like any other school	Based on relationships/history, Montessori school may get flexibility in some areas	Superintendent or district board has formalized idea that a Montessori school has flexibility in some areas	Formal, defined flexibility in key areas in exchange for meeting district goals

ers are district employees, and its students are district students. The school reached agreement with the district and the state under which it has an independent board and is responsible to the New Haven School District and the State of Connecticut for meeting ambitious performance goals.

- **Calendar and Schedule:** the school sets its own calendar and schedule and can adapt them to the needs of Montessori education
- **Curriculum:** the school has the ability to implement a full Montessori curriculum
- **Staffing:** the principal is hired by the independent board and all teachers (who are unionized employees of the school district) are selected by the school. Through an agreement with the district’s union, the school pays teachers about ten percent more than other city teachers in exchange for items including a slightly longer school day
- **Budget:** using the resources generated by students enrolled on the campus, the school has the flexibility to spend this revenue as best needed to support school operations

The operation of the school in these ways has led to great results for students:

- Increased achievement for students on internal Montessori-based and standardized assessments
- Stronger metrics for social and

emotional wellbeing for students

- Increase student attendance and belonging
- Retention of students from Primary into Erdkinder/Middle School
- Retention of staff
- Pathways and Learning Communities for Assistants and Guides

Similar structures can support other schools that operate as Innovation Schools. The process for becoming an Innovation School varies from state to state, but the key document creating an Innovation School is a contract between the school district and a partner nonprofit. Innovation Schools feature:

- Defined flexibility where the schools can make decisions about programming and continually improve
- A performance contract where the school is responsible for meeting goals set in partnership with the district
- Empowered educators who are invested in the mission of the school
- A community partnership nonprofit that provides consistency and helps make sure the school is meeting its goals

These structures allow for faithful, thoughtful Montessori education in schools that are also vibrant, crucial parts of their districts. There is **great power**—the flexibility to implement a school that meets community needs consistent with Montessori principles—and **great responsibility**—the

need to meet ambitious, holistic performance goals set in partnership with the school district. Like the child focused on the balancing walk along the ellipse, or the older learner using the Racks and Tubes for Long Division, schools with flexibility and autonomy are allowed the concentration to work toward their continuous improvement. With the obstacles removed, schools can focus on the sustainability and fidelity of the Montessori learning that our children deserve.

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