

Building public Montessori together

Together, we're stronger than ever before



SARA SUCHMAN

With the NCMPS Public Montessori Conference just barely in the rearview mirror, I want to share some highlights for those who were not able to join us and reflections for those who were.

Gathering a national community

In April, educators, school leaders, researchers, advocates, and partners gathered in Milwaukee for the 2026 Public Montessori Conference.

Together, we represented 90 schools from 33 states and Washington, DC.

In the room were:

- **132 teachers and assistants**
- **25 Montessori coaches and level leads**
- **66 school-site administrators**
- **16 district leaders, including two superintendents**
- **23 people working alongside schools in research, policy, teacher training, advocacy, and support organizations**

Across the **131 organizations and local education agencies represented**, roughly half had attended one of our previous conferences while half were joining for the first time.

Participants traveled from across the country—from our furthest guests at Chinook Montessori in Fairbanks, Alaska, to our wonderful hosts in Milwaukee.

Across these roles and geographies was the shared experience of providing Montessori education as a public good,

using public dollars, and with public accountability. This commonality matters. Along with our awe of children and learning, it brings us together and makes this community powerful.

The state of public Montessori

The broader landscape of public Montessori helps explain both the promise and the challenge.

The Montessori Census was one of NCMPS's first projects when the organization was founded in 2012. At the time, no one knew how many public Montessori schools existed, where they were located, or what impact the movement was having nationally. It is difficult to come together when you cannot find each other!

Today, the Census has become the closest thing our field has to a shared source of truth and remains NCMPS's most cited resource by researchers, policymakers, and media.

Because of the Census, we know that there are currently **596 public Montessori schools and programs across 43 states and Washington, DC.**

Of these:

- **230 are charter schools**
- **366 are district schools**
- **Including 85 magnet programs**

Together, these schools serve just shy of 200,000 children who, taken as a whole—though not necessarily in every individual school—are majority children of color and are as likely as not to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

These schools share a national identity, but they do not all share the same access to community and support.

62 schools are located within the **12 districts nationwide that host five or more public Montessori pro-**

grams, including Milwaukee and its seven schools.

Meanwhile:

- **118 district schools are the only Montessori program in their district**
- **Almost all 230 charter schools operate as stand-alone programs**

Building and convening this national ecosystem is core to NCMPS's work. There is strength in camaraderie and power in numbers.

Why a public Montessori conference

When NCMPS launched this conference in 2022, it was not because wonderful Montessori conferences do not already exist. They do. But there was no national space designed specifically around the realities of public schools. And context matters.

When we say **public Montessori**, we mean:

- **Tuition-free access** — even when early childhood still requires creative solutions while universal pre-K continues to expand.
- **Open enrollment** — all children are welcome, and when demand exceeds seats, admissions happen by lottery or, better yet, we create more seats.
- **Public accountability** — to standards, assessments, accreditation systems, and community expectations.

We are engaged in a very particular kind of work. We are building child-centered learning environments inside public systems. We work within standards, accountability structures, transportation systems, enrollment pressures, budgets, and shifting policy

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landscapes while holding tightly to our awe of children and their agency, concentration, curiosity, and joyful flourishing.

What we experienced in Milwaukee

Friday morning, every conference participant boarded a bus and headed to one of Milwaukee Public Schools' seven Montessori schools.

Participants spent the morning visiting classrooms, talking with school teams, observing practice, and learning directly from remarkable teachers and engaged students.

The rest of the weekend continued in that same spirit.

We learned more about Milwaukee's public Montessori journey, gathered in interest groups, shared meals, explored ideas through sixteen concurrent sessions, were inspired by Jacqui Miller and Paul K. Chappell on Peace Literacy, and closed with a moving plenary led by Regina Dyson and Dr. Nicole

Evans.

Generosity, humility, and a willingness to support one another.

At a moment when public education can feel defined by uncertainty, political strain, staffing shortages, and exhaustion, Montessori classrooms continue to offer spaces where children are trusted, capable, and deeply respected.

None of this work is finished. Contexts differ. Constraints are real. And for many schools, the challenges ahead are significant.

But what was visible in Milwaukee was something worth holding onto:

A growing national community committed not to perfection, agreement, or ease but to children, education, and doing difficult work thoughtfully and together.

Thank you to Milwaukee Public Schools for hosting us so generously. Thank you to our presenters, keynote speakers, facilitators, school communities, and the small but mighty NCMPS team who made the gathering possible.

A world of public Montessori is being built. Together. By all of us.

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