

From “Montesorta” to Montessori

A transformational journey



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The transformation of Parkside Elementary into Parkside Montessori was far more than a shift in curriculum—it became a story of a community embracing a profound cultural change. What began, as the parents fondly joked, as a state of “Montesorta” evolved into the intentional, structured beauty of an authentic Montessori environment.

Parkside’s journey stood as a joyful and instructive example of what is possible when vision, collaboration, and an unwavering belief in the child come together. It was also, importantly, a story that could not have been written without the partnership of families, a dedicated PTA, inspired teacher leaders, and the steady guidance of an exceptional Montessori coach.

A leap of faith: choosing authenticity

Every meaningful transformation begins with courage, and Parkside’s journey was no exception. The early years required honest reflection—acknowledging that while the school had embraced Montessori in spirit, implementation had been uneven.

What followed was a collective commitment to move beyond “sorta” and toward something deeply intentional.

This work was not carried out by one individual alone. It was supported by district leadership, guided by a strong instructional vision, and brought to life by a passionate, teacher-led, Montessori Leadership Team (MLT) and a

staff willing to rethink long-held practices. At the heart of this shift was also the school’s Montessori coach, whose expertise, clarity, and steady presence helped translate philosophy into daily practice.

Equally essential were Parkside’s families and PTA, who leaned into the transformation with trust and enthusiasm. Their support created the conditions for change to take root and flourish.

Crafting the prepared environment

At the center of Parkside’s transformation was the intentional design of the prepared environment.

Classrooms were reimaged to prioritize uninterrupted work cycles, allowing students to enter deep states of concentration. Materials became accessible, complete, and beautifully displayed—inviting children into purposeful engagement without unnecessary barriers. Child-sized furniture and real tools reinforced a powerful message: this was a space built for children, where they were capable and trusted. Practical life activities, gardening, and food preparation grounded learning in authenticity and purpose.

The environment also became richer and more connected to the natural world. Natural materials, plants, and sensory experiences supported whole-child development, while mixed-age groupings fostered mentorship, leadership, and collaboration. Classrooms evolved into vibrant micro-communities where students learned not only academic skills, but also how to live and work alongside one another with respect.

Importantly, Parkside made intentional decisions about what to minimize. Technology was used thought-

fully rather than pervasively, and while classrooms were alive with activity, they remained orderly, calm, and purposeful.

The adult transformation: from instructor to guide

One of the most profound shifts occurred not in the materials, but in the adults.

Teachers moved from being directors of learning to observers and guides. This required unlearning traditional practice—stepping back from constant instruction, resisting the urge to interrupt, and replacing external praise with strategies that fostered intrinsic motivation.

Instead, educators worked hard to lean into observation, using it as their primary tool for understanding each child’s needs. They cultivated calm, warm classroom presences and delivered precise, intentional lessons. Errors were reframed as opportunities for growth, and interactions with students were grounded in respect and curiosity.

This transformation was made possible through sustained professional learning, thoughtful collaboration within the MLT, and the ongoing coaching that supported teachers in translating theory into practice. The result was a staff that not only understood Montessori more deeply, but embodied it.

The flourishing child

As the adults and environments shifted, so too did the children.

Students became more independent, less reliant on adult approval, and more deeply engaged in meaningful work. Classrooms filled with the un-

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mistakable signs of authentic Montessori learning: joy, concentration, and purposeful activity. Children initiated their own work, persisted through challenges, and completed full cycles of activity. They collaborated naturally, offered help to peers, and resolved conflicts with words and respect.

Perhaps most striking was the development of executive function skills—planning, reflection, and sustained focus—that would serve them far beyond the classroom. These were not just students completing assignments; they were learners developing agency, confidence, and a genuine love of learning.

A strong foundation for sustainability

Behind the scenes, Parkside ensured that its transformation was supported by clear systems and structures. Strategic planning became core to cycles of continuous improvement—moving from hopes to collective actions, and allowing the school to track progress and maintain focus. This balance—between the joy of the classroom and the clarity of systems—proved essential. It ensured that Montessori was not simply an initiative, but a sustainable, evolving model of practice.

The first fruits of the journey

A powerful milestone in Parkside’s journey came with the promotion of its first cohort of 8th-grade students who were the pioneers of the school’s expansion. These students moved on

not only with academic readiness but with independence, confidence, and social responsibility. As they continued into high school, they offered early evidence of the long-term impact of a Montessori education—demonstrating that this work was not only meaningful in the moment, but enduring.

A community effort, a shared success

Parkside’s transformation was, at its core, a community story.

It was the story of teachers willing to grow, of leadership willing to listen and adapt, and of a Montessori coach who provided clarity and direction throughout the process. It was the story of a PTA and parent community that trusted the journey and invested in its success.

Together, they created something far greater than a program—they built a culture.

Key takeaways for the Montessori community

Parkside’s journey offered several important lessons for schools considering a similar path:

- **Start with honesty.** Acknowledge where you are before defining where you want to go.
- **Invest in people.** Transformation depends on teachers, leaders, and coaching working in alignment.
- **Design the environment intentionally.** The prepared environment is foundational, not optional.
- **Shift adult roles.** Lasting change

happens when adults rethink their role.

- **Engage the community.** Families and parent organizations are essential partners.
- **Stay the course.** Deep change takes time, but the results are worth it.

Parkside’s story ultimately demonstrated what can happen when a school dares to move beyond “Montesorta” and fully embrace Montessori. It was a celebration of growth, partnership, and the extraordinary potential that unfolds when children are given the time, space, and trust to thrive.

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