INSIGHT FROM
MontessoriPublic.org
BRINGING MONTESSORI INTO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION IN PRINT AND ONLINE • EXCERPTED FROM: **FALL 2026 (VOL. 11, #1)**

From government contracts to Montessori

There's more to Montessori than knowing the curriculum

PAMELA TAPSCOTT
WITH **DAVID AYER**

Not everyone who stands ready to support public Montessori with their time and energy comes from an education background, or has much experience with Montessori. In fact, sometimes that outsider perspective might be just what we need.

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector's newest board member, Pamela Tapscott, came to NCMPS after retiring from a 30-year career working with government contracts at Mathematica, a prominent social science research firm that works primarily with government agencies. *MontessoriPublic* sat down with Pamela to hear how she got involved with NCMPS and what she brings to the organization.

MontessoriPublic: Hello, Pamela—thanks for taking some time to speak with me.

Pamela Tapscott: Happy to do it. But I think this will probably be the shortest interview you've done because I don't have a lot of Montessori stories.

MP: It doesn't have to be a Montessori story! What's your story?

PT: After I earned my graduate degree at American University, I got an internship in federal government contracting. I really didn't know what I wanted to do! But I was prepared to do something in the government contract space.

So I went to work for the U.S. Office of Personnel Management *[Ed.: The USOPM is essentially the federal government's HR department]*. From there, I went to the Health Resources and Services Administration *[Ed.: HRSA manages health care for people who are uninsured, isolated or medically vulnerable]*, doing health related contract work for evaluations and that sort of thing.

But eventually my work with brought me to Mathematica, where I was in charge of the government contracts group.

MP: What does Mathematica do?

PT: It's a social science research organization. They do big research projects to give the federal government information for policy evaluations and decisions about huge government policies and initiatives—things like AIDS policy, Medicare, and AFDC. I worked there for 30 years. I really liked working to solve contractual problems so we could make a difference in the world.

MP: And Montessori?

PT: You know, even before I got married I met (current NCMPS Board Chair) Monique O'Grady, and she started talking to me about Montessori. And she may have talked to me about them when our kids were growing up, because her children, as you know, were very happy with their public Montessori education in Arlington.

But to be honest it just didn't resonate at the time. We live in McLean, Virginia, and one reason was because they have really good schools. So I said, well, that problem's solved. And my son had great opportunities here. He rowed in the crew team. He was in the symphonic band, which is really great, and he had great teachers. Fortunately, he was a really good test taker, but he didn't love school.

So when Monique asked me about NCMPS, I had just retired and I said, "Oh, okay, well how much time is involved? And what is this again?" I really didn't know about Montessori schools.

But when I went to the NCMPS Public Montessori Conference in Milwaukee earlier this year, my mind was blown. I was shocked by the amount of compassion, the warmth, and how much people cared about Montessori schools. I realized that my son would have had a much better experience in a Montessori school.

My husband and I have always been proponents of education. And I said to my son once, "You know, when you graduate, when you go to college…" thinking it was foregone, and he said, "Well, mom, maybe I don't want to go to college."

And I think he would've had a different experience in Montessori. When he puts his mind to learning something, when he has questions, when he can investigate and do things on his own, I feel like it would have been perfect for him. Right now he's doing just fine, but he does just fine at the things that he likes to do. And Montessori offers that experience for all children. That's what I discovered.

So that's my Montessori story.

MP: Did he go to college?

PT: He went to George Washington University for a year and decided it just wasn't the place for him. So he did not graduate, but you know, we think that at some point he will go.

It has to be something that he wants to do. We can't push him. It has to be what he wants to study. I mean, that's the kind of kid he is, which is why I

continues >

think Montessori schools would have been better for him.

And it's one of those moments when you say to yourself, that's where I failed. That's the thing I failed at. He would say he did many more things that were good, but I think he could have had a different experience.

MP: I feel like I should say, you didn't fail him! First of all, you believed in education, and in him, and you sought out the best schools you could. And it sounds like there wasn't a Montessori option where you were. That's why you're doing what you're doing now, to make that more available for more children.

PT: Hindsight is always 20/20 vision.

MP: Right?

PT: So I know about Montessori now, and I'm also able to help him out in other ways. So that is something. And I feel like he's taught me a lot. You know, learning goes two ways. I feel like I've learned a lot from him.

MP: What was schooling like for you growing up?

PT: My grandmother and grandfather had ten children and I was the first in the family to get a college degree. My mom really pushed me to go to school, even though she didn't have a high school diploma.

I went to Cardozo High School in DC. I was a majorette in the marching band and our band director Robert Gill took us up to Norfolk State University. I'd never been to a college campus. I got there and I said, I want to go to college. I went to Wilberforce University and then American University, and ultimately Mathematica. And at Mathematica I could work on problems I really cared about.

PT: So it sounds like both you and your son were at your most engaged in activities you really cared about. And now you're supporting Montessori. I don't think that's something unusual about the two of you—I think lots of kids, really most kids and most people, are like that, and Montessori just helps them live that out.

So what do you bring to NCMPS from that experience?

PT: My area of expertise is not the Montessori, although it's interesting to me, but more how we can make it happen. There are a lot of programs, such as charter schools, that the Department of Education funds. Well, not in the current climate, but that could change in a few years. But that could be OK for us because we could use the time.

MP: Does NCMPS have some work to do?

PT: Well, the government grants and contracts involved are highly specialized and complex, and take advance planning. You can't just see the RFP or come out in the Federal Register and decide, let's write a proposal for this.

You've got to have some sense of the evaluation criteria. But if you wait until the RFP is released, it's already too late. There's everybody else out there who knew it was coming, and they've started to write, and they have processes and procedures in place.

So an organization like NCMPS has to have people who can write proposals in a way that will be responsive to the RFP. And we'll need processes and procedures in place to show where the money's spent, how it's spent, and that it's for the benefit of this project, not for a different project or anything else.

MP: And we could stand to tighten up?

PT: I've seen people over the years working with government contracts not understanding that the words written on that contract mean a very, specific thing. And you can find yourself in trouble. So now's the time to be thinking about processes and procedures, and understanding the rules and regulations.

MP: So when we're ready to apply, we look like the other people applying. We don't look like amateurs.

PT: Right.

MP: This is where I think it helps to have an outside perspective. We can find Montessori people for our board. But who is going to tell us what we don't even know we need to know?

PT: Well, I'm enjoying it. You know, now that I'm retired, I feel like I'm busy all the time.

But this gives me the opportunity to think about the work that I did for 30 years and still stay sort of relevant.

MP: Well, we appreciate you.

Pamela Tapscott serves on the Board of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

David Ayer is the Director of Communications at the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

MontessoriPublic

MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

Subscribe at montessoripublic.org

Noncommercial reproduction of this material is permitted and encouraged. Consult authors for rights to copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2026 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector