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Making public Montessori last

A forty-year collaboration for public Montessori fidelity



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Establishing a public Montessori school is an achievement of passion. Sustaining it for decades within a traditional school district is an achievement of systemic design.

For Spokane Public Montessori (SPM), a district school in Spokane, Washington, formal steering governance, creative funding models, and collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) have been essential to securing public Montessori fidelity in a bureaucratic landscape over the last forty years.

A legacy of quality

Spokane Public Schools is the third largest district in Washington state, with 58 schools serving nearly 30,000 students. Spokane Public Montessori began in 1985, as a "school-within-a-school" model after years of advocacy from parents. The Association Montessori International-aligned program started with one site, and over subsequent years expanded to two schools. The district unified its separate Montessori programs in 2014, creating the city's first unified, public PreK-8 Montessori school.

The program now has 15 classrooms and serves approximately 450 students. SPM is classified as an "Option School" in the district portfolio, and enrollment is lottery-based. Today, there is unmet community demand for the program, with a consistent waitlist of over 300 families. The program's success can also be illustrated by recent academic recognition and climate survey results, including:

- **State Recognition:** 2023-2024 Washington State Recognized School for academic excellence.
- **Holistic Middle School Satisfaction:** 2025 Middle School Survey score of 3.91 out of 5, one of the top five in the district.
- **Exceptional Student Well-Being:** 2025 Climate Survey (88.9% participation rate) shows that 90% of students feel that doing well and trying their best matters; over 95% feel respected, valued, supported, and included by both peers and staff; over 70% look forward to attending class daily.
- **Academic Achievement:** Longitudinal data from the Smarter Balanced Assessments from 2021-2025 show that SPM students outperform non-Montessori students in Language Arts in grades 5, 7, 8 and 10 and in math in grades 7, 8 and 10. Math scores in grade 5 for Montessori students was slightly lower than non-Montessori students, but not statistically significant.

The choice-portfolio approach

Spokane's model illustrates how Montessori thrives when integrated into a district-wide Option School portfolio rather than treated as an isolated anomaly.

Spokane Public Schools manages a diverse choice ecosystem across grade levels that include traditional programs at neighborhood schools and specialized schools that families can select. Families also have the option to apply to "choice in" to a traditional school outside of their neighborhood.

Option schools at the high school level include project-based learning, credit-retrieval and contract-based, and career and technical education. Middle school options include Montessori, a STEM immersion program, and an accelerated program for students that are highly capable (gifted). Elementary options include Montessori and dual language immersion. Across levels there are options for specialized therapeutic environments, homeschool partnership programs, and virtual learning.

This choice-portfolio approach provides a ready-made administrative, legal, and transportation framework that accommodates Montessori seamlessly. The school district and the Spokane Education Association teacher union have a rich and collaborative history of site-specific agreements to ensure programs are run with fidelity. The success of this can be seen in the longitudinal and anecdotal data for the program.

Parent advocacy

Parent advocacy and engagement in the public Montessori program was formalized as a district-sanctioned steering committee during its formative years. The committee's bylaws mandated representation from teachers, building administration, elected parents and community members, central office administration, and consistent School Board representation.

This makeup safeguards the program from district leadership turnover and administrative shifts. The structure features a critical design element: A school district representative

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is always present at meetings to speak directly to district needs and administrative realities, allowing the committee and the district to collaboratively problem-solve as allies.

Alongside the steering committee, the Community of Montessori Parents (CoMP) functions as a vibrant volunteer-driven hub, utilizing parent professional skills across disciplines to fundraise, coordinate events, and provide volunteer support where needed.

Montessori fidelity through collective bargaining

Rather than viewing collective bargaining as a hurdle, SPM and the district used the union contract to formally codify and protect Montessori fidelity. The table below outlines the core negotiated clauses written directly into the collective agreement.

Staffing and peer coaching

A steady staffing flow requires deep regional connections. Staffing is anchored by a training pipeline with Whitworth University, which has trained 12 of SPM's 15 lead guides. SPM actively collaborates with the Spokane Montessori Collective, the Pacific Northwest Montessori Association (PNMA), and the Alliance for Educational Redesign to remain connected to the broader Montessori network for professional development, advocacy, and community awareness.

SPM has also developed a successful coaching strategy to prevent classroom disruption when guides are new or in AMI training. The coaching model includes retired Montessori teachers serving as volunteer coaches in the classrooms.

Additionally, the coaches can serve as mentor teachers in the new guide's classroom during practice teaching to support them within their own environment. This model ensures that developmental lessons continue to flow seamlessly under trained, veteran eyes, while providing vital, live modeling and mentoring for the teachers-in-training.

Blended funding for PreK

Funding the 3-6 Primary cycle in a public school system is notoriously difficult since public PreK funding is highly restricted.

SPM resolved this by piloting its first public Primary classroom in the 2024-2025 school year using a creative blended funding model. By combining state-funded Transitional Kindergarten (TK), the state PreK Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (EDEAP), and tuition-based preschool spots, SPM secured the financial backing necessary to support the full 3-year early childhood cycle.

This successful framework has since expanded, allowing the school to open its third Primary classroom. The strong foundation PreK provides for students can be seen in their overall school readiness scores.

Baby steps to big dreams

Navigating school district bureaucracy requires a distinct shift in mindset for public school leaders and parent advocates seeking to replicate this level of systemic sustainability. Remember, school boards and districts want to collaborate, but they are often bogged down by tight budgets, heavy regulations, and varied initiatives.

Approaching negotiations with empathy for district constraints builds the trust required to secure contract exemptions and compromises. Systemic integration is built over time. Establish the steering committee first, negotiate a single material-funding waiver next, and gradually write these practices into the official union contract and district systems.

Seek regional partnerships and volunteer expertise to build and sustain your staff. These partnerships also bring important public awareness to Montessori so it's clearly seen as a value-added model for the community.

By taking deliberate, structured baby steps, public school communities can protect Montessori pedagogical fidelity and turn big educational dreams into lasting, sustainable realities.

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