

## Establishing Montessori Programs in Public Schools

Convincing your local public schools to establish a new program is essentially an exercise in the American democratic process. Ideally, a core group of parents will find support from among some of the teachers, administrators, and local members of the school board.

Making the case for an alternative program within the public schools is rarely easy. In the case of Montessori programs, parents may find the challenge even greater. On the other hand, almost all of the public programs that have developed and succeeded are the result of a determined group of parents. The primary challenge is to plan correctly and implement fully a complete Montessori program.

### Recommendations for School Districts Considering the Establishment of a New Montessori Program

These recommendations were adapted from a set of recommendations drafted by a group of public school principals from across the United States. They reflect the wisdom of experienced public school leaders in making Montessori programs successful in the public sector. (Source: The Center for Public Montessori Programs).

### Philosophical support

Local school districts considering a Montessori program should work from three basic assumptions:

- All children can learn when provided appropriate opportunities.
- Public Montessori programs require high levels of parent involvement at all levels to be successful.

- Whatever levels a Montessori program serves at start-up, the Montessori approach is appropriate for children from ages three through the twelfth grade). The district should make explicit a long-range commitment to build and protect its Montessori program, including specific plans for program design, planning, implementation, and assessment.

### Initial planning

The district should approve a written program design prior to implementation. It should include a strategic plan that addresses:

- Key district administrators with responsibility for the Montessori program. These people should have frequent, direct contact with planners and trainers.
- The Principal, who should be included in planning long before a school opens.
- An advisory committee.
- Personnel recruitment.

- Training and in-service support for faculty.
- Site selection and preparation.
- Materials and furniture selection and purchase, distribution and set up.
- Transition into the new Montessori program and/or relocation of student population and faculty.
- Class size.
- Training and assignments of paraprofessionals and specialists.
- Public relations and information, with special attention to:
  - ▲ District committees
  - ▲ Parents and civic groups
  - ▲ Prospective teachers
  - ▲ Administrators
  - ▲ Media

### Funding

- The district should assure programs have adequate funding for materials:



- ▲ There must be a full complement of Montessori materials for each classroom.
- ▲ Funds should be reserved for replacement of worn materials.
- ▲ Funds should be provided to assist teachers and assistants in making materials.
- ▲ Plans should be made to replace materials on a ten-year interval (From our experience, the interval may need to be shorter if materials become worn). Curriculum planning should give adequate attention to Practical Life:
  - Practical Life should represent approximately 25 percent of the early childhood budget and about 15 percent of the elementary budget.
  - Funds should be reserved for replacement of consumable practical life materials.
- Montessori programs should be given budgetary autonomy to assure that funds are spent on materials consistent with the approach, e.g., Montessori programs should be exempt from mandatory textbook adoptions.
- Districts adopting a Montessori program should budget for long-term research — both individually and in concert with other districts offering Montessori programs. This research should address issues of:
  - ▲ The benefits of the Montessori experience.
  - ▲ The costs — both absolute and in relation to other programs — of the Montessori experience.

#### Faculty/Recruitment

- Employ Montessori teachers who have Montessori credentials for the levels they teach for each class group.
- Employ one teacher's aide per classroom, each having received an orientation in Montessori classroom practice for that role.
- First seek to recruit from the existing teacher force.
- Work with local teachers' unions, teacher education centers and institutions of higher education to create the greatest possible number of options to reward teachers who complete Montessori teacher education. This could include Masters degree and additional increments on the teacher salary scale.
- Work, perhaps in a multi-district collaboration, with one or more universities to prepare minority teachers.
- Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers.
- The District should be prepared to pay for:
  - ▲ Teacher training, whether on- or off-site.
  - ▲ Teacher consultation, evaluation and support by Montessori trainers.
- Fund Montessori education for a pool of teachers to prepare for predictable teacher attrition and retirement.
- Anticipate that teachers should be educated and certified as Montessori teachers at more than one level, providing a greater context for their work.

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- Budget for future Montessori teacher education for non-Montessori-credentialed teachers.
- Assure that teacher appraisal, improvement and reward programs reflect a Montessori approach to curriculum delivery, classroom organization and student teacher roles.

#### The Montessori environment

- Offer a full complement of Montessori materials for each classroom, purchased from Montessori suppliers.
- Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori's principles of a "prepared environment."
- Furnishings and materials in Montessori public school programs:
  - ▲ Furniture must be appropriately chosen and classroom design must be appropriate to the developmental needs of students.
  - ▲ The environment must be designed for function and aesthetics.
  - ▲ Reflect a sensitivity to the culture and the local and global community.
- Design of spaces should reflect the Montessori child-centered philosophy. Classroom environments should be:
  - ▲ Clean, sanitary, and safe.
  - ▲ Visually attractive (aesthetically pleasing).

- ▲ Properly ventilated and lit (including ample natural light).
- ▲ Equipped with a sink.
- ▲ Carpeted and tiled where appropriate.
- ▲ Designed to allow at least 35 square feet per child.
- ▲ Furnished with appropriately sized desks or tables for half the students.
- ▲ Furnished with shelving at a height so that all materials are accessible to children and sized properly to allow the materials to be easily visible to the children.
- ▲ Arranged in consultation with Montessori teacher education centers and consultants.

#### Purchasing Montessori Materials

- Materials vendors should be chosen after thorough evaluation of district needs and vendor quality.
- Purchased materials and apparatus should:
  - ▲ Come from varied vendors when appropriate.
  - ▲ Meet standardization requirements prescribed by Montessori teacher education centers and consultants.
  - ▲ Be evaluated on the basis of requirements outlined by Montessori teacher education centers and consultants sensitive to the school financial resources.
  - ▲ Montessori centers should prepare teachers to become evaluators of their own materials' effectiveness on an ongoing basis.

#### Educational Program

- Organize classes into the appropriate multi-age groupings recommended by most Montessori educators as being necessary for the diversity, flexibility, and reduced competition integral to Montessori. These multi-age groupings are generally accepted to be: Early Childhood (ages 3, 4 and 5); Lower Elementary (grades 1, 2 and 3/ages 6, 7 and 8); Upper Elementary (grades 4, 5 and 6/ ages 9, 10 and 11); Middle School (grades 7 and 8/ages 12 and 13); and High School (grades 9 - 12/ ages 14 — 17).
- Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3-hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal.
- Integrate art, music, physical education and other specialty programs into the classroom experience and main curriculum to the greatest degree possible.
- To the degree to which specialty classes must be taught by specialists outside of the student's primary classroom, schedule these classes at times when they will not interfere with the extended uninterrupted work periods.
- Montessori classroom teachers should be directly involved in decisions on how to use specialists, so that a minimum block of two hours of uninterrupted time is maintained.

#### Curriculum

The district should:

- Fund a process for correlating Montessori educational outcomes with district-wide standard objectives.
- Develop a scope and sequence (or continuum of curriculum) document — aligned to any district-wide scope and sequence. Make it available for parents and community review.
- Provide a common set of teacher manuals and albums to be used by the entire faculty in program planning, regardless of staff training backgrounds.
- Assure that teacher-made presentations and materials should be referenced in the school's scope and sequence document.



- Plan a “Cycle of Program Review,” to ensure that essential Montessori qualities of a program remain vital.
- Include Peace Studies as an integral part of the Montessori curriculum and student reporting system.

**Assessment**

Montessori programs should have the opportunity to develop a program specific reporting system that:

- Uses a process of reporting student progress that is compatible with Montessori and includes parent conferences and authentic assessment tools such as observation, portfolios, student self-evaluation, and performance assessment rubrics.
- Implements state-mandated assessments in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised.
- Supports maximum involvement of the student in self-assessment and reporting, e.g., through a journal.
- Move with caution in using standardized testing. Leadership should resist tests that drive or direct the curriculum and be sensitive to issues of test anxiety, especially among those in the early childhood program.

**Administration**

- Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator.
- Employ a building principal/educational leader who has knowl-

edge of Montessori principles and curriculum. Administrators should have special training geared to administration of public Montessori programs. Full Montessori training should be an option.

- The district should do succession planning for principals including apprenticeships.
- Building leadership should establish, with wide participation, a plan for discipline consistent with Montessori principles, i.e., conflict resolution, peer mediation, reduced competition and reduced use of extrinsic rewards.
- Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction, even with changes in administrative staff.
- Sustain the support of the central administration through high profile communications about program development.
- Recognize that the best implementation process is to begin with the early childhood age group (ages three, four, and five), adding one age at a time for a gradual progression.

**Professional Development**

- Develop opportunities for staff development, including, but not limited to, peer observations, professional leave opportunities, workshops, team building and other issues identified through assessment by parents, teachers or students.
- Establish an annual budget for in-service training and teacher self-development.

- Establish and fund a mentoring program that begins during teacher recruitment and training. All teachers in training should have a “big brother/sister.”

- Provide opportunities during the regular school day for teachers to meet with each other, to plan together, etc., through block scheduling, classified help and release time.

- Include auxiliary teachers (music, band, library, physical education, art) in a workshop/in-service program that exposes them to Montessori philosophy, child development, observation techniques and classroom leadership and management.

- Empower teachers through consensus building and provision of joint decision-making opportunities.

- Encourage teachers to attend a national or regional conference on Montessori-based education at least every other year.

- Maintain membership with one or more of the professional Montessori organizations and seek Montessori accreditation to assure consistent quality.

- In cooperation with building leadership, develop a program to give teachers release time to visit Montessori programs in other districts.

**Admission/Recruitment/  
Parent Education**

Programs should:

- Seek to admit all students at three years of age.

- Assure racial and gender balance.
- Limit admission of students after kindergarten.
- Provide Montessori parent education programs that promote understanding of Montessori principles and curriculum.
- Develop an admission process that informs parents about the nature of Montessori and seeks the necessary commitment to the program.

#### Relationship Between the District and a Teacher Education Program

- Teachers receiving district support for Montessori teacher education should sign a legally binding agreement to return the costs of education should they voluntarily leave the program before the end of a stipulated period — usually two or three years. In selecting a Montessori teacher education program, the following criteria should be considered:
  - ▲ Will instructors from the Montessori teacher education program come to your school site?
  - ▲ Do the instructors of the Montessori teacher education program have experience as public school teachers?
  - ▲ Does the Montessori teacher education program provide follow-up or mentoring for all levels of graduates? If so, how extensive is the service?
  - ▲ Will the Montessori teacher education program develop a package to meet the district's needs?
  - ▲ Does the Montessori teacher education program have university affiliation (credits/advanced degree)?
- ▲ Is the Montessori teacher-education program selected to work with the District accredited by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE), the accreditation process for Montessori teacher education recognized by the US Department of Education?
- ▲ Will the Montessori teacher education program provide assistance to the principal if an improvement plan for a graduate needs to be developed?
- ▲ What strategies, perhaps involving more than one Montessori teacher education program, will assure that as programs expand, systems are in place to train all necessary teachers at the appropriate levels? Montessori teacher education programs should be evaluated according to pre-arranged criteria, including an evaluation of the experience by program graduates.
- ▲ Contract for ongoing internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or professional support as a follow-up to Montessori teacher education.

#### Inter-Program Cooperation

- Montessori programs sharing a school with another program must be able to reach a building-wide consensus on a number of issues.
  - ▲ Discipline.

- ▲ Governance of public space, e.g., hallways, playgrounds, cafeteria.
- Development of a supportive community, with special reference to parent education, and sharing of non-Montessori specific materials.
- A common mission statement, including expectations for children.

We believe Montessori public school programs have greatly influenced the entire Montessori movement. However, as noted, implementing and maintaining full Montessori programs is daunting. Today's political pressures are fierce. Nevertheless, children require our advocacy on their behalf. A Montessori education is an education of each unique individual potential. This, rather than the current insistence for test-score performances, reminds us of the true purpose of education.

