

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Taming Montessori

**A century-old educational system that eschews rote learning and regimentation finds its public school programs under pressure in an era of high-stakes testing.**

By **Linda Jacobson**

*Seabrook, Md.*

The classrooms at the Robert Goddard Montessori School are stocked with materials that could be found in any school that follows the same 100-year-old educational philosophy: trays of small silver items to be polished, beans to scoop from one bowl into another, letters of the alphabet with a sandpaper finish.

In Elizabeth Smith's classroom of 3- to 6-year-olds, a boy wearing a blue apron is scrubbing a small wooden table, while the preschoolers in Rosie Rexach's classroom have spent the morning using blunt, serrated knives to cut carrots and celery—under supervision, of course.

Maria Montessori, the Italian physician who founded her celebrated school in Rome in 1907, called such tasks "practical life" exercises because they teach children to take care of themselves and their environment.

But students at this public Montessori school, located down the road from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, are also familiar with the drill of workbooks, testing sheets, and homework—features that would never be part of a private Montessori school.

The pre-K-8 school in the 134,000-student Prince George's County school district outside Washington is responsible for staying true to Maria Montessori's teachings, and also for preparing students to score high enough on Maryland tests so that the school can meet its target for adequate yearly progress, or AYP, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

And the 350-some public Montessori schools across the country are feeling the same pressures.

"We see more stress on the teachers. It's really against their philosophy to test their children," said Suzi Johnson, the assistant principal of Goddard, which has 550 students and

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#### From Visionary to Educational Icon

- Maria Montessori, the founder of the schooling method that bears her name, was born in the town of Chiaravalle, in the province of Ancona, Italy, in 1870.
- After graduating from medical school in 1896, she became the first female physician in Italy.
- Through her practice, she began observing how children learn and concluded that they build knowledge from what they find in their environment.
- In 1906, she left her medical practice to work with young children of poor and working-class parents in the San Lorenzo district of Rome. In 1907, she opened Casa dei Bambini, "The Children's House," eventually drawing international attention.
- She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times. She died in Holland in 1952.

SOURCE: *Education Week*



Javier Rivera, 8, concentrates on independent reading as his teacher, Marti Galvin, works with a younger group of students in the lower-elementary class for 6- to 9-year-olds. Montessori's method encourages children to explore their interests and learn at their own pace.

—Photo by Sevans

began in the 2001-02 school year, when three existing Montessori sites were consolidated here. "But if we don't show that this program helps children perform, then [school system officials] will do away with our program."

So in Marti Galvin's mixed-age class of 6- to 9-year-olds, bread dough rises in small loaf pans on a shelf, a boy rolls up a mat he was working on in the middle of the floor, and a gerbil exercising in a plastic ball rolls around the classroom. But students also finish pages in a math workbook before heading out for recess.

### 'Practically Impossible'

In many ways, educators say, the testing and accountability mandates of the NCLB law run counter to the beliefs Maria Montessori held about how children learn. The law requires annual testing in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8, and the results are used to show if schools are making enough progress in bringing all their students to proficiency.

Montessori taught that teachers should provide a "prepared environment" that entices children to explore, but that children should progress at their own pace, that it is important for them to develop a love of learning, and that they should be allowed to pursue their own interests. The teacher's role is to follow the children, observe them, and give them opportunities to develop their strengths.

Schools following Montessori's philosophy were started throughout Europe and India during the early 1900s, but it wasn't until after her death in 1952 that interest grew in the United States. Since then, thousands of private Montessori schools have opened.

In the 1960s, according to the New York City-based American Montessori Society, parents of children in Montessori preschools began to push for the public Montessori programs, and growth in such public programs also has taken place in magnet and charter schools.



Bria Herbert, 8, points to the results of her science experiment, with the help of Alexis Chandler, 8, right. —Photo by Sevans

Shukla Chakrabarty, who has been a Montessori teacher for about 20 years and works in one of Goddard's classes for 9- to 12-year-olds, calls the challenge of melding that philosophy with NCLB demands "practically impossible."

"How do you follow the child when you have to teach a standard?" she said.

In a typical Montessori school, preschool and elementary-age children are organized into three multiage groups: 3- to 6-year-olds, 6- to 9-year-olds, and 9- to 12-year-olds.

Material also is presented over each three-year time span, which doesn't match up with tests or expectations required by the state at a specific grade level—or here in Prince George's County, on a nine-week cycle.

"We're not a program that takes it in and regurgitates it," said Laure Fleming, a teacher in a class for 9- to 12-year-olds.

When testing occurs, teachers have to shift their mind-set and identify children as, say, 3rd graders or 8th graders. Students are even rearranged on those days so all those who are taking a test are in a separate classroom.

In the 39,000-student Cincinnati school system, one elementary school, Sands Montessori, even abandoned its multiage configuration for a few years in order to have a separate 4th grade, which, at the time the school made the switch, was one of the years for standardized testing in Ohio. But Janet Walsh, a spokeswoman for the district, said the school plans to return to multiage groups next fall.

"They think they can make it work," she said. "People choose Montessori for a reason, and the closer to that model that our schools can operate, the happier Montessori teachers and parents will be."

### Concrete Changes

Many public Montessori schools have had to address more concrete matters as well.

Most Montessori classrooms—including those at Goddard—don't have desks. Children do their work on the floor or at big tables. So when testing occurs, desks have to be moved from other parts of the building, said Ms. Johnson, the assistant principal.

Children in Montessori schools aren't rushed to finish their work, so when they're first introduced to testing, it's not unusual, she said, to hear them say, "I'm going to finish it tomorrow."

Testing booklets are foreign to Montessori students, and many children have had to be taught that whatever they write outside the black box or in the margins of the test sheet is not going to be counted in their scores. Ms. Johnson added that students also are accustomed to working together, and have to be told that they can't help their classmates with tests.

Some children even challenge the way certain test questions are written because they are taught to critique writing.

"We have to say, 'Just answer the question,'" Ms. Johnson laughed. She added that while most students have come to learn what to expect, "at the beginning, we had kids under tables crying because this was so far removed from what they ever had been asked to do."

The sentiments expressed by the faculty here aren't too different from what others in the public Montessori community voiced during the early days of the 5-year-old No Child Left



Marti Galvin listens to a question from a pupil as she sits with children at the beginning of the school day. In a typical Montessori school, children are organized into multiage groups.

—Photo by Sevans



Isaiah Marshall, 7, in the plaid shirt, and Ugo Igwe, 6, use the floor, instead of desks and chairs, for workbook space at Robert Goddard Montessori School in Seabrook, Md.

—Photo by Sevans

Behind law.

In the fall 2003 issue of the *Public School Montessorian*, Dennis Schapiro, the editor and publisher of the Minneapolis-based quarterly newspaper, wrote about what he described as the “potentially unsettling effects” the law would have on public Montessori programs.

“When NCLB started, there was a big sigh, and teachers asking, ‘What is this going to do to our program?’ ” said Connie Murphy, the former principal of a public Montessori elementary school

in Fort Wayne, Ind., and a past president of the American Montessori Society, which includes both public and private Montessori schools. “But we just needed to embrace it.”

Another area of concern is the law’s requirements for “highly qualified” teachers. Some in the Montessori community have questioned whether those standards will put financial and other burdens on teachers who often pursue their Montessori training on top of a traditional teacher education credential.

In staffing public Montessori schools, administrators tend to worry first about hiring certified teachers, and then focus on whether those educators have Montessori training, explained Tamara Lake, the principal of the public, 375-student Towles Intermediate Montessori School in Fort Wayne.

“We always assume that we’re going to train them,” she said.

Angeline Lillard, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, who has conducted research on public Montessori schools, agreed that some teachers probably feel that the Montessori techniques are suffering “because they’re being asked to do something that the [Montessori] system wasn’t designed to do.”

But she said students educated in Montessori schools often do “just fine” on tests and when they move to traditional schools.

### **The Early Years**

At Goddard, the changes are felt down to the primary-classroom level.

Ms. Smith now sometimes interrupts the typical three hours of unstructured work time in the morning to give her students brief timed activities, such as simple math equations, so they can get used to completing something within a time limit. And Ms. Rexach has been spending some time with her 3- to 6-year-olds on words that can be recognized by sight.

Still, Sherra Chapelle, the Goddard principal, says she will do her best to keep the early years of the program as traditionally Montessori and free from test pressures as possible.

“I believe in what we’re doing,” she said. Even if the students fail to make AYP, she added, “I will feel that we did the best for children.”

She may not need to worry. Though testing is not much emphasized in the early levels here, 3rd grade scores at Goddard exceed county and statewide averages on the Maryland School Assessment, which tests students in reading and math.



Bria and Alexis create various geometric forms during a three-hour morning time block.

—Photo by Sevans

And while the county and statewide percentage of students scoring at the proficient level declines as students move through the elementary and middle grades, that has not been the pattern at Goddard

In 2006, 53 percent of 8th graders in the district scored at the proficient level or above in reading, compared with 71.4 percent at Goddard. In math, just 35 percent of the district's 8th graders scored that well, compared with 85.7 percent at Goddard.

Ms. Johnson, the assistant principal, explained those results by saying, "Everything in Montessori builds upon itself, and by 8th grade, it all comes together."

The middle grades at Goddard serve as a bridge to traditional high schools. The students change classes and sit at desks. And the teachers teach separate subject areas.



Bria, in brown, and Alexis, center, look for a word definition on a classroom computer.

—Photo by Sevans

Gail Tucker , a

parent who volunteers at Goddard and has three students who "grew up Montessori," worries that the state requirements have "watered down" the Montessori approach somewhat. Still, she doesn't describe herself as a Montessori purist—she likes her children to have homework so she can "see how things are flowing."

Ms. Chakrabarty, meanwhile, rolls her eyes when she hears "NCLB". But as she rushed back to her classroom not long ago—to give a test—she acknowledged her responsibility.

"I have to prepare them," she said. "I have to make sure that they have all the skills that help them succeed in the world outside Montessori."



Darin Jackson, 9, center, talks to Brea Harmon, 8, in turquoise, about a group project using photos, essays, and facts about the United States. The students take class time to work on the project as a group.

—Photo by Sevans