

# HIGH SCHOOL FRAMEWORKS AT CLARK MONTESSORI

by Dean Woodring Blase and Marta Donahoe

*Clark Montessori Junior and Senior High School was the first public Montessori high school in the US. Marta Donahoe and Dean Blase outline the roots and founding principles of Clark Montessori in the context of Montessori pedagogy. Woven throughout this discussion of the Montessori high school environment are guiding principles that Clark adopted including respect for each other and the environment and collaboration of all in the service of students to achieve a sense of social responsibility. This is partially achieved through the foundation and continuation of Cosmic Education in the elementary years. She concludes with fundamental principles specifically for the Montessori high school.*

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**Dean Woodring Blase** is the principal of Clark Montessori High School in Cincinnati, OH. She has a doctorate of educational leadership from Harvard University and master's degrees in teaching and English literature from Miami University and Middlebury College. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and holds a secondary Montessori credential I and II from CMStep. She has served as an accreditation committee member for AMS and on leadership teams for Cincinnati Public Schools. Dr. Blase taught for seven years at Clark Montessori and served as a teacher for CMStep. She has published and presented extensively, including coauthoring *Trust Me, I Can Read* on Teachers College Press, *Great Books for High School Kids* on Beacon Press, and *There's an Octopus Under My Bed* on Shake It Ink.

**Marta Donahoe** is the codirector of Cincinnati Montessori Secondary Teacher Education Program (CMStep). She was the founder of and program coordinator for Clark Montessori's junior and senior high school. Marta holds AMS credentials for ages 6–18, a master's degree in education from Xavier University, and has studied organizational development with Peter Block. For 18 years Marta coordinated the development and implementation of the middle and high school Montessori program at Clark Montessori and for 37 years she has taught ages six through eighteen. She consults with Montessori schools all over the country and is on the editorial board of *Montessori Life*. She is a frequent presenter at Montessori conferences, has published a dozen articles in Montessori journals, and is a certified instructor with *Mindful Schools*.

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The reform of the secondary school is one of the most important problems. Many reforms have been made: they consist in giving more liberty to the pupils, in permitting them to make a choice in their studies, of materials which have been invented to make their studies easier and more profound. Beautiful schools have been built, parks laid out, etc., but all these are not enough. I maintain that, since we are discussing ideas of the formation of man, we must be more revolutionary. These partial acquisitions of liberty are not enough: We must consider what is the form of independence at this age, which guarantees the development of individuality. We must follow the psychic instincts which present themselves at this period of life. (“Dr Montessori’s Third Lecture” 181)

Clark, the first public Montessori high school in the nation, graduated its first class of twenty-two students in the spring of 2001. Students are admitted from the public and private Montessori elementary schools in the area. In 2001 and 2007, The Center for School Change published a nationwide study (“Smaller, Safer, Saner, Successful Schools”) to identify effective public schools. In both reports, Clark Montessori was one of the schools cited. Clark was selected as one of three finalists among public high schools in the United States in the President’s 2010 Race to the Top competition. It is one of seven public Montessori schools in Cincinnati who collectively serve one in seven students throughout the city.

It is worth noting here that our high school program was inspired by an eighth grade research project by our earliest group of students.

Clark’s environment places diversity at the center of the adolescent need for valorization and greater autonomy. In other words, diversity is the springboard for developing character, compassion, and confidence. Navigating the needs of the community alongside of the needs of the individual are reinforced through global studies in the humanities and sciences, and local experiences through service.

Five female middle schooler’s hard work and vision propelled teachers, parents, and ultimately the board of education to create our school, now in its twenty-third year of operation. For all adolescents, Montessori’s essential priorities involve creating an environment that enhances



Students working on a Habitat for Humanity home as part of a study of Appalachian culture.

the adolescent's ability to find one's place in society, understanding the connection between finding one's place in society and the nobility of all types of work, experiencing and learning the lessons of living in community, and believing in the dignity of humans and that the world is a place of hope and progression of the human spirit.

The younger adolescent, whose "unexpected decrease of intellectual capacity" at the time "when they should develop the most noble characteristics that would prepare a man to be social" (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 63), is in a developmental plane that involves learning to make choices and working as a team of learners on collaborative projects in and out of the classroom. Students become involved in acts of stewardship for the campus and community. For the older adolescent, the focus shifts as they return to a capacity for intellectual engagement and wonder. For one thing, academic work becomes more challenging. For another, their background and growth in community-building launches students to begin looking more deeply into questions like, "Who am I?" and "Who am I as a member of society?" So older adolescents begin to think

more specifically about their own paths to adulthood by involving themselves in service to society while discovering their personal gifts and interests.

High school students learn to manage long-term projects including an intensive year-long research project in senior year. Students are coached in leadership skills such as group development, decision-making models, restorative justice, and conflict resolution. Students and teachers engage in an alternative assessment of the student's knowledge, such as self-evaluation of work based on clearly defined objectives, presentations, and cumulative portfolios. Clark's environment places diversity at the center of the adolescent need for valorization and greater autonomy. In other words, diversity is the springboard for developing character, compassion, and confidence. Navigating the needs of the community alongside of the needs of the individual are reinforced through global studies in the humanities



Students working with a guide on senior project.

and sciences, and local experiences through service. In this setting, students succeed in learning and decision-making situations that minimize rote learning and encourage independence and interdependence. This approach cultivates student ownership in his or her education. The high school academic program challenges students to work responsibly and perform well on standardized tests.

### CLARK MONTESSORI IN CONTEXT

But, above all it is the education of adolescents that is important, because adolescence is the time when the child enters on the state of manhood and becomes a member of society. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 60)

Revisiting the ideas that lift and hold the school culture is vital to an enlivened Montessori program, so the following six questions resurface at community meetings at various levels with adolescents, staff and parents.

#### 1. What is our mission and vision for Clark?

Clark's vision is "to create a Montessori school environment that enhances the adolescent's ability to find one's place in society, to understand the connection between finding one's place in society and the nobility of all types of work, to experience and learn the lessons of living in community, and to believe in the dignity of humans and that the world is a place of hope and progression of the human spirit."

Our mission is to "seek the highest and most complete academic environment for each student and to form a human community that nurtures an atmosphere of caring and sets a thoughtful social climate. We strive to be a community of adults and teenagers who respect each others' deepest personal and human qualities."

#### 2. What and how do we teach?

At Clark, we strive to bring a standards-based Montessori curriculum to life, both within and outside of our classrooms. Teachers use strategies that actively engage students in learning and students experience joy in learning. Teachers provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world settings.



Students in a small group lesson in a high school math class.

### 3. How do we know and value what students learn?

Clark Montessori strives to learn from our students through a range of assessments. From projects and performances to standardized tests, we want to know how our students are doing. That means that our assessment system makes sense to students, helps teachers know their strengths, and provides support for areas that need more work.

### 4. How do our school facilities enhance student learning?

Clark Montessori seeks to have a beautiful, inspiring, clean, and safe school environment. Maria Montessori understood the value of having a “prepared environment” that could support learning.

### 5. How do we collaborate, communicate, and lead?

At Clark, we strive to provide teachers, students, and families the opportunity to lead. Clark administration seeks to collaborate

throughout our community to understand and respond to parent, student, and teacher needs and ideas.

6. How do our students have an impact on the world and on others?

Our core values (peace, respect, learning, hard work, and community) guide our Montessori program, especially our field studies and community service work. We strive to be partners in developing students who become respectful, independent, confident, socially responsible young adults who are ready to be citizens of the world.

#### OBSERVING IN CLARK CLASSROOMS

The adolescent must never be treated as a child, for that is a stage of life that he has surpassed. It is better to treat an adolescent as if he had greater value than he actually shows than as if he had less and let him feel that his merits and self-respect are disregarded. (*From Childhood to Adolescence* 72)

Peek into a secondary classroom and notice these things:

- Student-centered classroom with a sense of community  
The classroom set-up is versatile so that students can work individually or in groups. Teachers use a variety of lesson modes: whole class, small group, and individual.
- Seminar as a tool to develop respect, listening skills, insight, and understanding, which become a building block for community:  
Students gather in small or large group conversations, referencing text and responding to one another's comments.
- Curriculum encourages both convergent and divergent thinking. It is developed by passionate teachers and refined over time with input from students and shaped by current events.
- Hands-on work connects themes and concepts learned in class:

Students are engaged in projects that interweave subject areas, and they regularly leave the school to do field studies.

- Multi-layered projects that allow for a variety of modes of expression
- Students demonstrate learning in a variety of ways that play to their strengths and develop new skills.
- Blocks of work time last for at least 1.5 hours. This allows for small group lessons, collaborative projects, hands-on activities, and a variety of instructional and assessment practices.
- Clear objectives, rubrics, and tools for self-evaluation: For more involved assignments, students are given stated objectives and rubrics with detailed descriptions of the level and kind of work they are expected to do. They are also expected to evaluate their own work based on these rubrics, as well as receiving peer and adult evaluation based on those rubrics.
- A focus on service with the support of instructional lessons:  
Meaningful service work happens when students are prepared for the work of the heart. This is an essential component to a developmentally appropriate curriculum for the adolescent.

#### WHAT MAKES IT MONTESSORI AT CLARK?

Let us resolve to stand in delight at least once in each day and look to see what we can learn from the child. To stand for just a short moment is to see compassion, kindness, co-operation, selflessness, humour, diligence, courage and love. (*Education and Peace* 25)

The Montessori high school has a unique approach to creating a caring environment, cultivating wisdom in the guide or teacher, and by noticing that adolescents are more than just minds and bod-

ies. They are spiritual beings preparing to take their place in the adult world.

The Montessori secondary learning environment has:

- A curricular context for Cosmic Education:  
In what way does the coursework encourage the adolescent to find her place in society?
- A curricular context that fosters a sense of hope and progression of the human spirit:  
This curriculum includes action in stewardship of the Earth and humanity.
- A structure in place for the care of the environment:  
Charts for classroom maintenance and jobs ensure that everybody feels responsible for the school environment.
- Opportunities for economic independence are not an attempt to create a love of money, but to help the adolescent feel useful, capable of effort, and proud of his own transition to adulthood: Students are encouraged to develop mini economies or micro businesses. At Clark there have been a number of small businesses: wood-fired pizzas from our pizza oven, honey from our hives, eggs from our chickens. Mostly students are compelled to find ways to make money due to the expectation that they will pay half of their field study fees.

Field studies and meaningful service work are two very essential components of the Montessori high school that guide the adolescent to develop a sense of stewardship and a heart of compassion.

The teacher nevertheless has many difficult functions to perform. Her cooperation is not at all excluded but it becomes prudent, delicate, and manifold.... She must acquire a moral alertness which has not hitherto been demanded by any other system, and this is revealed in her tranquility,

patience, charity and humility. Not words but virtues are her main qualifications. (*Discovery of the Child* 151)

The Montessori teacher exhibits:

- **Courtesy and respect:**  
This includes using soft voices in the classroom. Teachers and students are clearly on task and speak in a way appropriate for the situation. They speak a little more loudly when addressing the whole group and very softly when in small group.
- **Skill with whole to part (and part to whole) learning:**  
What is the big picture that will pique a student's curiosity and draw the adolescent into the work? The teacher reminds students to move between the whole to the parts and back again to help them understand relationships and concepts rather than facts in isolation. Field studies apply the concepts of "Pedagogy of Place." These studies take students into the world, concretely show them the concepts they have studied in abstraction, and help them to develop compassion for all of life.
- **Deemphasis on competition and reemphasis on cooperation:**  
How do we encourage a sense of generosity and abundance rather than scarcity and fear? Teachers design activities and lessons to show students that "Everybody does better when everybody does better."

### **The Adolescent as a Spiritual Being**

The freedom of our children has as its limit the community, for freedom does not mean doing what one wants, but being master of oneself. (*Basic Ideas of Montessori's Educational Theory* 16)

The younger adolescent is the social infant and the older is more like a social toddler. They have developed a greater skill in social facility, but still must be treated with great care and tender-



Students working together with a special needs student on a science project.

ness. They also still need the guidance of wisdom, compassion, and clarity on the part of the adult in order to face the challenges and accompanying joy that lead to “valorization of the personality” (development of character). Field studies and meaningful service work are two very essential components of the Montessori high school that guide the adolescent to develop a sense of stewardship and a heart of compassion.

#### CONCLUSION

In all, Clark has evolved over the past 23 years to serve 700+ public school students who reflect the socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of our city while remaining true to the core tenets of Montessori philosophy. Dr. Montessori’s call to experience joy, curiosity, and wonder despite (or perhaps due to) the downward pull of poverty, social woes, and academic complexity inspire those of us who spend much of our waking lives here. Perhaps this is because many of our most radical and enduring elements were designed by adolescents for adolescents, trusting the adults to carry out their vision and promise in partnership with Clark’s future generations.

## APPENDIX: THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

Clark's high school curriculum is constantly evolving as teachers respond to their developing knowledge of Maria Montessori's principles, the needs of students, and the dictates of national and state education standards. However, some aspects of the curriculum are fixed as the foundation upon which further innovative ideas can be supported.

### **Honors-Level Core Courses**

All core courses are taught at the honors level, with four years of English, math, science, and social studies required. English and social studies have overlapping content, which gives students a deeper learning experience. All students, regardless of perceived ability level, have access to challenging ideas and materials. Intervention specialists operate side-by-side with general education teachers to provide individualized modifications and accommodations as needed so that all students can access the curriculum.

### **Intersession Field Studies**

Twice a year the regular curriculum stops for intersession, when students participate in two-week, full-immersion studies. Each fall there is a progression of grade-level intersessions based on the developmental plan appropriate for each grade level (see Courses Required for Graduation below), and each spring, students choose from a list of offerings. These field studies can involve travel to other countries, other cities, or within Cincinnati; but at the very least, they include day trips or one overnight.

### **Learning through Service**

Clark students also expand their knowledge of the world and their own self-confidence by participating in mandatory community service (see Credit Requirements for Graduation below). They may volunteer for any nonprofit organization they choose, getting as much (or more) from this experience than they give. Over the course of six years of service, most students develop relationships with a single organization attuned to their skills and interests such as the local zoo, hospitals, nursing homes, or parks. Students learn first-hand about the problems faced by those who are less powerful in

our society (becoming better citizens in the process); they also build life and career skills and gain a sense of their place in the community when their actions have a positive impact on others.

### **Community Meeting Time and Team Building**

Advisory meets once a week, every week, for one hour. During this time, advisors not only provide students with important information, they also build community among students by leading group initiatives. These initiatives are team-building activities that knit the students closer together as a group and help them appreciate each others' talents.

### **Ability to Choose Courses**

There are certain courses that all Clark high school students have to take, but students also have a fair amount of choice. Students choose two elective courses per semester in grades 9-10 and three elective courses per semester in grades 11-12. See Elective Courses below for a list of the current year's electives. The list includes such courses as Intro to Computer Science, Film Tech and Analysis, Advanced Psychology, AP Chemistry, and Robotics.

### **Varied Schedule**

Each student takes six or seven courses at a time, and we operate on a block schedule four days a week, which essentially doubles the length of each class. The block schedule allows students to spend more time learning certain concepts or working on projects.

### **Arts Opportunities**

Clark offers an array of performing and visual arts electives, including Jazz Band, Printmaking, Steel Drum Band, Sculpture, and Photography courses. See Elective Courses below for a complete list.

### **Help Nights**

All teachers are available after school to help students. They have regularly scheduled help nights but can also arrange to meet with students on other afternoons as well.

## Post-Secondary Enrollment Option

Students can earn college and high school graduation credit by successfully completing college courses. This option is available to students in grades 9-12 who have at least a 3.0 GPA in the subject they want to study. One example of this option is the College Credit Plus: General Chemistry course, shown in our list of Elective Courses below.

## Elective Courses

One of the hallmarks of the Montessori method is giving students the ability to make choices about their learning. With that end in mind, Clark offers a full complement of elective courses to support students in their academic and intellectual development.

Language Arts Electives: Creative Writing, Film Tech and Analysis, Yearbook Production (Journalism)

Social Science Electives: AP U.S. History (all students who enroll must take the AP exam), Current Events, Collaborative

Mathematics Electives: Robotics, College Prep Math, College Algebra and Trigonometry (dual enrollment), College Intro to Statistics (dual enrollment), AP Calculus (All students who enroll must take the AP exam), Innovation and Design Thinking

Science Electives: Anatomy and Physiology, Environmental Studies, Zoology, College Credit Plus: General Chemistry Forensics

Performing Arts Electives: Jazz Band (Jazz Ensemble), Percussion Survey (Drumline), Steel Drum Band, Steel Drum Band II, Steel Drum Band III, AP Music Theory, Musical Theater (JH only)

Visual Art Electives: Ceramics 1, Ceramics 2, Introduction to Sculpture, Introduction to Drawing and Mixed Media, Intro to Printmaking, Photography

Physical Education Electives: Collaborative Fitness, Walking for Fitness, Yogalates

## Courses Required for Graduation

<b>Credit Requirements for Graduation</b>	<b>Grade 9 Course Requirements</b>	<b>Grade 10 Course Requirements</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mathematics - 4</li> <li>• Science - 4</li> <li>• Social Studies- 4</li> <li>• English - 4</li> <li>• Foreign Language - 2*</li> <li>• Fine Arts- 1</li> <li>• Health - 0.5 (1 semester)</li> <li>• Physical Education - 0.5 (2 semesters)</li> <li>• Intersession Electives - 4</li> <li>• 200 Community Service Hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English 9 Honors</li> <li>• Geometry Honors (Algebra I is taken in 8th grade)</li> <li>• Physical Science Honors</li> <li>• Modern History Honors</li> <li>• Foreign Language</li> <li>• Fall Intersession – Freshman Orientation to High School</li> <li>• Spring Intersession (choice)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English 10 Honors</li> <li>• Algebra II Honors</li> <li>• Biology Honors</li> <li>• US History Honors</li> <li>• Foreign Language</li> <li>• Fall Intersession – Community Service</li> <li>• Spring Intersession (choice)</li> </ul>
* 3-4 Credits Strongly Recommended		
<b>Grade 11 Course Requirements</b>	<b>Grade 12 Course Requirements</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English 11 Honors</li> <li>• Precalculus Honors</li> <li>• Chemistry Honors</li> <li>• American Government Honors</li> <li>• Foreign Language (third year strongly encouraged)</li> <li>• Fall Intersession – Post Secondary College Prep and Tour</li> <li>• Spring Intersession (choice)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English 12 Honors</li> <li>• Functions and Statistics (or AP Calculus)</li> <li>• Physics Honors</li> <li>• Theory of Knowledge Honors/Extended Essay Honors (combine for the year-long Senior Project)</li> <li>• Foreign Language (fourth year strongly encouraged)</li> <li>• Fall Intersession – Career Internship</li> <li>• Spring Intersession (choice)</li> </ul>	

