

MONTESSORI PARTNERS SERVING ALL CHILDREN: AN OUTREACH INITIATIVE OF THE MONTESSORI CENTER OF MINNESOTA

by Connie Black and Molly O'Shaughnessy

Montessori Partners Serving All Children is endorsed in terms of economic development as a statistically proven return for the money, leadership, parent education, institutional partners, and a sense of community in preparing teachers to serve families with a hub of resources through Montessori Center of Minnesota. Assessment is also integral to the team in terms of children's academic skills, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth and is aligned with school structures such as administration, professional development, and technical assistance.

While our name has changed in the last year to better reflect our mission, our mission remains the same: to co-develop ten, high-quality, early childhood Montessori programs within culturally rooted communities to serve children and families who experience

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Molly O'Shaughnessy is an AMI teacher trainer, international lecturer, and Montessori consultant. She has served as the director of training at the Montessori Center of Minnesota since 1996. Molly is deeply committed to working at a grassroots level to increase access to quality Montessori programs for children living in poverty. Through her outreach efforts, Montessori Partners Serving all Children was initiated with the mission to open ten high-quality Montessori programs in the state of Minnesota for underserved communities. This effort is one of AMI's Educateurs sans Frontieres projects and is dedicated to assisting children through the Montessori approach to education.

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limited access to such programs due to a lack of adequate resources. It is our intent to develop a model that provides greater access to our most vulnerable children. We hope to see our model grow, replicated, modified, and exported to other areas of need regionally, nationally, and globally.

The Hiawatha Education Foundation generously supports us. Robert Kierlin, founder and chairman of the board of Fastenal and a former Minnesota senator, recognized a difference not only in his own children, but also in all of their peers who were afforded the opportunity for early Montessori experiences as they progressed through their school experiences and entered into the local community as leaders. He and his daughters decided to concentrate the Hiawatha Education Foundation resources on giving more at-risk children the opportunity for a Montessori experience.

We fully expect to see a high return on this investment as the children mature. Rob Grunewald, regional economic analyst, and Art Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research for



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Federal Reserve Bank, are quoted as saying, “Research has shown that investment in early childhood development programs brings a real (that is, inflation adjusted) public return of 12 percent and a real total return, public and

private, of 16 percent. We are unaware of any other economic development effort that has such a public return, and yet early childhood development is rarely viewed in economic development terms.”

Every effort is made to identify a viable candidate from within the culturally rooted community to serve in a leadership position toward developing the Children’s House.

The process of developing a Montessori Children’s House begins by looking for a thriving non-profit, which is perhaps already providing services to children and families. This partner must have the financial and organizational capacity to develop the Children’s House and sustain it for many years. Once the partnership is ascertained, the Montessori Center of Minnesota (MCM) has scholarships to offer the organization for teacher training. Every effort is made to identify a viable candidate from within the culturally rooted community to serve in a leadership position toward developing the Children’s House. Ongoing mentorship and professional development is available through the MCM to the lead teacher and support staff.

Through an intensive parent education initiative, we see a strengthened sense of community as families are engaged and participate in a series of parent education events as well as in social events within this new framework. By targeting culturally rooted communities who are vulnerable and are frequently unable to access quality early education, we reach out to include more partners in the collaborative.

Once the teachers and support staff have been trained, MCM will partner with them to design and implement an exemplary Montessori early learning environment. Throughout this process, MCM serves as a hub of resources and provides ongoing technical assistance and pedagogical guidance to all partners in the collaborative. All of this is done with cultural responsiveness, providing the affiliate partner with all the tools needed to implement the Montessori program that provides high-quality developmental education to their communities. With all these supports in place, we are sure

that the successful implementation of a Montessori Children's House will support children to reaching their full potential, which will strengthen families and their communities. When our children and our communities are strong, we are all stronger.

We have a program evaluation team in place to help us to assess outcomes. The team consists of Betty Emarita, Gail Mason-Chagil, and Steven Hughes. Our three identified focus areas are

- Children's academic, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical health
- School structures and quality (prepared environments, professional development, ongoing mentoring, and administrative technical assistance for recently launched programs)
- Successful inclusion and support of parents and community

Molly intentionally located MCM in the heart of the neighborhood that we targeted to serve. An existing building (a residential facility for disabled adults) was completely renovated into the hub of professional activities and services to children and families. Cornerstone Montessori School has become a true oasis of optimal development for the children that we serve. We have worked to establish a welcoming, engaging atmosphere, where parents learn about what their children are experiencing and can share with us how it affects life at home. Social gatherings have helped to forge new relationships, not only between school and home, but also among the families within the community.

We are seeing positive outcomes after the first year of program assessment, with growth for the children from the fall to the spring of 2012-13. The most exciting emerging pattern is that we are showing little to no achievement gap for children in our Montessori programs by ethnicity, home language, or economic status. We are literally changing the shape of education for children and families in East St. Paul.

Bright Water Montessori School, a public school that serves families in North Minneapolis, was the original partner in writing the grant proposal. Our pilot project in the *Montessori Partners Serving All Children* initiative is Cornerstone Montessori School and Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School. When a child was asked about her experience at Cornerstone, she replied, “It’s fun, it’s beautiful, and it’s safe.” It is telling that this child appreciates the environment for its beauty and the sense of safety she feels while in it.

A Cornerstone parent stated,

That is what is special about Cornerstone. There is a clear commitment to his academic development, his emotional development, to his social and spiritual development, and that is really what we’re looking for as parents, is whole child development. One of the biggest things is he has a subtle commitment to peacefulness, and I don’t know how else to describe it, but I can see it in him and the way that he interacts. Even if we’re driving down the street he has this thing where he has to stop and figure out how to help a person; or the way that he engages with his nieces and nephews and cousins. So this commitment to peace that he has and our desire to keep that in him is the biggest thing I see and I attribute that to this environment. It’s not just the school environment. I think the truth of the matter is that it makes you evaluate all the environments that your children are in, not just school; even your home in terms of how you begin to modify your home and things that you do to be consistent with that. One of the side benefits that doesn’t get talked about enough is that the development for you as a parent changes and your style as a parent and the way that you develop your home. So there’s a bonus component to his development that happens because you as a parent are also developing as you go through the Montessori experience.

Our first affiliate to launch was Centro, an organization serving the Latino community in Minneapolis. The Siembra Montessori Children’s House has become an oasis for the children they serve and their children are thriving. Roxana Linares, executive director of Centro describes how their leadership decided to forge a partnership with us:

We know that our kids, who are mostly low-income recent immigrants to the Twin Cities, start school with one hand tied behind their back. Their families have very low

literacy skills and they do their best to support their kids. But even though we work with them and we have a good school so far, we know that if we want them to succeed they need the best quality education. So we thought Montessori would give them that extra edge they need to go into school ready and be able to graduate. We think that the Montessori curriculum will provide the best education for our kids. All the teachers' training has been leading to improve the classroom environment and their techniques and to provide the best education for our children. We really need to give them that extra edge to graduate from middle school and go on to high school.

Our second affiliate to open was the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. Like Centro, this school had a long-running early childhood program in existence. This community does not lack financial resources, but their children still experience a high rate of educational disparity. Wanting to close this gap, they fully funded their participation in our initiative, not accepting any grant allocations. They, too, saw a marvelous transformation of their physical space, and are witnessing tremendous growth and development in the children. We have two more affiliates deep into the process of launching programs, and they are desperately searching for affordable space.

The Hmong American Partnership has two AMI diploma holders in the waiting and support staff who have taken the sixty-hour AMI assistant's course. They have made a herculean effort to execute all the handmade materials necessary for an exemplary prepared environment reflecting the Hmong culture. Bao Vang, executive director, speaks about the partnership:

We are very fortunate to be...part of this collaboration. They [MCM] have been instrumental in terms of really looking for funding to help us send our teachers through training. Without this partnership I don't know what we would have done about getting our staff trained.

The Bush Foundation selected Janice LaFloe as a Bush Leadership Fellow. She is pursuing the development of a Montessori American Indian Center that merges the language and culture of the Ojibwe and D/Lakota communities with the Montessori approach to prepare children for life. Janice is the mother of three children and is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North



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Dakota. She has earned a BA in political science and law and society from Macalester College and a master's degree in public policy from the Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota. She has spent nearly ten years working in the area of Indian education in Minnesota. She has served her community in various ways over the years and continues to engage in community and youth development. As one of the scholarship recipients, she is now also an AMI diploma holder.

In addition to the affiliates who are partnering with us to open programs for their communities we have partnered with other organizations to bring expertise and support to the project. First Children's Finance has been indispensable in helping us to develop our engagement tools, to help each of our affiliates to develop a budget and business plan, and now to provide critical support to each affiliate in developing sustainability plans. Neinhuis has partnered with us to offer a substantial discount to each of our affiliates to be able to fully equip a Children's House. This package includes the hard Montessori materials, furnishings, and even a first set of consumables.

We have also forged a partnership with St. Catherine University: Our students will now be able to complete their graduate studies



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right here in St. Paul. St. Catherine has successfully submitted a grant proposal to the Better Way Foundation on behalf of our new partnership. This grant presents the opportunity to work interprofessionally, building skills for St. Catherine students, and sharing learning across organizations, all with the goal to help children and families address social, emotional, behavioral, physical health, and other issues that create barriers to educational achievement and holistic health.

REFERENCE

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