

MontessoriPublic.org

BRINGING MONTESSORI INTO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION IN PRINT AND ONLINE • MONTESSORIPUBLIC.ORG • SPRING 2017 • VOL 1 NUMBER 2

Public Montessori and the charter debate

Charters are neither villains nor saviors, and public Montessori relies on them



BY KEITH WHITESCARVER

Charter schools have been part of American public education for 25 years. Throughout this relatively brief history of educational innovation, charters have served as a lightning rod both within and beyond the world of educational reform. There are predictable heroes and villains on both sides of the dispute. What you may not know, though, is that both the pro-charter and the anti-charter camps are prone to contortions and flat out misrepresentations of the charter movement.

The anti-charter camp would have you believe that charter schools were created and fostered by large corporate

entities and their wealthy owners. Wal-Mart and the Walton family, Dell Computer and Michael Dell, and Microsoft and Bill and Melinda Gates are the primary villains in this tale. They are supported in their nefarious endeavors by hedge fund managers, bankers, developers, and others who have made fortunes in our capitalist society. The purpose of pro-charter work, ostensibly, is to put more money in the pockets of these wealthy individuals by raiding public coffers.

A secondary, and even more nefarious, goal of the corporatist villains, as portrayed by the anti-charter camp, is to fray the social and civic fabric embodied in our system of public schooling. These bonds, first described by Horace Mann in 19th century Massachusetts, were to be fostered by a shared experience of schooling (called a “common school” in his era). Common schools, in Mann’s view, had two primary goals. First was to help reduce income inequality by leveling the economic playing field. Second was to improve our national and state governments by creating a moral, literate, informed citizenry able to make wise choices in elections. We make many



Evaluating her options at Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School.

of the same arguments over 165 years later, even if reality has not borne out our beliefs.

In other words, in the minds of some anti-charter advocates, those supporting charters are either malevolent or dupes. It sounds extreme, but if you follow the reasoning of this critique to its logical conclusion, charter schools are

designed to make money for an elite, intensify income inequality, and create an ill-educated citizenry unable to choose wisely in elections.

Logical extremes aside, these claims just aren’t supported by the evidence. First, most charter schools are nonprofit

continues on page 6 >

Magnets, choice, and equity in Houston

Magnet schools gave my kids Montessori education. But why is their school so white?



BY SARAH BECKER

We live in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) – the seventh largest school district in the country. Our district has been doing some form of school choice for over 35 years, which

means that school choice and magnet programs are deeply embedded into the culture of public education here.

Magnet programs began as the district’s final attempt to satisfy court-ordered desegregation in the 1960s and 70s and were later expanded to include voluntary intra-district transfers from whiter districts in surrounding areas. In 1981, when the district was declared “unitary” – meaning all aspects of its formerly segregated schools were gone, the magnet program began to change.

Thirty-six years later, school choice in Houston ISD continues with over 100 magnet programs throughout its 287 schools. However, the way students access these special schools and programs has changed and with those changes has come a shift in the populations that

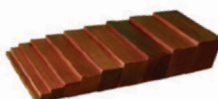
benefit from them.

Two years ago, when our oldest daughter first entered the public Montessori school she currently attends, I thought we were incredibly lucky to have received a space in the lottery. And we were lucky, to some extent. But there were also larger systemic factors I was unaware of at the time that made it possible for us to secure a space at our school.

While the magnet program was created to bring students of diverse backgrounds together, today white students within HISD, such as my daughter and son, benefit disproportionately from this program. One of the ways this happens is the simple fact of where magnet programs are located. The well-regarded

continues on page 8 >

Building Strong Minds From The Beginning



888-668-8538
MONTESSORIOUTLET.COM

It's all about choices: a history

School choice has a long history with a few surprises along the way



BY DAVID AYER

“School choice” has existed as long as there have been schools, and of course it has always been intertwined with class and economic status. Elites have always had choices about whether, and how much, to educate their children – in sacred groves, with tutors, or in the

1800s, choice for most essentially meant simply the decision whether to give up a child’s economic contribution to the family. (And of course blacks, especially southern blacks, typically had no access to schooling at all.) Even with the advent of compulsory public school in the early 20th century, children usually just attended the only nearby option, which, for half of them, was a one-room schoolhouse. Public education continued to expand and develop through the Progressive era, with a variety of approaches and curricula being introduced. But the idea that one school might be significantly “better” than another, and that a family might choose one or another on that basis, was slow to emerge. Even the landmark desegregation decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, was set-

all-white schools, but they were not often successful. Forced busing, of course, ran counter to choice and has a complex and controversial story of its own.

Vouchers

Vouchers, dating back in some version to at least 1869, were brought back into the education conversation in 1955 by the influential free market economist and Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman. Under a voucher system, state funding for education takes the form of a voucher which families can use to pay private school tuition, somewhat like food stamps. Milwaukee, Wisconsin has had a voucher program since 1989, and 13 states and the District of Columbia have them today. Vouchers can in principle give low-income families access to private education typically available only to the more affluent. But they have been criticized on grounds of inequity and because they can in some cases be used at religious schools. Still, with the appointment of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a voucher advocate, they may grow in importance for public education in the U.S.

Magnet Schools

Magnet schools were developed in the 1970s to desegregate schools by drawing

continues on page 4 >

Vouchers, a libertarian idea from the 1950s, go back to 1869

church – while choice for the lower classes consisted of taking what was offered or nothing at all. Today, school choice exists everywhere – for families able to choose their neighborhood, or pay for private school.

In the U.S., with the development of locally funded public education in the

tled not on the basis of inferior facilities and education (though that was often the case), but on the idea that “separate but equal” was in itself unconstitutional.

But desegregation remedies brought choice into the equation. Early choice programs sought to give black families the opportunity to enroll in formerly

- 1 **Public Montessori and the charter debate**
KEITH WHITESCARVER
- 1 **Magnets, choice, and equity in Houston**
SARAH BECKER
- 3 **It's all about choices: a history**
DAVID AYER
- 5 **Remembering John Snyder**
- 7 **It's a new day for public Montessori schools**
HAL KWALWASSER
- 9 **Five questions on the impact of charters**
MIRA DEBS
- 10 **Montessori needs charters and choice**
GARY W. HOUCHENS
- 11 **Achievement equity in public Montessori**
SARA COTNER
- 12 **Breakthrough: A new model**
NCMPS STAFF
- 14 **Playing the school choice lottery in D.C.**
MICHAEL CHANDLER
- 15 **Depending on community and commitment**
MELISSA HARBERT
- 16 **Equity and diversity at Ridgeline**
SHARON MARTIN
- 17 **Chartering change, one child at a time**
GENA ENGELFRIED
- 19 **The Public Calendar**

COMING SEPTEMBER 2017:
Assessment

What is the role of assessment in public Montessori? What tools does your school use? How does it shape your practice?

Contributions, observations, and letters, on this or any public Montessori topic, are welcome at

editor@montessoripublic.org

In this issue: Charters and choice in Montessori

This issue of *MontessoriPublic* brings together a range of voices and perspectives on the topic, from within the Montessori world and beyond.

Sarah Becker, a Montessori mother in Houston, takes a hard look at the equity considerations of magnet programs in her school district.

Michael Chandler, a *Washington Post* reporter and Montessori parent, shares her experience navigating the complexities of the Washington, D.C. school choice system.

Sara Cotner, Executive Director at Montessori For All, brings her experience working in high performing charter schools and district-run public Montessori to the complex intersection of class, race, geography, privilege, and social justice in Austin schools.

Mira Debs, a post-doctoral fellow at Yale and public Montessori researcher, lays out five critical questions for evaluating charter schools generally and Montessori charters in particular.

Gena Engelfried, Head of School at Golden Oak

Montessori Charter School in California, tells us why she joined forces with the charter movement.

Melissa Harbert, Head of School at Lewis and Clark Public Charter Montessori School in Oregon, shares what's helped make her school successful.

Gary Houchens, an educational leadership professor, education reform writer and advocate, writes about how being a Montessori parent shaped his views on school choice.

Hal Kwalwasser, former General Counsel of the Los Angeles Unified School District, writes from School Superintendents Convention to tell public Montessori that in this era of focus on choice and equity, our time is now.

Sharon Martin, Principal at Ridgeline Montessori Public Charter School, considers the challenges of maintaining her commitments to equity and high quality Montessori on meager resources.

Keith Whitescarver, Executive Director of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, takes a measured view of both sides of the conversation.



Ayer: It's all about choices: a history

continued from page 3

white students into historically black schools where the magnet programs were sited, and at times to function as schools of choice in white neighborhoods to draw in children from across a district. 20% of today's public Montessori schools are magnet programs, with several, such as Sands Montessori in Cincinnati, dating back to this period. Other district-wide choice programs had some success in desegregation—notably Cambridge, Massachusetts' "controlled choice" model, where choices are balanced to keep school demographics in line with district averages and resources are directed to less frequently chosen schools. John M. Tobin Montessori School, the first district Montessori school to achieve AMS certification, is part of this model.

Charter Schools

The next big development in school choice was charter schools. In 1974, Dr. Ray Budde, an education professor at the University of Massachusetts, tossed out an idea for school reform intended to reduce bureaucracy and empower innovative teachers, in a short paper titled "Education by Charter" presented to an obscure journal. It landed without even a thud, seemingly irrelevant to the challenges of the time, and lay dormant there for more than a decade.

But in the 1980s, school reform was back in the national consciousness, crystallized in the hugely influential "A Nation at Risk" report. In 1988, Budde published his paper as a short book. Activist and national teachers' union leader Al Shanker took up the idea, and the charter school movement was born. Budde's original concept was to

re-organize districts, leaving schools intact, and giving teams of teachers full responsibility and accountability for instruction under three to five year "Educational Charters". But the idea grew and developed as it spread through the education reform world, becoming something very different.

The first charter law, in Minnesota in 1991, envisioned teacher-run charters, authorized by local school boards, with licensed teachers from the school as a majority of the school's board of directors. The first charter granted (although not the first school to open) was for Bluffview Montessori in Winona, Minnesota, still in existence today. California approved charters in 1992, six states followed in 1993, and federal legislation was approved in 1994. As states passed their individual laws, the model expanded and diversified, incorporating non-licensed and non-union teachers; additional authorizers such as universities, state boards of education, and nonprofits; and the growth of for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs).

The consequences of these developments have been as varied as the implementations. A 2002 review of the previous decade found charters to be smaller, somewhat less white and affluent, moderately innovative, and mostly equitable, compared with district schools, and that their impact on student achievement was mixed. A 2010 review saw the growth of EMOs and non-profit Charter Management Organizations, or CMOs, from about 20 to 200 over a ten year period, almost half of them for-profit entities, as the business world began to see opportunities in the charter model. Equity and achievement measures were literally all over the map, varying widely by state and region.

Charters today

As of 2015, 6,723 charters enrolled nearly three million students, about 6% of students nationally. Charters enroll the most students in populous states such as California (500,000 in 1,125 schools), Texas (235,000 in 658 schools), and Florida (230,000 in 623 schools),

traditional, locally controlled, unionized, open access, and politically accountable neighborhood schools. Even under open enrollment plans, charters have been observed to serve populations different from their surrounding districts in achievement levels, family involvement, and racial composition, raising charges of "skimming" or "cherry-picking" and



A rural classroom between 1900-1920. Image courtesy the Library of Congress.

and serve the largest share of students in charter-friendly Washington D.C. (48% of students), Arizona (27%) and Florida (14.5%). 26% of charters are managed by non-profit CMOs (such as KIPP, IDEA, and Harmony), 15% by for-profit EMOs, while the remaining 59% are independently managed.

Education reform philanthropy has contributed heavily to charter schools. The Walton Family Foundation has invested more than \$400 million in charter schools since 1997, and has committed an additional \$1 billion over the next five years. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has put in at least \$400 million in direct support and political advocacy, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation has spent \$144 million.

Charter schools remain highly controversial. They are often hugely popular with families, with long waiting lists and heavily subscribed lotteries. As charters have grown to serve, in aggregate, more black, Hispanic, and low-income families than national averages, proponents point to achievement gains in some schools for these underserved populations, and to longer instructional time with longer days or more days of school.


Criticism comes on several broad, overlapping fronts. Philosophically, charters are seen as privatization of public education and as a threat to

segregation. "High-performing" charter schools such as KIPP and others have been seen as "teaching to the test" and promoting a rigid culture of obedience and extrinsic motivation. The NAACP has called for a moratorium on charter schools until greater transparency and accountability can be shown.

Montessori charter schools

In this broad context, Montessori charter schools make up a tiny segment of the market: 200 or so in all, concentrated in Arizona (33), California (26), Colorado (26) and Florida (16). Yet they make up 40% of public Montessori schools, probably because the autonomy and independence inherent in the model provides the most freedom to fully implement structural elements of Montessori such as mixed-age classes, alternative teacher training, curriculum, and materials, different staffing models, and a more holistic approach to assessment. None are part of a CMO or EMO, and they are often grassroots efforts launched by families from existing private Montessori schools.

David Ayer is the Communications Director for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and Editorial Director for MontessoriPublic.



montessori educational programs international

Promoting peace
through authentic
Montessori
education and
practice

mepiforum.org

HelloWood.com

Quality Montessori

~

American Made

Remembering John Snyder

John was an energetic and creative man, who comfortably and gracefully filled the roles of leader and teacher

John Snyder, a longtime contributor to the newspaper *Public School Montessorian* (the wellspring of *MontessoriPublic*), passed away in March. John contributed a quarterly column to the paper over a span of 16 years, which became the backbone of his 2014 book *Tending the Light: Essays on Montessori Education*.

MontessoriPublic printed a moving excerpt, “Talking to Children About Peace in a Time of War” in the December issue. John’s widow, Kathy, passed on her appreciation of the newspaper. “John appreciated so much the opportunity which the paper provided, to write down his thoughts and experiences every quarter for the direct benefit of other Montessorians. Thank you very much to *Public School Montessorian* for their encouragement and support of John’s writing. Now an even wider audience can enjoy and learn from those writings.”



John’s family shared his obituary with MontessoriPublic:

John Robert Snyder, 62, passed away peacefully at home on Sunday, March 5, of complications related to ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease).

John was born December 31, 1954, in Victoria, Texas, to Joseph R. Snyder and Loyce Weathers Snyder. He was their only child. John is survived by his beloved wife of 39 years, Kathleen Sigle Snyder and their only son Karl Joseph Snyder of Minneapolis.

From an early age, John was strongly attracted to music and books. He later went on to earn degrees in music, computer science, and philosophy at the University of Houston and the University of Washington in Seattle.

John was an energetic and creative man, and he comfortably and gracefully filled the role of leader and teacher in spiritual and academic communities alike. In addition to being a devoted husband and father, he was an accomplished musician, composer, choir director, and computer scientist, an internationally recognized poet, and a Montessori elementary teacher, administrator, and lecturer. He was truly a unique Montessorian in every fiber, with a mind and spirit filled with wisdom and generosity. He is the author of two books, *Tending the Light: Essays on Montessori Education* and *Infinity Minus One*, a book of poems.

Photo: John with his wife Kathy and their son Karl

MONTESSORI
public

BRINGING MONTESSORI INTO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION

MontessoriPublic is a digital and print communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori, presenting news and information about public schools, publicly supported programs, public policy, and relevant ideas and events in education.

MontessoriPublic is distributed free of charge to every school listed in the Montessori Census (montessoricensus.org), as well as all MACTE-accredited teacher training centers, state and national Montessori organizations, and individual subscribers. Multiple copies are sent to public schools based on the number of teachers listed in the school’s Census entry.

To subscribe, visit montessoripublic.org, enter your email address, and add your mailing address to your profile.

For advertising information, submission guidelines, or other communications, contact David Ayer at editor@montessoripublic.org.

Editorial Director: David Ayer

Contributors: David Ayer, Sarah Becker, Michael Chandler, Sara Cotner, Mira Debs, Gena Engelfried, Melissa Harbert, Gary Houchens, Hal Kwalwasser, Sharon Martin, and Keith Whitescarver

Publication design and production: Matt Giraud, Gyroscope Creative

MontessoriPublic is a publication of the

NATIONAL CENTER for
MONTESSORI in the **PUBLIC SECTOR**

Noncommercial reproduction of material in this publication is permitted and encouraged. Please consult authors for rights to reprint copyrighted articles.

Copyright 2017 National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector

public-montessori.org

What is your work
in the world?



MONTESSORI
EDUCATION CENTER
OF THE ROCKIES
BOULDER, CO



LEARN MORE @
MECR.EDU

ENROLL NOW

AMS-affiliated Administrator Course
BEGINS JAN 2018

MACTE Accredited and AMS-affiliated
Teacher Certification Courses from
Infant to Elementary II
BEGIN EACH JUNE

Whitescarver: The charter debate

continued from page 1

entities, and it is nearly impossible to make substantial sums of money in running a school, particularly a school that is not part of a charter network. Montessori charter schools, in particular, are almost always greatly underfunded. School leaders are always counting their pennies to allow them to hire another assistant or purchase needed materials.

Second, the individuals working in foundations that support the charter school movement are, by and large, dedicated in finding ways to improve our public schools, especially in urban areas. As Executive Director of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, I frequently work with and talk to the people in the foundations supporting education reform and charters. They are thoughtful, deeply concerned with equity, work strategically to direct their resources to improving schools. They are motivated by the opportunities possible with school choice not because they want to dismantle public education, but because they want to make better education available to more Americans.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, just as there are, and have always been, individuals who would prefer to see public education dismantled.

So what is the theoretical flaw? Simply put, schools are not a business.

But then, re-imagining, if not dismantling, public education is also what motivates those of us who work in public Montessori.

Schools as businesses?

The pro-charter camp is also guilty of logical and theoretical flaws and unsubstantiated claims, rooted in the development of the movement in the early 90s. The idea of charters originated in 1974, and was first championed by legendary teachers' union leader Al Shanker in 1988. But the activating force behind the model was a book, *Politics, Markets, and American Schools*, written by two political scientists, and published by the left-leaning Brookings Institution, in 1990. The book's premise was that the endless cycles of school reform never achieved the desired results because the institution itself was the problem. The solution to this

problem was choice. Choice, the authors argued, would unleash healthy competition, foster school autonomy, and lead, eventually, to real and sustainable school improvement and academic achievement – all because choice would bypass the deadening bureaucracy overseeing previous public school reform efforts.

While this wasn't the first time school reform driven by a market approach had been proposed, having the weight of a Stanford based research project and a liberal think tank made quite an impact. By the time I entered graduate school, the book was required reading and was carefully digested by school reformers. One year after publication, the first charter law was passed in Minnesota, and the floodgates were open.

So what is the theoretical flaw? Simply put, schools are not a business. Markets are disinclined toward equity. A restaurant with horrible service and food might close in 100 days, and hungry former customers can go to a new restaurant. Closing a school because of bad teaching and a bad curriculum is not so simple. Shutting down a school at any time can create great disruptions and hardship to families and the community. Closing in the middle of a school year would be catastrophic. In our country, education is a basic right

given to all children. A school governance body isn't permitted to shrug its shoulders, shutter the school, and say to the world, "We gave it our best. Students, go find another school."

Even if deregulated markets did work to improve student achievement, problems would still be likely. Take airlines, for instance. Deregulation has made flying a supremely unpleasant experience—even though prices are lower than when airlines were regulated. Think of the incredibly shrinking seat; the "snack" comprised of a bag of six pretzels; up-charges for luggage, early boarding, and a few more inches of leg room.

The promise and price of autonomy

Thirty years into this wave of reform charter schools have yet to produce the promised dividends. On average,



Implementing the curriculum at Ridgeline Montessori Charter School

students perform about the same in charters and district schools. Charters tend to receive less per pupil funding than neighboring district schools, leading to shortages of needed items and sub-standard facilities. In Washington, D.C., for example, where about forty-five percent of all students are educated in charter schools, charters receive a modest facility allotment. But the city has some of the highest real estate prices in the country. Charter startups often find themselves in small, overpriced, commercial sites, leading to cramped classrooms and limited green space. And because charters almost always operate as their own local education authority (LEA), they alone are responsible for providing all special education services, which presents serious challenges for an already underfunded school.

While NCMPs is intentionally agnostic on the virtue or vice of charter schools, we do recognize two realities, which all Montessorians offering an opinion on the matter would be wise to consider. First is that the dramatic expansion of public Montessori we are currently experiencing has been and is likely to remain reliant on the charter movement because of the autonomy that charter schools can provide. Second is that the very purpose of bringing Montessori to the public sector is grounded in deep dissatisfaction with the prevailing assumptions and practices that characterize our system of public schooling.

Every effort to mount a Montessori program in the public sector – regardless of whether the school is charter or district or magnet – is an exercise in challenging the status quo. From budgeting

to scheduling to teacher preparation and credentialing, to expectations regarding family engagement, operators aiming to offer a Montessori program that even approaches fidelity to the model, must, in most cases, run a school that bears very little resemblance to other schools in district.

Montessori schools that operate within a district enjoy larger budgets and resources that accompany large systems. They are also vulnerable to the whims of the central office, including highly mobile superintendents who may or may not require a reading curriculum in all second grade classrooms, or managed budget cuts that remove classroom assistants, or decide that Montessori is a bad idea.

Today, there are 520 public Montessori schools, serving approximately 130,000 students – more, if you count Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Between fifteen and twenty schools open annually, making public Montessori the largest "alternative" model operating in the public sector – and the growth area of the contemporary Montessori movement. Most of that growth has taken place in the last decade, and most of these students are educated in charter schools.

It is vital that those of us who value public Montessori programs – and I assume everyone reading this shares this value – continue to both buoy the work of charter schools and support efforts to continue their autonomy.

Keith Whitescarver is the Executive Director of the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.



MONTESSORI PUBLIC | SPRING 2017 7

Becker: Magnets, choice, and equity in Houston

continued from page 1

magnet programs in HISD, including its two public Montessori schools, are located in predominantly white neighborhoods. The enrollment of most magnet schools within HISD is split between students zoned to the school and magnet

students from across the city. In most grade levels, students from the neighborhood zone have a priority over magnet applicants from elsewhere. Couple that with the fact that magnet schools get more dollars per student, and even if you are a white student attending your neighborhood school, you are likely to receive the benefits of magnet funding even if you don't participate in the magnet program.

Here's how this plays out at our children's Montessori magnet school. The campus student population is 6% African American versus the district's proportion of 25%. The Hispanic population of 55% is close to the district level of 62%, but the white population is extraordinarily skewed at 33% versus 8% for the district. Furthermore, the white population is growing in our children's school – the proportion of white students is up 14% over the last three years.

There's also the problem of self-selection in magnet programs. The parents who are able to take the time and energy to research what school is best for their child, go through the online application process, and take on the risk of the child attending school far from home are by definition parents who are

door for charter schools in poor neighborhoods and intersects another aspect of school choice that drains students and tax dollars out of the district. Within HISD's borders, over 35,000 children go to charter schools – enough children to create a medium-sized school district in this state.

are removed, white students are often the largest student group in many classrooms at our school.

Finally, the system of school choice and the funding that follows it in HISD puts extreme pressure on principals. HISD is the birthplace of the modern-day high stakes testing movement,

Should some parents be penalized because they don't have the resources to play that active role?

Another factor here is the very complicated discussion of what makes a school a "good" school or "bad" school. Or maybe it's not so complicated. When researcher Amanda Bancroft of Rice University studied how high status parents choose schools in Houston, she found that they seemed to identify good schools by a high number of white, affluent families. This is troubling and directly undermines the mission of the magnet program. Even if magnet programs are started in schools with predominantly children of color, this "choice" trend among affluent families

and magnet schools are often threatened with a loss of magnet status when test scores are not improving. This is problematic for the two Montessori schools who follow a different curriculum yet feel pressure to justify their existence by test scores.

Many parents choose Montessori in HISD because in many ways Maria Montessori's teaching methods are contrary to our traditional public school models. These same parents are often disappointed to learn their students must still prepare and take the standardized tests, and maybe more importantly, how much time is taken throughout the year for practice tests and benchmark exams – all of which look and feel just like those once-a-year state mandated exams.

I've heard it said that "Montessori is right for every child, but not every parent." As a Montessori parent, I have seen firsthand the beauty of Dr. Montessori's pedagogy and wish access to it would grow throughout our city. However, I cannot help but notice that the larger system of "school choice" from which my children benefit does not help everyone in the same way.

If the goal of having public Montessori schools is to increase access to these schools by populations who would not otherwise have them, then we as a Montessori community must think long and hard about the systems in which we are participating and whether they are meeting the goals they are supposed to be meeting. Montessori in Houston will really only be public when it's available – equally – to all.

Sarah Becker is a mother of three Montessori kids, a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology, and an advocate for public education. She lives in Houston, Texas.

The well-regarded programs are located in predominantly white neighborhoods

capable of taking a more active role in their child's education than other parents. Should some parents be penalized because they don't have the resources to play that active role?

A frequent complaint of HISD's system is that it pulls the best and brightest students from underserved neighborhood schools and places them in schools with more resources – concentrating students with parental involvement, economic advantages, language skills, and time in schools of choice. Not surprisingly, this concentration correlates with race and class. This may be a positive outcome for students that make it into a magnet school, but it damages the diversity of the schools they leave behind and undercuts the efficacy of the public school system. As "non-choice" district schools struggle more and more, the individual schools are seen as good opportunities while the district as a whole struggles with its ability to serve all children. This opens the

presents a significant barrier to becoming a desired magnet program and getting the funding that comes with magnet enrollment versus neighborhood enrollment.

It is within this complicated context that my children received spaces at our public Montessori school. One of the primary reasons we chose public school was for the diversity we wanted our children to experience, and while we are thankful our kids have access to Montessori curriculum, it is because of these larger problems in the magnet system that their school is disproportionately white.

A deeper look at our own campus experience reveals systems within the school itself such as teacher requests by parents and the location of bilingual classrooms outside the main buildings, which magnify the problem of white overrepresentation in our child's specific classroom. Once the 23% of the students that are "Limited English Proficiency"

MI
AS

Montessori
Institute of
Advanced
Studies



"I looked forward to each class meeting and seminar. The instructors and the materials presented were highly motivating."

"Very good quality; depth and breadth. Interesting, valuable material. I will recommend this program to prospective teachers. I have changed for the better; better mom and better teacher."

"The whole program is outstanding!"



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY®
education that transforms lives
Affiliated Teacher Education Program

MACTE
Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education

MIAS offers:

- Small classes with individual attention
- Offering a convenient schedule that caters to working students
- Experienced staff specialized in connecting students to their unique gifts residing within

Start your journey today!

Visit: www.montessori-training.com

22781 Canyon Court - Castro Valley - CA - 94552
(510) 581-3729
montessori.ins@gmail.com

Five questions on the impact of charters

What makes a Montessori charter school good? It's not just the Montessori



BY **MIRA DEBS**

Beyond the current public debate that seeks to characterize charter schools as either wholly “good” or entirely bad, there are at least five strands of questions about the impact of charter schools and Montessori charter schools in particular as to their “goodness” and “badness.”

First, what is student achievement like at the charter school in comparison to the surrounding district, and are charters doing a better job? Studies have been very mixed about student achievement in charter schools, and no study has been able to document that charter status automatically creates higher achievement. It seems that significant state regulation such as what's been implemented in Massachusetts correlates to charter

or socioeconomic diversity. Research has shown that charters can have a segregating effect, and that charters disproportionately under-enroll low-income students, special education students and English language learners. My own research shows that charter Montessori schools enroll a lower proportion of students of color and low income students than their comparative districts and also magnet/district Montessori schools. This can be a positive feature if the charter is more racially diverse than a hyper-segregated city school district, but can be a problem if the difference is too stark. One specific challenge for charters is that, unlike magnets that were created as part of desegregation court orders, Montessori charters rarely begin with accommodations to ensure diverse student enrollment. A number of Montessori charter schools in St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore have become so popular with middle-class white parents that they have declining enrollments of students of color. Some of these schools are now creating weighted charter lotteries in order to ensure underserved students will be able to access their schools. But other charter Montessori schools have exclusionary practices such as tuition-based preschools, no

contribute to broader district improvement? Research here suggests the size of the town or city and the size of the charter sector makes a critical difference, and cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and

their test scores and funding practices, policy makers are not usually considering the diversity of their enrollment, their Montessori implementation and their impact on the district. These fac-

Charters have a higher degree of freedom that supports stronger Montessori fidelity

DC with substantial charter sectors are having a disastrous cumulative impact on district schools. And unlike the early promise that charters would be “laboratories” of school improvement, there have been few examples of charter-district collaboration. It is important for Montessori charters to consider how they can have a positive impact on public education beyond what they offer and the students that they serve in their school buildings.

Finally, is the charter held to equal accountability standards as district schools? Although charters are scrutinized for

tors are critical to examine in order to be able to assess the impact of charters, and Montessori charter schools in particular, on the public school landscape.

Mira Debs is a post-doctoral fellow in Education Studies and Political Science at Yale University. Her work on public Montessori, race and equity has been published in the Journal of Montessori Research and featured in Education Week. Her thesis won the American Montessori Society prize for best dissertation in 2016.

Studies have been very mixed about student achievement in charter schools

school quality and student achievement, in contrast to a lack of charter regulation in states such as Michigan. There is limited and mixed research for public Montessori school achievement, and achievement differences between charter and district/magnet Montessori have not been examined. From my initial investigations, I've found high achieving and low achieving charter Montessori schools and high and low achieving district and magnet Montessori schools. An additional important question is how well public Montessori schools support students of color and help to close the opportunity gap, as discussed in this issue's article by Sara Cotner. The jury is still out here.

A second important question is whether the charter school serves a similar population of students as the surrounding district or makes a positive contribution to supporting greater racial

school bus transportation, no free lunch, and restrictions on enrollment at later ages, which limit the accessibility of their schools to the most vulnerable students. Such discrepancies with public schools are worrisome and schools should work to correct them.

A critical third question is how well charter Montessori schools are able to implement Montessori. Carolyn Daost and Sawako Suzuki's findings suggest that charters have a higher degree of freedom that supports stronger Montessori fidelity in comparison to Montessori district schools. From this angle, charter Montessori schools may have a clear advantage in using added autonomy to maintain Montessori implementation.

Fourth, it's also necessary to examine the impact of charters on the surrounding school district. Does the charter take necessary resources away from the surrounding district? Does the charter



HOUSTON MONTESSORI CENTER
TEACHER EDUCATION SINCE 1973

**INFANT AND TODDLER
EARLY CHILDHOOD
ELEMENTARY I/II
SECONDARY I/II
ADMINISTRATION**

ELISABETH COE, PH.D., EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
7807 LONG POINT, SUITE 100
HOUSTON, TEXAS 77055
PH. 713.465.7670 FAX. 713.465.8577
WWW.HOUSTONMONTESSORICENTER.ORG

**AFFILIATED BY THE AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY,
ACCREDITED BY MACTE
APPROVED AND REGULATED BY THE TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION**

Montessori needs charters and choice

Charters allow Montessori schools the flexibility they need to challenge traditional schooling



BY GARY W. HOUCHENS

I've been an educator for more than 20 years now, spending most of that time as a teacher and administrator in traditional public schools. As an educator, I've long supported school choice policies as a way of expanding access to high-quality education options for all families. But my experiences as dad of two children who have been blessed by a wonderful Montessori preschool education has sealed my commitment to school choice, and to public charter schools in particular.

My work in both public and private schools has taught me that no school, no matter how good, can meet the needs of every single family. The needs of individual students are simply too diverse. We put an unfair burden on great public school teachers by asking them to be all things to all students. That's why every family, regardless of their income or neighborhood, should have access to a range of high-quality schooling options.

This conviction took on a new urgency when my wife and I had to make choices for our own children. Many parents we knew highly recommended a local, pri-

In fact, being a Montessori dad significantly altered my thinking about education in general. It taught me how independent kids can be when given a well-prepared learning environment that respects their dignity as individual learners. It changed my conception of the teacher's role in guiding learning, rather than controlling every aspect of the learning process. It made me appreciate how learning is natural and that children have an innate curiosity that traditional forms of education at best don't recognize and, at worst, actually harms.

All of these insights have begun to shape my teaching, writing, and policy advocacy. But above all, my Montessori experience has made me zealous to ensure that every child – not just those with affluent and well-educated parents – has access to such an option.

So I advocated publicly and passionately for the recent passage of Kentucky's new charter school law. And I continue to advocate for a scholarship tax credit program that would incentivize private donations that help low-income families access tuition-based schools. I would like to see a public Montessori option, or at least a private Montessori option that serves more children of poverty, in every community where there is sufficient demand.

In short, education is a public good, but that doesn't mean it has to be delivered by government-owned and operated schools. As American Enterprise Institute education scholar Andy Smarick recently argued in his paper, *Analyzing an Educational Revolution*, school choice programs deepen the democratic elements of public education by empowering parents and by engaging a wider

single reason why charter schools tend to be successful with at-risk students, it is their freedom from the bureaucracy and cultural constraints of traditional schools. I recently visited Explore! Com-

like Libertas School of Memphis, which blends Montessori pedagogy with a rigorous liberal arts curriculum, serving children in one of the city's most impoverished neighborhoods. Libertas



Students enjoying their autonomy at Libertas School of Memphis

munity School in Nashville, which is not a Montessori school but uses a highly student-centered, project-based learning instructional approach. The principal explained that as a charter school, Explore! can be "nimble" in rapidly adjusting the curriculum or instructional program based on the needs of students, and without needed approval or oversight from the local district bureaucracy.

Left up to the decisions of local school district authorities, authentic Montessori would not become a welcomed option in many communities. Montessori simply challenges too many of the core assumptions of teaching and learning that guide traditional structures of schooling. Perhaps this is why, according to the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, approximately 40 percent of all public Montessori options are charter schools.

As public charters, these schools provide access to a diverse group of students who are in great need of educational alternatives, while enjoying the autonomy to use and adapt the Montessori Method to the needs of those same students. I'm inspired by many great examples

also hosts a teacher residency program, where aspiring Montessori guides learn their craft in an authentic Montessori environment. The Libertas model would be highly unlikely if the school was not organized as an autonomous charter school with tuition-free enrollment open to all families.

Not every charter school will be right for every family. That's the point of course. As Montessorians know well, not every traditional school is right for every child either. But charter schools and choice policies in general help give every family a chance for the kind of rich Montessori education my own family has enjoyed, while preserving the independence of Montessori schools and teachers. For families who want Montessori, that choice is priceless.

Gary Houchens, Ph.D. is associate professor of Educational Administration, Leadership, and Research at Western Kentucky University and a member of the Kentucky Board of Education. All views expressed here are his alone. Follow his blog at schoolleader.typepad.com

Being a Montessori dad significantly altered my thinking about education in general

vate Montessori preschool program with a nurse for infants. Our oldest daughter entered the program at 8 months old and stayed until she entered kindergarten. Our youngest son will graduate from the preschool this May. We have enjoyed 7 wonderful years, and I am confident my kids' worldview and capacity to learn will be forever enhanced because of their Montessori experience.

variety of community-based schooling options.

But school choice is not just important for the access it provides children who otherwise would not have the Montessori option. School choice is also important for helping schools maintain the integrity of the Montessori method itself.

Montessori schools need maximum autonomy and flexibility. If there's a

Achievement equity in public Montessori

Adapting high performance charter techniques to fully implemented Montessori for educational equity



BY SARA COTNER

Earlier this year, I participated on a panel discussion at the University of Texas entitled, “Are charter schools good or bad for public education?” In Austin – where I founded the city’s only free public Montessori school – the anti-charter sentiment is palpable. There is a high concentration of liberal academics and activists that argues that public charters are dismantling our public education system.

Even as a self-proclaimed “liberal activist,” I have little patience for the debate. I care less about whether a child receives a public education (an education funded by tax-payer dollars) in a school that is governed by an elected school board

the second greatest achievement gap of major urban areas behind Washington, D.C. The highest-performing public schools in Austin serve children really well – and those children happen to be mostly white and affluent. They also happen to be located west of the interstate – a line that has divided our city into groups who have access to resources and privileges and those who do not.

Children in our city are not democratically assigned to their local public district schools. Rather, the families who have access to the best public district schools “buy” their way into those schools by purchasing a home within the school zone of their choice.

The families in Austin who cannot afford to purchase housing in the higher-performing school zones are typically relegated to under-performing schools. For example, at the public high-school down the street from our Montessori school on the east side of the interstate, only 29% of students graduated “college-ready” according to the state in 2012. Most of those students are children of color. Conversely, on the west side of the interstate, 87% of children at a more affluent public high school were

Helping all children – regardless of their families’ income levels – attain a high-quality education is one of the most important social justice issues of our time. It’s the issue we must stay focused on. Figuring out how to ensure academic, social, emotional, and physical equity for all children is where we

that many Montessorians don’t believe in standardized testing, but many civil rights groups do. They believe it allows us to keep our eye on inequity. After all, if children can’t do basic reading and math, their ability to pursue their cosmic task is going to be severely hindered.

At Montessori For All, we believe that



Working towards equity at Montessori For All

The equity gap in our country is huge

with an appointed Superintendent or in a school like mine that is governed by a non-profit board with an appointed Superintendent. I care more about whether children receive a high-quality, free, public education.

I have worked in public district Montessori programs and know what it feels like to constantly have to fight for the freedom to fully implement Montessori. While I am a huge proponent of public district Montessori, I also appreciate the autonomy that we have in our public charter Montessori programs. At the end of the day, I care most about children having access to a free, public Montessori education.

The people who worry about charters dismantling our public education system believe that public schools are the very foundation upon which our democracy is built. And I agree! But I have to admit that the public district education system in Austin (and generally around the United States) is not particularly democratic. In 2011, a report was published that revealed that Austin had

deemed “college ready.” The vast majority of those students are white.

At our public Montessori charter school, families cannot buy their way in. All the families living on the east side have an equal chance of gaining admission through a random lottery. Until there is massive reform related to how children are assigned to public district schools, charter schools will continue to generally provide more democratic access to public education.

Additionally, some charter school networks for children in low-income communities have done the impossible: demonstrating that home life does not have to be a predictor of success. Research suggests that children might as well not even take standardized tests, as the results correlate almost perfectly with families’ income and education levels. However, charter networks such as Uncommon Schools and Achievement First have proven that schools can overturn the predictive power of economic poverty. Children in those schools are out-performing more affluent peers.

should spend the bulk of our energy – not on arguing about whether charter schools are good for public education.

Here’s what I think we really should be focusing on: the equity gap in our country is huge. Children from low-income communities have a 9% chance of graduating from college. Given the current reality of our country, graduating from college is generally a precursor to being able to pursue one’s cosmic task. Children from high-income households are 77% likely to graduate from college.

Although we have research that shows that public Montessori programs tend

it is possible to fully implement Montessori and reduce the huge disparities between high-income and low-income children. In 3rd grade reading, for example, our high-income children scored higher than the high-income children in our local district. Our low-income children scored higher than the low-income children in our local district, as well as scoring higher than the low-income children being served in high-performing charter schools focused on helping low-income children get to college. The gap between high-income and low-income children at our school was reduced

Many Montessorians don’t believe in testing. But many civil rights groups do.

to outperform local schools, the data masks the huge inequities that typically exist within our wonderfully diverse public Montessori schools – district and charter alike. Low-income children in our programs tend to fare way worse than higher-income children on measures of basic proficiency in math and reading. In one of the most touted public Montessori schools in our country, there is a 38-point gap between the reading scores of high-income students and low-income students. I understand

to 17 points, whereas the gap in the local district was at 27 points.

In order to work toward these kinds of outcomes for children, we had to adopt and adapt some best practices from high-performing charter schools serving children from low-income communities. We choose to administer the DRA reading assessment at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year, so guides sit down with children

continues on page 19 >

Breakthrough: A new model

The NCMPS pilot program takes a child-centered approach

BY **NCMPS STAFF**

Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School in Washington D.C. was designed and supported by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector. Intentionally situated in D.C.’s charter-friendly and Montessori-rich environment, Breakthrough serves as a national pilot for design principles NCMPS has been developing and testing over the last five years.

Funding for Breakthrough was provided by CityBridge Education through their Breakthrough Schools: DC initiative. Several of CityBridge’s design principles lined up particularly well with Montessori:

- meet the diverse learning needs of each student
- enable students to learn at their own pace
- give students skills, information, and tools to manage their own learning

This approach is a major shift from the past two decades of education reform. Up to now, the focus has been on whole-school models that address student achievement and tackle the persistent gap in achievement test outcomes between white students and students of color—the so-called “achievement” or “opportunity” gap. One model for this

broad support for and among children and families.

Three pillars

These key concepts — human development, prevention, and community — are the ‘pillars’ of the Breakthrough model. Putting these principles into action effectively takes a lot of hard work and financial support. Fully implemented Montessori calls for significant investments in training, instructional leadership and coaching, and fully-prepared environments. Likewise, a high functioning, fully integrated early intervention program requires both Montessori and special education expertise, and plenty of time for staff to deliberate. Generous per-pupil allocations beginning at age three, combined with start-up funding from the Walton Family Foundation and the District of Columbia made these initial investments possible.

Keith Whitescarver, NCMPS’s Executive Director, who has served as Breakthrough’s founding leader during its launch year, explains: “Our intention is for Breakthrough to be a model for other programs. We want to maximize the potential of the D.C. policy environment to show what’s really needed to get the transformational changes we are already seeing.”

Human development

Montessori education is at its core a model of human development, and Breakthrough aims for full Montessori implementation in the classroom

weeks ahead of the of the start date for children for in an intensive Summer Institute, including careful consideration of how fully implemented Montessori would play out in the changing D.C. neighborhood of Petworth.

In addition to weeks spent collaboratively preparing their environments,

for developmental challenges similar to those offered by occupational therapy.

Second, at Breakthrough, observation is the first step in supporting children who have problems in the classroom. Richardson explains: “Knowing the child as a whole individual is at the center of our work. We strive to better



Human flourishing starts early at Breakthrough

Breakthrough staff explored the neighborhood surrounding the school, prepared to orient Breakthrough’s founding families, and laid plans for the school’s emerging programs for family support, intervention, and assessment.

The assessment framework centers human flourishing in all conversations about student success and achievement, in the design of progress reports, the use of executive function measures such as the Minnesota Executive Function Scale (MEFS), and universal screens focused on normalization and adaptation. This framework keeps the focus on human development grounded in Montessori theory and practice while responding to the needs and interests of Breakthrough children and families.

Prevention

Prevention rests on two guiding principles. First, Breakthrough sees fully implemented Montessori as a guiding model for prevention. Montessori prepared environments are, by definition, designed to foster optimal development, which ‘crowds out’ unhealthy development before it can get started. The calm, orderly spaces stocked with child-sized furniture and child-oriented manipulatives act as interventions

know what makes each child ‘tick’. That means we dig in, to get a better grasp on what may be affecting the child.”

This observation-based support is enacted in Child Study, a rethinking of Response to Intervention (RTI) first developed by NCMPS researchers in 2009. In this model, a Montessori-trained Child Study Lead brings together the faculty as a whole to support a teacher in removing obstacles, developing an action plan, and monitoring progress for a child experiencing developmental and learning challenges. Child Study may eventually lead to a special education classification, but more typically develops strategies to help a child be successful without clinical interventions. Jackie Cossentino, a co-developer of Child Study, elaborates: “Our guiding question, always, every day is: what’s going on with this child? Not, what’s wrong this child, but what is, actually, going on socially, emotionally, intellectually, physically.”

Community

Building community with Montessori outreach to school families supports prevention as well. “Parents of three and four year olds are in a ‘sensitive period’ for parenting support,” Cossentino explained. Before the school even opened

Breakthrough shifts the emphasis toward human flourishing.

effort is the high performance “no excuses” charter school, for which Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools have become the exemplar.

Unlike the “no excuses” approach, Breakthrough addresses the challenges of poverty and equity through a fundamentally different model that shifts the emphasis toward human flourishing. Fully-implemented, well-supported Montessori education is the foundation of this model, which is further elaborated in design principles focused on working with children and families early to prevent problems later, and engaging deeply with the community to build

and beyond. Hannah Richardson, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, describes the approach: “Our goal is to make all actions within the school child centered, which is the true essence of Montessori. We work hard to ensure that every interaction, every discussion, every decision is made by first asking ‘What’s best for the child?’”

In practice, this means abundant staffing and constant professional cultivation. Seven trained teachers were hired for five classrooms, making possible all-day Montessori as well as creating a reserve for contingencies — a “deep bench”. Likewise, all staff gathered five

its doors, parent events were designed not just to build enrollment, but to help parents understand their developing children, and to bring some of the school-based prevention elements into the home: preparing the environment, observation, and fostering independence. At one session, parents took home a small glass pitcher, with some ideas on how it could be used. Cossentino continued: “When you’re working with parents of young children, you want to make as many opportunities as you can for them to be blown away by the child’s possibilities and capabilities. So many stressors — which are obstacles to development — can be so easily resolved with just a few little things: bedtime, choice, a predictable routine. You have to follow the family as well as the child.”

NCMPS sees Breakthrough ultimately as a driver of community transformation, and this begins with the family but extends beyond. This means intensive

engagement far ahead of actual enrollment, and constant outreach.

The work with families is led by the Director of Family and Community Engagement Emily Hedin. Before the

Fully implemented Montessori is a guiding model for prevention

school opened, Hedin called every applicant, inviting them to information sessions, and called every lottery winner to welcome them the day names were drawn. A detailed family handbook went out early, to keep parents informed and invite their involvement.

Over the summer, Breakthrough hosted events for families: playdates, community dinners, volunteer meetings, and forums on multiculturalism and diversity. In August, each child received

a welcome letter and photos from their guide and assistant, and was invited to a welcome visit to spend time in the classroom one-on-one with their guide. Meanwhile, parents had a meeting with

Hedin to make sure all questions were answered.

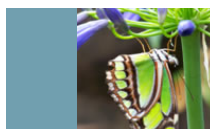
During the school year, Breakthrough welcomes families into the school not just through standard events such as conferences, but also potlucks and classroom observations. Staff also move out into the community to meet families with home visits, sharing information about the school and child development, but also learning from families about their individual circumstances. Over

the course of the year, guides visit all the children in their classroom to build strong relationships and open communication between school and home. Breakthrough extends further into the community by developing partnerships with non-profits, museums, libraries, cultural organizations, and more.

The school is less than a year old, and there have definitely been lessons learned along the way. It was always intended to be a testing ground for a new, more child-centered model of addressing the challenges of poverty and equity, in the belief that strong support at the beginning will pay off in life-long dividends down the road. Whitescarver emphasizes, “NCMPS is not a school operator, so it’s critical to have a strong partnership with the Breakthrough team. This relationship enables Breakthrough to truly serve as a laboratory for the concepts and solutions that NCMPS develop for schools all over the country.”



**Educate.
Experience.
Inspire.**



- Secondary I and II credential program
- Graduate credit and Master’s Degree option from Xavier University
- Based on the Montessori Method and work of the Clark Montessori Jr and Sr High School teaching team
- Clark Montessori Jr. and Sr. High School was recognized as a top model school in the U.S. by the Center for School Change:
 - “Top Ten Most Amazing Schools in America” by Ladies Home Journal
 - One of three finalists in President Obama’s Commencement Challenge
- CMSTEP is AMS-affiliated and accredited by MACTE

Katie Keller Wood and Marta Donahoe, Co-Directors
For course content and scheduling information:

visit www.cmstep.com

call 804.869.2111

write P.O. Box 17152 • Richmond, VA 23226

cmstep.com

Playing the school choice lottery in D.C.

Even with time and the “inside track,” the lottery can be a challenge to navigate



BY MICHAEL CHANDLER

Washington DC’s universal pre-school program – which provides full-day pre-school for all 3- and 4- year olds, regardless of family income – is at once the greatest benefit of raising young children in the nation’s capital and the biggest stressor.

With no guaranteed space in any school until your child is in kindergarten, enrollment is secured through a randomized lottery. If you get into a high-performing school, it can set a path for the rest of your child’s education—like

buying a house in a posh neighborhood west of Rock Creek Park, but without the million-dollar mortgage.

So when the lottery opened, I did my due diligence – visiting open houses, poring over test scores, and weighing possible commutes and different educational philosophies. I was feeling good about our prospects. As a *Washington Post* reporter covering DC schools, I had an inside track. I had interviewed the deputy mayor about the lottery system and written a story about how it works. I had plenty of time – on the clock – to visit schools. I knew the intricacies of how schools are evaluated and who the top performers were.

In the end, none of that mattered. Out of the 12 schools we listed on our common application, we got zero matches.

Our waiting list numbers ranged from 14 at a traditional school in our neighborhood to more than 400 for a popular dual language program. My anxiety level spiked.

We applied to some private pre-schools, swallowing hard at the prospect

of another year of \$1500 a month or more in tuition. And then we applied to more public pre-schools in a second round of the lottery. I leaned on my sources, searching for some hidden gems.

It paid off. By early summer we got a spot in a traditional public school in another neighborhood. With a dilapidated building and dwindling enrollment, the school had almost closed a few years earlier. But when we visited, we encountered a really likable principal who had made a huge investment in pre-school and some great teachers.

Still, when the school year started, my main reaction was something that none of my research had prepared me for: how it felt to drop off a just-turned-3 year old – who still slept in a crib and had been potty trained for all of three weeks – at school. It felt like dropping him off for kindergarten. We weren’t ready. A few weeks into the year, we got off another waiting list at a day care center that also runs a universal preschool program. Small. Nurturing. Long naps. Mostly play. We took it.

A year later, we did feel ready for something more challenging and long-term. I had my eye on a new Montessori charter school scheduled to open in time for the current school year. I had visited both public and private Montessori schools and admired the immaculate classrooms, the go-at-your-own-pace

More than halfway through my son’s first year, we feel very lucky that we did. Our 4-year old is experiencing a burst of independence and a growing confidence, and he has an infectious enthusiasm for learning.

Our experience with the lottery shows that arming yourself with infor-



Michael and Jonah have their eyes on Montessori

mation only helps to a point. The universal lottery is truly random. The days of paying someone to wait in line to get a favorable lottery number, or juggling a dozen different wait lists at a dozen different schools – processes that rewarded the most persistent, well-resourced, and plugged-in parents – are over.

That said, the word is still not fully out about Montessori. The model is very popular with white families and middle and upper class families in the District, less familiar to other groups. Charter



Engaging with Purpose
**Social Graces
Joy**

WHAT IF there were a TOOL that measured what really matters in a Montessori classroom?

Measure 60 attributes of children, adults, and the environment proven to support **executive functions, linguistic and cultural fluency, and social-emotional development.**

Measuring What Matters:



Developmental Environment Rating Scale

WWW.DERS-APP.ORG

Inspired by Montessori. Backed by Research.

In the end, none of that mattered. Out of 12 schools we got zero matches.

model and mixed age classes. I was not alone. Other charter Montessori schools in the city are among the most sought-after schools – with lengthy waiting lists. I knew the best chance for getting in was during the school’s first years while it was getting established.

Despite this, we didn’t apply in the first round, initially dissuaded by its location next door to a parole office. We applied in the second round, after we once again struck out in the first round, and eventually got a spot on the waiting list.

schools, not bound by neighborhood lines, have the potential to be the most racially and economically mixed schools in the city, but they can only be as diverse as their applicant pools. Continuing to spread the word will be a challenge for our school community going forward.

Michael Alison Chandler is a mother of two and a journalist who writes about working families for the Washington Post.

Depending on community and commitment

Community connections and a commitment to Montessori have kept us strong



BY **MELISSA HARBERT**

Lewis and Clark Montessori Charter School in Damascus, Oregon, on the outskirts of Portland, is wrapping up its ninth year. Opening its doors in 2008 to about 75 students ages five through seven, the school now serves 375 students, aged two through fifteen. Our three Primary classrooms, four Lower Elementary and four Upper Elementary are led by AMI-trained guides, and the adolescent program is informed by AMI principles and practices with teachers trained via the NAMTA Orientation to Adolescence.

As Head of School for the past 8 years, I've been with Lewis and Clark as it has grown from the ground up, adding one grade level each year through the adolescent program. Over the years, the school has had its struggles, to be sure, but we have also done some thoughtful, careful planning along the way to ensure success. Starting small, staying true to

and worked toward creating a Montessori community. The benefits have been realized as retention rate is high due to robust parent and staff member satisfaction with the program. Indeed, the retention rate has been between 94-96% each year, rivaling established private Montessori programs.

Community connections

Lewis and Clark enjoys a positive reputation in the local community, as well as with the sponsoring school district and the Montessori community. How was this accomplished? The answer is pretty simple: by being exemplars of our values, not just in the classroom or in our school community, but with all relationships we have worked to establish.

The school has had from the beginning a strong orientation toward service to the community. Not only does this reflect the values of Montessori education, but it has also had secondary benefits in supporting growth and development. The surrounding community has come to respect the school for walking our talk with high-impact community projects. Engaging families in food production on our mini-farm, involving the civic community in addressing problems of food insecurity, serving an aging and chronically underserved populace, and a general dearth of connectedness between agencies and citizens, has resulted in raising awareness for the school, for Montessori education, for charter

Staying friendly with the district

The school is fortunate to have a supportive sponsor in the Gresham-Barlow District. The relationship between charter schools and their sponsors can be difficult at times, given the sometimes imperfect understanding of the culture of each party's organization, and the

conducted in Oregon indicates that, while on the surface most charter schools receive an average 80% of the state per pupil allotment (already an alarmingly low dollar amount), in reality charters receive about 60-65% of the funding per student that district schools get from state and federal sources. For Lewis and Clark this meant that in order to keep our doors open and provide for all we



Making community connections at Lewis and Clark Montessori Charter School

lack of knowledge on both sides of the basics of the other's educational delivery method. Building a positive relationship has incalculable value for each side, but for the charter school in particular. Charter schools by definition offer an alternative to the local, conventional education system, which can be seen as a threat, or even as a Class B educational method. Montessorians have had to deal with this dynamic for over 100 years. Leadership at Lewis and Clark early on went the extra mile to establish positive relations with the school district, bearing through some prickly moments in the early years, learning humility through amending the inevitable mistakes, and continuing to communicate as much as possible with as many as possible. The relationship between the school and the district, like all relationships, has been tested a number of times, and fortunately has been found to be resilient. And, we can't rest on our laurels, as resilient does not mean static or bomb proof: the school's existence depends on the graces of this relationship, and we tend it with care.

Revenue streams

Another factor that scaffolded our success was the early development of alternate revenue streams. Research

wanted to do for our students and staff, we had to get really good at getting funds from other sources. Adding before and after school care, a fee-based Primary program, and community-based classes were natural avenues, but the school also had to develop capacity in event planning and execution, grant-writing, annual fund, business sponsorships, and major donor cultivation, and all that goes with advancement for a burgeoning school. While all schools fundraise, in the charter world, survival depends on it.

Being a nonprofit with the ability to fundraise, as well as establishing positive relationships in the public education world, has meant that the school has been fairly free to ground itself in very sound Montessori practices which have informed student learning, family connections, and community partnerships for the benefit of the many and the few. Walking this talk has meant that, for Lewis and Clark, what goes around really does come around, and standing in community builds strength and resiliency for individuals as well as organizations.

Melissa Harbert is Head of School at Lewis and Clark Montessori Charter School and Board President of Montessori Northwest, the AMI teacher training center in Portland.

While all schools fundraise, in the charter world, survival depends on it

Montessori, building relationships, and cultivating revenue streams have been critical to our survival.

Slow, steady growth

The choice (made by the founders of the school, and already in place when I arrived) to start small and "grow our own" students was critical. While other models are possible, this "roots to blossoms" approach has filled our upper grades with "Montessori-experienced" students. Ensuring a high fidelity Montessori classroom experience was the driving force behind this approach, although it meant that revenue would grow more slowly than if we had admitted as many students as possible

schools, and for what can happen when folks work together on simple solutions to solve local problems. People want to get behind such efforts as providing weekly fresh produce to senior citizen households, serving lunch at the school along with presentations on topics of interest to those who rarely are able to get out and about, being directly involved with the local farmer's market, and bringing the whole community inside the school with an annual art festival. The community has come to trust Lewis and Clark to be a social change agent in our small corner of the world, so it supports the school with time, expertise, and funds.

Equity and diversity at Ridgeline

Public Montessori charter schools can challenge perceptions and preconceptions



BY **SHARON MARTIN**

The appointment of Secretary of Education DeVos signaled imminent, possibly immense shifts in education, but it also sent mixed signals about public charter schools. As a public Montessori principal and a student in University of Oregon's Educational Leadership program, I find myself defending Montessori ideals in mixed company, with mixed feelings. How did our unique model, with its principles of spiritual awareness, compassion, and social responsibility, come out on the wrong side of the NAACP? How did a school founded by a fierce anti-fascist feminist pacifist acquire a new "champion" in a woman who recommended arming school staff against grizzlies and turning back Title IX? More importantly, how can we disentangle ourselves from these pro-charter "friends" we've gotten mixed up with? And, are we confident that we really are all that different?

Let's start with the basic awareness that charter schools are indeed a mixed bag. While proponents see a way to

of charter development, it's almost cliché to say, "the research is mixed," wrote Andre Perry, author of *The Garden Path: The Miseducation of a City*.

State charter legislation also varies dramatically. In DeVos' home state of Michigan, private companies run 80% of the charters with little to no accountability or oversight. Some nationwide charter franchises boast 20-30 branches. On the other hand, Oregon charters such as Ridgeline Montessori in Eugene run with just 80% of per-pupil funding – in a state where funding is already low. Additionally, we are required to purchase and maintain our own building. It takes love, sweat, ridiculous faith, and grassroots community volunteer hours to make public Montessori happen here. Our five other public Montessori programs in Oregon experience the same struggles and, like us, are held to exceptional levels of state and local accountability. Schools like ours, growing out of the pavement in cities and suburbs across the nation, need to start acknowledging and challenging the discourse around choice – or risk getting lost in the sauce.

That risk, that the public will not discern our unique flavor in this mish-mash of charter options, becomes even more unpalatable when we add in civil rights issues. While Montessori developed her model of education in direct response to inequity, our identity as charters lumps us in with a movement whose mixed motives have had damaging effects. We need to listen to the anger that some black community leaders are expressing toward charters. Dr. Julian Vasquez

city schools in the 1970s, they are still perceived as a model that caters to white middle-class families.

So how true is that perception? The clearest picture we get of our actual group demographics comes from Mira Debs' comprehensive study of racial and economic diversity in U.S. public Montessori schools. For context, there are currently around three million students attending charter schools nationwide, and Montessori students represent 1.6%

far greater than that of the other district charters, more of our economically disadvantaged students met or exceeded on state tests than their peers statewide – 40% more – and multi-racial students, our second-largest racial demographic, did 20% better than their Oregon peers. We found too that a full 28% of our elementary students have been identified as Talented and Gifted; around one quarter of that TAG group also has disabilities such as autism and ADHD. Test scores



Carving out their own niche at Ridgeline Montessori Public Charter School

How did our unique model come out on the wrong side of the NAACP?

broaden opportunities for underserved youth and increase innovation, critics argue that charters aggravate segregation and cheapen the educational system by applying corporate structures. While the original ideal of charter schools was to provide local options responsive to community needs, for-profit management has created an almost antithetical result. The promise of higher student achievement has been unevenly, almost haphazardly delivered, and non-academic benefits of charter school graduates have not been adequately measured or reported. "After more than 25 years

Heilig, who led the NAACP's call for a moratorium on charters, posits, "We're talking about charter schools when we should be talking about inequality...how charter schools exacerbate the inequality we see in schools." Some charter schools have been rightfully accused of an almost "missionary" approach to educating children of color, and some communities of color lament a loss of local control over educating their own children. Black students are highly overrepresented in charters, comprising 28% of enrollment. And while public Montessori schools were first opened in attempts to desegregate

of that whole. Debs studied 284 public Montessori schools; about 40% of those are charters. She found that 61% of Montessori public schools have high levels of racial diversity. Almost half of all public Montessori programs serve a population where 40% or more of their students are eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch, the same as the national public school average. While Debs' study was complicated, it does lend credence to the idea that Montessori charters are different.

Our school in Eugene, Oregon, makes a commitment to checking on the equity of our own program, and to collecting wider evidence that we add value to our particular community and aren't unwittingly catering only to "gluten-free moms," as one community member quipped. Still, even in educational circles, people get us confused with the local Waldorf, and my friends still ask me how much it costs to attend. In the larger perception, we do get grouped with private Montessori. But we know who we are!

We don't just rely on the "feel" of our school, though. We look at data, and we often find surprises. For example, while our racial and economic diversity is similar to that of the district as a whole, and

schoolwide are exceptional, and parent testimonies, local journalism, and even a recent Niche study demonstrate that Ridgeline is serving our community.

The critics are correct to say that equity doesn't happen accidentally, and choice doesn't invariably lead to equity or excellence. At my school, we are both proud and humble to be public charter Montessorians. Amid all the financial struggles and legwork it takes to keep our special model special, our very mixed community takes time to mix it up at pasta dinner fundraisers and impromptu meetings at parks. They tell stories of headstrong TAG girls, and kindhearted oddball boys, and the whole diverse group of independent, socially aware, risk-takers and innovators who got to grow up Montessori here. We know our small Eugene community, and we hope it is a bright spot on the bleak social political landscape. We hope we can stand apart from "friends" like DeVos and send a clear message – public charter Montessori is here for everyone.

Sharon Dursi Martin is in her fourth year as the principal of Ridgeline Montessori Public Charter School in Eugene, Oregon.

PHOTO OF SHARON MARTIN BY JOEL SADOFSKY, RIDGELINE MONTESSORI STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chartering change, one child at a time

The charter landscape is treacherous terrain. Yet authentic Montessori thrives there.



BY **GENA ENGELFRIED**

Charter schools are interesting beasts, and like the denizens of Kingdom Animalia, they are diverse in size, shape and sense of purpose. The movement began in the 1990s as a response to the threat of vouchers. How can we keep schools public and provide parents with choice? The hybrid answer was the charter school, born of innovation and the sweat and sometimes tears of hard working educators, determined to make a difference without the constraint of text book adoptions, district bureaucracy and unwieldy volumes of “Ed Code.”

Unfortunately, the charter development tool soon became a weapon, and some politically minded, as well as profit-driven, entrepreneurs chose to develop charter schools with a myriad of goals. These goals have included weakening teachers’ unions, sidestepping facilities regulations and – outrageously to those of us who have been trying to run public schools on inadequate funding – making a profit. Why

might never have access to a Montessori education, including low income children. You can do this in neighborhoods that have never heard of Montessori schools and with parents who are eager and grateful to have access to our developmental approach. You can pay teachers a living wage and provide them with pensions for retirement. You can use tax dollars in the form of Common Core funding to buy beautiful and authentic materials and send teachers to training. You can even access old, but charming, disused schools that are no longer functional according to economies of scale – and you can hear their once abandoned courtyards ringing with laughter and the slapping of jump ropes and balls.

Students at Montessori public charter schools can learn in three-year mixed age groups. They can have a three-hour work period. They can “go out.” They can even have a farm school. Parents are enthusiastic, grateful, and invested in the model. For the most part, they listen eagerly to almost anything we offer, once they witness their children’s engagement and growth. Opportunities for community outreach, and dissemination of Montessori ideas, ideals and methods is limitless. Each charter Montessori school that remains authentic provides proof that our method of educating humans is the most effective, most dignified and most optimistic way of providing for the future of our democracy and our world. Districts pay attention, and public school teachers send their children, come to our workshops, and buy in

child or just the prestige that has somehow become associated with Montessori.

It doesn’t matter why they come. The children grow and develop the same way as all children have since 1907. They grow in grace and courtesy, and they bring home a peaceful way of solving problems, working to perfection, and being open to possibility. They love learning, nature and each other. They infuse their families, their neighborhoods and, someday, their world, with the spirit that brought us to “the work” in the first place.

That is why Montessori charter schools work. And in a perfect world, we will no longer need public Montessori charter schools because all public schools will be Montessori schools. Until then, we will continue to find ways to bring authentic Montessori education to the masses. For now, being a Montessori public charter school is one of those ways.

Gena Engelfried is the Head of School at Golden Oak Montessori (a public charter school in Hayward, California).

Montessori Materials by Lakeview

30 years providing classroom-ready Montessori materials

www.montessorimaterialsbylakeview.com

Ph: 519-974-4177 • Fax: 519-974-2532

Unfortunately, the charter development tool soon became a weapon

would a Montessorian, whose goal is to provide authentic Montessori learning environments for children and adolescents, choose such strange bedfellows as political zealots and those who, however noble their goals, might contribute to the deconstruction of civil society?

The answer: Because Montessori public charter schools make a better world.

It’s not easy and it isn’t always pretty, but public Montessori, in the shape of charter schools, works. Why charter a Montessori school? Because as a Montessori charter school, you are free to provide authentic Montessori education on the state’s dime to children who

to our ideas. The world gets a bit more peaceful and children are able to learn with without constraint.

The process isn’t simple, nor is it always fun. The stakes are high. School districts can be hostile, friendly, ambivalent, or neglectful. Students have to take tests. Teachers, depending on the state, may need to get state credentials in addition to Montessori training. It’s still worth it. Parents don’t always sign up with the best intentions. Some come because they believe the fanatical rhetoric about the evils of government, some come because they want a smaller school or a safe haven for their special needs



Montessori 123 provides over **400** beautifully designed Montessori materials for toddler through upper elementary classrooms.

Find out how we can partner with your public school:
montessori123.com/public

Green World, Happy Kids

Early Educational Childhood Furniture



KOHBURG.COM
888-718-8880



Cotner: Staying focused

continued from page 11

and listen to them read one-on-one. If children are below level, we set an ambitious goal for them to grow 1.5 years in one year, using a data tracker spreadsheet. We get really clear about what that growth will look like at the middle of the year so we can track our progress. We talk with the children about where they are and what they can do to take ownership over improving their reading level. We meet with families to teach them to support their children at home. Our guides deliver guided reading lessons at least twice a week to children who are below grade level. They also conference with them at least once a week during independent reading time.

We've found that the inequities at our school are not just academic. They also extend into the social and emotional areas. Over 90% of our white children are considered to be within the typical range of development for social and emotional learning. Only 75% of our black children are. What does that disparity say about our school? Are our

black children not developing as well or is there implicit bias at play with regard to how guides view children? These are the kinds of conversations we need to be having within our public Montessori programs. Additionally, we need to continue to deepen our practice as anti-bias and anti-racist educators.

Maria Montessori believed that the only way to build a just and peaceful world for all was through education. We will never be able to attain that vision until all children receive an equitable education. As Montessorians, we have so many tools at our disposal – three years with children, peer learning, small-group instruction, differentiation – to help bring about equitable outcomes for all children. The pursuit of academic, social, emotional, and physical equity for everyone is where we should put the bulk of our time and energy as educators. That is how we will be able to bring about a more just and peaceful world for all.

Sara Cotner is the founder and Executive Director of Montessori For All.

Practical Life Specialists

Pouring • Polishing • Washing
Cooking • Cleaning Up • Gardening
Sewing • Woodworking

Over 2500 Carefully Selected Items

Preparing the Environment
Art • Music • History • Geography
Science • Sensorial • Language
Resource Books • Peace Education
Elementary Materials



Montessori Services

Your Resource for Preparing the Child's Environment since 1976

MontessoriServices.com • ForSmallHands.com



FREE CATALOG 800-214-8959



NAMTA 2017-2018 CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

June 22-24, 2017 • Cleveland, OH
Montessori Mathematics for the Adolescent

October 6-8, 2017 • Cleveland, OH
The Keepers of Alexandria

October 19-22, 2017 • Baltimore, MD
Reaching Every Child: Preparing a Social & Emotional Environment to Support All Children

November 9-11, 2017 • Chicago, IL
*NAMTA Montessori Whole-School ManagementSM:
A Professional Development Course for Administrators*

February 16-19, 2018 • Phoenix, AZ
NAMTA's Adolescent Event at the AMI/USA Refresher Course

March 8-11, 2018 • Portland, OR
Coming Together Around the Child: Parent Partnerships

SEE MORE DATES AT WWW.MONTESSORI-NAMTA.ORG/CONFERENCE-SCHEDULE

The public calendar

June 22–24, 2017	NAMTA Conference MONTESSORI MATHEMATICS FOR THE ADOLESCENT CLEVELAND, OHIO
June 22–25	Montessori for Social Justice Conference CREATING ANTI-BIAS/ANTI-RACIST MONTESSORI COMMUNITIES HOUSTON, TEXAS
July 9–12	AMS Summer Symposium for School Administrators GLEN COVE, NEW YORK
July 9–14	AMI–EAA Annual Summer Conference GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA
July 27–30	28th Annual International Montessori Conference PATHWAY TO PEACE: MONTESSORI EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC
October 6–8	NAMTA Conference THE KEEPERS OF ALEXANDRIA CLEVELAND, OHIO
October 19–22	NAMTA Conference REACHING EVERY CHILD: PREPARING A SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT ALL CHILDREN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
November 9–11	NAMTA Conference MONTESSORI WHOLE-SCHOOL MANAGEMENT SM : A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE FOR ADMINISTRATORS CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
February 16–19, 2018	AMI/USA Refresher Course PHOENIX, ARIZONA
February 16–19	NAMTA Conference NAMTA'S ADOLESCENT EVENT AT THE AMI/USA REFRESHER COURSE PHOENIX, ARIZONA
February 23 – 25	MEPI Annual Conference SCIENTIST, SERVANT, SAINT – THE MONTESSORI GUIDE KIAWAH ISLAND RESORT, SOUTH CAROLINA
March 8–11	NAMTA Conference COMING TOGETHER AROUND THE CHILD: PARENT PARTNERSHIPS PORTLAND, OREGON
March 22–25	AMS Annual Conference MONTESSORI: INSIDE & OUT DENVER, COLORADO

If you'd like your Montessori event featured here, send it to us!

Deadline for the next issue: **August 1**

Be sure to include the date, organization, event title, city and state

Email to: editor@montessoripublic.org

Nienhuis

MONTESORI

A Heutink brand



The Global Standard

Nienhuis Montessori is the leading manufacturer of Montessori materials worldwide. For over 85 years, we have produced materials that contribute to the responsible development of the child as a whole. Based on Dr. Montessori's educational principles, our high quality products stimulate the child's desire to learn. They promote independence, increase insight and facilitate critical thinking. Children can develop without pre-determined rules, but they do need individual guidance and supportive educational materials. We believe in personal growth and offer the necessary tools to promote this.

Find more online: heutink-usa.com

heutink.
USA

Nienhuis Montessori, A Heutink brand
150 S. Whisman Road Mountain View, CA 94041-1512 USA
Phone: 1-650-964-2735 | Email: info@heutink-usa.com | shop: shop.heutink-usa.com