

MPPI interviews public policy makers

What leaders and public officials want the Montessori world to know



BY **DENISE MONNIER, JAMILAH R. JOR'DAN, AND WILLIAM C. SMITH**

As advocates for policy change in support of Montessori education, we focus a lot of energy on policy makers. We talk about meeting them, educating them, volunteering to serve on advisory boards and committees with them, and hopefully convincing them to make policy changes in favor of our programs.

Sometimes we are appealing to policy makers who have little knowledge of Montessori education, or even have had negative impressions of what we do. Sometimes we know that policy makers themselves have Montessori experiences with their own families, but have not been able to bring those experiences to public education reform. Sometimes we are able to join forces with policy makers who fervently support Montessori education. The Montessori Public Policy Initiative (MPPI) recently spoke with two such figures who shared their stories and viewpoints on advocacy.

Jamilah R. Jor'dan serves as the Deputy Director of the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development. There, she supports the development and implementation of early childhood policy across multiple state agencies. In addition, her efforts focus on strengthening interagency and community collaboration by

developing and maintaining relationships with other agencies, family and community organizations.

Maryland State Senator William C. Smith was re-elected in the 2018 election cycle and is the first African-American to represent Montgomery County. In the Senate, Senator Smith has worked to forge relationships with his colleagues from across the state and political spectrum which has allowed him to become an effective legislator in Annapolis. As a Vice-Chair of the Judicial Proceedings Committee, Smith has championed robust criminal justice reform measures, has led efforts to provide economic opportunities, and is committed to ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all Marylanders.

JJ: My godmother provided my earliest introduction to Montessori education. She was among the first African-American women to open a Montessori program on the south side of Chicago. I have also read noted African American scholars' publications that support the Montessori approach for African-American children. I include Montessori education in my History and Philosophy of Early Childhood Education course at Chicago State University. Sharon Damore of the American Montessori Society (AMS) invited me to join the AMS Research Committee, where I served for five years. We developed the research program and research poster sessions, and in addition, a research journal was established. I have also presented at the

There is a focus on equity and inclusion and the Montessori community should be engaged in the dialogue.

Both Jor'dan and Smith have had personal and professional experiences with Montessori.

Senator Smith experienced Montessori education as a child and has worked to support the growth and stability of programs in his community: "Having received a Montessori education at the Barrie School, in Silver Spring, I have firsthand knowledge of the benefits a Montessori education can have."

We asked a few questions about the Illinois and Maryland Montessori communities, and the advocacy work and partnerships from our policy makers' points of view.

AMS conference. I have also had the opportunity to collaborate on an article about manipulatives and Montessori education and have written about teacher preparation and Montessori education.

MP: *How strong is the Montessori movement within your state? Does your state Quality Rating and Improvement System aggregate data for Montessori programs?*

JJ: There are over 200 Montessori programs in the state of Illinois. When developing Illinois' Quality Rating

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and Improvement System we were intentional about including Montessori participation within our system. Within Illinois' QRIS Montessori data is not tracked independently. As you are aware, this could be a problematic undertaking because Montessori is not protected by copyright or patent. We need assurances that programs are in fact Montessori. We are working, in coordination with the Association of Illinois Montessori Schools (AIMS) on how to recognize Montessori credentials that have been received from programs accredited by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education within our QRIS.



Sen. William C. Smith and Dr. Jamilah R. Jordan

WS: Every year in Maryland, over 4,000 students receive high-quality educations at more than 30 Montessori institutions throughout our state. Montessori programs are valuable because they teach students to think independently and creatively. As in Illinois, Maryland's QRIS recognizes the quality of Montessori accreditation, but data is not tracked independently.

MP: Does your state's Montessori community reach out to partner with state organizations/agencies or other education groups?

of the Montessori community become a part of the larger community. They are needed in order to change the narrative and perception of Montessori education.

WS: The official advocate for Montessori programs in our state is Montessori Schools of Maryland (MSM), an organization I worked with during the 2018 legislative session. Senate Bill 1041, a bill I sponsored, would have expanded opportunities for Montessori teachers so that teachers wishing to work in a public Montessori school

MP: What do you think is the single most important strategy that the Montessori community can implement to support advocacy work?

JJ: Building and strengthening relationships is one strategy the Montessori community can adopt to support advocacy work. The Montessori approach is often not understood or misunderstood by individuals. Relationship-building provides opportunities to increase awareness and understanding of the Montessori approach and how it aligns in a larger context. This will become increasingly important for the Montessori community due to the increasing growth of Montessori education in the public schools across the country.

WS: In Maryland, advocacy groups are becoming increasingly effective at advocating for the success of the Montessori method. I would encourage advocates and those passionate about Montessori education to visit and engage with the Maryland General Assembly or their County Council. Montessori students, caregivers, and teachers are the best advocate for the Montessori method.

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JJ: There has been an increase in visibility, engagement and representation by the Montessori community, represented by AIMS, in policy discussions and development. We're starting to experience the Montessori "voice" in Illinois. I've watched this change evolve and appreciate their contributions and hope to see more members

would have been able to do so by completing accredited Montessori preparation programs. While significant, this is just one example of how public policy advocacy can be used to improve upon the quality of Montessori schools in Maryland.

MP: *Can you name some things you wish were different about the Montessori community and why? Or provide feedback on how Montessori can more effectively manifest the social justice aspect of Dr. Montessori's work?*

JJ: I've been an advocate for Montessori education for over 30 years. I have watched the Montessori community struggle up close and at a distance. The differences between American Montessori Society and Association Montessori Internationale have been a challenge, but it is my understanding the issues are resolved, which is a great hurdle passed. The challenges Montessori education has faced with research, because anyone can call themselves a Montessori program/school resulting in lack of fidelity to the approach, have also been a barrier. I have been transparent and have expressed my concern about the disconnect from the social justice focus established by Dr. Montessori. My observation is not offered as criticism but an area that needs to be strengthened. There is still a perception that Montessori programs are for affluent children and families. Across the country, the Montessori approach

is growing in public schools. Specifically, to provide access and support for children of color. There is a focus on equity and inclusion and the Montessori community should be engaged in the dialogue. As stated earlier, we have a responsibility to change the narrative about Montessori education.

WS: I am a proud graduate of the Barrie School, which pushed me to pursue social justice and advocacy as a lifelong profession. I look forward to working with Montessori advocates in Maryland to help in the future, as the Montessori community increases focus on this fundamental aspect of the philosophy.

Jor'dan and Smith are policy makers who have been touched personally by Montessori. We know there are many more supporters out there who can see the power of Montessori education for as many children as possible, and we look forward to partnerships with them.

Denise Monnier is the Director of Advocacy for MPPI. Jamilah R. Jor'dan, PhD, is Deputy Director of the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and faculty on leave with Chicago State University. Maryland State Senator William C. Smith was appointed to represent District 20 in the Maryland State Senate in 2016, making him the first African-American Senator from Montgomery County.

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MontessoriPublic, the communications and advocacy platform for public Montessori is a publication of

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