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Transitioning from tuition to public funding

There are many ways to serve the public

BRIANA WEBER WITH
DAVID AYER

Outlining the shape of public Montessori

This is the story of a tuition-based school in Portland, Oregon that wanted to offer more Montessori to more children, and their navigation of the state's web of public support.

Oregon, like many states, offers a mosaic of support to help families access preschool or daycare for three- and four-year olds.

Multnomah County Preschool for All (PFA), launched in Oregon's most populous county in 2022, is a true Universal PreK program, aimed at offering free preschool to all children in the county by 2030. Multnomah County is home to about 800,000 people, 20% of Oregon's population of 4.3 million.

The program is funded at about $65 million per year by a local income tax on high-income families and is comprehensive in scope, providing full-day, full-year care, prioritizing children with disabilities, BIPOC families, low-income, and unhoused children, disallowing suspensions and expulsions, and enforcing staffing qualifications and workforce wage standards.

PFA program has faced criticism for a slower-than expected rollout and some bureaucratic inflexibility, and although universal coverage is the ultimate goal, prioritization has led to a high proportion of children with additional needs in its placements, surprising and even overwhelming some providers.

Oregon Preschool Promise (PP), a statewide means-tested program launched in 2016 with $125 million in annual funding, is similar to PFA but available only to families meeting eligibility requirements (up to ~200% of the Federal Poverty Level).

Employment Related Dependent Care (ERDC), a child care subsidy program for low-income families who are working or attending school, has a $600 million budget, primarily from federal funding.

With the advent of PFA in particular, Montessori programs in Oregon have been exploring working with these funding streams to provide more access to Montessori education for young children. *MontessoriPublic* sat down with Briana Weber, Head of School at Harmony Montessori in Portland, to learn more about the school's transition from mostly tuition-based to mostly subsidized over the last four years, and the steps along the way.

MontessoriPublic: Thanks for speaking with me today.

Briana Weber: Happy to be here!

MP: Tell me a little about yourself. How did you get involved with Montessori?

BW: Great question. I went to school to be an elementary teacher at Western Oregon University—where I never heard anything about Montessori—and I had a class called math for elementary students where we essentially learned to train children to take standardized tests. And I said, "No. This is not the teacher I want to be." So I decided to

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become a music teacher.

After graduation, I moved to Portland and worked in childcare. A parent in my classroom was taking Montessori training and said, "You need to do this." And I did.

After *that*, I was a primary assistant and guide, and did some Reggio and RIE-inspired work, and eventually became a school director.

MP: All in private programs?

BW: Yes. And a stint in "corporate Montessori." But it wasn't for me. When I found my current position at Harmony, it just felt like coming home.

MP: Tell us about Harmony.

BW: We have four primary classrooms with 80 students, and a new toddler classroom. Harmony was tuition-based but already moving towards subsidized when I arrived. It's part of the mission. We had 40 PFA slots already in 2021, just coming out of COVID. A lot of schools were regrouping—trying to reorient to the needs of the families, the needs of your community.

At that time for Harmony, it felt like a great time think, how can we help, and where are some funding sources? We also had a flood, so we moved—to a more vibrant, diverse, lower socio-economic neighborhood. It's an amazing part of town to be in. There is a really active community development corporation where we're building some bridges. I'm really passionate about building more community connections and looking at things like wraparound care along with providing high quality Montessori education.

So when you're adding in all of these pieces it just makes sense to also find all of the funding strategies that you can for the children. Our plan is to slowly increase our PFA and PP numbers as we can, with a balance of some tuition based slots. That's partly because we're still remodeling our building, and, unfortunately, we can't use the state and county money for that. So we're also applying for the Childcare Infrastructure Fund and Build Up Oregon, major grants that rolled out last year to bolster capacity and improve childcare statewide.

MP: So you use all the sources of funding you can find. How do they all work?

BW: Well, PFA is free tuition for three- and four-year-olds in Multnomah county. That's about half of our enrollment. There is priority for children with IFSPs (Individualized Family Service Plan, a special education document outlining services for children with developmental delays or disabilities), families of color, or immigrant/refugee/houseless status. And no expulsions or suspensions. So if a child is placed at our school, we meet their needs as much as possible. We do behavior interventions to help children succeed and thrive, and we meet with families and Early Intervention, and do as much as we can. I'm proud that we have only had a couple of recommendations for other placements.

MP: And how has that been going?

BW: It's been a process, to be honest.

The first year we were really not prepared for who the children were coming to us. We met a lot of challenges we didn't expect. For example, our number of neurodiverse students went up drastically. With the priority for IFSP children, that opened up our view of where those disparities are happening in childcare. Let's be real—sometimes providers will choose not to enroll students with difficulties. Or maybe it's going to be less accessible because of the cost.

Our numbers went from about 9% having an IFSP to 25 –30%. —in some classrooms, half of the students. As you know, you start out the year with one number, and as year goes along you notice other children that need referrals and evaluations.

It's important for us to make sure we're working with the different organizations that provide services. And now we're kind of known in the Portland community as a Montessori school that is more inclusive and welcoming into neurodiverse families and students. I'm really proud of that.

At the same time, we are not a special education school, and it's definitely a burden on our teachers. Our guides went to school to be Montessorians, and there's a different skill set when it comes to our special education.

So we've been navigating how we meet that, and we still haven't really come to an answer. But every year is a little bit better. More sites that are joining the program, so the hope is once universal preschool is really universal throughout the county, it will be more balanced. At the same time we have been doing in-house trainings on positive discipline and inclusion, and we're getting a lot of support from PFA to make that happen which has felt great. We didn't always know what to ask for, which was a huge part of it. Over the last three years we have learned not to be afraid to be really vocal when things are not working, or we have questions, and that has really made the program better. I hope so!

MP: Did you have you had to adjust staffing?

BW: Yes—we have three teachers in every primary classroom with 20 students. PFA funds that third teacher if we have four IFSPs. We found that really works well for us. The teachers feel more supported, instead of having a person coming in and out. There's just a tight team of folks who know who the children are and can predict the needs

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to get through the day. We're rolling with that model moving forward.

One year we tested out four teachers in a classroom, and that was too many adults, too many bodies in the room. Especially since we constantly have outside service providers coming in through Early Intervention and even some private therapy. We had a couple of ABA technicians working one-on-one with students. So we try to balance making sure the classroom is not too full, and giving the team everything they need.

MP: And Preschool Promise? A similar program with a similar name.

BW: Yes. It's tricky for families. That program is state funded and income-based. Families apply, and upload income documents. It only covers school day, school year tuition—no aftercare, no summer. The program covers another 25% of our students.

The biggest benefit is that I can meet with families and request a placement, while PFA is a lottery. I can have a tour with a family, learn if they are qualified for PP, and do regular enrollment. So we're more able to come together and make that decision with a family rather than having them be assigned to us.

With PFA, they may not have chosen us because we're a Montessori school. It could be the closest one to their house. Some families thing we're Catholic. So with a new family it's like, "Oh, now you're at our school," and going from there.

MP: And then there is ERDC.

BW: Yes, that comes through DHS. Low income families, immigrant/refugee families, and children in foster care system qualify. There's a long waitlist, though, and it can get kind of messy. But it's worth it, because it makes care that much more accessible. Some of my PP students use ERDC as well to pay for school day—they can use a mixture. In our toddler program, three-fourths of my toddlers use ERDC.

There's some overlap, but overall 17 or 18 children use ERDC. Only a handful of students pay full tuition.

MP: So this all sounds like a lot. Having to corral and balance these funding streams to make sure you're using the right dollars for the right thing.

BW: Exactly. And making sure we're looking outwards at what other revenue streams are available. For example, we're struggling to retain kindergartners, so we're looking at different ways to supplement that. We just haven't found the answer yet.

MP: Why do people leave?

BW: Well, the Kindergarten is tuition-based, so often they go to their neighborhood school, or one of the two charter Montessori programs in Portland. The funded programs only cover three- and four-year-olds.

MP: And you can't really stretch two years of dollars to cover three years of school.

BW: Definitely not. And often it's not even allowed.

MP: What would you say have been the biggest challenges? Besides what we've already talked about!

BW: Well, in our neighborhood there's a cultural challenge. People don't understand what Montessori is, and they think that their child could never come to our school because of cultural, socioeconomical disparities like they perceive at the school. There is tuition, and they may not know that they can use ERDC to pay it, and that their child likely could come here for free just using that funding. I think a lot of people don't even know we're an option. I'm trying to break down that barrier as much as I can.

MP: What does that look like?

BW: Going to community events, putting up flyers. That's our first step. We are attending some local health fairs, and hosting events in this really large parking lot we have at our new facility.

We also want to hire a staff that is more reflective of who we serve. A lot of our staff is white, and I can imagine if you're a person of color coming in seeing a staff that's white, that could be a barrier. Because you want to see yourself, or who your child is reflected in the teaching. We're working hard to find and hire people of color who are Montessori-trained.

Another challenge, or maybe just a difference, is that we're approaching Montessori in a different way from some things in my training. You might not see every single Montessori material on the shelves, because sometimes it's not appropriate or safe for the children we actually have. We have a lot of neurodiverse children, and we can't always have every single spooning and pouring activity out because we have some children putting every single thing in their mouths. Sometimes when we have people who come from other Montessori schools, they can be curious about that, or seeing three teachers in the classroom. But what we're doing is following the children who are in our classrooms.

MP: And what are some parts of this that you are really loving?

BW: Our staff for sure. The staff at the school are the bones in the backbone of why we're so successful. We're very democratic, so policy decisions, changes that are happening—we discuss it as a team. And it's not just

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admin team, not just the lead guides. It's everybody.

I also love that we are inclusion driven. We are looking to the children to tell us what they need on a regular basis, and then we're really curious and adjusting and adapting as needed.

Overall things are going great this year. It's been a really wonderful year compared to the previous years, and it makes me hopeful for the future.

MP: Hopeful for the future. Thanks for speaking with me today.

Briana Weber is the Head of School at Harmony Montessori in Portland, Oregon.

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Montessori for Social Justice updates

Looking back and looking forward

DAISY HAN AND **REGINA DYSON**

Last fall, as part of their *Real Talk, Real Action* webinar series, social justice nonprofit Embracing Equity hosted a conversation between Daisy Han, Embracing Equity's Executive Director and Regina Dyson, Board Chair of Montessori for Social Justice.

MontessoriPublic listened in on that webinar and is happy to share some highlights here.

Daisy Han: For me, Montessori for Social Justice (MSJ) is deeply personal. Social justice isn't just a concept—it's a life mission. My journey into this work started with the realization that education holds immense power—not only to impart knowledge, but to shape a just and equitable society. I believe there is so much potential in Montessori as a pathway toward a more equitable world.

Regina, can you share what brought you to MSJ?

Regina Dyson: My connection began on the periphery. I had colleagues and friends involved since its genesis. But at the 2023 conference in Chicago I became engaged. I attended with a high school student—who also happens to be my own child—and it was everything MSJ always has been: grounded in community, mission, and vision.

Shortly after, I was invited to join the board, and then to serve as chair. It's been a whirlwind—about nine months now—and full of growth and energy.

DH: Let's look back at the roots of MSJ, reflect on where we are today, and envision where this movement could go.

Maria Montessori was a revolutionary figure—an advocate for social reform, women's rights, and the rights of children. She famously said that "children are both the hope and the promise of mankind." She understood the importance of education as a force for social change. Her work, over 100 years ago, laid the foundation for what we are doing today.

At the same time, it's important to ask: right now, in this lived reality—How do you approach social justice in education today? What is MSJ doing today that's relevant, applicable, and productive in our current context?

RD: MSJ is a community—always has been. From its beginnings, it has operated through the vision and mission of its community. And that includes anyone who is Montessori: practitioners, parents, students, advocates, and activists working in the Montessori context.

Some things are the same, and some are different from when MSJ started. As we talk now in 2024, the board is actively discussing how to focus our efforts, how to recalibrate, and how to stage our next chapter.

We're in a unique position, unlike a lot of Montessori organizations. We can truly collaborate, partner, and attend to the fundamental needs and aspirations of the Montessori community—without being bound by external obligations or restrictions. That flexibility is incredibly valuable. It means we don't have to do things a particular way. We're not constrained by a rigid set of ideals or practices. So we've focused our energy on a few key areas:

Access for adults: We want to improve access to training, support, and resources for adults in Montessori—particularly resources centered on social justice.

Adolescent leadership: We want to engage more deeply with adolescent curriculum and leadership development. We believe that young people are going to change the paradigm. Our role is to be prepared adults—with the right materials, resources, and environments to support and respond to their leadership.

Workplace support: We're looking at how to support practitioners in their workplaces—whether through HR support, program development rooted in social justice, or guidance specific to their regional and policy contexts.

In all of this, we're thinking in terms of collaboration. We're interested in doing this work with others—not in isolation.

MSJ actually preceded—and in many ways set the stage for—a lot of the anti-bias, anti-racism, and social justice work now happening in Montessori spaces. MSJ, and the people who made it what it is, helped catalyze this movement.

I have a deep respect for beginnings and for the people who launch a movement. And that includes a whole group of folks. If it weren't for MSJ, I believe this work would still have come forward eventually—but MSJ was the vehicle that brought Montessorians together and put them to task. It gave people a way to engage meaningfully, powerfully, and necessarily in social justice work. Because let's be honest—it can feel incredibly lonely when you're

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doing this work alone in your school or classroom. Being part of something larger, knowing you're not alone, gives you a sense of solidarity. You know someone is in your corner.

DH: Let's talk about the journey that brought us here. It started with a group of energetic Montessori parents, educators, and trainers—including Mira Debs, who at the time was doing her dissertation work. She noticed that everywhere she went, people were passionate about accessible Montessori education. They wanted to connect.

In 2013, after the International Montessori Congress in Portland, Oregon, Mira started a listserv. Then in June 2014, the first public Montessori "unconference" was held at City Garden Montessori Charter School in St. Louis, Missouri. That was the beginning of this beautiful, growing community. Walk us through what happened next.

RD: Various projects were taking shape in different places—especially by 2017 and 2018, and certainly into 2019.

2014: After the unconference in St. Louis, we held a second conference in Salt Lake City. That's when the name Montessori for Social Justice (MSJ) and its mission were formally determined by the launch group.

2016: The third conference was in Cambridge, at the Tobin Montessori School, with a focus on building the public Montessori movement and advancing educational equity.

2017: The MSJ board was elected by the attending MSJ community—everyone who was part of the community could vote.

2018: The fourth MSJ conference was held in Houston, along with the first official board meeting. Another conference followed in St. Paul, Minnesota.

2019: A conference was hosted by Harmony Montessori School in Portland, Oregon, including a two-day pre-conference Decentering Whiteness event, and a full-day retreat for Montessorians of Color and people of the global majority. So many powerful things came out of that experience.

2020–2023: COVID—a significant pause.

2023: Our first post-COVID conference was at Near North Montessori in Chicago. This was a wonderful event—reaffirming and re-energizing.

Now, we're working on expanding our board and growing our working committees, and we're actively planning for the 2025 conference. MSJ has touched so many people.

MSJ provides a space where people can show up whole

DH: Why do you think this organization resonates with so many people?

RD: People see MSJ as a nexus organization: A place where the community can come together around these issues with transparency, lived experience, and an immense pool of knowledge and expertise.

When folks attend an MSJ conference or engage in this community, they feel seen, heard, and valued—in ways they often aren't in their own environments. And to be frank, in some cases, they're not even allowed to be fully themselves where they live, work, sweat, cry, and experience joy. MSJ provides a space where they can show up whole.

It's been healing. Revitalizing. Empowering. Deeply connecting. In my 30–35 years as an educator, I've never experienced what MSJ has offered and continues to offer—this kind of space that draws people together with a shared mission around equity, healing, wholeness, and justice. It's real, meaningful, lived work. I go to many conferences and engage with many people, but MSJ provides something singular—something rare.

DH: I think the transparency and vulnerability are key. That's something that stood out to me as well—both as an attendee and as a board member. The environment is prepared for us to show up in our full humanity, and to be affirmed in community as people who are passionate about providing that for children.

Since MSJ started in 2013, we've seen incredible connection and passion, and there have also been real obstacles: gaps in organizational infrastructure, limited staffing, and confusion around what's happening behind the scenes. There's been a halt in progress at times.

Can you speak to some of the challenges that have hindered MSJ's mission, growth, and stability?

RD: Like any emerging entity, especially one rooted in passion and ideals, MSJ faced growing pains. That includes differences in vision, conflicting priorities, or even differing beliefs about what the work should look like, how it should be done, and who should be doing it.

There's a very human element to that. These kinds of tensions can hinder clarity, stability, and progress.

COVID, of course, threw a massive curveball. The board and working committees had been doing great work prior—strategic planning, framing the

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mission, building community—but the pandemic forced everyone to shift focus. People had to prioritize survival, both personally and professionally.

On the other side of COVID, I want to give a huge shoutout to Dr. Lindsey Pollock, who remains on the board. She held things together on a fundamental level—maintaining continuity and structure so that when the time came to reemerge, we had a foundation to build on.

And then came the conference in Chicago, where Lindsey, Mercedes, LaToya, George, and others stepped in to help get us back together and resume this important work.

Montessori in its most liberatory form—what could that look like?

Now, in terms of organizational development—and this isn't just MSJ, this applies to many nonprofits—one of the biggest challenges is that we often don't give enough time and attention to the nuts and bolts: logistics, infrastructure, clear role definitions, and solid foundations.

That's when things become chaotic. We lose clarity, we can't assign responsibilities effectively, and we're trying to move forward without structure.

At the same time, life is still life. We're living through turbulent political, economic, and social times. That deeply affects people—both as individuals and as professionals. It limits capacity and energy.

So yes, we've had lots of challenges. But now we're at a point where we're putting our legs back under us. We're functioning as a working board again.

So, while it's not like we're starting over, there are internal things we need to attend to. There's the business of being a 501(c)(3)—the infrastructure, the logistics. That's where we're directing our time and attention now: to find our groove, to be productive, progressive, engaging, clear, and to build solid footing.

DH: It's as if MSJ is in its adolescent stage of development. For adolescent practitioners out there, you'll recognize this. It's a stage filled with potential and knowledge, but also a time of coaching, honing, refining, and making mistakes. A time to learn how we relate to each other as we engage in this cosmic task together.

RD: Absolutely. That's exactly how I understand where we are. There's so much possibility, and there's also a lot of real-time learning as we figure out how to do this work together meaningfully.

DH: That's such a graceful view of your current reality. You have a unrelenting belief in what's possible for the future of MSJ.

What motivated you to say yes to the role of board chair and president? And what are your reflections and goals in this season of reemergence?

RD: I don't believe in timing being coincidental. Attending the 2023 conference was pivotal. I brought my child who also attended and graduated from a Montessori high school. Watching them engage, listening to their reflections, and seeing the impact the conference had on them—that was clarifying. It was a call to action for me, as an educator, as a Montessorian, as a parent, and as a Black woman moving through spaces that don't always embrace my full humanity. It made me ask: What's next for me? What's my role in this season of life?

I work with other high schoolers too, and they have made it even clearer that my role in this moment is to be as prepared, available, and supportive as I can be for their cosmic task. I truly believe their generation—and those that come after—will be the shift. They will be the ones who transform the world.

Montessori education emboldens them. It recognizes their innate potential, their genius. And we—adults—need to do the work of ensuring they can show up confidently, courageously, and safely. They need to be seen, heard, and activated. That's my work.

MSJ is committed to that. That's part of its mission. When we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, it's not just about race or ethnicity. It's also about gender, age, identity—all of it. Young people are at the forefront of what's next. And it's an honor to be working with the people I get to work with, in this time, in this place, and in this way.

DH: That's what energizes me about your leadership as board chair—your clarity. You're not doing this for your own career. You're doing it as a pathway for our youth. You're asking: How do we amplify young people to become the leaders of a world we can't yet imagine?

And young people like your child are already embodying intersectionality in such powerful ways. Their mindset is different. It's valuable. And it's often missed or dismissed in traditional Montessori spaces.

There's still too much deference to "the way it's always been." To models from 100 years ago. But we need to make Montessori relevant to the world we live in now—and the world that's coming.

We have to collectively envision what's possible for MSJ. Otherwise, as

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Montessori said, we risk becoming like an unused organ—shriveling up and dying. If we don't do this visioning work together, we'll just keep spinning on the same hamster wheel.

RD: Yes, young people should be centered. And I also deeply believe that Montessori is the most powerful path to liberation. Whether we're talking about teachers, heads of schools, board members, parents, or students—Montessori offers a common space where we can truly live liberated lives. That belief is what undergirds why I show up the way I do—and why I persist.

DH: So how do you imagine that future? Right now, Montessori is still very inaccessible—less than 3% of schools in the U.S. The training is rigid. The credentialing is bottlenecked. There are all these restrictions in the name of keeping it "authentic."

But if you carry a deep knowing of what Montessori truly is, in its most liberatory form—what could that look like?

RD: We need to grow adolescent programs. Whether that's programs embedded within existing schools, standalone adolescent schools, or something else entirely.

We need the full adolescent window—from 12 through 18. And beyond that, I have dreams for the 18–23 window too. That age group is so often overlooked and unsupported. It's an untouched space that needs our attention.

We should be exploring every model available: lab schools, hybrid models, mentorship, apprenticeships. And crucially, young people need to be in the room, invited to conferences. They need to be shaping these experiences alongside us—not as an afterthought.

Their experiences, voices, and leadership should be central—not left out while the adults make decisions for them. We can't keep doing things for young people without with them. They need to be at the table. They are part of the formulation.

I also have a deep respect for our ancestors and our elders—with a capital E. There's so much wisdom that only time and experience can give. I believe we need some healing, some recovery, and some intentional reconnection with that wisdom. Knowing where we come from helps us understand where we're going. And that's not just a cliché. That's a core belief.

There must be intentionality and demonstrated commitment in Montessori organizations—training centers, certifying bodies, leadership development programs—to collaboration. Every Montessori organization should be making equity commitments publicly. Every one of them should be conducting equity audits, just like 501(c)(3)s conduct financial audits. Equity audits are not optional—they are integral to doing this work with integrity. I believe that without pause or apology.

DH: MSJ is currently in a year-long equity audit partnership with Embracing Equity, right?

RD: Yes. Whether it's been Chambers of Commerce, schools, or nonprofits, I've always been committed to some form of audit to help clarify what's actually happening in our programs, our engagement, and our impact.

It's a tool of accountability and reflection. It asks: Are we doing what we say we're doing? Where are the gaps? How can we enhance, enrich, or correct course?

So with Embracing Equity, our MSJ board started with the anti-racist leadership cohort. At the time, we had six board members, and I invited four additional practitioners—folks in different roles and on different timelines—who were deeply interested in MSJ's future. That work was powerful. It gave us tools, it fortified us, and it deepened our shared language and understanding.

It was a diverse group—many perspectives, many walks of life—and it helped us build trust and connection. This work is complex, layered, and tender. And that doesn't change whether we're in a cohort or not. If you're walking this walk, you're doing it every day.

The experience brought us together in meaningful ways. Especially in moments of broader cultural or political tension, it gave us a foundation for responding from a place of care and accountability.

We're now in a year-long leadership program. It includes coaching, development, tools, and resources to support us as leaders. And let me tell you: no matter how much you think you know—there is always more to learn. Our bandwidth gets pulled in so many directions. This work keeps us grounded and focused.

Even as someone who walks through the world in brown skin, with that lived experience, I know there are still things within me that need work. We all have things to work on—places where we need to grow.

DH: As Montessorians, we know the spiritual preparation of the adult is paramount. If you're not doing that work—intentionally, as a way of life—you're not really doing Montessori.

RD: Exactly. Say it how you want, but I'll just say it: if you're not spiritually preparing yourself, you're not doing Montessori.

And this is not a "read a book and move on" kind of thing. It's ongoing. We all fall off sometimes—but that's why we come back to the work.

DH: Right. And the inequities that exist within Montessori education don't

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just exist on the surface. They go deep. Classism, gender identity, sexual orientation—these systems of oppression are intentional and structural. And they're also internalized.

DH: What would you love to hear from folks today?

RD: I'd love to know: What are the challenges you face in doing social justice work—whether you're in the classroom, on staff, in leadership, or elsewhere?

What supports you? What depletes you? What fortifies you? What harms? Those are the questions I ask in every space I'm in.

Let me know your interests—whether that's adolescent programming, intergenerational work, LGBTQIA+ advocacy, conference planning, or organizing around equity at other Montessori events like ICC, MPPI, or AMS. Folks can email me at chair@montessoriforsocialjustice.org

We'd love to build with you.

DH: Thank you, Regina. I'm so deeply grateful for your leadership, your clarity, and your heart. You have all of us in your corner—we're with you.

RD: Thank you. It's good to be here together. This work would be meaningless without all of us showing up together.

Regina Dyson is the Board Chair of Montessori for Social Justice. Daisy Han is the former Executive Director of Embracing Equity.

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So many ways to Montessori

Big, small, rural, urban, and all points in between

SARA SUCHMAN

This issue highlights some of the many ways districts, schools, and individuals are working to bring more Montessori to more children. District schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and vehicles that aren't schools at all: There's far more than one way for Montessori to get started, take root, and thrive.

Starting with the largest scale of implementation, **Why Not More Montessori?** by Katie Brown summarizes her co-authored and recently-published study looking into why district leaders don't include Montessori in their district's portfolio of schools. The finding is not that they've never heard of Montessori, or that they need more research. They're often familiar with the model and understand its benefits. Instead, they wanted to know more about what launching a new school or changing over an existing one would look like, in detail. Will they need a new building? What about our current employees? How will families react? What will this do to the bus schedules? They know intuitively and rightly that a successful launch is more than just flipping a switch.

On the other end of the spectrum, **Remote Montessori in Crawford** profiles a 25-year-old program in extremely rural Crawford, Colorado—population 403. What does Montessori look like when class might be interrupted not by the ice-cream truck's music through the windows, but by a cattle drive down Main Street?

In between we have so many different models. **Hands-on in the Elementary** comes from Creative Montessori Academy in Michigan, one of four Montessori schools serving nearly 1500 students supported by Choice Schools Associates, a Michigan charter management organization (CMO) working with 16 schools in all.

In **Transitioning from tuition to public funding**, you can read the story of a private, tuition-based school in Portland, Oregon, that has moved to enrolling almost exclusively families supported by Oregon's patchwork of universal and not-so-universal preschool and daycare funding streams.

In **Montessori innovations roll ahead**, the Montessori Collective works in the Denver, Colorado area, helping schools with existing Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms convert them to Montessori by removing barriers such as funding for training, materials, and professional development. Meanwhile, Montessori on Wheels operates a bus-turned-Montessori-environment,, driving from site to site offering enrichment and after-school experiences, gently introducing children and families to the model.

Montessori growth: Who are we missing? is our round-up of new schools this year, including two schools representing different paths to growth. Last spring, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) was awarded a $15M grant from the US Department of Education's Magnet School Assistance Program. This fall, FCPS' Bucknell Elementary School will add a Montessori track to the existing program.

Applying for the grant was an enormous undertaking, and after the money was awarded, dedicated outreach with existing stakeholders such as families and teachers was needed for everyone to understand the process and the benefits to the community. Money is necessary, but the full story always includes the people.

In Cincinnati, Bramble Nature Campus will become Bramble Montessori after the long-running Montessori Lab School at Xavier University announced this past fall that it would be transitioning away from Montessori. Families negotiated with Cincinnati Public Schools to add the program to CPS' portfolio of district schools, and the new school will be open in the fall.

Three more new programs are profiled in the article, along with 20 schools celebrating their 25th anniversaries! If your school, public or private, is not on the Census, please reach out and let us know. We need you to help the movement grow!

As we celebrate these stories of ingenuity and growth, we also know that each and every one of you has your own story of challenges and triumphs. We celebrate you–your service, creativity, and dogged determination to do what is best for children.

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Montessori innovations roll ahead

Two creative innovators in Colorado share updates

TATENDA BLESSING-MUCHIRIRI AND **EMILY MADISON** WITH **DAVID AYER**

MontessoriPublic has been keeping up with public Montessori activists Tatenda Blessing-Muchiriri and Emily Madison since the fall of 2021.

Madison is a Montessori child turned conventional teacher who helped get a Montessori Pre-K program started at Stedman Elementary in Denver, with Blessing-Muchiriri coming on board as the teacher. (Adding Montessori primary to a District K-5, *MontessoriPublic* November 2021)

Sadly, the classroom closed in 2023. But that didn't slow them down. Madison went on to found the Montessori Collective to help Denver-area schools with existing Early Childhood Education (ECE) classrooms convert them to Montessori by removing barriers such as funding for training, materials, and ongoing professional development. Blessing-Muchiriri launched Montessori on Wheels, a mobile classroom in a converted school bus to introduce Montessori to children and families in a friendly, accessible way. (Montessori on the move in Denver, *MontessoriPublic*, May 2022)

We caught up with them again this spring to hear the latest.

MP: What's happening with the Montessori Collective and Montessori on Wheels?

EM: Montessori Collective will be opening our 6th partner classroom next year at a school that Montessori on Wheels has been working with. Montessori on Wheels introduces the idea of Montessori to a community, and then we follow up with establishing a classroom. This is the first organic opportunity we've seen for that to happen. The teacher is very much in love with Montessori after working with Montessori on Wheels, and the school and community have been exposed to it.

So it's really laid that foundation for Montessori Collective to come in and start a classroom. We're not starting from scratch; there's already a lot of knowledge about Montessori. All of the Montessori Collective partner classrooms are doing really well.

We've started three classrooms at schools that did not have any Montessori previously, and then we supported two classrooms at an existing Montessori program that had both traditional and Montessori strands within the same school. The Montessori program had a long waitlist, so they wanted to expand.

We've got solid data showing that students are outperforming their Colorado State averages by about 20 percentage points in kindergarten readiness—small sample right now, three classrooms, but promising.

MP: That's a big number. I imagine that's kind of attention-getting.

EM: Yeah, it is. It's not totally apples-to-apples because the State numbers include kids who didn't attend preschool, but it's still showing that Montessori and early education produce strong outcomes.

MP: Early education works, and Montessori is a kind of early education that works. So people can't say, "Well, we know early education works, but we don't know about Montessori." No—it works.

EM: Yes, and even when it's just a classroom within a traditional school, Montessori still works.

MP: Tell me about the most recent partnership. What's the school? How did the bus come first and then you came?

EM: How did you start your partnership with Val Verde, Tatenda?

TBM: They got funding from the Denver Public Schools Foundation. They were our first partner back in 2022, and we've been going to Val Verde for three years now. Initially, it was just exposure visits—parking the bus outside on early release days. Later, they invited us into classrooms to do blocks of Montessori in science, literacy, or practical life. For the past two years, we've been doing that with ECE classes, plus offering Montessori through Spanish with our Spanish teacher.

MP: Where does Montessori Collective fit in?

EM: Towards the end of last school year, they reached out. They had a teacher particularly passionate about Montessori and excited after working with Montessori on Wheels. We brainstormed, secured funding for one classroom for 2025–26, and we're sending a teacher to training this summer.

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MP: What age group?

EM: Currently just 4-year-olds. We're hoping to get more 3-year-olds in. The classroom is designated for 4-year-olds, but some 3-year-olds have been placed there because of low enrollment.

MP: Is that how Denver typically structures it?

EM: Some places have moved to mixed 3–4 classrooms, but this school stayed with separate classes. They have two 4-year-old classrooms, one in Spanish and one in English. We'll be working with the English-speaking classroom. It takes some mindset shifts to get people on board with mixed age groups.

MP: You got funding for her training? How does it work?

EM: Our training program is a full six weeks intensive over the summer, followed by a practicum year with weekend seminars. She'll do a self-directed practicum through Montessori Education Center of the Rockies.

MP: So there will be six classrooms now?

EM: This will be the sixth.

MP: Do they usually become 3–4 classrooms? What's the thinking about including kindergarten?

EM: We're starting those conversations—to figure out what's a real barrier and what's just mindset. From a funding perspective, early childhood and K–5 streams are different, which complicates it.

MP: But existing DPS Montessori schools have figured that out.

EM: Right. It's possible—it's about getting the right people to coordinate. DPS made a decision to prioritize early childhood, offering programs for 3–4-year-olds, and the bus provided additional Montessori exposure. Over time, that exposure led to deeper collaboration.

MP: Meanwhile, what has the bus been up to?

TBM: We've been evangelizing Montessori around Denver and Aurora. Three big accomplishments: At the Village Institute, working with refugee families, we transitioned a traditional preschool into a Montessori-inspired classroom by training refugee women in 2023. We're working with newly arrived immigrants from Venezuela within DPS, running a language program. And we were invited to expand into Paris Elementary in Aurora, working with YAASPA (Young Aspiring Americans for Social & Political Activism). We're setting up a new Montessori classroom there for next school year.

We're also thinking about how to develop BIPOC teachers too, just like we did with Village Institute, and we're taking a strategic pause this spring to assess and plan our next three years. Our current partnerships include Denison, Sandoval, Val Verde, and Vega, where we do literacy, Montessori, and science programming.

We've had interest from Monarch Montessori and Stedman wanting to onboard with us, so we're carefully thinking about capacity and future direction.

MP: So from mobile bus visits to actually running programs—and possibly a full school.

TBM: Exactly. Families have loved it so much they're asking, "What's next?" We want to create a lab classroom at Paris Elementary and continue mobile services. Funding will be key, through CCAP and grant writing.

MP: You're stimulating demand—families want more Montessori!

EM: Yes, but principals often see kindergarten as a separate thing. Kindergarten brings new accountability and academic expectations. There's some hesitancy.

However, trust is building. At first principals were skeptical of Montessori, but now that they see kids entering kindergarten already reading, they're more open. We've started talking about creating standalone kindergartens, merging 3–4–K classrooms, and expanding into elementary.

Some students have even left to attend Denison Montessori to continue their Montessori education, which principals are noticing.

MP: Tiny little pieces adding up. If you had your own Montessori elementary, you wouldn't lose them. How is your relationship with the public Montessori program in DPSA?

EM: I work closely with the director overseeing Montessori in DPS. She's supportive. And the broader Montessori community in Denver is very supportive

MP: Is it still the same bus?

TBM: No, now we have two buses. The new one is smaller, designed for working with small intervention groups. The larger bus is becoming a neighborhood station in East Colfax.

MP: When you say interventions, that's literacy for lower elementary?

TBM: Yes. For example, at Denison, we run literacy interventions using Montessori and OG (Orton-Gillingham) methods. We support kids needing interventions before formal services are

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prescribed. Schools contract with us after an initial free trial period.

MP: Do you need to be certified in some way to do this work?

TBM: Well, it's not formally "intervention." We bring Montessori-based offerings—literacy, math, science—into the schools before kids are officially placed in intervention tiers.

MP: And principals must like that.

TBM: Yes, and we have evidence that kids return to their classrooms at grade level. For example, at Denison, kids we worked with last year didn't need further interventions this year.

MP: That sounds like a compelling model.

TBM: It is. We're proving impact. We aim to be proactive—help kids before they fall behind.

EM: It's also budget-friendly. Principals often can't hire full interventionists, but they can afford to contract with us without all the costs of a full-time hire.

MP: What are your biggest pain points?

EM: Funding. Demand is higher than what we can supply.

TBM: We're also thinking about sustainability. Building frameworks others can replicate. Opening a school to create a revenue base. Funding threatens our existence, so we have to diversify. And we're thinking about strategic planning as well: How to build a framework of what we do, so that we can share with others to enable them to do in their own space. So that the demand is not overwhelming for us.

MP: Well, it's exciting to hear about your progress. Best of luck going forward!

Tatenda Blessing-Muchiriri is the founder of Montessori on Wheels. Emily Madison is the founder of the Montessori Collective.

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Remote Montessori in Crawford

Montessori in the Rocky Mountains

CAMI BAIR AND
DENISE REGELMAN
WITH **DAVID AYER**

Rural. Remote.

That's the remotest of the U.S. Census Bureau's 12 categories of "locale," defined as "more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster." And that's where you'll find North Fork Montessori at Crawford, a district school serving 124 children in Crawford, CO. It's one of just five public Montessori schools in that category.

To put that in perspective, Crawford itself had a population of 403 in 2020. The nearest town is Hotchkiss, 11 miles away, and hardly an Urban Cluster at 875. That honor goes to Montrose, home to 20,291 Coloradans, 51 miles by road. It's only 21 miles as the crow flies, but that crow flies over the rugged and breathtaking Gunison Gorge Wilderness, so the road is a better bet. The closest Urbanized Area nod goes to Grand Junction, 65,000 souls 71 miles up Highway 50.

So yes, rural. Remote.

But North Fork Montessori has been providing free public Montessori education to the families of Delta country for 25 years.

MontessoriPublic sat down with Crawford Principal Denise Regelman and Lower Elementary teacher Cami Bair (25 years with the school) to learn more about the program. Regelman and Bear are so in sync that they finish each other's sentences, so we'll just call them the Crawford team in this edited conversation.

MontessoriPublic: Tell me about your school, and what it's like doing Montessori out where you are?

Crawford Team: We have 121 students, primary through upper elementary, with two sections of each. So two classrooms of primary, two lower elementary, and two upper elementary.

MP: Does your primary have three- and four-year-olds, or do you have to start with Kindergarten? How does that work in the funding model for Colorado?

CT: We do have a full age range in primary. We have a universal preschool program where the state covers about 80% of the cost. We also have grants through are Colorado-based organizations Anschutz and Temple Buell, which help with tuition. Before the universal pre-K program, we relied heavily on grant money because preschool can be cost-prohibitive for many families.

MP: So there's tuition for three- and four-year-olds?

CT: Yes, it's a sliding scale.

MP: So 80% of the cost is covered by state funding, and the remaining 20% is covered by tuition, and families can also get grant support?

CT: Yes.

MP: And you're in what the US Census describes as a "rural, remote" area.

CT: Yes, very rural. Delta County is one of the lower socioeconomic counties in Colorado. *[Ed.: 51st out of 64 counties in median household income at $56,349, well below the U.S. median of $75,149 and further below the Colorado median of $87,598.]*

We are in a little community called Crawford, at the very edge of Delta County. If you drive a few miles you're in Montrose County, and our demographic is definitely rural. We're talking "real America," you know—we have kids that have had all kinds of stuff go on in their lives. Kids that are from solid ranching families. Kids whose parents moved here for the school. A normal American can still afford a few acres here. Lots of the kids get up and irrigate or go get eggs from the chicken coop before they get on the bus. It's just a very cute and, I would say, a kind of a normal demographic that we serve for rural America.

MP: How is it that there's a Montessori school in Crawford in the 1st place?

CT: It's a little miracle. Here's what happened. The district, Delta County School District, 50J, is a very lovely district. They were open to a group of interested parents. About 25 years ago the district had had a Montessori classroom or two in one of their schools, and it had been sweet, and they had really liked it. So when this group of parents approached them and said, "Can we actually start a school?", believe it or not, they said, "Sure, let's try it."

And almost right away it got a very good reputation. We've had tons of awards and the district loves us. *[Ed.: Crawford has been a Colorado School of Distinction twice in the last three*

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years among other awards.] As a public school, of course, we take all comers, and the success rate at the school is high. We do really well on standardized testing. And when we send out parent surveys and student surveys, we get really high scores on those.

The school used to be in Hotchkiss, but we were outgrowing our tiny building there, and we had a waiting list. There was a beautiful building here in Crawford whose numbers had gone down a bit, so they moved us up here.

CT: And one thing that's really wonderful about this school and this district is that there's busing provided throughout Delta County. So we have families coming from Paonia and Hotchkiss, and all of our little surrounding towns which make up our school district. And sometimes there are families that travel, as far as 35 miles one way just to be a part of our school.

And it's definitely a rural community. There are times when kids will be late to school because of a cattle drive, or a sheep drive.

CT: This October the kids did a "Hunter's Bake Sale" for a fundraiser. We get quite a few hunters that come through the area. So the kids were doing the bake sale, and then the whole town of Crawford fills up with cattle, everyone watching 150 cows go by. Then the streets open back up, and they just go on with the bake sale. These are just parts of life here,.

MP: What's the newer facility like?

CT: We have a gym. We have a library which was added with grant funding. And in the library we put a STEAM lab, and the kids can go and do engineering, 3D printing, robotics. They do all this absolutely incredible project-based stuff. We also offer Spanish, Latin and band starting in 4th grade.

And then the play area is bigger, too. We have a separate, beautiful play area for the primary program. They play soccer out there. We got grant money and put beautiful new play structures in and—this is kind of funny—we have this big hill behind the school, but it faces south. So we got grant money to rearrange it, to move some dirt and make a little sledding hill.

We spend a lot of time outside, and on those snow days that are coming, students are allowed to even bring a sled, and they go sledding. You can even hike up the hill and find fossils, believe it or not, right here in Colorado.

The town elevation is almost 7,000 feet. It's not really a hill: we're on the side of a mountain. You climb up, you get to the top. It's the most extraordinarily beautiful view you've ever seen. You see mountains to the north and to the east, and then rolling farmland and a river, and it's just unbelievable to the south and the west, and then about two-thirds of the way up, there's a bank full of marine fossils, brachiopods, and little beautiful fossils like that, and the kids go crazy, as you can imagine.

And then we go hike into town. We go to the library. This wonderful couple rented the Town Hall for us once a month, and we go there and do square dancing and other kinds of folk dancing.

And then we go to businesses. Our little town of Crawford really supports our school. So we work together, we have food drives, and we support our library by having, instead of a Scholastic book fair, our students donate books, and then they purchase them back, and then all the money goes to our little Crawford library.

MP: So the community is vey connected to the school?

CT: Yes, and once or twice a year, we have an open house—a "Montessori showcase night." Parents come, and you wouldn't believe how cute it is. These kids are showing mom and their grandpa, and so forth, the Montessori approach. And you'll have a first grader or a second grader showing long multiplication. You should see the parents. Our students are the teachers, and they have their planners all ready to go for their parents. And then the student has to sign off after they do their works. The parents really enjoy that night. And the teachers are just observing. It's really beautiful.

MP: What kind of school are you in the Colorado system—district, magnet, charter, or something else?

CT: We're a Colorado School of Innovation *[Ed.: This is a Colorado category that allows schools some flexibility in "educational programming, personnel selection and evaluation, calendars and scheduling, and budgeting."]* So we have a contract with the district where we still have to follow all the Colorado standards but, for example, we are allowed to use our Montessori curriculum, and have a teacher and an assistant in the classroom. We update that plan every three years.

The district supports our school and our curriculum hundred percent. Because they know that it works! We just had a school board meeting last week, and we were honored to receive the Colorado School of Distinction award *[Ed.: Again!]*, and for three of the past four years we have been voted the best school in Delta County.

In fact, typically, in Colorado, the proficiency and advanced rates are between 40 and 50%. We're at 90%. And that's with half of our student population qualifying for free and reduced lunch—yet they are excelling academically. [Ed.: Crawford is a Title I school.] Keeping them in this Montessori, safe community environment allows them to thrive regardless of their home life.

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MP: You're kind of the best kept secret.

CB: Right! So many people think we're this little prestige private school. It's just amazing. The first question people usually ask when they call is "How much does it cost?" As you can imagine. Even though we publicize that we are free and public. Because it's unusual—like you said, "Hey, how is this existing in a town of 400 people, in very, very rural Western Colorado?" So we do have a little bit of a of a barrier to that understanding of the public Montessori, as compared to Denver where they have 18 or 20.

MP: Are there other elementary schools in your town of 400?

CT: Not in this town. There are five communities within the Delta County School district: Cedar Ridge, Delta, Paonia, Hotchkiss and Crawford, and they each have an elementary school.

MP: Do most of the families in Crawford come to your school? Or if they don't, where do they go?

CB: We only go to 6th grade. As kids age out, there is busing down to Hotchkiss, some take their kids to Paonia, and there is a homeschooling element, as you can imagine. But we get a lot of people in Crawford, and then we also draw from all around Delta County.

MP: What are some challenges you face?

CT: Transportation. Some students live 15 miles away and have to take early buses. We also have a lot of mesas in the area, so snow can make transportation difficult. Another challenge is marketing our school. The town has only 400 people, so we need to draw from a wider area. At the same time, we want to maintain good relationships with the district and other schools.

MP: Right, other small towns want their kids to attend their own schools.

CT: Exactly. And the other schools in our district are great. We don't want to step on anyone's toes.

MP: And how do things look going forward? What's the growth trajectory?

CT: Well, we've been pushing for pushing towards building it up. We have at times filled it up completely. It's wonderful to have the bigger space for the primary classrooms. But right now, they are so full it's ridiculous. We're having to brainstorm—what do we even do next year?

MP: Because, as that big primary class moves through, you may have bigger numbers in the lower and upper levels.

CT: Yeah, exactly. That's what we're thinking. And we're considering opening up another section of primary. We're working with a marketing team to attract more families. A lot of people don't know we're here, and they don't realize what a joy it is to live here. It's really like going back in time, a very slow lifestyle. When you go to the grocery store, expect to be there an extra fifteen minutes because people just want to visit. It's wonderful.

That's why I came here. We were living on the Front Range and wanted a smaller school for our children, a strong sense of community. There are so many opportunities here—farming, ranching, arts, and music. It feels very safe.

MP: It sounds wonderful. Thanks for sharing your school with us!

Cami Bear is the Lower Elementary teacher and Denise Regelman is the Principal, both at North Fork Montessori at Crawford in Crawford, CO.

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Why not more Montessori?

A new study asks district leaders what it will take

KATIE BROWN

From 2021 to 2023, my colleagues Ian Parker and Annie Frazer and I conducted a study with leaders of districts with and without Montessori programs to learn more about what might make it difficult for them to launch Montessori programs. We presented this work at the Research Poster session at the 2023 American Montessori Society annual conference (Emerging Public Montessori research, *MontessoriPublic*, May 2023). The study has now been published in the School Superintendents Association's *Journal of Scholarship and Practice*. What follows is a summary of the study and our findings.

If you're a public Montessori educator, chances are good that you have looked at your school's (often lengthy) waitlist and wondered: Why aren't there more public Montessori schools? Why aren't school districts more eager to open Montessori programs when they're so overwhelmingly popular?

Multiple studies have shown Montessori students perform as well or better than their peers in traditional schools—especially in literacy, math, and executive function. Research even suggests Montessori can help close achievement gaps for low-income and minority students.

Still, Montessori is often absent from school reform discussions. According to this new study, that's not due to a lack of results. It's because of something deeper: cultural norms, institutional habits, and systemic inertia. The data we collected sheds light on what keeps promising models like Montessori from becoming mainstream, and what could change that.

Study design

To answer this question, we conducted interviews and focus groups with 11 district-level leaders from eight different school districts across the country. Some of these districts already had public Montessori schools, while others didn't. For the districts without an existing Montessori program, the leaders had two interviews. In the first interview, we asked district leaders about their impressions and knowledge of Montessori and how they typically make decisions about educational programs and curricula. After the first interview, they were given a literature review to orient them to the empirical evidence about outcomes from Montessori programs. In the second interview, we asked them if the literature review had changed their thinking on Montessori, and what it would take for them to implement Montessori in the district.

For the leaders who already had Montessori in their districts, we asked them how their Montessori program came to be, what factors have limited its expansion, and how it fits within the larger context of their district's programming. We then looked closely at what the leaders said in the interviews, identifying common ideas and themes in their responses.

Recognition of Montessori's potential

District leaders generally acknowledged the potential benefits of Montessori education; many of them had firsthand experience with Montessori, either as a parent of a Montessori child or through exposure to private Montessori schools. They saw it as a promising approach to address current educational needs, particularly in early childhood education. They recognized its capacity to support students' social-emotional learning and strengthen academic foundations, which were seen as crucial in the context of post-pandemic recovery. By emphasizing hands-on learning, independence, and emotional development, Montessori classrooms can help rebuild what was lost—not just test scores, but confidence, self-regulation, and a love of learning.

Our conversations revealed that district leaders didn't need to be "sold" on Montessori, and they didn't necessarily need to be oriented to the research behind it. Many of them are already believers.

Inside the decision-making process

So if all these district leaders are so pro-Montessori, why aren't there more district Montessori programs? What we found was not simple resistance, but a complex web of considerations: political, financial, logistical, and philosophical.

School leaders asked questions like:

- Will this fit with our current curriculum and standards?
- Can we afford the materials and training?

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- Will our teachers and parents support it?
- How do we ensure equitable access, especially if transportation is a barrier?

In short, introducing Montessori isn't just a curriculum switch—it's a paradigm shift. And that's a heavy lift in a system designed for conformity, not innovation.

The psychology of institutions

To make sense of this, we framed our study using institutional theory, which helps explain why even good ideas struggle to gain traction in large systems like public education.

Institutional theory tells us there are three types of obstacles:

- **Regulative:** Rules, funding, and laws. These are the logistical hurdles.
- **Normative:** Shared values about what education "should" look like.
- **Cultural-Cognitive:** Deep-seated beliefs and habits that guide behavior, often unconsciously.

While funding challenges are real—Montessori does require special training and materials—this study shows that the bigger barriers are often invisible. For example, many teachers are skeptical because Montessori looks so different from traditional classrooms. Parents may be confused or unsure if it's rigorous enough. And administrators worry it won't align with testing requirements or district priorities.

When Montessori does work

In districts where Montessori has been adopted successfully, leaders got creative. Some repurposed under-enrolled schools into Montessori campuses. Others applied for grants or used magnet school funds to support the launch. In one case, a district created its own in-house Montessori teacher training program to avoid costly external certification.

Most importantly, these leaders built trust. They held community nights to explain the Montessori approach. They found teacher-champions and offered them extra support. They made sure families knew what to expect, and why it mattered.

A superintendent in the Midwest explained how his district introduced Montessori not as an elite option, but as a solution to a struggling school. "We weren't trying to be trendy," he said. "We were trying to save a school from closure and give our families something better. And the response was overwhelmingly positive."

Whose voices matter?

One of the more surprising findings from the study was this: while teachers and administrators were heavily involved in the decision-making process, parents were mostly left out. Yet once programs launched, parental enthusiasm often surged—if the district had taken time to communicate.

This points to an opportunity. If districts are serious about school reform, they may need to rethink who gets a seat at the table. Teachers, families, and even students should be part of shaping what education looks like moving forward. Montessori grows best when it's rooted in the needs and dreams of the community.

Key takeaways

- **Montessori is seen as a promising model:** District leaders recognize the potential of Montessori to address critical educational needs, particularly in early childhood and in supporting holistic child development.
- **Knowledge gaps exist:** A significant barrier to wider adoption is the limited understanding of the Montessori method among district-level leaders. This lack of in-depth knowledge can lead to misconceptions or hesitation in considering it as a viable reform model.
- **Context matters:** Decisions about implementing Montessori are heavily influenced by the unique context of each school district, including its existing resources, priorities, and community dynamics.
- **Implementation challenges are significant:** Practical concerns around teacher training, curriculum alignment, and financial sustainability are major considerations for district leaders.
- **Family influence is not a primary driver:** While leaders acknowledge the importance of community support, families are not typically seen as the primary force behind curriculum adoption decisions.

Recommendations:

- **Increase awareness and education about Montessori:** We recommend proactive efforts to educate district leaders about the core principles, research-backed outcomes, and practical implementation of Montessori education. This could involve workshops, site visits to successful public Montessori programs, and accessible resources that clearly articulate the model's benefits.
- **Highlight successful public Montessori models:** Sharing information and case studies of successful public Montessori programs can help to alleviate concerns about feasibility and demonstrate how the model can be effectively integrated within a public school setting.
- **Address implementation challenges:** We suggest developing resources and support systems to help districts navigate the practicalities of implementing Montessori, particularly in areas like teacher

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training pathways, curriculum development aligned with state standards, and budget considerations.
- **Engage families and communities:** While not identified as primary drivers in this study, the authors implicitly suggest that engaging families and the broader community in understanding the benefits of Montessori could build stronger support for its adoption.

While we found an openness to Montessori's potential, bridging the knowledge gap and addressing specific local implementation concerns are crucial steps towards its wider consideration and adoption as a valuable option within public education.

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Hands-on in upper elementary

The sensorial materials keep their magic

KELLY KIESELBACH

"You are the only one who can do it," my principal said when I arrived at her office. I silently hoped my face wouldn't betray me when I found out just what she was asking of me. I had been deeply rooted in Montessori education for nearly thirty years, training as a Children's House teacher (where I fell in love with the materials), and working at that level for the entirety of my career in both private and public programs, and then as a Montessori instructional coach in a public school in my home state of Michigan.

Becoming a Montessori coach was like a dream come true. When my principal asked me to take the lead in an upper elementary classroom that day, I reflected on the experiences interspersed throughout my years in the classroom. There were many opportunities to act as a mentor and Montessori trainer. I valued each and every one. I had always believed that the philosophy and materials have a powerful effect on children of all levels. I have observed firsthand the brilliance of Dr. Montessori's method for much of my career with our very youngest students. Sharing ideas, demonstrating materials, and helping others to learn and grow in their practice is like letting someone in on a wonderful secret. The feeling of satisfaction cannot be duplicated. "Follow me and I'll show you the magic of Montessori!" I was soon to find out how true that was!

I realized that being asked to become the lead teacher in an upper elementary classroom due to staffing changes presented its challenges. Wanting to guide the students to success but also feeling apprehensive about the experience, I wondered about working with students in the second plane. My experience with this level amounted to only a handful of days as a substitute teacher.

Despite my initial excitement, I didn't fully understand the reality of guiding upper elementary. After all, I had grand plans for this class! "I can come in and sprinkle my knowledge of all things Montessori like magic and the students will immediately normalize and grow!"

The students knew me, as I had coached in their classroom and visited about once a week. I had observed peaceful work. Despite that, I noticed immediately upon my entry that this was a class that had experienced great change due to unforeseen staffing shifts.

By the time I arrived in late February, I sensed distrust. Simple directions became a cause for outrage. Motivating them to complete work was a daunting task. They appeared to be rather reliant on technology. Many had become disorganized and began falling into less-than-optimal work habits. At the suggestion of a fellow teacher, we had a "problem/solution" class community meeting with the support of the school social worker in order to restore some functionality to the class. Despite these efforts, there still seemed to be many students who were resistant to the idea of me being their teacher. I was a kindergarten teacher lost in an upper elementary wilderness.

I realized on that first day that I *did*, however, have a fallback option: the Montessori materials themselves! Completely improvising at the end of a very challenging first day, I grabbed the geometric solids off the shelf in an act of pure desperation and asked the students to join me. They did so reluctantly. I presented them with little language and a focus on the hands. Channeling my inner kindergarten teacher, I noticed that the students were surprisingly silent and engaged.

Encouraged by this win, I continued to demonstrate extensions with the solids in the coming days. I asked the students to put their hands behind their backs. I put a shape in their hands and they had to guess which one they had without looking, working on the stereognostic sense. I asked them to close their eyes and guess which one was missing, working on visual memory. They immersed themselves in these early activities with glee, and, more importantly, purpose. Like the proverbial light bulb going off, I thought "Is the hand as important to upper elementary as it is to early childhood?" I believe the answer is yes.

Montessori wrote about the connection between intelligence and hand in her book The Absorbent Mind. She wrote that the hand begins to do purposeful work in infancy. Further, she shared that "Children who have been able to work with their hands make headway in their development, and reach a strength of character which is conspicuous". Indeed, "The hands are the instrument of man's intelligence." Through my Montessori training, I had learned that the sensory-motor exercises in the practical life and sensorial sequences are crucial to the three-to-six-year-old child, but what of children

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in the second plane of development?

Kay Baker, a long-time Montessorian affiliated with the Association Montessori International, wrote that, "The child in the elementary years has an inner dictate to seek the reasons for things and exploring how things work with their hands satisfies this need to know." She also stated that, "The cosmic education plan exposes the child to knowledge, and most importantly, then allows the child to explore this knowledge through the work of the hand."

I set out to work, equipped with this profound new observation. One afternoon, when we had an uninterrupted work period, I decided to set up Montessori centers with a variety of materials. I brought out the metal insets, coloring a continent map, an "animals on the continents" activity, and making the geometric solids out of clay. Everything involved use of the hands.

It was fascinating to see the quality of their work. Beautiful metal inset designs, drawings of animals, and clay sculpted shapes. This was not the silent work of early childhood; their voices were engaging and insightful, and their enthusiasm was undeniable. Another time, I asked a few volunteer teachers to come and work with the students on re-introducing the checkerboard in small groups. I noticed that some students who tended to gravitate to Chromebooks were excited to explore this material and teach it to others. The enthusiasm was palpable. When given the chance to create their own paper checkerboard as an extension, one student actually clapped! Another student asked "Are you showing us Montessori materials to get us off of Chromebooks?" Inwardly, I smiled.

Perhaps introducing and re-examining the exercises of early childhood and lower elementary is beneficial to the upper elementary child. We are a public school after all, and not every child has had the chance to experience the full spectrum of Montessori education. Some enroll in preschool, while others do not enroll until 5th grade or later. Is creating or recreating experiences with early childhood materials useful to the 9-12 year-old child?

Through my observations over the days and weeks, the students demonstrated an ability to concentrate on the materials in a way that they hadn't when it came to pencil and paper tasks. After presenting the triangle box, for example, one of the more vocal students exclaimed "That was impressive!" after an extended period of silence.

I continued to present materials in the classical Montessori way, with a clear focus on the hands, precision of movement, and little verbalization for the remainder of my time in the classroom. An assistant with aspirations to become a teacher graciously offered to take the lead, allowing me to return to my coaching position.

This experience was one of the most challenging of my career, forcing me to stretch in ways I couldn't even imagine at the time. Luckily, this was not a job that I had to do alone; I had several wonderful teachers offer their assistance and expertise to the students and me. I also remembered that there can be no growth without discomfort for both teachers and students, a lesson well learned, even in my advancing years.

The words of my Montessori mentor ring in my ears to this day; that we must always go by what the children teach us. While there were many tears behind the scenes that my kind and supportive colleagues can attest to, I would not trade my experience with this class for the world, as the world does indeed belong to them.

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Denervaud: gender, creativity, and more

Swiss researcher digs deeper into Montessori brains

SOLANGE DENERVAUD
WITH **DAVID AYER**

In the fall issue of *MontessoriPublic*, we spoke with Swiss Montessori researcher Solange Denervaud about her PhD research (Beyond Executive Function, *MontessoriPublic*, November 2024). She spoke about her experience as a child in the somewhat rigid Swiss educational system, her discovery of Montessori, and her PhD work.

In her research comparing Montessori and conventional schools, she had expected Montessori children to show higher executive function, consistent with other research. But to her surprise, the Montessori children showed no difference in executive function. Yet academic achievement, which typically tracks with executive function, was higher, along with creativity and well-being at school. Brain imaging showed that the Montessori children perceived error and correction differently, without judgment, and this allowed them to be more flexible and creative thinkers. (*Beyond executive functions, creativity skills benefit academic outcomes: Insights from Montessori education. PLoS ONE 14(11): e0225319.*)

Our conversation was too long to get into one article, so we have picked it up here.

Solange Denervaud: The result—how we react to errors—was so interesting. If you are not afraid of being wrong then you can create. But wait! When you enter in contact with other human beings, every human being is a "mistake" to any other human being because you're different from me, so to my brain you're an error, because you are different from me. To the brain, hearing "3 + 3 equals 5" or me meeting you, it's the same signal: it's an error. It's something different. But if I have been in school with children, especially from different ages, and we have to work together and we are discussing the whole day around the work, instead of (in the conventional system), "Sit down at your place, don't discuss with your neighbor otherwise, I will punish you," and, "You do the same work that I will compare with your neighbor," it's not the same mindset from a social perspective.

So I began to investigate this social dimension. Because this brain system that detects something that is different, or an "error," is also implied in social processes. I wondered if we were missing something important! For children at that age, what if they have real social diversity in the classroom—not just having one neurodivergent child in the class or something, but really having to work with one another? Where I have to learn from your point of view and we have to come together over a common goal, then we are really training the error monitoring system but for social interaction. And there we saw big differences between Montessori and traditional school children in social skills and social diversity, and how they would engage and perceive others.

And *then*, where in the traditional Swiss system you see that boys and girls they start showing different outcomes in social skills or social-related brain regions, Montessori boys and girls they are similar! And with what society suffer nowadays with gender differences, I thought, "this is important!"

MP: How are the non-Montessori children differentiated by gender in their social interactions? What do you see in Swiss schools?

SD: The study is about you how the complexity of socially interaction is so high that we rely on several brain regions that have to coordinate to work together. And in these brain regions we observe that traditional school boys had lower smaller brain regions in areas related to meaning making and regulating social context. That's often an issue reported by school teacher —"These boys are aggressive, and they don't care about the classroom."

You might wonder, is it just a matter of biology or is it a matter of experience? We have preliminary data showing that it might not just be a matter of experience—it might be a matter of training *and* experience.

Then of course you want to know, "Why do adults act this way with boys? Because they're acculturated to, or is there something about boys that drives them?" Because, even if, subconsciously, you don't want to make gender differences, we are in a cultural environment, we have some information, and even if we don't want to we convey some information. And just by the simple process of organizing brain activities, I'm transferring information about myself that I'm not saying loud but because we synchronize brain activity it comes across.

And it might be that in Montessori schools where there is a one teacher for

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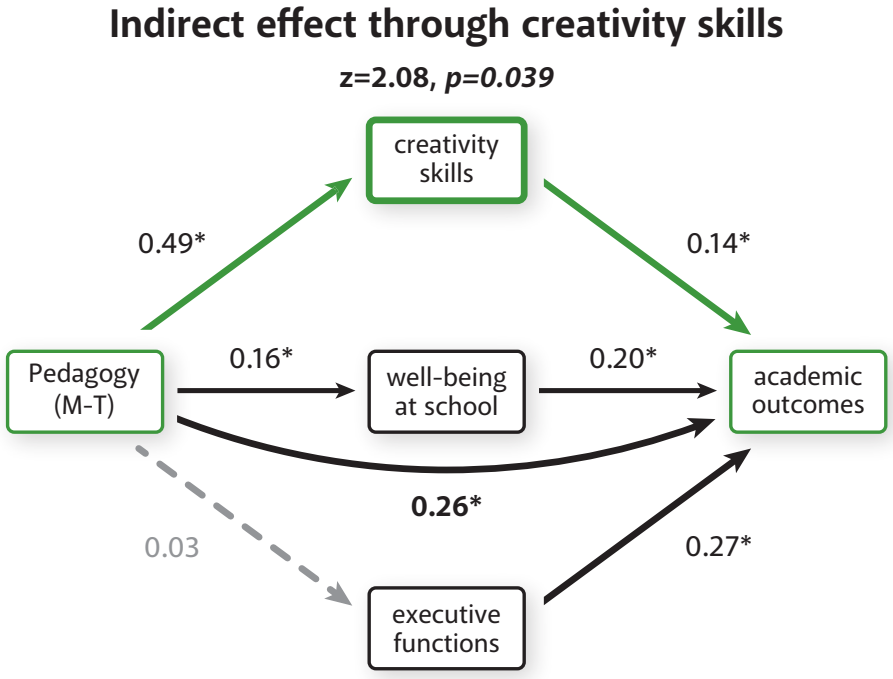
large group of children, and they interact and work *with peers* more than with an adult, the adult might be transferring less of this kind of bias than in traditional school system.

MP: So why are boys even like this, if they are? What do they get for being so thick-headed and unemotionally responsive and all that? If boys have a deficit here, do they do better in some other area—or is it just pretty much just a disadvantage, and we'd be better off if Montessori could make the boys be more like girls?

SD: No, it's not a matter of what's better. It's just that we observe some differences and some problems in the society that we might not have if we understand better that children they spontaneously they want to interact and work together. But in Swiss schooling it's like, "Shut up and sit, don't talk." And for boys it seems that the sociality is also more sensitive to a competitive environment. And school is highly competitive, so if boys react more strongly, they might be more individualized at that stage but it doesn't mean that outside school it's helpful.

MP: There's a strain of thought in American education that says testosterone is real and has an effect. That boys are naturally more competitive and less inclined to mediate differences with talking and with emotions, and we should design school differently for boys and girls. We should have separate boys classes with lot more competition because that's their natural inclination. And girls should have classes and activities that respond to their more emotional, language-based ways of interaction and that's OK! And we shouldn't be trying to do things in schools that make the boys more like the girls.

SD: Well. I just hope that we have less misunderstanding between women and men later in life, and can be more complementary than similar. The point is to understand each other's strengths and modes. If there is more testosterone, there must a good reason but if we can understand how to work together to be a better team then I think that's the point of humanity.



The only significant (z > 2) indirect mediation effect on academic outcomes was creativity skills in Montessori schoolchildren (green path).

MP: Well, testosterone pathways evolved a long time ago as adaptations to very different circumstances. Our lives are not mediated by nearly as much violence or aggression as they have been historically and prehistorically. So maybe boys are just outdated! They're really no longer a useful adaptation and the best we can do with the boys is try to socialize them a little bit.

SD: That's not what I'm saying. It's just that, observing societal problems, maybe the root is in how we train children. When we got these results we thought, "How is it that possible?" So we went back to some schools and observed. Do teachers perpetuate gender differences, like saying to the girls, "You do drawing" and to the boys, "You come with me and do math?"

So we counted! And actually it was less what teachers said than the number of interactions that was drastically different. And we counted child interactions: each time one boy and one girl were talking we made a mark. Then we looked at what they were interacting over—is it play or work? In the Montessori schools they interact with work, so they have to adjust themselves because they have a project together. They have to align themselves and share points of view, disagreeing and commenting. They have very spontaneous interactions, sometime lasting for two seconds, sometimes for two hours, so there is no rule—just let them interact. Which is good because between ages six and ten they don't want to stop talking—they have to talk. (And this is a problem now in Switzerland—people have communication issues and we have to take a class at work to communicate better!)

But I remember from my school

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years, you sit down and shut up, you don't disturb, you stop talking. I was punished so many times because I was always talking. But the beauty of Montessori is this: You want to talk, talk—but talk about your work. So children have to adjust over a common goal, which is harder than when you want to play together. You have to achieve something concrete and sometimes it's something you haven't completely decided, and that's highly frustrating, and then you have to gently grow up that capacity. Naturally in the teenage years you start discussing about topics you share interests in, and you decide who you want to belong with, and why, and how. That's the next level but if you impair that level then teenagers are harder and you know there are these cascading effects.

MP: OK, so we've been kind of all over the map here. This all comes back to how children process unexpected events in their environments.

SD: All this work with children and the way they were talking led me to study memory semantic issues (how understanding and the knowledge are stored in the brain). How it was different and how it was flexible and interconnected—which part of the brain, on which side, would change more.

And that led me to think, "So when they work together, I wonder if they synchronize faster between children than between a child and an adult. If their brains are sensitive to mistakes, meaning unexpected events, intellectually or socially, it might be easier to get unexpected reactions from a peer than from an adult. Because we do so many random actions within a day for a child, and their brains might be less sensitive to understanding what the novelty is.

MP: So children find other children less predictable than adults—the adults are a little boring, which doesn't stimulate learning.

SD: Sort of. With children they experience novel actions, which triggers brain activity and they want to learn. It's easier for them to extract information from another child than from an adult. We have to be explicit about what we want them to learn but spontaneously from another child they expect many of the actions and reaction and sometimes there is something novel and then they are like, "Oops that's interesting." So we created some studies to see if that was true or not and it seems that these brain regions related to error monitoring are also related to social monitoring and it's also more sensitive to other children when they do something different.

MP: So going all the way back to whether Montessori "works" or Montessori is "better," it's not so much about outcomes academic outcomes, but more about, "What is the character of the interactions among children, what are the subtleties of behavior differences among the Montessori children and the non-Montessori children?" Kind of teasing out those the various differences there without necessarily imposing a value judgment. Although it does seem like all things being equal it's better to be a good communicator and to be able to work things out in social interaction. And to manage a difference in expected outcome without a heavy affect hit.

And it seems like that's a better way to have a richer life experience, more opportunities, and that sort of thing.

SD: It makes me think of the quote attributed to Darwin "It's not the more intelligent that survive, it's the ones that can adapt themselves." That's a great adaptation, when you can react well to an unexpected event, which is real life right? We face so many different challenges and changes now and it's just the beginning.

So what do we wish for the future of our society? Do we wish for people that can adjust, create, come up with novel aspects, communicate, and collaborate? Or do we want people that are scared and afraid of change, and freeze and panic, and are just aggressive because they don't know how to embrace diversity? I think that's a societal question it's beyond "is it good or bad?" It's just, what do we wish for ourselves in the future?

Because more and more teachers realize that they are less bounded than they think in what they have to do. They just have to remember they are more free and creative than they think. They forget their own powers of innovation and creation but I think that's coming back. Science can never be capable of saying what to do, but we'll always be a good team member, to grow understanding and to go beyond methods or recipes.

MP: And once again we'll have to leave it there. It's always great to speak with you.

Solange Denervaud is a neuroscientist working at the CIBM Center for Biomedical Imaging, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL).

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Montessori growth: Who are we missing?

At least nine new public programs this year

DAVID AYER

On top of nine programs opened for 2024-25, we know of at least five new programs launching in September 2025. And at least 20 programs are celebrating their 25th anniversary this year.

We collect and improve public Montessori data on the Montessori Census (montessoricensus.org). Check our your school's listing and send us an email if anything's missing or incorrect!

In Cincinnati, an amazing story has played out over the last few months. In November, Xavier University, home to a Montessori teacher training program since 1965, announced the closure of its 60-year-old Montessori Lab School, which provided low-cost Montessori education and practice environments for aspiring Montessori teachers.

Families scrambled to create an alternative, exploring private and homeschooling options. But they were quickly able to achieve a collaboration with Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS), home of the first U.S. public Montessori school in a program which has grown to seven schools including two high schools. CPS had an underenrolled building, Bramble Nature Campus, and the lab school families had a ready supply of committed families. The deal came together quickly, and **Bramble Montessori** is set to open in September.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, the school district was awarded a $15 million Magnet School grant to add a Montessori track to **Bucknell Elementary School**, starting with PK3–K and adding grades thereafter.

Invictus Nashville Charter School will open in Nashville, Tennessee, after first being rejected, and then approved on appeal, back in 2023. Invictus principal and Build Excel Sustain (BES) Fellow Dr. Brenda Jones' persistence has paid off, and the school will open in September serving K-2nd grade, with plans to expand through to 8th grade in coming years.

The **Oklahoma Public Montessori Initiative**, also approved in 2023 (and the only one of four applications approved that year), will open in Oklahoma City this fall, serving students from pre-K through fourth grade.

Finally, in Columbus, Ohio, a new Wildflower charter school, **Rainbow Montessori Learning Center**, is slated to open in September, ultimately serving "a diverse urban population of students in grades PK4-8," according to their website.

Here are the 20 schools opened in 2000 and celebrating their 25th anniversary this year!

- Birch Lane Elementary School
- Briar Vista Elementary School
- Brockman Elementary School
- Bucks County Montessori Charter School
- Bush Elementary-Montessori
- Cumberland Road Montessori
- Huntley Hills Elementary and Montessori School
- Johnson Elementary-Montessori
- Leelanau Montessori Public School Academy
- McCormick Elementary
- Montessori Academy, School 53
- Mountain View Montessori Charter School
- North Fork Montessori @ Crawford
- Pomeroy Elementary-Montessori
- Ridgeline Montessori Public Charter School
- Riverway Learning Community
- Southern Ute Indian Montessori Academy
- Tree of Life Montessori Charter School
- Triangle Lake Montessori School
- Waukazoo Elementary School

If your school is missing, or we got your birthday wrong, let us know! editor@montessoripublic.org

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