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POLICY BRIEF

Montessori Programs in Urban Public Schools: Policy and Possibilities

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Introduction

Montessori programs in public schools are expanding as a school choice option increasingly offered in magnet programs and charter schools (American Montessori Society [AMS], n.d.; Courage, 2005; National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, n.d.). As of July 2013, 443 of the estimated 5,000 total Montessori programs in the US were in public schools (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, n.d.). Various educational policies that are based on the traditional public school model create challenges for public school Montessori programs (AMS, n.d.; Courage, 2005; Murray & Peyton, 2008; Rambusch, 2007). This policy brief provides a basic overview of the Montessori philosophy, a survey of Montessori in US public schools today, an enumeration of the benefits of Montessori for urban students, and a discussion of educational policies which create challenges for effective implementation of Montessori in public schools.

The current expansion of Montessori programs in public schools (American Montessori Society [AMS], n.d.; National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, n.d) creates policy considerations for these programs and implications for urban students. While Montessori holds significant promise, particularly as an early childhood program for low wealth students (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Dohrmann et al., 2007; East Dallas Community Schools, 2010; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006), some educational policies create challenges for effective implementation of the Montessori method (Courage, 2005; Murray & Peyton, 2008; Rambusch, 2007).

The Montessori Method

The Montessori method is not just a curriculum, but rather an entire educational philosophy and approach developed by Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator. While she initially developed her method for children with mental disabilities, who had been dismissed as unteachable, it proved so effective that she generalized it for use with non-disabled children. Her first school opened in 1907 and served children of factory workers in the slums of Rome (Cossentino, 2010; Donnabella & Rule, 2008; Lillard, 2005; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008).

The Montessori method has experienced three distinct waves of popularity in the US: as an educational fad for children of the wealthy elite in the early 1900s, as a private school movement among middle-class suburban families in the 1960s and 1970s, and as a growing school choice option in public schools from the 1990s through the present day (Rambusch, 2007; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008).

Although many adults in the US are familiar with the term "Montessori," confusion and misconceptions about this philosophy and instructional approach are widespread (Murray, 2012). The philosophy is best summarized by the motto, "follow the child" (Murray & Peyton, 2008). Instruction in Montessori classes is highly individualized and differentiated, with students working independently or in small groups with specially prepared manipulatives for extended periods of time. Students move at their own pace; teachers assess student progress through careful observation and record-keeping rather than formal assessments (Cossentino, 2010; Lillard, 2012; Pickering, 2003). Students are encouraged to develop an intrinsic love of learning rather than relying on grades, prizes, and competition for motivation (Dohrmann, Nishida, Gartner, Lipsky, & Grimm, 2007; Lillard, 2012). Classrooms are multiage and students stay with the same teacher for three consecutive years, ideally beginning at age three (Cossentino, 2010; Lillard, 2012).

Benefits of Montessori Education for Urban Students

Several factors have presented challenges to studying outcomes for Montessori programs, including fidelity of program implementation, parental motivation and home factors, sample size and attrition, and a lack of randomized samples (Dohrmann et al., 2007). However, some research indicates that Montessori education, particularly in early childhood, offers benefits for urban students. Two of the most empirically sound studies comparing academic outcomes for demographically matched Montessori and non-Montessori students showed that the Montessori students outperformed the non-Montessori students (Dohrmann et al., 2007; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). Both of these studies involved urban schools. The study conducted by Dohrmann et al. examined outcomes seven years *after* students had left the Montessori program, showing that these benefits are long-term. East

Figure 1. Locations of public school Montessori programs in the continental United States

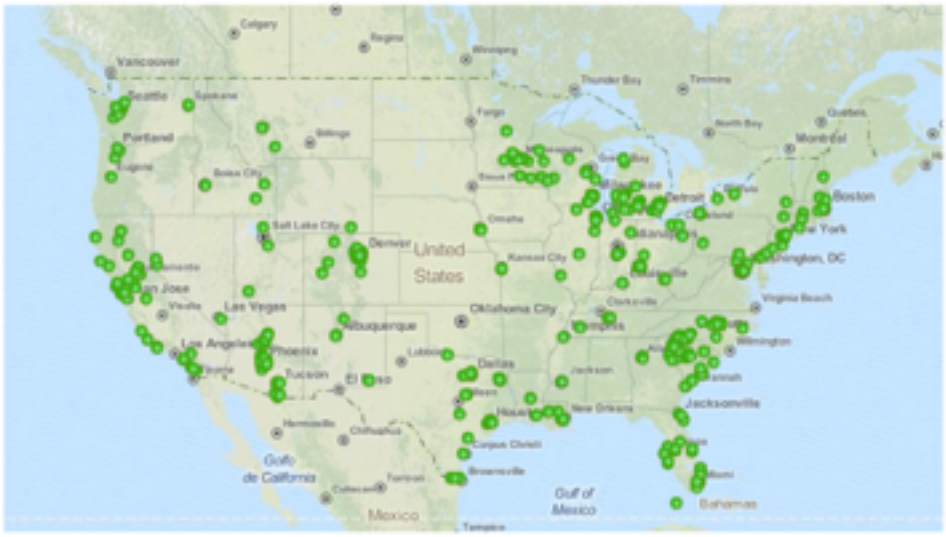

Figure 1. Locations of public school Montessori programs in the continental United States (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, 2013).

Dallas Community Schools, a group of three Montessori charter schools in Texas, boasts a high school graduation rate of 94% for its alumni, 42% of whom are classified as Limited English Proficient and 63% of whom are low wealth, in an area where the overall graduation rate is only 50% (East Dallas Community Schools, 2010). Montessori programs contribute to school readiness through the development of executive functions, a set of cognitive and emotional self-regulation skills that are often less developed in low wealth students than in their high wealth counterparts (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Montessori, with its highly individualized and inherently differentiated structure, is also a natural fit for serving students with learning disabilities (Cossentino, 2010; Pickering, 2003); Montessori has been called "the first inclusion model" (Cossentino, 2010, p. 38).

Montessori Programs in Public Schools Today

As of November 2014, there were almost 500 identified public school Montessori programs of the estimated 5,000 total Montessori schools in the United States (National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, n.d.). These include school-within-a-school and whole-school models (AMS, n.d.); most of these are charter schools or magnet programs (Courage, 2005). As Whitescarver and Cossentino (2008) noted, the third wave of Montessori education in the US has coincided with the rise of charter schools. Admission is often first-come, first-served, or by lottery (AMS, n.d.). In a 2008 survey, almost 80% of participating public Montessori schools had a waiting list. A third of these schools reported that the majority of their students were students of color and low wealth (Murray & Peyton, 2008). These schools must still meet the same standards and take the same standardized tests as traditional public schools (AMS, n.d.).

Policy Considerations

Some educational policies create obstacles to implementing a Montessori program with fidelity in a 21st-century American public school. The first and most obvious is the challenge presented by the testing mandates of No Child Left Behind. Standardized testing in general runs counter to the Montessori philosophy of assessment through teacher observation; there is also concern that government-mandated tests are not in alignment with the Montessori curriculum (Courage, 2005; Murray & Peyton, 2008). The lack of public funding for three- and four-year-olds makes it difficult for schools to offer a multi-aged primary Montessori program without charging tuition for three- and four-year-olds (AMS, n.d.; Rambusch, 2007). The expenses associated with starting and maintaining a Montessori classroom can also be an obstacle for public schools; funding specialized Montessori teacher training is particularly difficult when these teachers are also required to hold a traditional state teaching license (AMS, n.d.; Courage, 2005; Murray & Peyton, 2008; Rambusch, 2007). Montessori charter schools in particular struggle with securing adequate facilities, since in many states charter schools do not receive funds for facilities (Murray & Peyton, 2008). Even when teachers are Montessori trained, school and district administrators often are not, which can produce a cultural and ideological mismatch between teachers and administrators (AMS, n.d.; Murray & Peyton, 2008; Rambusch, 2007).

Rambusch (2007) called for a renewed focus on Montessori in public schools, arguing that "where public schools were failing was a place where Montessori education might make a difference: in the education of the urban black child" (p. 28). Though these words were originally written in 1976, they are arguably still applicable today. Policy changes are necessary before public school Montessori programs can reach their full potential in serving urban students. These changes include:

- Creating pathways for teachers to earn state licensure through Montessori teacher training programs
- Providing Montessori schools with flexibility in participating in non-essential assessments
- Funding preschool for low wealth three- and four-year-olds
- Providing incentives for administrators of Montessori schools to receive training in Montessori philosophy and curriculum
- Allowing for use of teacher evaluation and observation instruments that are compatible with the Montessori approach
- Providing facilities funds for charter schools

South Carolina's legislation regarding state licensure for Montessori teachers is an excellent model for other states that wish to become more Montessori-friendly (South Carolina Department of Education [SDCE], 2010). Under this system, teachers who complete a Montessori teacher training program approved by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education [MACTE] can qualify for one of two types of teacher licensure. If the teacher already has a valid South Carolina teaching license, he or she receives an add-on endorsement to teach Montessori at the level for which he or she was trained. This option is most likely to be utilized by veteran teachers who decide to pursue Montessori certification later in their careers. A teacher in this situation would be eligible to teach in either a Montessori or a traditional classroom (SCDE, 2010). The other option is the Montessori-specific licensure; this option applies to teachers who have completed only the MACTE-approved Montessori teacher training program in lieu of a traditional teacher preparation program. These teachers are only eligible to teach in Montessori classrooms (SCDE, 2010). This option is likely to be attractive to a new teacher who wants to receive the two-year Montessori teacher training, but does not want to invest an additional one to two years in a traditional teacher preparation program as well. Proposals like this one help alleviate the shortage of licensed Montessori-trained teachers, which is a challenge for both new and existing public school Montessori programs (AMS, n.d.; Courage, 2005; Murray & Peyton, 2008). This is just one example of the kind of flexibility and outside-the-box thinking that is necessary to support the expansion of Montessori programs in public schools.

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