PHOTO: KEITH WHITESCARVER

The Beechwood Estate in Scarborough, New York. The first Montessori school in the United States opened in this location in 1911 in the building on the far left.

Right: Nancy McCormick Rambusch and Margaret E. Stephenson addressing a Montessori study group, early 1960s

PHOTOS: AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT LIBRARIES

Montessori in America: t

In the first of two parts, **Dr Keith Whitescarver** explores the history behind the Montessori movement in the United States.

The United States was an early adopter of Montessori education. Maria Montessori opened her first school, the Casa dei Bambini, as part of an urban renewal project in the San Lorenzo district of Rome in 1907. By 1909, additional schools were launched and news of Montessori's academic benefits spread throughout the European continent and then to the rest of the world.

In the United States, news of Montessori education had spread far and wide by 1911. In an article published in the highly popular *McClure's Magazine*, Maria Montessori was described as "an educational wonder-worker" and depicted the students studying in her school as "miracle children" because of their ability to read and write at such a young age. The American response to the article was intense and positive. Latching on to the popularity, S. S. McClure, the owner/publisher of the magazine, assumed the role of American promoter of both the founder and method. To this end, he ran letters from the public commenting on Montessori's ideas and created a column on Montessori education that became a regular feature.

An American Montessori school opened in Scarborough, New York, in the fall of 1911 in the home of Frank Vanderlip, one of the leading bankers in the country. The teacher in this school, Anne George, wrote about the school for *McClure's* at the end of the first academic year:

"Externally, Dr. Montessori's Casa dei Bambini bore little resemblance to this first American school. She made her first experiments in the model tenements of the San Lorenzo district in Rome – a section which has the same relation to the Eternal City that the East Side has to New York... My children all came from cultured families, whose greatest ambition it was to give their children everything possible in the way of education and rational enjoyment."

In other words, the American version of Montessori differed dramatically from its Italian forerunner. Where Dr. Montessori's educational experiment grew out of a larger social initiative, it was the "miracle children" who captured the attention of wealthy American supporters.

In this dazzling period of favorable publicity, additional Montessori schools opened around the country. Montessori's American backers, including Mabel Bell and her spouse, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, were strong initial supporters. She and her husband opened a school in Nova Scotia in the summer of 1912, and they created a second school in Washington, D. C. later that fall. Other progressive era reformers lauded the new educational approach. In the years 1912–1914, there were 187 English language articles and books on Montessori education; almost all were published in the United States. In the international training course led by Dr. Montessori in Rome in 1913, sixty-seven of the eighty-seven enrollees were from the United States.

Supported, in part, by McClure, Dr. Montessori traveled to the country in 1913 and 1915 to great acclaim and to packed lecture halls. She taught a training course in San Francisco as part of the Panama Pacific International Exposition in the latter tour. By the 1916-17 school year, there were over 100 Montessori schools in 22 states.

Maria Montessori (left) gives a lecture in Italian to 5,000 teachers in Los Angeles, California in 1915. The English translator is Adelia Pyle.

Amazingly, the movement burned out in the United States just as quickly as it had arrived. Language barriers, travel limitations forced by World War I, an anti-immigrant sentiment, and public criticism by a few influential educational leaders, led to the decline. By the 1920s Montessori had all but disappeared.

While Montessori continued to flourish as a global movement for child-centered, peace-oriented learning for the remainder of Dr. Montessori's life, the movement lay dormant on American shores. By 1960, however, a distinctly American version of the system began to take shape.

The leader of the American revival was Nancy McCormick Rambusch. Like the movement's founder, Dr. Rambusch

he first 100 years

was charismatic, well-educated, and a determined advocate. The young Nancy McCormick became aware of the writings of Maria Montessori while a student at the University of Toronto in the late 1940s. It was not until marriage and the birth of her first child, however, that she actively sought an alternative to traditional American schooling. In search of answers, she traveled to Paris in 1953 to attend the Tenth International Montessori Congress. There she met the new leader of the international Montessori movement, Mario Montessori. She was urged by Mario to take Montessori training and to bring Montessori education back to the United States.

Taking Montessori's advice, Rambusch completed training in London in 1955. Afterwards she returned home and prepared a Montessori classroom in her Manhattan appartment. Subsequently, the Rambusch family moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, and Nancy, with the collaboration of a group of prominent Roman Catholic families, opened the Whitby School in September, 1958.

In June 1959 Mario Montessori appointed Dr. Rambusch the "representative of the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI)." Six months later, the American Montessori Society (AMS) was born, becoming the organizational representative of AMI for the United States. The goals of AMS were to support efforts to create schools, develop teacher education programs, and publicize the value of Montessori education.

The last goal got a huge boost in 1961 when the news weekly *Time* published a story about Rambusch, Whitby school, and the American Montessori revival in its May 12th issue. For the second time, an article on Montessori education galvanized the American public. Interest was so intense that *Time* printed a special report shortly afterwards, and AMS received numerous requests from parents on how to start schools and begin study groups. Publicity generated by print media, including *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the *Catholic Reporter*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and the publication in 1962 of Rambusch's book, *Learning How to Learn*, led to dramatic growth in schools and students.

Above left: Montessori L&A Wise Memorial Day Care Center.

Above right: Unidentified teacher and students at the Whitby School, 1960

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From the beginning Nancy McCormick Rambusch and AMS pursued a "transmuted" rather than "transplanted" version of Montessori in the U. S. Transmutation manifested itself most obviously in teacher education. AMS broadened the curriculum for teachers and attempted to forge inroads into mainstream schooling by running courses in Montessori instruction through traditional university-based teacher preparation programs.

Mario Montessori disagreed with this approach, calling for a deliberate approach to innovation. AMI and AMS parted ways in 1963, largely over disagreements regarding teacher preparation.

After the split, Margaret Elizabeth Stephenson, who had previously worked with Rambusch to establish training courses in the US, replaced Rambusch as Mario Montessori's personal emissary to the United States. As Montessori schools grew in number, AMI opened a branch office in the United States at Miss Stephenson's request. AMI/USA was founded in 1972 and directed for its first ten years by Karin Salzmann. Currently, Virginia McHugh Goodwin is the Executive Director of the organization. In 2010 there were 180 AMI affiliated schools in the United States.

The American Montessori Society is now the larger of the two organizations with over 1200 affiliated schools in 2010 and over 11,000 members and 90 accredited AMS-affiliated teacher education courses. Richard A. Ungerer is Executive Director.

There are at least four other organizations through which a school may be affiliated. Schools that wish to identify themselves as Montessori schools without any organizational affiliation are free to do so as well. The name Montessori is not protected by copyright or patent.

In recent years increased attention to the public sector has been a priority for both AMS and AMI. Both organizations view the extension of Montessori education to larger numbers of children as a key, mission-based, priority. Today there are more than 240 public Montessori programs in 32 states. The highest concentrations of public Montessori schools are found in the states of Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Texas—each with more than fifteen schools identified. The vast majority of these schools report no affiliation with a Montessori professional association (AMI or AMS).

In the last two decades the number of Montessori schools in the United States has grown dramatically in both the public and private sectors. ■

In the second part of this series, Dr. Whitescarver delves into why this resurgence is occurring and provides case examples of successful public Montessori programs and schools.

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Montessori in America: the current revival

In the second of two parts, **Dr Keith Whitescarver** explores the resurgence of Montessori in the United States.

On April 30, 2010, the White House named Clark Montessori Junior and Senior High School of Cincinnati, Ohio, one of three finalists to President Obama's Race to the Top Commencement Challenge. Over 1000 public high schools in the United States chose to participate in the contest—a contest to highlight excellence in academics, the development in students of a sense of personal responsibility for their own education, and to showcase how graduating students were ready for college and career. The school winning the challenge would have the honor of President Obama delivering a commencement address at graduation.

While the White House did not select Clark, students and faculty were recognized throughout the country for their success. U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the consolation prize, delivered the commencement address for the class of 2010. The school received plaudits for the quality of its program, teachers and students. The success of Clark also brought attention to the growing Montessori movement in the United States in recent years, especially in the public realm. The school also highlights the modest but increasing efforts to bring Montessori education to the secondary level. In this sense, Clark serves as a symbol of three important Montessori trends in the United States in the past two decades: 1) Montessori schools of all types are increasing in number; 2) numerous school districts are creating public Montessori schools as part of their efforts to reform urban schools; and 3) Montessori is being extended to students in ages 12 to 18 and birth to 3.

Clark Montessori opened in 1994 in Cincinnati, a city in the American Midwest with a history of both public and private Montessori. The school began with only a seventh grade class

Right: Montessori Magnet School Classroom

Below: Students at the Annie Fisher Montessori School

that consisted of students from public and private Montessori schools from the greater Cincinnati metropolitan area. In each subsequent year an additional grade was added until the school's first class of high school seniors graduated in 2000.

This urban school mirrors the economic, racial and ethnic diversity of Cincinnati. A third of the school's students receive free or reduced meals, an indicator of poverty. 47% of students are African-American, 45% are Caucasian, and 8% are Asian, Hispanic, Native American or multi-racial. Remarkably, since that first graduating class, 97% of all Clark's graduates have attended university.

Clark was, and still is, a magnet school. Magnets came into existence in the 1960s as a method of bringing about desegregation to racially segregated school districts. The idea was that schools with innovative programs would attract white students to areas of a city that were populated predominantly by students of color. Beginning in the mid-1990s, policymakers acquired a renewed interest in magnet schools, and their similarly organized offspring charter schools, as a way to bring about school reform through school choice. Consequently, as magnet and charter schools acquired currency as a viable approach to school reform, public Montessori programs began to proliferate alongside other comprehensive reform models.

The greatest growth in public Montessori, however, is occurring at the elementary and primary levels. Montessori schools in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, illuminate this process. Hartford is an older industrial town famed for its former factories that built bicycles, typewriters, and the Colt 45 revolver. Today the city is known as the insurance capital of America. The poverty rate in Hartford, currently at 34%, is the highest of any city in the country; 92% of the city's children qualify for free or reduced meals and one in six of these children have an incarcerated parent. Hartford has the highest minority population (94%) of any public school district in New England. In sum, Hartford is a city in great economic distress with many children having unmet physical, psychological, and emotional needs. Amidst all of the human despair,

however, the two public, magnet Montessori schools in the city offer genuine hope to families and children.

The older of the two schools, the CREC Montessori Magnet School of Hartford (MMS), opened in 1992. The school functioned quietly until 1999 when it became a center of efforts to address the racial and economic isolation experienced by minority students in the city's school system. In 1999 the school opened under new administration in a new location. The revived and renovated MMS developed a nationally recognized Montessori program for children ages 3 to 12. Fifty percent of the school's 340 students come from Hartford and the other 50% of the student body are from 29 different, and more affluent, school districts in the Greater Hartford area. The school is located in a beautiful, modern campus on a 16 acre tract of land in downtown Hartford. The site, known as The Learning Corridor, is an urban redevelopment project that eliminated a rundown, desolate block frequented by gang members, drug dealers, and prostitutes. In addition to the Montessori Magnet School, The Learning Corridor is home to a Magnet Middle School, and two Greater Hartford Academies that teach high-level Math, Science, and Arts. It borders Trinity College, a small, urban, liberal arts college.

The recently opened Annie Fisher Montessori Magnet School is in its third year of existence. Created in part due to the success of MMS, and in part because the district superintendent, formerly of Cincinnati, was familiar with public Montessori schools, Annie Fisher is situated in northwest Hartford in a newly renovated building located next to a public housing project. The school is the highest performing elementary school in the Hartford Public Schools system, based on results from state-mandated tests of reading and math. It is anticipated that by the time the entering three and four year-old students reach age 12, they will have the option to continue their public Montessori School experience in an Erdkinder Program and, eventually, a Montessori High School in Hartford. Admission to the Montessori magnet schools is, and will continue to be, determined by a lottery system. Applicants for enrollment far outweigh those able to be admitted.

As promising as these portraits appear, the operation of Montessori schools in the public realm in the U. S. is still a tricky proposition. In addition to the usual goals of Montessori pedagogy, public schools are faced with meeting the demands of local, state, and national authorities. High stakes testing, mandated as part of federal educational policy in the Bush Administration and continuing under Obama, can distort both a school's mission and pedagogical practice as teachers and administrators may place achieving high test scores before creating normalized children.

Reading outside in the courtyard. A dry streambed serves to stimulate a child's imagination.

Schools in the private arena continue to prosper even in the current dire economy. Hartford, for example, also is home to nine independent, privately funded and operated Montessori schools. Both tuition and the quality of the Montessori programs offered at these schools vary greatly. The least expensive has an annual tuition of approximately $7,000. At the high end, tuition can run to $18,000 for a student in a full-day elementary program. The quality of teachers and their training also varies greatly. Some schools have only in-house, apprenticed teachers, who frequently diverge from Montessori pedagogy. Other schools pay strict attention to Montessori practice and have only highly trained, certified teachers on staff.

The Hartford case provides insight into Montessori education and the complex world of school governance in the United States, while highlighting differences in the public and private realms. The key point, though, is that Montessori programs are popular and growing in number, not only in Hartford but also in Cincinnati, Denver, Brooklyn, and cities large and small across the country. From one school in the United States in 1959, to 355 schools in 1970, to roughly 5000 schools today, the growth has been considerable.

The surge in Montessori is due to several factors. First, as evidenced by bulging waiting lists in urban magnet schools, many parents have become disenchanted with public schooling and are looking for a humane, yet challenging, alternative. Second, recent research into how children learn has confirmed the value of the Montessori approach. Parents feel comfortable with the goals and outcomes of Montessori education when there is a scientific stamp of approval attached. Finally, American urban school systems are frantically attempting to improve practice and outcomes while offering families a choice in options. The successes of Montessori schools in a few high profile locations have led to additional districts attempting to replicate their success. ■

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