NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

Braided Funding for Fully Implemented Montessori Early Learning

Key Points:

- Creating fully implemented Montessori programs in the public sector presents challenges because states and districts frequently lack funding to serve students younger than age five.
- Some states offer state-funded pre-K programs for three- and/or four-year-olds, but the availability of these programs varies widely.
- Some public Montessori programs charge tuition for three and four-year-olds to create mixed age primary classrooms.
- When establishing policies for how tuition-paying pre-K students will matriculate into the publicly funded program at age five, public Montessori programs should ensure their programs remain accessible to low-income families.

Multiage Classrooms and Fully Implemented Montessori

Multiage classrooms constitute a signature element of the Montessori Method. Grounded in the evidence-based concept that the early childhood is a period of rapid and consequential brain development, Montessori schools deliberately identify the beginning of school as age 3 rather than age 5. Moreover, the program emphasizes the development of core executive function, literacy, and social-emotional skills, which are strongly associated with opportunities to learn in complex environments characterized by high degrees of choice, self-direction, and voluntary social interaction. In high fidelity Montessori environments, classrooms are comprised of three year age spans, allowing each child the experience of being the youngest, middle, and oldest member of the community. The result of learning communities that are both stable and varied are children who demonstrate superior skills in executive functions, literacy, and social-emotional skills.²

While independent Montessori schools rarely have difficulty achieving this mix, public schools striving to offer a fully implemented Montessori program face challenges. State and local governments are only legally obligated to provide a free and appropriate public education from kindergarten through grade 12,³ which means school districts do not generally receive funding to serve children younger than age five.

Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education

While publicly funded early childhood or pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs do exist in some states, access to these programs varies widely by locale and student demographic. Public pre-K options tend to be either federal compensatory programs for low-income children, like Head Start and Title I preschool, or programs managed at the state or local level. Both state and federal programs tend to be targeted rather than universal, meaning that only certain populations of students are eligible for or encouraged to apply for the program.⁴

Nationwide, only 42% of four-year-olds and 15% of three-year-olds were enrolled in publicly funded preschool programs in 2014. Accessibility of public programs varies widely by state; only eleven states have public pre-K programs serving more than half of their four-year-olds, while ten states have no state pre-K programs at all. The District of Columbia served almost 99% of its resident four-year-olds in 2014, but Ohio, Nevada, Missouri, Alaska, Rhode Island, and Minnesota all served less than five percent of their four-year-olds.

For three year-olds, the picture is even bleaker. State pre-K for three-year-olds is unavailable in 24 states.⁷ States with pre-K programs serving at least some three- and four-year-olds are shaded yellow on the map below. States in orange serve only four-year-olds, while states with no shading have no state pre-K program at all.



Figure 1: Ages Served by State Pre-K Program, by State

Braided Funding

Public Montessori schools around the country have developed multiple strategies to create and fund multiage-appropriate primary classrooms. Some districts, such as Lexington 4 in South Carolina, earmark Title I funds to support their pre-K programs.⁸ Alder Montessori in Portland, Oregon, is a partnership between the local school district and local nonprofits, with over fifty percent of annual funding supplied by these nonprofits.⁹

In the absence of public or philanthropic funds, some public Montessori schools operate tuition-based preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds. These schools create multiage-appropriate primary classrooms by combining tuition-funded three- and four-year-olds with publicly funded five-year-olds. One such program is Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School in in St. Paul, Minnesota, which braids sliding-scale tuition fees for three- and four-year-olds with a charter school beginning at age five.¹⁰

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (Barnett et al., 2015), twelve states currently incorporate tuition into their funding model for their state pre-K programs. These states are shaded blue on the map below. An informal survey of members of the Montessori Public Policy Initiative (MPPI) listserv elicited information that public Montessori schools in several additional states also have successfully blended tuition and public funding to create mixed-age primary classrooms; these states are shaded red. In some cases, these tuition-funded preschool programs may be licensed and funded as a separate entity from the public school, even though the students are housed in the same building.

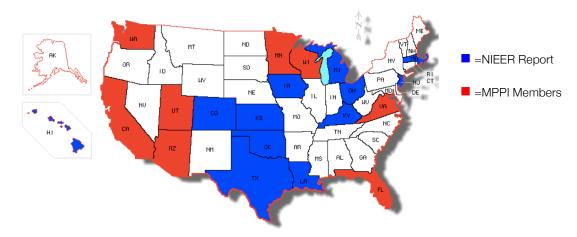


Figure 2: States Currently incorporating Tuition into their Funding model for Pre-K Programs

Matriculation into Elementary Programs

Because admission to public Montessori programs is often determined by lottery, the inclusion of tuition-paying pre-K students raises the question of what happens when these students become eligible for the publicly funded elementary school program, typically at age five or six. Admission-by-lottery schools must enter these tuition-paying students into the lottery for kindergarten slots along with students who would be new to the school. This means these students are not guaranteed a space in the program. Some states allow schools to provide these students with priority or a weighted entry in the lottery. Guidelines for schools receiving federal Charter School Program funds suggest that charter schools with tuition-based preschools programs hold their lotteries for elementary slots a few years early, "giving students who will enroll in the preschool program and those who will not an equal chance of receiving the opportunity to enroll in the charter school (elementary) program. Under this approach, the charter school would have an affirmative responsibility to inform prospective applicants that winning the lottery does not require them to enroll in the private preschool. Thus, any child selected through the lottery would be guaranteed a slot in kindergarten a few years later, whether or not he or she enrolls in the preschool program." Montessori schools that choose to implement a tuition-based program for three- and four-year-olds should carefully consider how to keep their public Montessori programs accessible to families who do not have the resources to participate in a tuition-based program.

Notes

__

¹ Lillard, A. S. (2005). *Montessori: The science behind the genius*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Montessori, M. (1967). *The absorbent mind*. New York, NY: Holt. (Original work published 1949). Rambusch, N. M. (1962). *Learning how to learn: An American approach to Montessori*. Baltimore, MD: Helicon.

² Lillard, 2005. Lillard, A. S. (2012). Preschool children's development in classic Montessori, supplemented Montessori, and conventional programs. *Journal of School Psychology*, *50*(3), 379-401. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2012.01.00.

Lillard, A., & Else-Quest, N. (2006). The early years: Evaluating Montessori education. *Science*, *313*, 1893–1894. doi: 10.1126/science.1132362.

Lillard, A. S., & Heise, M. J. (2016). An intervention study: Removing supplemented materials from Montessori classrooms associated with better child outcomes. *Journal of Montessori Research*, *2*(1), 16-26.

³ Hustedt, J. T., & Barnett, W. S. (2011). Financing early childhood education programs: State, federal, and local issues. *Educational Policy*, 25(1), 167-192. doi: 10.1177/0895904810386605

⁴ Hustedt & Barnett, 2011

⁵ Barnett, W. S., Carolina, M. E, Squires, J. H., Brown, K. C., & Horowitz, M. (2015). *The state of preschool 2014: State preschool yearbook*. Retrieved from the National Institute for Early Education Research: http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Yearbook2014_full3.pdf

⁶ Barnett et al., 2015

⁷ Barnett et al., 2015

⁸ Lexington 4 School District. (2015). *Title I newsletter 2015-2016*. Retrieved from http://ecc.lexington4.net/title-one

⁹ Frazier, L. (2015, October 20). Low-income families get free access to Montessori methods at new preschool. *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from http://www.oregonlive.com/education/index.ssf/2015/10/new_preschool_introduces_monte.html#incart_river home

¹⁰ Montessori Center of Minnesota. (2015). *Bold ideas: 2014-2015 annual report.* Retrieved from https://montessoricentermn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/MCM_AnnualReport_2014-15.pdf

¹¹ United States Department of Education. (2014). *Charter schools program Title V part B of the ESEA: Non-regulatory guidance.* Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/programs/charter/nonregulatory-guidance.html