

2007 Montessori Audit

River Valley Charter School

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The basic premise of all charter schools is simply this: that families should have free, public school options beyond what is offered in their local school district in traditional schools. Charter schools by definition are independent public schools of choice. They are funded by taxpayer money and are sponsored by local or state educational organizations which monitor their quality and integrity. Charter schools operate with varying degrees of autonomy in different states, but all have this in common: They are viable only so long as they are accountable, and part of that accountability process is a periodic audit. An assessment of any educational entity, charter or not, begins with an observation which is meant to provide the raw data to be interpreted for use in answering one fundamental question: Does the school do what it says it will be doing? In the case of charter schools, the question encompasses another facet and has a slightly altered timeframe imbedded in it. There is the assumption that the document in which the school "says" what it is doing is the charter itself. So, another way to phrase this fundamental question is, "Does the school do what it said it would do when the charter was written and approved?" In the case of River Valley Charter School, the answer is a resounding, "Yes!"

In the forward of his seminal work, Implementing Montessori Education in the Public Sector, editor David Kahn wrote, "No matter what language is chosen to describe Montessori, there is no substitute for visiting a good Montessori program for several days and observing the children interact with a scientifically prepared environment and with adults who are trained and experienced in working in that prepared environment." Those of us who have had the opportunity to participate in such programs in a variety of formats, (private, magnet and charter), have a tendency to reply, "Yes, but. . ." Those of us whose programs include the adolescent in our Montessori model bemoan the dearth of "scientific" materials in the environment, not to mention the wild goose chase in which we must often engage to find "trained and experienced" Montessori teachers to interpret the philosophy which Kahn states must remain

intact in order to achieve the "highest aspirations" of this relatively new initiative. Kahn acknowledges that in the public arena, "prevailing conditions are not always favorable to Montessori education," and admonishes us that it is when we "drift from Montessori goals" that the programs are diluted beyond recognition. River Valley Montessori Charter School suffers no such fate.

Throughout my visit, evidence of Dr. Montessori's influence was visible. From the bundled up Head of School greeting children in the cold as they arrived at school the first morning to the gracious offer to secure a recipe for pumpkin soup as I headed back to Maryland, the school and its staff embodied the spirit and heart of Montessori education as it applies not just to a learning environment, but to life. One does not have to see the pink tower or the racks and tubes being used to know that this is a school that cares about its community.

The American Montessori Society has outlined the characteristics of a successful Montessori school in the public sector, and RVCS closely follows the guidelines described in this outline. As stated previously, the particular challenge of finding Montessori trained secondary teachers is addressed with the implementation of both in-house staff development and significant emphasis on teachers availing themselves of staff development opportunities in the larger educational realm. All staff members are invited and encouraged to participate in local and national Montessori workshops, seminars and workshops. In addition, an ongoing dialogue with local schools fosters respect and understanding between RVCS staff and traditional educators. The result is an impressive rate of acceptance by selective schools for students completing eighth grade at RVCS.

One of the greatest challenges of a public Montessori program is meeting the standards and objectives of the local school system without allowing it to alter or water down the goals and objectives of its own philosophy. While pressure to achieve certain arbitrary scores on standardized tests is to be expected from the agencies administering those tests, a more subtle influence

can sometimes be sensed from some members of the parent community as well. At RVCS, highly structured parent education and well defined, clearly stated goals help refocus those whose desire to have the students score impressively on standardized tests might cause them to veer away from the vision and mission of the school. RVCS heads off such a possibility by having parents sign an agreement before registering their child, as part of the application process, which avoids any ambiguity about the school's purpose. Parents are asked to verify that they have read the charter (or excerpts from it) and that they understand the mission and educational philosophy of the school. Classroom observations are encouraged, as is participation in an information session. The Parent Agreement plainly states that the school follows the Montessori philosophy, that parents are expected to volunteer a certain number of hours every year, and that students are assessed upon entry and then annually to measure their academic progress. While few details are given, parents are encouraged to contact the office for additional information. This procedure is an indication of the school's adherence to the AMS' guideline to "seek parents who are informed about the nature of Montessori" and . . . "have the necessary commitment to the program."

Addition of the kinderhaus program has been an integral part of the growing success of RVCS. Two teachers and an assistant (as well as a Special Ed. assistant) guide thirty-two children whose enthusiasm for the Montessori materials is a pleasure to see. Puzzle maps seemed to be a favorite among the children, as were the binomial and trinomial cubes. (A few of these materials appear very well used, and could perhaps use a dab of touch-up paint over the summer.) The natural exuberance of children at this age made the pace of the morning seem a bit frenetic, but overall the message was clear that the students who begin their Montessori education in the kinderhaus will have a distinct advantage over those who enter RVCS later. One simple example I observed was the gentle reminder offered a girl who repeatedly stepped on other students' work rug. Far better to nip this tendency in the bud, while she is among the five

year olds, than to have to manage it next year in the 6-9 class. Ideally, a long range goal, however unlikely to be reached it seems right now, should include the implementation of a true primary class, for 3-6 year olds.

All of the observed classes at RVCS, including the Middle School, exemplified the cornerstones of Montessori philosophy. In fact, the Middle School students have certainly extended their understanding of Dr. Montessori's (and Mahatma Gandhi's) philosophy to incorporate the ideals expressed in the United Nations' Millennium Declaration. It was a privilege to observe the presentations about their UN experience, given by these young adults to students in the EL2 classes.

The Middle School instructors do an excellent job of providing rigorous and challenging course work while minimizing the competition and apathy so rampant in more traditional programs. Observing these students in both morning and afternoon classes, I saw adolescents who were committed and connected to the work they were doing, whether it was geometry, language arts or lunch.

RVCS has expanded its use of the facility to provide music and PE space, and has maximized the effectiveness of the Middle School area. It is clear from the design and management of this area that the adults involved are particularly knowledgeable about the needs of young teenagers. Lots of open space, an appropriate amount of more cozy space, and good sight lines throughout, give the Middle School students the opportunity to maximize their social development under the watchful eyes of the staff.

Other, older areas of the building have been well maintained, though as is always the case in Montessori schools, more storage space would be welcome. Most of the elementary classes have found ways to contain all of the "stuff" in a way that does not detract from the overall visual appeal of the rooms. In the EL2 area, where the children are no longer in the stage of development that craves order, the teachers and students seem to have reached a mutually agreeable compromise that permits some degree of disarray while children are

working, but requires straightening things up prior to transitions. Ongoing monitoring of this concession is important, however, as it does not take long for some children to ignore (as if they're invisible) materials they used just moments before. In most classrooms, there will be a few students for whom the clutter is irritating, and it is essential to keep them from becoming the "cleaning crew" by default. Management of this environmental issue is critical, as it can sometimes spark disproportionate upset if ignored.

Another environmental issue, this one in the EL1 wing, is the dimming of lights, which seemed to be the preferred mode in several classes. While I understand the concerns about the fluorescent lighting, I recommend looking into alternative bulb possibilities, such as full spectrum lights, which discourage mushroom growth. More lamps with incandescent bulbs would also help brighten the many shadowed corners. Several halogen lamps were in use, and it is recommended that bulb guard grids be installed on them.

Because I did not always match faces to names very quickly, I did not realize that in one classroom I observed, the teacher was not present when I arrived. I did however find that the noise level was noticeably higher in this room than in the others, to the point that a girl stated loudly, "It's way too loud in here!" She was ignored by all. I then overheard an unfortunate exchange among three boys, including the comment, "Let's play a new game. The game is called "Don't Play With Greg." Six boys were clustered noisily around the computer during most of my observation, and I was almost afraid to peek at the monitor to see what they were so excited about. (I did eventually peek; it wasn't anything inappropriate.) Only one student was using Montessori materials on a work rug on the floor, a girl who took out a stamp game for a while. Two children were teaching each other karate poses and more than one student ran across the room. All of this ceased when the teacher returned but the fact that the paraprofessional was unable to maintain a safe and orderly environment while the teacher was away is a concern. I also think it was especially conspicuous because it was such a dramatic contrast to the other classes. Of

course, any classroom can have an hour like that on occasion, and I regret I did not get a chance to return to that particular class the next day to see if what I observed was an anomaly or an ongoing issue.

In another E1 classroom, I saw an interaction that warmed my heart. A young child tripped slightly on her way across the room, spilling the entire basket of plastic counters she had been carrying. The noise was quite startling in an otherwise quiet room and the immediate silence following it was eerie. A moment later though, a boy working nearby got up from his table and said, "I'll help you," without making a big production about it, and a moment after that, the room was once again humming with the activity, focus and concentration for which Montessori classrooms are famous.

It being January, it was not surprising to find many children with runny noses. It is recommended that a review of the lessons on proper use and disposal of tissues be provided. Frequent hand washing, preferably with soap and water but otherwise with hand sanitizer, should be strongly encouraged. Otherwise, a significant drop in attendance rates is likely to occur every winter.

Special Education is provided to qualified students at RVCS, through use of both mainstreaming and pull-out programs. Implementation of Individual Educational Plans and Section 504 Plans is equivalent to that of the traditional public schools. However, due to multi-age grouping and freedom of movement in a Montessori classroom, far less emphasis is placed on children leaving the room for Special Ed. services or having a special assistant come into the room. These occurrences are seamlessly blended into the work time.

Technology is an integral part of the work done in every classroom at RVCS. Children seemed comfortable, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the computers in general and PowerPoint in particular. Several impressive presentations were observed during my visit.

In every classroom I saw evidence of ongoing, authentic assessment taking place, in the form of observation, record keeping and even the gathering of specific materials for later use in a portfolio. Not evident at all were any

dilution, alteration, or modification of the Montessori scope and sequence to accommodate the state mandated standardized assessment which was to take place in the spring.

During conversation with the chair of the Board of Trustees, discussion about the role of Board members was initiated. It is clear that appropriate guidelines are followed, with the Board primarily engaged in broad policy making and oversight, not day to day micromanagement of the school. The Board has been a stabilizing influence on the school over the years, and has taken pains to see that continue as the natural attrition of founders occurs.

The governance structure at River Valley Charter School reflects its core values, as does the staff. The Montessori curriculum supports the development of integrity, respect, responsibility, compassion, perseverance, tolerance and independence. The community works collaboratively with the administration and teachers to ensure that these values are evident in the daily practice of all stakeholders at the school.