

River Valley Charter School
Newburyport, MA

Annual Montessori Audit
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“River Valley Charter School (RVCS) is a public Montessori school for children ages 5 – 14. The tuition-free charter school is located in Newburyport, Massachusetts, serving 288 children in grades K-8 from Amesbury, Newbury, Newburyport, Salisbury, and West Newbury. RVCS provides a distinct choice among local school districts, with a program that is holistic, child-centered, interdisciplinary, academically challenging, and interwoven with the rich and varied resources of the Merrimack River Valley region. Admission is by lottery and is open to all Massachusetts residents with preference given to children within the region and their siblings. The school was founded in 1999 by local parents and was the first Montessori charter school in Massachusetts.”

-River Valley Charter School

I became connected to River Valley Charter School and Dr. Dale Bishop via the Internet in the fall of 2007. I had just accepted a job as the Montessori Program Specialist for Holliston Public Schools. The Montessori program in Holliston was in jeopardy of closing after 25 years of educating children in the public school sector, due to the pressures of tougher standards and increased standardized testing. Administrators were hiring me to try to turn the program around. My first call to action was to research the four other Public Montessori programs in Massachusetts, examining their programs and their level of success. River Valley Charter School appeared to be one of the strongest public programs around and I knew it was important for me to connect with the administration, in hopes they would share their secrets of success. Within one day of my email, Dr. Dale Bishop contacted me at work. He was extremely welcoming and encouraged me to come spend the day at RVCS.

Dr. Bishop provided me a full day of observation in all the classrooms, from Kinderhaus to Middle school, and shared the school’s correlated curriculum, assessment plans, and current annual report. Since that visit, Dr. Bishop and staff have organized a professional development day for all the Montessori Public Schools of Massachusetts. I have also noticed that several members of the RVCS faculty have presented and will be presenting workshops at local and state Montessori conferences.

RVCS and Dr. Dale Bishop took Holliston’s program under their wing, providing information and help where needed. They are faithful to the Montessori philosophy and programming, while successfully meeting state demands and standards. This program is an exemplary model for other Montessori programs in the public sector as well as for other charter schools.

I feel privileged to have been asked to perform the annual Montessori audit based on the *Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public Sector*. The American Montessori Society and several other reputable Montessori organizations have endorsed this document. These essential elements are the standards I used during my two visits to RVCS. My visits included observations in all classrooms, with a focus on the Elementary 1 (E1) and 2 (E2) classes, as well as interviews with E1 teachers and the administrative team consisting of Dr. Bishop, Ann Mooney, and Lisa Camp.

Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public Sector

MONTESSORI TEACHERS

1. Employ Montessori teachers who have Montessori credentials for the levels they teach.

100% of the current River Valley Charter School (RVCS) Elementary 1 (E1) and Elementary 2 (E2) lead teachers hold Montessori credentials or are being trained for the levels they teach. The school requires all lead teachers to either be certified or enrolled in a Montessori training program. All teachers are also Massachusetts State certified and most hold Masters degrees as well.

2. Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers.

The administration at RVCS employs formal and informal teacher recruiting.

Informally, RVCS strives to provide a collegial working environment where teachers feel supported and enjoy teaching. This produces a strong professional community, which leads to high faculty morale and a long-term staff retention rate. There has been very little teacher turnover at RVCS. Many times, an open position is filled through staff recommendations. Administrators work hard to hire teachers for all positions who share the same educational philosophy. They encourage prospective teachers to join the RVCS teaching staff when there is an opening and then supply them the education and training as needed to step into higher-level positions.

Formally, RVCS recruits and advertises positions on the websites of the American Montessori Society (AMS), Association Montessori International (AMI), and North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA). They also employ interns and student teachers from Harvard University and Salem State College and partner with many local colleges such as Lesley University and Boston College. Networking through these reputable institutions and as a member of the Montessori Schools of Massachusetts (MSM), RVCS maintains on-going, open recruitment.

3. Budget for future Montessori teacher education for non-Montessori credentialed teachers.

The school's annual budget provides finances for Montessori training, conferences, and professional development. Administrators control the budget and anticipate the funds required to further the staff's educational training. In addition, RVCS has received federal grant money to be used for professional development.

4. Provide professional Montessori in-service by experienced credentialed Montessori educators.

All RVCS teachers meet four times a month for in-service training and grade level curriculum work. These sessions provide in-service time to cover any topic that meets professional development needs and/or the needs of the student population.

In addition, these meetings provide time for Professional Study Groups. Every year, the staff and curriculum coordinator, Lisa Camp, review the Montessori curriculum as well as the Massachusetts frameworks, and select a focus area for the year. Each Study Group, or team, then concentrates on aligning the Mass frameworks in that focus area to Montessori lessons and

curriculum, creating new materials, resources, and lessons to spark enthusiasm and meet the needs of all children. Cultural studies are the focus for the 2007-2008 school year. E1 teachers are currently concentrating on United States history. They are creating materials that focus on an American inventors time line, which will be paired with primary sources for student research. E2 teachers are using themes from the Montessori curriculum, human tendencies and fundamental human needs, to create a series of resource bases and projects for students. Migration, resources, and shelters are all common threads that link human beings together and will be studied in depth. The units will cover the three-year cycles and the Mass Frameworks, while providing for diverse skill levels. RVCS will be hosting an entire day of professional development for the other five Montessori Public Schools of Massachusetts on Feb. 13, 2008. The morning session will enable teachers and administrators from the visiting schools to observe the K-8 classrooms. The afternoon session will consist of sharing and discussing “best practices” in education.

5. Contract for on-going internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or follow up to Montessori teacher education.

Outside feedback through audits, reports and observations such as this, *Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public Sector*, provide significant information for RVCS. Additionally, the school employs external Montessori consultation and follows up teacher education when needed. Last year, the River Valley staff attended the AMS national conference in New York City and the MSM conference, which provided external teacher education and consultation.

6. Employ one paraprofessional per classroom, each having received Montessori orientation for that role.

Every E1 and E2 classroom at RVCS employs one assistant teacher. Each assistant teacher is provided a Montessori overview and continual internal training through RVCS. Opportunities to attend Montessori conferences and workshops for professional development are also made available to assistant teachers.

ADMINISTRATION

1. Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator.

Lisa Camp is currently RVCS’s curriculum coordinator. She has been involved in Montessori education for 27 years, having taught all levels. This is her third year as the curriculum coordinator for RVCS. She is American Montessori Society (AMS) and North American Montessori Teachers’ Association (NAMTA) trained and holds a Masters in Education. The E1 teachers speak highly of Ms. Camp’s work, reporting that they feel especially supported in the areas of curriculum and instruction and the prepared environment.

2. Employ a building principal/educational leader who has knowledge of Montessori principles and curriculum through Montessori coursework, Montessori Administrator Credential and or/annual conference exposure.

RVCS has an exceptionally strong directors’ team. Dr. Dale Bishop is the school director and Ann Mooney is the assistant director. Dr. Bishop has been involved in public education since 1974. He began his career teaching middle and high school students, advancing to assistant

principal, principal, and assistant superintendent. He holds an M. Ed. in School Administration and a Ph. D. in Curriculum, Instruction and Administration from Boston College, as well as Superintendent and Principal Massachusetts certifications. This is Dr. Bishop's seventh year as Director of RVCS. Not only does Dr. Bishop provide a strong background in public school administration, he also embraces the Montessori philosophy and practices that define this charter. Additionally, he has completed NAMTA Montessori Leadership Training and NAMTA Adolescent Program Training.

Assistant director, Ann Mooney is certified in ages 3 - 12, earning AMS and AMI certifications. She has completed the NAMTA middle school training and fulfilled her administrators' training at Loyola College in Maryland and with ISM in Washington.

Dr. Bishop and Ms. Mooney complement each other nicely, with a good balance of Montessori and public/charter school education and knowledge. Both attend Montessori conferences and workshops on a regular basis.

3. Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction even with changes in administration staff.

RVCS's mission is to provide a rigorous academic program based on Montessori philosophy. This commitment is written directly in the school's charter. The faculty of River Valley consists of strong, dedicated, and highly qualified Montessori trained teachers. This, paired with countless opportunities for professional development, fortifies the school and its commitment to Montessori education. The curriculum coordinator's job description also ensures that the commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction will not be compromised if changes in administration occur.

4. Sustain the support of the central administration through high profile communications about program development.

Dissemination of information about River Valley's program and practices is an essential piece of their charter. They have already become a model in Massachusetts for public Montessori education. In 2004, RVCS received a grant that allowed them to create a video of 3 public Montessori schools. Administration and staff continue to share this video with parents, schools, administrators, and visitors.

RVCS faculty also share pedagogy and program development by presenting at local, state, and national conferences. In February, RVCS will be hosting an entire day of professional development for the other five Montessori Public Schools of Massachusetts. The morning session will enable teachers and administrators from the visiting schools to observe the K-8 classrooms. The afternoon session will consist of sharing and discussing "best practices" in education.

The school provides a very welcoming environment for visitors (as in my case). RVCS opens their doors to the public, allowing observation, and sharing of program highlights.

5. Recognize that the best implementation process is to begin with the 3-6 age groups and add one age at a time for a gradual progression.

RVCS recognizes the best way to build a solid program is to begin with a mixed 3-6 age group. Unfortunately, due to the limitations and restrictions on state and town funding for early childhood programs, River Valley was unable to begin with the 3-6 grouping.

The school launched as an E1 (6-9) program, adding 4th and 5th grades over the next two years. Gradually, classes were added one age at a time until the school reached 8th grade in 2002-2003. In 2003-2004, RVCS added the Kinderhaus program for kindergarteners. River Valley looks forward to the day when early childhood funds will be available to charter schools. Adding the 3 and 4 year olds to the already established Kinderhaus, will complete the program.

RECRUITMENT / PARENT EDUCATION

1. Provide Montessori parent education programs that promote understanding of Montessori principles and curriculum.

Parent education programs and curriculum nights are continually offered through RVCS. They are organized and presented by faculty, administration, outside speakers, and even parent groups. For example, teachers have organized and presented a parent math night, while Lisa Camp, the curriculum coordinator, has provided a workshop regarding assessments. Additionally, River Valley's parent organization has assembled a speaker series, highlighting experts such as Richard Lane and Ed Garrity. These topics are just a few that have been offered recently. Programs like this help parents better understand how their children are educated using the Montessori philosophy. This strengthens the parent-teacher-student partnerships, which in turn increases the opportunity for student success.

2. Develop an admission process that informs parents about the nature of Montessori and seeks the necessary commitment to the program.

In January, RVCS holds Open Houses for parents of children applying to the school. This is a perfect opportunity for families to become acquainted with the Montessori philosophy and curriculum and ask questions they may have. These sessions are important so attendees can be sure this is a school program they can embrace. Before attending RVCS, parents must also observe in a classroom and sign a waiver stating that they understand the school's mission and dedication to the Montessori philosophy and that they commit to the program.

CURRICULUM / ENVIRONMENT

1. Offer a full complement of Montessori materials (about \$25,000 per classroom) purchased from Montessori dealers.

In 1999, when RVCS opened its doors, each classroom was supplied a full complement of specifically designed Montessori materials. These materials were purchased from the most reputable Montessori dealers, such as Nienhuis, Bruins, Gonzagaretti, and Montessori Services. The school budgets money to maintain this inventory as well as acquire new materials.

2. Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori "prepared environment" principles.

RVCS classrooms have been designed to meet the needs of all students and to encourage independent learning and exploration. Each E1 and E2 classroom is unique and possesses its own identity. All the elementary rooms are spacious, bright, and aesthetically pleasing. Maps, time lines, and paintings beautify the walls, along with colorful flags and peace symbols. Clean,

organized shelves furnished with beautiful, sequenced Montessori materials provide for exploration and curiosity. The rooms include living plants and animals and one even displays a hive suspended from the ceiling. The furniture design allows children the space they need to physically move around the room, confer with small groups of classmates, or work individually in a cozy nook. The E2 rooms were especially welcoming and calming, featuring unique lighting, comfortable armchairs, modern metal stools, and homemade projects. A few classrooms could use doors on their teacher storage shelves, which will enhance the organization, control, and beauty of that section in the room.

The classroom curriculum partners program opens the door of education to the environment and the world, which in turn develops into a prepared environment for students. This program provides real life experiences for RVCS students, allowing the development of critical and creative thinking and problem solving skills, while connecting them to the local Merrimack region. Raising salmon eggs to release in the wild, designing “quests” to explore Old Town Hill, planting trees along the main streets of Newburyport, and identifying and reporting sightings of birds to Massachusetts Audubon Society are just a few examples of these amazing partnerships, which open up the world to the students at River Valley.

3. Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3 hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal.

All classrooms at RVCS provide uninterrupted daily work periods. The E1 and E2 classes receive a three-hour block of time in the morning, that allows students the time they need to concentrate on their work without interruption. This schedule provides a consistent, dependable routine for students, allowing the opportunity for a variety of work choices.

4. Integrate specialty programs (music, art, physical education, etc.) around the uninterrupted work periods.

All specialty programs, such as music, art, and physical education are only offered to E1 and E2 classes in the afternoons. This allows for a three-hour uninterrupted work period each morning.

5. Apply the appropriate multi-age groupings: 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, and 12-15, necessary for the diversity, flexibility, and reduced competition integral to Montessori.

RVCS incorporates all the appropriate multi-age groupings that are recommended and integral to Montessori education, with the exception of 3-6. For this group, all that is available is the Kinderhaus program for 5-year-olds, due to lack of state funding for younger children. All the necessary components vital to the Montessori philosophy are maintained in these groupings.

ASSESSMENT

1. Use a process of reporting student progress that is compatible with Montessori and includes parent conferences and authentic assessment tools such as observation, portfolio, performance assessment with rubric, etc.

RVCS created a comprehensive toolset that defines their cycle of assessment.

Observation is a cornerstone of Montessori education, as the teacher “follows the child”. Daily teacher observation and recordings are used to track student’s daily classroom work and progress

and help create an Individual Learning Plan (ILP's). The learning plan is an individualized plan that focuses on student goals and helps to provide direction for future lessons. Teachers monitor student progress with the help of Curriculum Progress Tracking Sheets. These allow teachers to report what Montessori lessons and concepts they have introduced and how the child is progressing. These sheets are used for three years and are color coded for ease of quick assessment.

The portfolio system is the primary means of authentic assessment, as developmentally appropriate. Teachers and/or students carefully select samples of student work for the portfolio. The cross-section of work shows mastery of standards, lessons, and concepts, while providing a visual record of progress. The portfolios are shared with parents during conferences. Progress reports with rubric scoring, as well as a narrative written by the lead teacher, are completed and sent home three times a year.

2. Implement State mandated assessments in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised.

RVCS has successfully matched the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks to the Montessori curriculum and lessons. These are available for public viewing on the RVCS website. The assessment toolset described above, proves that state mandates have not compromised the Montessori program, and yet provides significant accountability.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Budget for continuing education through Montessori workshops and conferences.

The school's annual budget provides finances for Montessori training, conferences, and professional development. Administrators control the budget and place a strong emphasis on continuing education through workshops and conferences. In the past, RVCS has received federal grant money to be used for professional development.

This past year, 16 members of RVCS' faculty attended and participated in the AMS national conference.

2. Maintain membership with one or more of the professional Montessori organizations and seek Montessori accreditation to assure consistent quality.

RVCS maintains membership with numerous professional Montessori organizations such as American Montessori Society (AMS), Association Montessori International (AMI), and North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA).

It is also a member school of Montessori Schools of Massachusetts and the Kinderhaus is NAEYC and Essex County AEYC accredited.