

River Valley Charter Public School ~ Montessori Audit



Elizabeth Slade
New View Montessori Consultancy
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Montessori Audit Report

School: River Valley Charter School				Date: February 2011	
Head of School: Jeanne Schultz		Enrollment: 288			
Classrooms	K: 1	EI: 4	EII: 4	MS: 5	Total: 14

Introduction:

The River Valley Charter School is a public Montessori school offering a full day Kindergarten program, 4 Elementary I classes, 4 Elementary II classes and a Middle School with four core areas of instruction. Their maximum enrollment is 288 students and they hold an annual lottery to fill any openings.

Process:

Several tools were used to review the River Valley Charter School's current practices. The first was also used for your last audit and is a well-known document collaboratively drafted and endorsed in the late 1990s by The American Montessori Society, the Association Montessori Internationale, the North American Montessori Teachers' Association, Montessori Educational Programs International, and the Southwestern Montessori Training Center. ***Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector*** is widely used to assess the fidelity of Public Montessori programs to their roots.

In order to complete the Essential Elements analysis the following school documents were reviewed: The River Valley Charter School Annual Report, RVCS Parent Handbook, River Valley Charter School Faculty Handbook, River Valley Charter School Application for Renewal, River Valley Charter School Accountability Plan, River Valley Staff list and credentials, River Valley Toolset Cycle of Assessment, Curriculum Alignment documentation, Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan, River Valley Charter School Professional Development spending July 2010 through June 2011, Student Portfolios, Progress Reports, and some teachers' lesson plans/schedules.

During on-site visits all classrooms were visited at least once, including Art and Music. A second tool was used during these observations as a way of collecting an overall picture of the classrooms. It was a list of Montessori guidelines developed by Public Montessori specialists in Springfield during the crafting of two Public Montessori programs. ***Montessori Classroom Guidelines*** is intended as an internal evaluation tool and a copy is attached for your review and future use. The "Evaluation Key" from your Progress Report was used to show the results (NC=Not Consistently, G=Generally, C=Consistently) at each level.

Another Montessori evaluation tool used is the ***Work Engagement Observation***. Its purpose is to do a quick evaluation of student engagement and to review Montessori materials in use. Section One is a snapshot count of what students are doing. It is tallied twice in each classroom visit- at the start of the observation and at the close. The numbers reported below are an average of both within all classes at that level. Section Two indicates materials in use during the 30 minute observation and gives a picture of what Montessori materials were being used at each level on a particular day. This form was not used to evaluate Middle School.

An important part of the process was open discussions with various groups- Kinderhaus & Elementary One, Elementary Two, Middle School and Parents. The question asked to promote conversation was “What would move this school from great to greater?” People had the opportunity to think and talk about where the school is right now, and what are the growing edges to focus on next.

Results:

Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector

Area	Component	✓	Notes
Montessori Teachers	Employ Montessori teachers who have Montessori credentials for the levels they teach.	✓	All but one of the teachers have their Montessori credential. That teacher is currently in Montessori training.
	Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers.	✓	The River Valley Charter School website is used to keep an active recruitment going.
	Budget for future Montessori teacher education for non Montessori-credentialed teachers.	✓	Currently ¾ of the PD budget for course work went towards Montessori training.
	Provide professional Montessori in-service by experienced credentialed Montessori educators.		This is an area of growth for River Valley. Beyond regular team meetings and work with in-house credentialed educators, no whole school Montessori professional development was done in the last year.
	Contract for on-going internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or professional support as a follow up to Montessori teacher education.	✓	This Audit was performed by an external Montessori consultant. Additional professional support as follow up to Montessori training is done in-house by Germaine Koomen.
	Employ one paraprofessional per classroom, each having received Montessori orientation for that role.	✓	All classrooms have either two lead teachers or a lead teacher and a paraprofessional.
Administration	Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator.	✓	RVC currently employs an experienced Montessori specialist as an Elementary coordinator.
	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.	✓	The new Head of school, Jeanne Schultz has attended a Montessori overview at Lexington Montessori and various Montessori conferences.
	Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction even with changes in administrative staff.	✓	The Administration at River Valley changed last year without change to their commitment to the Montessori curriculum.
	Sustain the support of the central administration through high profile communications about program development.	✓	The Accountability Plan for the school, as well as the most recent Application for Charter Renewal both inform central administration about program development.
	Recognize that the best implementation process is to begin with the 2.5-6 age group and add one age at a time for a gradual progression.		While the recognition of the importance of the multi-age program is there, the regulations of the charter defines them as a K-8 school and therefore RVC currently has only 5 year olds in its K program.

Recruitment/ Parent Education	Provide Montessori parent education programs that promote understanding of Montessori principles and curriculum.	✓	The Parent Handbook devotes several pages to an overview & introduction to the philosophy. The year begins with an Open House for parent education and is followed up differently each year.
	Develop an admission process that informs parents about the nature of Montessori and seeks the necessary commitment to the program	✓	The admission process begins with an Open Enrollment meeting offered to all interested parties in the community and followed up with an Open House welcoming new families. The following fall there is an Open Classroom Night for parents and children.
Curriculum/ Environment	Offer a full complement of Montessori materials purchased from Montessori dealers.	✓	Montessori materials were available to students in all classrooms with amounts varying from room to room.
	Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori "prepared environment" principles	✓	All classrooms had ample space with many beautiful prepared environments including plants and animals.
	Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3-hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal.	✓	Every classroom had at least a 90-minute work cycle, with most extending longer depending on the day.
	Integrate specialty programs (music, art, physical education, etc.) around the uninterrupted work periods.	✓	Through creative scheduling this goal was achieved.
	Apply the appropriate multi-age groupings: 2.5-6, 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-18 necessary for the diversity, flexibility, and reduced competition integral to Montessori.		RVC currently has only 5-year-olds in its Kinderhaus program as a result of the regulations of the charter, which defines them as a K-8 school.
Assessment	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.	✓	There are Progress Reports specific to each level, with a teacher comment section that varies in style and length. Student portfolios are used as an authentic assessment tool and also vary from class to class. Parent conferences occur regularly.
	Implement state-mandated assessments in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised.	✓	RVC has an alignment document to guide their state-mandated curriculum and uses the MCAS as their mandated assessment tool.
Professional Development	Budget for continuing education through Montessori workshops and conferences.	✓	Last year many RVC teachers attended the national AMS conference in Boston. This year approximately 9% of the budget for workshops and conferences is allotted for Montessori Professional Development. 11 teachers attended the Montessori Schools of Massachusetts conference in January 2011.
	Maintain membership with one or more of the professional Montessori organizations and seek Montessori accreditation to assure consistent quality.	✓	RVC is a member of the American Montessori Society and the Montessori Schools of Massachusetts.

Montessori Classroom Guidelines

NC=Not Consistently, G=Generally, C=Consistently

	Beauty & Order	Procedures & Routines	Grace & Courtesy	Work Habits	Instructional Environment	Instructional Approach
K	C	C	G	G	C	C
E1	G	C	G	G	G	NC
E2	G	C	C	G	G	NC
MS	G	C	C	G	NA	NC

These represent a snap shot of a day in January. They are also averaged across the classrooms, so with the exception of Kinderhaus, represent four classrooms. Individual classrooms may have had more consistency in certain areas, but this is a reflection of the overall level.

Work Engagement Observation

1. Work Engagement of Students:

	Engaging in work	Using work as a prop	Choosing work	Receiving help or in a lesson	Wandering	Behaving disruptively
K	54%	8%	16%	19%	3%	0%
E1	33%	28%	21%	14%	4%	0%
E2	42%	10%	6%	35%	7%	0%

2. Work on Montessori Materials observed:

	Math	Language	Other: Cultural, Prac Life, Sensorial
K	Snake Game, Teens Board, 100's Board, Short chains	Moveable Alphabet, Word Matching, Research, Initial letter sounds	Puzzle Maps, Spooning, Pouring, Tongs, Table Washing, Cylinder Blocks,
E1	Stamp Game, Addition Strip Board, Checkerboard, Bead Frame, Golden Beads, Snake Game	Word Study Cards, Preposition Grammar Box,	Puzzle Maps, Pin Map, Shell Classification, Reptile Research, Human Body Nomenclature
E2	Geometric Cabinet, Binomials with Bead Bars		

These numbers represent an average across the levels, looking at student engagement and use of Montessori materials on only one day. They can be used as point of discussion, for teams to talk about how to diversify lessons and to increase student engagement in learning.

Meetings:

Kinderhaus & Elementary One

- More unified Cultural work perhaps resulting in assemblies. More assemblies in general as an opportunity to come together and celebrate community.
- Consistent preparation of the third years for their step up into Elementary 2.
- Creating an Elementary 1 environment that is set up for students who have only had one previous year of Montessori.
- Communication between the levels.
- Review the 'lost time' in the fall that goes into assessing each child to improve the process.
- Montessori-ize the standards- consider benchmarks for each level aligned with the standards, yet focused on Montessori academic development.
- Creation of a tighter, more effective Early Intervention Process by enhancing or revamping the current Child Study Team.

Elementary Two

- Connection between the levels – faculty connections as well as student connections to enhance the fluidity for students moving up through the school.
- Greater use of small group lessons to enhance student learning.
- Assemblies- the creation of school customs around assemblies with perhaps Middle School students designing and leading them.
- Greater connection to Kinderhaus.
- How to balance the demands of the state with the desire to implement a pure Montessori curriculum

Middle School

- Authentic Montessori -how to develop and maintain a true Erd Kinder program? Start a business, connect to a farm, serve student cooked meals in formal dining style
- In order to realize the vision there needs to be: transportation, kitchen, washer & dryer
- Discussion of Immersion days
- Interconnection between the levels
- Montessori work cycle in Middle school
- Revamping the schedule to avoid having specials so early disrupting the work cycle.
- Review of the students' transition out into the world
- Professional development connections

Parents:

- Developing a stronger system for recruiting trained Montessori teachers. Networking with other Montessori schools and training centers to maintain high quality teachers.
- Providing support for staff to maintain teacher stability and longevity- funds for professional development, appreciation events etc.
- Improving dissemination of the Montessori mission into the community.
- Creating a Parent Education arrangement that goes beyond Open House and is consistent from year to year. One year the school did the 'Silent Journey'- consider revitalizing. How to offer more opportunities for parents to learn about Montessori and get the word out so they're well attended.
- Develop support for students changing levels and for parents to understand. Perhaps a meeting to give an overview – here's what the next level is about, here's what the Progress Report looks like...etc.
- Continuity and academic consistency from class to class at the same level. Are teachers observed and evaluated?

Commendations:

- **Environment** is one of the key aspects of a Montessori program and is seen as an integral part of the students' education. River Valley has a lovely, warm feeling throughout. Spaces are clean, organized and welcoming. Parents, children and staff all seem to feel at home in the school, with a positive and happy countenance. The children clearly owned the space offering unsolicited directions or assistance as hosts and hostesses of the building.
- Another essential aspect of a Montessori program is the trained guide who holds a deep understanding of the mission. All of the classrooms in the school are led by teachers with or in **Montessori training**, the majority who have been at the school for more than three years. In addition they all have an assistant teacher or a co-teacher working with them full time.
- Dr. Montessori describes in her writing a process a child goes through called "normalization." A "**normalized**" classroom environment then is one where all or most of the children have come to a place of self-regulation with a focus on learning. This is a great achievement for any classroom or any school. Throughout each classroom visit it was evident that River Valley has reached normalization within the classrooms and throughout the school as a whole. There were no students who were intentionally disruptive to the classroom, with a majority focused on learning.
- All human beings have a need and a tendency towards order and Montessori schools respect and reflect this need through the creation of a predictable and established routine. This keeps the emphasis on the learning and student energy focused on solving academic problems instead of environmental problems. **Procedures and routines** of the school, as well as in each class room were clearly understood and embedded into daily living. The students knew and followed them without reminders from adults, often reminding one another.
- The value on **the Arts** is apparent with beautiful spaces for Art and Music as well as high quality instruction.

- It is evident that significant resources have been invested in **supporting struggling students**. Support is available at each level in both math and literacy, as well as a full time school counselor and a full special education staff.
- **Parents** are very happy with the school and the quality of education their children are receiving. They appreciate the school's intimate climate and that their children are known and cared for at River Valley.

Recommendations:

- **Observation** is a foundational practice in the Montessori Method. Dr. Montessori, with her background as a scientific observer, created an elegant form of assessment within the Montessori classroom by insisting her teachers observe children at work. There should be an adult sized chair in every classroom that is designated as the 'Observation Chair' where teachers observe their students regularly. An important rhythm in the Montessori classroom is: Present, Circulate, Observe. Following this cycle ensures that teachers include observation as part of their daily work.
- The core Montessori curriculum in Elementary is the **Cosmic Education** curriculum written by Dr. Montessori and adapted over the years to provide students with an invitation to explore deeply all subject areas. It will be important for the school to revitalize this curriculum within the Elementary classrooms, perhaps through professional development opportunities for teachers or coaching support. In addition, a 'kit' should be assembled for the first "Great Lesson" as it requires many science materials. This is another way to support the teachers in giving this lesson every fall.
- The **Montessori materials** were developed to entice the child to explore and to provide them with opportunities to come to their own understanding of abstract concepts in what Dr. Montessori termed the "Ah-ha" moment. The variety of materials presented in each classroom directly contributes to the number of authentic student realizations and student engagement in learning. This is an area of growth for River Valley. Ideas: bring some materials out of storage, rejuvenate your weekly lessons with materials you see are not in use in your classroom, spend ten minutes in each team meeting to have someone present a material for discussion, use your Montessori resource people to walk you through a material you're unsure of using. Boldly use Montessori materials to teach every part of the curriculum.
- **Consistency** at each level and between the levels was a theme that ran throughout the meetings with the different groups. Consider having teams develop systems that can support this at each level, for example determining a system for creating student portfolios, or noting teacher observations, or arranging the narrative portion of the student Progress Report. One way to address this issue as a larger topic would be to begin to create 'Exit Goals' for each level. These goals could then be reviewed in vertical teams, and even shared with parents. This work will benefit children moving levels to feel prepared and ready for their next step and help parents to more deeply understand the arc of the curriculum.
- **Montessori Professional Development** is essential for the on-going growth of the teachers. Some topic suggestions are: The Power of Observation, Cosmic Education – an overview and refresher course, Practical Life at all levels. These topics would be good for the whole staff and could be a unifying experience that would address the universal desire for more overlap between the levels.