



The River Valley Charter School is a public Montessori school offering a full day Kindergarten program four Elementary 1 classes, four Elementary 2 classes and a Middle School with four core areas of instruction. RVCS offers a high functioning Montessori program for children 5 to 14 years old that happens to be a public school as well. Over the course of these two days, many strengths were revealed.

Classroom Environments

The faculty has created prepared environments that are spacious, peaceful, and conducive to independent student work. The rapport teachers demonstrated with their students, their manner and warmth, energy and attention to detail was notable. More impressive was the consistency that I saw in classroom after classroom. Clearly there is a common vision in this, perhaps the most important element of a Montessori education.

A Team Approach

Conversations with different constituents in the RVCS community were wide in scope but narrow in their message to me. The Board, groups of teachers, the administrative team, and student panels consistently indicated that they felt part of a group effort that was moving in the same direction. “Everyone’s on board”, “pulling together”, “I can depend on support”, were just some of the comments from faculty and board interviews.

Longevity of Leadership Administration

The above-noted common purpose is nurtured and challenged by a strong administrative team. The Director, Assistant Director, and Curriculum Coordinators have worked together for five years, and they bring years of experience to their work. They are well-respected and well-received by the board and faculty who feel they are supported and valued. Sometimes there is simply no substitute for years of service when that time is spent with the right people sharing a common vision.

Quality of Instruction

The amount of Montessori lessons observed, the amount of Montessori materials being utilized by children, especially at the Kinderhaus and Elementary 1 levels was impressive. Discussion and movement towards more use of Montessori materials in Elementary 2 is encouraged. It was described by one as a pendulum swing back towards materials and away from a reliance on Wordly Wise and JumpMath style resources. The tenor of discussion in the Middle School demonstrated all the components of a quality Montessori early adolescent program.

Resistance to the Status Quo

Perhaps this underlying strength is what will propel River Valley Charter School forward. The Professional Practice Framework and the Peace Education Curriculum are indications of an institution more interested in challenging itself than resting on laurels. "What can we do better?" was a common theme in my discussions. "How can we best move forward"?

River Valley Charter School is well-poised to traverse these new horizons where they find them. Mainly, consistent, high-quality Montessori educators teaching in beautiful well-appointed prepared environments, led by a team of administrators who have a long history with the school in different capacities and an excellent working relationship with support from the Board of Directors. In this process of moving forward, the school would be well-served to keep the following topics in mind.

Scheduling

The balancing of classroom work cycle and specialists and special education is universal, expected, and somewhat baked into any Montessori school that decides NOT to rely on a single classroom teacher to meet the art, music, engineering, technology, physical education, and learning issues of his or her students. That being said, it should always be a topic for discussion and tweaking. Pressures that squeeze uninterrupted work cycles into shorter and shorter sections of weeks and days are not to be discounted.

Use of Montessori Materials in Elementary 2

The juxtaposition of Kinderhaus and E1, where it was difficult to traverse the classroom without stepping on a stamp game or checkerboard, with E2 in regards to the use of Montessori materials was striking. That everyone involved is committed to reversing the trend is commendable, but warrants and would benefit from attention to stay on that course.

Montessori Materials Inventory

It is simply best practice to keep track of which materials, of which age, are in which classroom. A classroom without an important material can be indication that the teacher needs support. An inventory can also aid in budget forecasting.

Website

Some updating is needed. For instance, the last listed Montessori audit is from academic year 2010-2011. Also, a sentence in the FAQ states, "Some of River Valley's students have gone on to successful colleges and universities around the country," which seems to vastly understate the value of an RVCS education. Just "some"?

Longitudinal Studies

River Valley Charter School would benefit from learning more about the experiences of their graduates. Do they struggle or are they academically well-prepared? Is the move from a Montessori environment after 8th grade seamless or difficult socially and emotionally. Part of dissemination should be a look at the whole child product as the result of an RVCS education.