

ANNUAL MONTESSORI AUDIT
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for

RIVER VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL
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Introduction

The mission of the River Valley Charter School is to provide a rigorous academic program based on the Montessori philosophy and rooted in the history, culture and ecology of the Merrimack River Valley. Students will reach their full potential as scholars and become self-reliant, productive members of society. They will be adept at critical thinking and creative problem solving and will be fully prepared to succeed in future schools, careers, and civic life.

I visited River Valley Charter School on February 2, 2009 observing in the Kinderhaus and elementary classrooms and visiting the middle school common area and individual subject rooms. My focus, as suggested by Dr. Dale Bishop, was on the prepared environment, which has been a focus of the faculty's professional development this year. A *Prepared Environment Focus Observation Checklist*, which I created, was used to evaluate a range of environmental preparedness at each level and in each classroom. Elements such as classroom organization, scope and sequence of appropriate materials, environmental design to promote student independence, overall attractiveness and aesthetics, general maintenance, inclusion of peace areas, and accessibility of materials and supplies for student use, were considered. Additionally the *Essential Elements of Montessori Schools in the Public Sector* document, which follows, was used to audit RVCS's adherence to Montessori principles and practices.

The physical prepared environment of the school - classrooms, hallways, community areas, outdoor environments, offices - were found to be consistently well prepared and maintained. Students are in environments that are attractive, inviting, stimulating, and promote student learning. Each classroom is equipped with a full complement of Montessori materials and equipment. Furniture is varied and offer students a variety of seating options. Plants, animals, natural objects and artifacts to support the curriculum, are on display for students' viewing and/or use. Additionally,

lamps providing soft lighting, framed artwork, meaningful student work on display, cultural artifacts, textiles, mobiles, added to the aesthetics of each classroom. Pillows, comfy chairs, couches, and quiet areas gave classrooms a peaceful and home-like atmosphere. Although each classroom at each level is equipped with the same basic materials, each classroom has a distinct personality of its own, developed by the teachers and students in their classroom.

During the work cycle, students were observed engaged in meaningful work with a high degree of independence. Students were often spontaneously helping other students through positive and creative problem solving. Many peaceful and thoughtful peer interactions were observed at all levels of the program.

RVCS is a model for authentic Montessori education in the public sector. They have successfully integrated the Montessori philosophy and methodology with the curriculum standards and outcomes for public education in Massachusetts. Their alignment of Montessori curriculum and state frameworks, as well as their comprehensive assessment toolset, are just two of the many exemplary outcomes of the school's goals and objectives as set forth in their mission statement. The integrity of Montessori principles has been preserved in the program through the dedication of the leadership, faculty, staff and parents of the school community.



ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL MONTESSORI SCHOOLS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

 Printer-Friendly Format

Montessori Teachers

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

Currently all of the Head Teachers at River Valley Charter School in Kinderhaus, Elementary I & II classrooms are Montessori credentialed for the level they teach.

- **Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers.**

RVCS has found that the best recruitment tool is hiring highly qualified Assistant teachers for possible movement to the position of Head Teacher. The school mentors and assesses these teachers as paraprofessionals then encourages and supports those successful teachers in Montessori training programs to become credentialed as Montessori Head Teachers at the school. 87% of the teaching staff was retained from the '07-'08 school year.

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

YES

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

YES

- **Contract for on-going internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or professional support as a follow up to Montessori teacher education**

YES

- **Employ one paraprofessional per classroom, each having received Montessori orientation for that role**

YES

Administration

- **Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator.**

Ms. Lisa Camp, former Middle School Coordinator at RVCS currently serves as Curriculum Coordinator. She has an AMS teaching credential, over 25 years of teaching experience in Montessori education, and a Masters degree in Education. She has served as the school's curriculum coordinator for the past three years.

- **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.**

Dr. Dale Bishop, Head of School, has a strong background in public education, having been a teacher, assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent. He earned his doctorate in Curriculum, Instruction and Administration and holds certifications in Administration for Superintendent and Principal. Since his tenure at RVCS, Dr. Bishop has fully embraced the philosophy and methodology of Montessori education. He has completed the NAMTA Montessori leadership course and the Adolescence Training at NAMTA. On a regular basis, he attends workshops, conferences, and professional development sessions as related to Montessori education. Ms. Ann Mooney, Assistant Head, has Montessori certifications from both AMS and AMI as well as many years of teaching and administrative experience. She also attends Montessori workshops and conferences. Dr. Bishop, Ms. Mooney and Ms. Camp have created an administrative team with strong collective skills in public education, school leadership, professional development and Montessori pedagogy and practice.

- **Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction even with changes in administrative staff.**

Thus far, the administration team has been relatively consistent for the past seven years. The commitment to providing authentic Montessori education is embraced by the entire school community – board, administration, faculty, staff, parents, and students. Even with eventual changes in administrative staff, the school's charter, mission, objectives, institutional structure of assessment and accountability are so clearly defined and committed to, that the integrity of the Montessori seems safe.

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

The internal and external communications about the program development seem to be frequent and well developed, as well as widely disseminated in the public, charter, local and national Montessori communities. Last year the school organized and hosted a Montessori in Public School Conference with teachers and administrators attending from 5 public and charter Montessori Schools in Massachusetts. The school's video of 2004 has been widely distributed. It is seen as a model for new and developing programs. Internally there appears to be good communication between board, administration and faculty on program development with strong commitment on the part of all constituencies of the school community to the Montessori philosophy and pedagogy of the program.

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

RVCS recognizes the importance of the Children's House level of the Montessori program and has begun the process of adding this level to their program with the Kinderhaus (Kindergarten) level for the program. When and if the funding from the state becomes available to add the preschool ages to the program, RVCS is anxious to develop this level to include the full 3-6 age range.

Recruitment/Parent Education

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

RVCS hosts parent education programs throughout the year and has an active parent involvement program. The school offered parents a wide variety of over 20 educational opportunities during this school year such as: Open Circle Parents Program, Internet Safety Night, Book Breakfast Club, Morning Coffees with Dr. Bishop, Classroom Orientations, and Art of Expression and Poetry Night. RVCS boasts a high level of parent participation in the school community both in volunteer hours (97% of families contributed time) and financial commitment (75% donated to the school's Annual Fund).

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

RVCS holds monthly visits and tours for parents (as well as the community at large). Information about the admissions process is posted on the school's website along with a student application. Parents are scheduled for classroom observations and informational sessions to learn about the Montessori philosophy and methodology. The application for admission includes a parent understanding and commitment section for parents to indicate their understanding of and commitment to the Montessori program at RVCS. Parents are encouraged to donate 40 hours of volunteer time yearly to the school.

Curriculum/Environment

- **Offer a full complement of Montessori materials (about \$25,000 per classroom) purchased from Montessori dealers.**
- **Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori "prepared environment" principles.**

The classrooms at RVCS are spacious, attractively designed, functional, and fully equipped with Montessori materials and educational supplies. Classrooms are child centered, inviting and aesthetically presented. The Montessori materials are reviewed and replaced on an ongoing basis to ensure that the prepared environment is maintained and developed. There is a full range of materials at all levels and sufficient in quantity for student use. Classrooms are neat, clean, organized and well lit. All classrooms had a variety of work spaces for students and highly organized systems for storage of student work. Although all classrooms were similarly furnished with basic Montessori materials, each classroom had a unique "personality" in how it was decorated, designed, and functioned.

- **Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3-hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal.**
- **Integrate specialty programs (music, art, physical education, etc.) around the uninterrupted work periods.**

Schedules have been designed to create and protect an uninterrupted work cycle in each classroom, offering a 3 hour work cycle for elementary students during the mornings. Specialty programs such as art, music, physical education are offered to the elementary students in the program in the afternoons in order to preserve the work cycle of the morning period.

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

With the exception of the 3-6 classroom, all other levels of the program apply the traditional Montessori multi-age grouping – 6-9, 9-12, 12-15. The 3-6 level is a Kindergarten only program due to the absence of publicly funded preschool programs within the local school district. When and if this funding becomes available, it is the desire and intent of RVCS to offer the 3-6 level program to preschool children.

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.**

RVCS has developed a comprehensive system for assessment – the River Valley Assessment Toolset. This toolset combines the Montessori scope and sequence with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and provides learning objectives and outcomes for each program level of the school. Components include frequent teacher observations of students, detailed record keeping, student self-assessment, student goal setting, portfolio development and progress reports. Learning objectives are documented for each student.

- **Implement state mandated assessments in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised.**

RVCS administers the MCAS as required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as well as the Terra Nova each year. Test results are used as an analytical tool to aid in assessing student progress and setting goals for individual students. The school sets generalized goals for test results as stated in the school's charter "...significantly above state and national averages."

Professional Development

- **Budget for continuing education through Montessori workshops and conferences.**

The current annual budget for continuing professional development is \$39,425, approximately 1.3% of the total school budget. This is used for expenses and registration at Montessori conferences, both local and national and for professional development opportunities at the school with Montessori professionals on site.

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

RVCS currently maintains memberships with the American Montessori Society (AMS) and the North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA), both national Montessori organizations, as well as the regional, Montessori Schools of Massachusetts. The school has plans to seek Montessori accreditation in the future, most likely with AMS.

This document is endorsed by the following organizations:

American Montessori Society **(AMS)**
Association Montessori Internationale **(AMI)**
North American Montessori Teachers' Association **(NAMTA)**
National Center for Montessori Education **(NCME)**
Montessori Education Programs International **(MEPI)**
Southwestern Montessori Training Center

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Some suggestions for continued development:

- Storage of materials not in use in the classroom and teacher resource materials is currently a challenge, as there is no designated school wide storage facility. Teachers store materials on shelving in student bathrooms and on shelving in classrooms. Care should be taken to ensure that these areas of storage are kept uncluttered and hidden, where possible, so as not to detract from the order and aesthetics of the classroom environment.
- Review the furniture at each level to ensure a variety of sizes of chairs and heights of tables to accommodate the three year age span in each classroom.
- Have classroom teachers designate an Observer's chair and notebook for visitor feedback to students and teachers. A student "greeter" is always a nice addition to the student responsibility chart.
- Have Middle School students take care of the "common space" - since this is the entrance to the middle school area - extra care should be taken to ensure its presentation to visitors.
- Review sequencing of materials on shelves, especially in the math areas of classroom.