



**Montessori Program and Implementation Audit  
River Valley Charter School  
2 Perry Way  
Newburyport MA 01950**

**Conducted: November 4-5, 2015  
Final Report submitted January 4, 2016**

**Auditor:**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Davidson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Gary Davidson, MA, Director, Seacoast Center Montessori Teacher Education Program.**  
AMS EL I-II Certification (1981),  
EL I through Secondary I Classroom Teaching Experience 1975-2012.  
School Administrative experience 1999-2015

**Purpose**

This report is prepared in partial fulfillment of the River Valley Charter School 2014-2019 Accountability Plan. The Accountability Plan identifies the Mission and Key Design Elements of RVCS. For the purpose of this audit attention centered on the Mission Statement as a credible representation of the RVCS identity as a Montessori program.

Further consideration and verification extended to AP Objectives 1 and 4 given their direct focus on the Montessori Program:

Objective 1: River Valley Charter School will provide a high quality Montessori learning environment for all students.

Objective 4: RVCS will share its Montessori curriculum with other schools in Massachusetts over the course of its charter term.

**Description**

The program audit consisted of review of documents furnished by Administrative personnel for evidence of compliance with Objectives. A survey of community members was distributed online, and a two-day site visit consisted of observations of class sessions at all levels and interviews with Administrators, faculty, staff, and members of the student body. An informal oral report was conveyed to Administration at the conclusion of the on-site visit. This report includes data from the above sessions.

**Data Collection Instrument**

“Elements of a Successful Montessori School in the Public Sector.” (AMS).

**Documentation****Additional Data Sources**

1. RVCS Vision Statement (3/17/2-14)
2. RVCS Internal Montessori Audit Report (11/17-21/2014)
3. Snap online survey of school community (Distributed 11/2/15; a total of 83 replies were received between 11/2-6/2015)
4. Classroom observations
5. Interviews with Administrative team, faculty and staff
6. Interviews with Students
7. River Valley Charter School Strategic Plan 2014-2019
8. Review content of [www.rivervalleycharter.org](http://www.rivervalleycharter.org) web site and posted documents.

## Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector

Key: Met- Evidence of achievement or substantial compliance with goal.

Progress Evidence of attention to identified issue

Advisory Issue identified by audit and not noted previously

NA Verified as Not Applicable

Not Met- Verified and Not Compliant with common standards

| Area                | Component  |     |   |
|---------------------|--|-----|---|
| Montessori Teachers | <b>Employ Montessori teachers who have Montessori credentials for the levels they teach.</b>   | Met | Verified by review of documentation and by interviews with Administration and faculty   |
|                     | <p>Comment:</p> <p>All classroom teachers hold sufficient qualifications for working with children at the level of teaching. Specialist teachers observed demonstrated are qualified within areas of expertise. Kinderhaus and Elementary I teachers hold MACTE-accredited Montessori credentials issued by the American Montessori Society. Elementary II teachers hold either Elementary I-II credentials from AMS or diplomas issued by the North American Montessori Center distance program, which is not MACTE-accredited. Documentation of professional development provided indicates continuing numerous opportunities for personnel. The school is substantially compliant with this element. Middle school faculty has foundational knowledge of the Montessori Method for adolescents and expertise in specific content areas. The Middle School Coordinator is AMS certified in Elementary I and II. The Academic Program Coordinator is experienced and Montessori-trained at the EL I-II level.</p> |     |   |
|                     | <b>Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers.</b>   | Met | Verified by review of web site at <a href="http://www.rivervalleycharter.org">www.rivervalleycharter.org</a> . Site shows Substitute Teaching position available. |
|                     | <p>Comment:</p> <p>RVCS uses customary professional channels to advertise positions for Montessori-certified teachers and is active in identifying prospective teachers</p>  |     |   |

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|  | and supporting them for certification. Nationally, difficulty in recruiting certified, experienced teachers, particularly at the Upper Elementary and Middle School level remains a constant.   |     |  |
|  | <b>Budget for future Montessori teacher education for non Montessori-credentialed teachers.</b>   | Met | Verified by interview with Principal and review of public board minutes on web site. |
|  | <p>Comment:</p> <p>Each year the school budgets funds for projected Montessori training needs. This amount varies year-to-year depending upon teachers who are seeking training. Examination of Board minutes and reports posted for 2015 shows sound fiscal operations.</p>      |     |  |
|  | <b>Provide professional Montessori in-service by experienced credentialed Montessori educators.</b>   | Met | Verified by interview with Administrative team and faculty.                          |
|  | <p>Comment:</p> <p>The school is an active participant in local and national conferences. RVCS has hosted public Montessori professional development sessions Professional development has been supplied by and/or scheduled with recognized experts in the Montessori field.</p> |     |  |
|  | <b>Contract for on-going internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or professional support as a follow up to Montessori teacher education.</b>   | Met | Verified by review of documentation and interview with Administrative team.          |

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|                | <p>Comment:</p> <p>The planned audit model provides for annual review, alternating an internal process with outside consultation. The internal audit conducted in 2014 was thoroughly reviewed for benchmarks for the 2015 outside audit. The internal audit addressed in considerable detail complementary areas that would not be possible for a team solely addressing the elements of public Montessori education. This is a commendable mixture both in content and in providing a two year cycle for initiatives resulting from discussion of each audit.</p> |     |  |
|                | <p><b>Employ one paraprofessional per classroom, each having received Montessori orientation for that role.</b></p>   | Met | Verified by observation of classroom and interviews with faculty.              |
|                | <p>Comment:</p> <p>Kinderhaus , Elementary I, and Elementary II Level classrooms observed contained one head teacher and at least one paraprofessional or support specialist. Middle School groupings appeared well organized and were sufficiently supported by additional personnel.</p>  |     |  |
| Administration | <p><b>Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator.</b></p>  | Met | Verified by review of documentation and interview with curriculum coordinator. |
|                | <p>Comment:</p> <p>The curriculum coordinator is an experienced Montessori Elementary I-II teacher with a commitment to the integrity of the model at each level. During the interview she expressed clear awareness of the concrete basis of the Montessori method and understanding of the importance of her role as the “gatekeeper”.</p>  |     |  |

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|   | <p><b>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.</b></p> | Met | Verified by review of documentation and interview with principal/academic coordinator.   |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>The principal/education leader of the school benefits from teaching experience as an Elementary I-II and Middle School teacher. His long-term connection with RCVS in different capacities offers a strong sense of the school's history, heritage, and developmental path. His enthusiasm for the school community and understanding of the school's potential for forward movement exhibit commitment and creative vision. His direct involvement with students is considerable. Casual comments by students and faculty show respect and affection.</p> |  |     |  |
|   | <p><b>Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction even with changes in administrative staff.</b></p>   | Met | Verified by observation of general school activity within and outside of classes, interviews with Administrative team and faculty, and interviews with students. |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>Administrative guidance rests with a team of four individuals qualified by education and experience with public Montessori education. This is a fairly rare blend of in-house expertise in Montessori charter school leadership. Each member has experienced and contributed to the school community at different stages of institutional maturity. The degree of trust within the team is noteworthy and commendable.</p>   |  |     |  |

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|   | <b>Sustain the support of the central administration through high profile communications about program development.</b>                         | Met | Verified by review of documentation and interviews with Administrative team and faculty.   |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>In review of the RCVS web site and through conversation it becomes apparent that a great deal of information is available to client families as well as professional staff. Dissemination of information and integration are not synonymous; low-key comments on the topic ranged from “we get a lot of mail” to “we have so many new things”. These are within the spectrum of normalcy for a school well into its own stages of development.</p>   |   |     |  |
|   | <b>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.</b> | N/A | Verified as n/a by review of documentation and interview with principal/educational leader |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>The adapted Kindergarten program offers a model of the Montessori Early Childhood classroom and an important intake experience. During the short period of observation, Kinderhaus members were operating with a benevolent combination of independence and self-direction. It is all too common to visit settings in which the entry of 5 year olds is treated only as preparation for academic years ahead and children race to paper and pencil work. While naturally that will become a point of arrival for children in many skill areas, it was not the central focus of activities observed and the feel of the classroom was solidly grounded in Montessori.</p> |   |     |  |

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| Recruitment/<br>Parent Education  | <b>Provide Montessori parent education programs that promote understanding of Montessori principles and curriculum.</b>                    | Met | Verified by interview with parents, results of online survey, and review of information at <a href="http://www.rivervalleycharter.org">www.rivervalleycharter.org</a> . |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>The web site provides numerous resources for basic information about Montessori education as articulated at RVCS. The school calendar advertises open houses and information sessions. As evidenced by published Board minutes, teachers occasionally present sample lessons to the Board. This is an often overlooked opportunity for significant impact at the level of governance and is commendable. The Director also publishes a weekly essay on relevant school topics, frequently addressing core Montessori concepts.</p> |  |     |   |
|   | <b>Develop an admission process that informs parents about the nature of Montessori and seeks the necessary commitment to the program.</b> | Met | Verified by review of documents, web site, parent survey, and interviews with parents.  |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>In addition to the generous amount of information about Montessori education on the web site, there is a thorough description of the admissions process. Admission is on a lottery basis, with a waiting list roughly twice the size of the school's enrollment capacity. Responses from newer parents to the school were uniformly positive and comments often expressed how fortunate families feel at receiving admission.</p>  |  |     |   |



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| Curriculum/Environment | <b>Offer a full complement of Montessori materials purchased from Montessori dealers.</b>   | Met | Verified by observation of classroom and interview with Curriculum Coordinator.               |
|                        | <p>Comment:</p> <p>Full complements of Montessori materials appeared to be present in Kinderhaus and Elementary I. At Elementary II, the class observed was engaged in an activity that did not require concrete materials but involved a great deal of critical thinking and articulation of the problem solving involved. Students were engaged and enthusiastic. A question arising from the observation and discussion is: "To what extent are traditional Montessori materials used for advanced concepts in the Elementary II classrooms?"</p> <p>That children moving through the Upper Elementary level are transitioning from concrete to abstract work is given. A full complement of Upper Elementary math and geometry material is part of each environment.</p> <p>For Middle School, traditional Montessori materials typically are not manipulatives and are borrowed as necessary as teaching aids only when students return to a concept for which there is a comparable material.</p> |     |   |
|                        | <b>Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori "prepared environment" principles</b>  | Met | Verified by observation of classrooms, interviews with faculty, and interviews with students. |
|                        | <p>Comment:</p> <p>All classroom spaces visited presented themselves as age-appropriate Montessori environments with adequate shelf area and age appropriate fixtures and furniture. The school facility is large and fully developed.</p>  |     |   |

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|   | <b>Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3-hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal.</b>   | Met | Verified by review of class schedules, interviews with Administrative team and faculty, and observation of classrooms. |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>Considerable energy has been given over by teachers and administration to preserving work time for children. This challenge is endemic to all publicly funded and the great majority of private Montessori schools. Observations of classrooms noted natural variance of style between teachers.</p>   |  |     |  |
|   | <b>Integrate specialty programs (music, art, physical education, etc.) around the uninterrupted work periods.</b>  | Met | Verified by review of class schedules, interviews with faculty, and observation of specialist classrooms.              |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>A “hot topic” during the audit period was the reorganization of specialist schedules from the previous years and use of a single-grade model for those parts of the program. Comments centered less on the impact on work periods and more on the change from multi-age to single grade in specialist subjects.. When this topic came up in discussion with students it offered a chance for them to reflect on the multi-age classroom itself, which was enthusiastically endorsed.</p> |  |     |  |
|   | <b>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.</b> | Met | Verified by observation of classrooms.   |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>This field was prepopulated with NA by the school owing to the non-traditional age grouping of Kinderhaus. With that stated, the diversity, flexibility, and reduced competition integral to Montessori was in evidence during observation of all classrooms.</p>  |  |     |  |

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| Assessment  | <b>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.</b> | Met | Verified by review of documentation, including the 2014 Internal audit, interviews with faculty, and classroom observations. |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>The use of multiple means of assessment and reporting was evident in discussions with teachers and in observation of classrooms. The extremely thorough 2014 Internal Audit identified progress reporting and state mandated assessment as areas receiving attention. Tools described appear to be appropriate. These issues will always be discussion points. Having established benchmarks in 2014, they will merit revisiting in each internal audit.</p> |   |     |  |
|   | <b>Implement state mandated assessments in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised.</b>  | Met | Verified by review of documentation, interviews with the Administrative team, and faculty.                                   |
| <p>Comment:</p> <p>As in the previous comment, the impact of the “high stakes” MCAS tests was noted as an area in which the administration identified a need to modulate impact on the daily life of the school. Administration has consistently worked to educate parents regarding the limited value of standardized assessments, and has supported curriculum development and implementation that diminishes focus on state mandated tests.</p>                              |   |     |  |

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| Professional Development | <b>Budget for continuing education through Montessori workshops and conferences.</b>  | Met | Verified by review of documentation and by interviews with Administration and faculty |
|                          | <p>Comment:</p> <p>A budget line for continuing education is available. Ample evidence of opportunities for professional development in Montessori and other relevant topics was given during faculty interviews.</p> |     |   |
|                          | <b>Maintain membership with one or more of the professional Montessori organizations and seek Montessori accreditation to assure consistent quality.</b>  | Met | Verified by review of documentation and by interviews with Administration and faculty |
|                          | <p>Comment:</p> <p>RVCS is a current member in good standing of the American Montessori Society and the Montessori Schools of Massachusetts.</p>  |     |   |

This document was drafted and endorsed in the late 1990s by several Montessori organizations\* wishing to help guide the growth of public school Montessori. It has been presented at a number of Montessori conferences since then and used by various school districts preparing to offer a Montessori option.

\*The American Montessori Society, the Association Montessori Internationale, the North American Montessori Teachers' Association, Montessori Educational Programs International, and the Southwestern Montessori Training Center.

### **Summary Points of Reflection**

The Montessori Program of River Valley Charter School successfully demonstrates the essential elements of successful Montessori schools in the public school sector. Based on two days of audit and discussion, the school manifests the community climate and the products of a thriving Montessori institution. Montessori elements are applied conscientiously and creatively in the school's program. The school's broader mission is identifiable in its application of Montessori principles.

As the first public charter Montessori school in Massachusetts, River Valley Charter School is of significance in the history of education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Extensive exploration of and involvement with the Merrimack River Valley community, particularly by students in the Upper Elementary and Middle School years, is complementary with the goal of providing a high quality Montessori education.

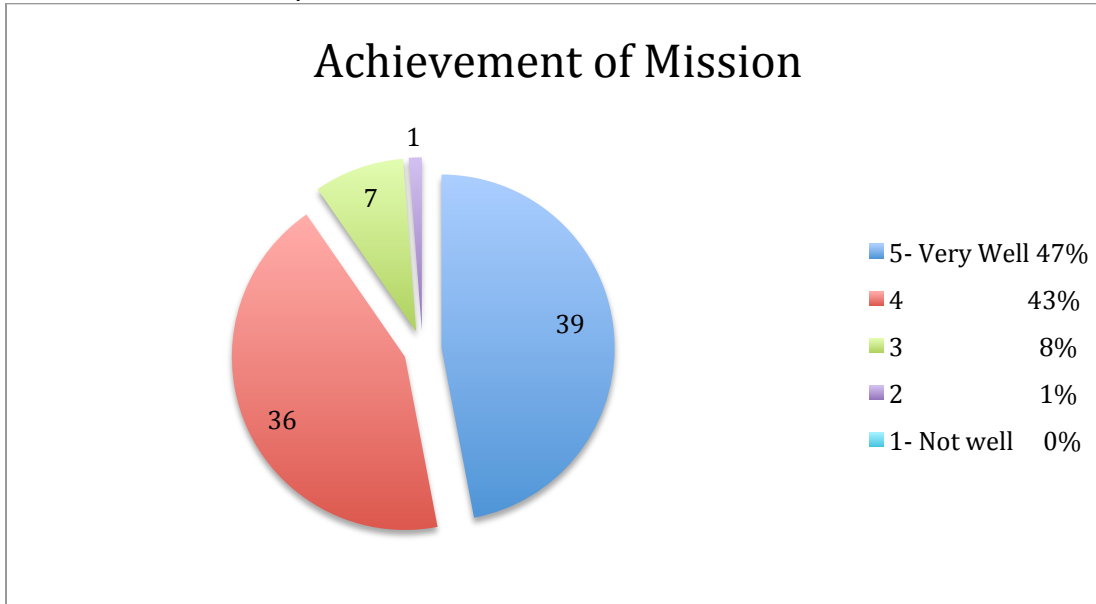
### **Future Learning**

The initiative described in the Strategic Plan for 2014-2019 has strong potential and inherent challenge to the identity of the school community. The potential is to move River Valley Charter School into the future as a learning and growing institution and to further Objective 4: RVCS will share its Montessori curriculum with other schools in Massachusetts over the course of its charter term. The inherent challenge is to develop the proposed relationship with the Institute for Future Learning as an articulation and enhancement of the well-spoken Vision Statement of 3/17/2014. This remains at the germinal stage of "thoughtful consideration".

Response to Audit Survey:

83 responses total to the question:

“Overall, how well do you feel the school achieves its mission?”



131 children from Kinderhaus to Middle School represented in responses to the question:

“How would you describe your child or children's experience at RVCS?”

