

## In Charter School Era, Montessori Model Flourishes

By **Sarah D. Sparks**

Montessori education has a more than century-old history in the United States, but thanks to burgeoning charter and parent-advocacy movements, the model is in the midst of an unprecedented boom in public schools.

At the same time, new research raises questions about how the model will fit with states' and districts' test-focused accountability systems in public education, as well as how well it will fit the needs of diverse students in its communities.

Nationwide, more than 500 public schools enrolling 125,000 students follow the Montessori model—an education approach that emphasizes child-directed learning in multiage classrooms. **Nearly 300 of the public Montessori schools have opened** in the past 15 years, according to Mira Debs, a

Montessori postdoctoral researcher at Yale University who has tracked that growth.

Gettysburg Montessori Charter School, a few miles from the famous Pennsylvania battleground, is one of them, and its story mirrors that of many of the new public Montessori schools.

The school grew out of a small private Montessori school for preschool and young elementary pupils in the area. A group of parents whose children had attended the preschool petitioned the Gettysburg school district to open a separate charter Montessori for K-6 in 2009.

Today, the school serves 155 students drawn from 10 surrounding districts and is planning to open two new campuses in the next five years to help accommodate its waiting list. "A lot of our students come by word of mouth," said Gettysburg Principal Faye Pleso. "Most people pay a lot of money to send their children to Montessori, and we are free."

Nationwide, students in public Montessori programs—particularly black and Hispanic students—**are more likely to attend schools with students of other races** than are students attending other public schools, Debs found in forthcoming research. For example, more than half of Latino students in public Montessoris in 2012-13 attended a racially diverse school, compared to only 34 percent of Latino public school students nationwide.

### Accountability vs. Pedagogy

Gettysburg Montessori, like most schools employing the model, uses multiage classrooms covering grades 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6.

That can make meeting state standards tricky, Pleso said.

"We are a public school, so we are absolutely mandated to comply with all the regulations for Pennsylvania." That means making sure the multiage classrooms cover all the state standards for each grade, but, "it's all with a Montessori twist," she said. "The students get their formal

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instruction, then go into their small groups or individual work. We're kind of a Montessori hybrid."

The Boyd County, Ky., school system has used Montessori for all its preschools since 1985, and it fits the current push to "educate the whole child," said Carla Malone, Boyd County's preschool director.

"The pros of utilizing the Montessori approach are that it is individualized. It teaches the way that young children learn," Boyd said, but she has found that the rising rigor and structure in state standards puts pressure on the Montessori philosophy of children exploring and learning on their own.

"The approach indicates that the children require three hours of uninterrupted work," Malone said. "It is difficult to get that much time in each day. The Kentucky state regulations have expectations and guidelines that must be followed as well."

In addition, keeping teachers up to date on both state-required training and separate Montessori certification drains both time and money, she said.

### **Diversity and 'Fit'**

The pressure to meet structural and academic requirements is a piece of irony for Yale's Debs. During the 1960s and '70s, Montessori was seen as useful for closing early-childhood achievement gaps for poor and minority children because it included more structure and skill development than free-play nursery programs. That helped spur the model's use in magnet programs designed to integrate urban districts that had experienced white flight to the suburbs.

In the past five years, the numbers of new charter schools have begun to outpace new magnet schools using the Montessori approach, making some Montessori experts question whether the new schools will carry on the model's social-justice commitment to serving diverse students.

"There's always been this tension between Montessori's social justice and the perception of it as something elite," Debs said.

In a study of 300 whole-school programs in the 470 Montessori public schools open in 2012-13, Debs found charter Montessoris are on average less economically and racially diverse than Montessori magnet schools nationwide. More than half of Montessori magnets enroll 50 percent to 75 percent students of color, compared with just 20 percent of charter Montessori schools.

Katie Brown, the District of Columbia regional coordinator for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, and other center researchers in 2015 **analyzed 166 charter Montessori programs nationwide**. About a third of the schools mirrored their communities racially, but most overrepresented white students. Overall, more than 60 percent of the 38,000 students enrolled were white.

The "whiteness" of many Montessori charters was not surprising to Maia Cucchiara, an associate



Michael Bloise, 15, takes notes during a Citizenship and Interdependency class at the Denver Montessori Junior/Senior High School.

—Barry Gutierrez for Education Week

professor of urban education at Temple University, who was not associated with the new research. “We really need to understand this against the backdrop of extreme competition for good education and markers of academic success,” Cucchiara said, in a discussion at the American Educational Research Association conference in Washington last month. “For many families, there’s a sense that their children’s future is highly contingent [on education] and they can’t depend on school to make their children successful. That’s a profound shift in the last 20 years.”

Once part of Montessori schools, parents can bring their own pressure to bear on the model’s less academically-oriented practices, such as exploring nature or using manipulatives to work out math concepts on their own.

“The language in school choice is often around ‘fit.’ You hear parents talking about it; you hear school choice representatives talking about it. ... ‘Pick a school that fits your child.’ But I found ‘fit’ can be a really ethnically- and racially-contingent process, particularly for black and Latino parents,” Debs said.

She conducted more than 260 hours of classroom observation and a series of in-depth interviews with 31 families in two new public Montessori schools in Hartford, Conn. Both schools had lower poverty levels than the district and other area magnet schools, but racially diverse classes. No racial group made up more than 35 percent of the schools. Parents of all racial backgrounds strongly supported Montessori practices, but nearly half the black and Latino parents said they felt “conflicted” about the approach, in contrast to only 4 percent of white parents. In particular, while black and Latino parents liked their children developing autonomy and leadership skills, they worried that the approach was not academically rigorous enough and that it focused on abstract concepts of education rather than on concrete outcomes like getting to college.

One black mother told Debs she was concerned because, “as much as I do love the program, my child still has to compete on a national level.”

“One of the dangers of using this language of ‘fit’ is that schools can say, well, this parent is just not a good fit” for Montessori, Debs said. “I found for every family it was a process of interpretation. You couldn’t necessarily predict and say Montessori doesn’t work for these types of families.”

She argued that schools that use Montessori and other models that differ significantly from traditional pedagogy should do more to acknowledge parents’ concerns and help them understand how practices like gardening relate to academic-achievement expectations.

Gettysburg Montessori is overwhelmingly white—on par with the Gettysburg district—but more than half its students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, a higher rate than the district’s, which is at about a third. Pleso, the principal, said she focuses on close connections to parents to counter concerns and make sure families feel they are a part of the school. For example, she has coffee with groups of three to four parents at a time, covering every family. She also meets



In the kitchen at Denver Montessori Junior/Senior High School, 8th graders Melody Elizocde, Nateya Chavez, and Lily Kleinfeld-Hamilton, from left to right, help prepare lunch for the entire school. —Barry Gutierrez for Education Week

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"We have parents everywhere from professors at the local college to parents who are unemployed," Pleso said. "It boils down to relationship-building, taking time to really get to know the parents and get to know the children."

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