

AN OVERVIEW OF FAMILY STAR MONTESSORI SCHOOL

by Ginny Trierweiler

Family Star Montessori School is well acquainted with “under-three” child care having served 3000 children over the last twenty-three years. Many of the children come from below the poverty line and bring strong diversity to the enrollment of the program. More than half of our faculty are also diverse, coming from Peru, Bulgaria, Honduras, and Mexico, and classrooms are bilingual. Family Star has four Nido classrooms, seven toddler classrooms, and three primary classrooms, and many students are identified as mixed-age ranges. They provide year-round parent and family support, doctor visits, special education, including home-based learning, and conscious community building.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Family Star is a high-quality, Montessori, early education program based in Denver, Colorado, serving families in center-based, home-based, and community-based options. The organization was founded by a passionate group of inner-city parents and educators determined to stop the decline of their neighborhood and reduce opportunity inequities for young children in Northeast Denver. Esteemed public school principal, Dr. Martha Urioste, persuaded Denver Public Schools’ leaders to develop a Montessori public school in order to retain upwardly mobile families in the school district. She developed a partnership with Judi Orion and her AMI training

Dr. Ginny Trierweiler was president and CEO of Family Star Montessori School (Denver) for five years. She is currently the president of Hearts and Minds Together, which provides executive coaching and organizational consulting on education systems, strategic planning, and program evaluation. As a child psychologist, Ginny worked for many years providing and directing child and family mental health services. An experienced nonprofit leader who builds high performing teams and maximizes resources, Ginny has a passion for building exceptional early education programs.

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center, The Montessori Institute, and they recruited parents from the neighborhood who were interested in becoming Montessori teachers and willing to participate in rigorous training.

Over the past twenty-three years, Family Star has grown from an initial capacity to serve twenty-four infants and toddlers to present-day capacity of 216 children at a time in Northeast and Northwest Denver. We are proud that more than 3,000 children in Denver have received excellent early education and comprehensive services from Family Star over the past twenty-three years, and we are on track to serve more than twice that many in the next twenty-three years.

Who We Are and Who We Serve

In Montessori environments, young children discover and create themselves. They become competent, confident, whole human beings. They develop fundamental skills in all areas—language, coordination, concentration, courtesy, independence, persistence, and a sense of responsibility and community—on which they can build their lives. We believe that all children need and deserve these opportunities, so we prioritize services to children who most need these opportunities, including those from low-income households.

Program diversity is important to us, and our program is diverse in terms of language, culture and ethnicity, and family economics. Family Star's two locations are in diverse, urban Denver neighborhoods—Northeast Denver and Northwest Denver—in which families in poverty and more affluent families both live. The wealthier families who seek Family Star's program tend to be young families seeking an urban lifestyle. They will stay in the inner city as long as the schools are good and they feel their children are safe. Montessori Public Schools and early childhood programs like Family Star help keep these families in integrated, urban neighborhoods.

Most (70%) of the students we serve come from families living in poverty or have special learning needs; we hold approximately 30% of our slots for full-tuition families. Half of all students identify their ethnicity as Latino or Hispanic, 23% as Caucasian, 16% as African American; and 16% "other" or mixed race. A significant percentage of our students (12%) come from families in which Spanish is the primary language and 10%–20% of our students are identified with special learning needs.

Family Star also has very diverse staffing in order to most effectively serve this diverse community. Half of our Montessori lead teachers are from nations other than the United States, including Peru, Chile, Honduras, Mexico, and Bulgaria. Each Family Star classroom has one or more fluent Spanish speaking teachers.

Family Star Mission and Vision: to discover the child in inclusive Montessori environments and inspire a movement for educating the human potential. To fulfill this mission, Family Star does three things—we educate young minds, strengthen families, and build community.

EDUCATING YOUNG MINDS

Family Star’s year-round, extended-day, center-based program includes four Nido environments, where children start as early as eight weeks of age.





Family Star Montessori school has seven toddler classrooms that are warm and nurturing environments for one- to three-year-old children.



Family Star has three primary classrooms that are fully prepared Montessori environments for three- to six-year-olds.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Family Star supports each family, supporting successful parenting in which each parent can feel confident and effective in their role. We have a very active parent board, called the *policy council*, which makes policy and personnel decisions. Recognizing that the well-being of the child is dependent upon the well-being of the entire family, we also offer year-round parent education and individualized family support.

Comprehensive Services for All

Family Star cultivates the potential of the whole child and their family. As Helene Stebbins and Jane Knitzer identified “ingredients that put young children on a pathway to success,” they include:

- Regular visits to the doctor, even when they are healthy;
- Stimulating early learning opportunities;
- And stable, nurturing families with enough resources and parenting skills to meet their basic needs.

As a Head Start and Early Head Start program, Family Star offers comprehensive support services to all children and their families. We offer on-site health and mental health services, and we ensure that all families have systems of ongoing health care. We offer a wonderful nutrition program, introducing young children to real, healthy foods through active participation in meal preparation and family-style dining. Our family advocates and home-based parent educators work with parents to identify needed resources or supports, set goals, and access necessary community resources to resolve challenges such as homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, or violence in the home.

Home-Based Parent Education Program

Family Star offers home-based, parent education services to Early Head Start and Head Start families, utilizing the evidence-based curriculum *Parents as Teachers*. Parent educators provide weekly home visits with child development, parenting information and support. This program reaches families that have been previously underserved, including undocumented and stay-at-home families, pregnant mothers, and families that have experienced loss of employment or are in need of child care.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

If help and salvation are to come, they can only come from the child, for the child is the constructor of man... The child is endowed with an inner power which can guide us to a more luminous future. (Montessori 1-3)

At Family Star, we take to heart Dr. Maria Montessori's belief that peace will originate with the children. We seek to develop more young children who can contribute great value to their communities. When young children and families are fulfilling their highest potential and families from diverse backgrounds are developing meaningful relationships, we are building community.

We support young children's natural desires to learn how to take care of themselves and their needs in ways that are thoughtful toward others. We support young children's natural desires to participate fully in the human community, giving them materials that

fit their hands and myriad opportunities to take care of their environment, such as setting the table, cleaning up after themselves, putting things away where they belong, nurturing plants, etc.

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Many Family Star parents have proudly told us that their children are the most competent and considerate children in their play groups. We frequently hear from elementary school teachers that they are particularly glad to receive Family Star students.

Many parents often add that their thoughtful, courteous young children inspire them to be the best parents they can be as well. Many Family Star parents have been inspired by their young children to also tackle their own goals, whether educational, career, health, or other goals. Family Star parents develop confidence and effectiveness as their children's first teachers. They enjoy good relationships with their children and experience a sense of belonging to a diverse, integrated, and supportive community. Parents also report that they particularly appreciate opportunities for parent involvement in program decisions.

We also seek to develop a community that is profoundly supportive of the development of young children. Family Star partners with more than twenty Denver organizations to facilitate families to access rich community supports. In addition, we work to spark a movement for making excellent early learning opportunities much more broadly available, participating in research efforts on quality early learning environments and offering national, regional, and local workshops on creating early learning environments that maximize the brilliant development of young children.

Working to educate young minds, strengthen families, and build communities, prioritizing children and families who can especially benefit, Family Star is doing its part to build the better, more peaceful society envisioned by Dr. Maria Montessori.

REFERENCES

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