

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE BACHMAN LAKE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

by Tom Loew

*Tom Loew says that East Dallas Community Schools have been creating beautiful and functional environments for decades, but developing Bachman Lake Community School was more than creating a school. They also had to establish a community center, scale up staff quickly, service a wide number of families, leverage Montessori training and related costs, and ensure a Montessori approach. Most families at Bachman Lake are below the poverty line, very young, few are native speakers, and some are without immigration status. A mental health component is critical, home visits are frequent, professional intervention happens in homes, parents engage in “reflective service” utilizing licensed counselors, and the school encourages father participation.*

As Montessorians we understand the huge impact in early childhood of the interactions between parent and child and the interaction of the child with the surrounding environment. All families, regardless of social or economic circumstances, need support and guidance in understanding the simple, elegant, and profoundly meaningful insights that Dr. Montessori has passed on to us regarding the development of individuals from birth to maturity. But we need to stipulate that there are resource-poor communities where we can offer interventions that can have enormous impact on future lives. Offering these communities a network of meaningful support is the main motivating factor that draws us together.

Offering support to families by creating beautiful, functional environments based on sound developmental principles is not new

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to us. We've been doing it for decades, and our mode has been to start Montessori schools. We have been successful. There are many examples of distinguished Montessori schools with a thirty-, forty-, or even fifty-year history. This is a record to be proud of. Because of our emphasis

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on doing it right, i.e., growing a school with the developmental needs of children foremost in our minds, our schools tend to take significant amounts of time and require generous amounts of money. Even so, at full capacity, our school numbers are small. As one example, Lindsley Park Community School in Dallas started in 1999 and took six years to fill the building to capacity of 185 students, primary through lower elementary. If we had upper elementary and middle school, it would have taken a decade at least. We might be a middle-sized Montessori school, but we're also an urban public school, and in that category we are exceptionally small.

This provokes a question central to this gathering: How can we establish community organizations focusing on the earliest years of life, guided explicitly by Montessori developmental principles, and that target resource-poor families. Into this mix of goals we add a desire to build to a reasonable scale in a relatively short period of time without using prohibitive amounts of money that is needed for staff training, start-up capital costs, etc.

I suspect that as our schools grow, these communities will become highly individualistic, much more so than our schools. I also believe we can extract a few general principles from our experience that can apply to many of our situations.

First, for a little context supporting the growth of our Bachman Lake program, I will very briefly describe the structure of our organization. We have three sites and will very shortly officially announce a fourth. Two are Montessori schools in the traditional sense. The third, although it has "school" in its name, only very loosely fits

our conception of a school. East Dallas Community School is our original site, started thirty-six years ago. For the pregnancy through three-year-old population, it has a Parents as Teachers program and one toddler class. There are also two primary and two lower elementary classes, serving about ninety children. Lindsley Park Community School is a charter Montessori school, in its fifteenth year, with a Parents as Teachers program, four primary and three lower elementary classes.

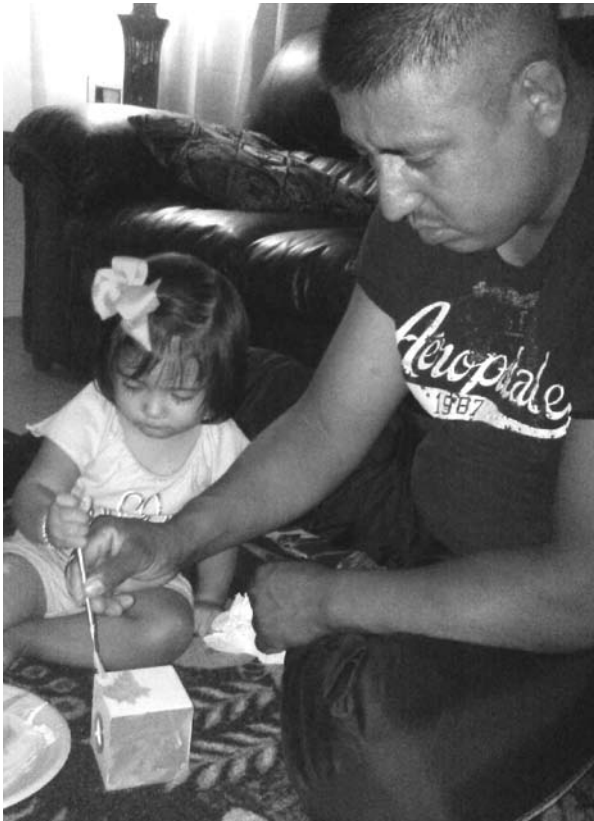
Bachman Lake Community School, by contrast, in year two was serving just over two hundred children, although the number has decreased slightly due to mandated sequester cuts in federal funding. It represents a departure for us, a different model. For the first time in thirty-six years we stepped outside our near east Dallas neighborhood. Also, our direct intention was not to start a school (at least during the beginning phase), but to use our human development and organizational expertise to meet a community need. We wanted to:

- Scale up the staff and operational aspects relatively quickly;
- Serve a substantial number of families;
- Impact the most critical developmental years of pregnancy through five-years old;
- Leverage training expertise and available dollars; and
- Ensure sound Montessori developmental principles guided every aspect of the program.

The targeted area was rich with needs: many families with very young children, almost all below the poverty line, very few native English speakers, and many with questionable immigration status. The first key element in our plan was to recognize that we had no personal connection with these families. If we wanted success, we had to prepare the field and not just import personnel and programs. We used our ongoing relationship with a community partner, Dallas Area Interfaith, to first establish personal connections with families

in the area. Dallas Area Interfaith used its organizing expertise and “one conversation at a time” technique to structure individual and small group meetings, all with the intent to listen to family interests and then align our proposed programs with high-priority community needs. This was a labor intensive activity, but it was organized and structured to produce results.

Staffing and staff training was another key component. We all have at least a rough idea of the expense and time frame it takes to train a Montessori teacher and get them classroom ready. Twenty-two of our current thirty-three member staff have been trained through the Parents As Teachers program. The training lasts one week at a small fraction of the cost of Montessori training. Parents



Fatherhood Initiative, Bachman Lake Community School,  
Dallas, TX

as Teachers educators are assigned families base on perceived need. Some are assigned up to twenty-two families with two home visits a month. A smaller number make one home visit a week and serve a smaller number of families. Parents as Teachers training is sound but does not offer the depth or scope of Montessori training. Our Parents as Teachers family advocates, after initial training, move into an internship program led by a Montessori trained and experienced assistants to infancy guide. They use Dr. Montanaro's textbook *Understanding the Human Being*, have regular classes and observation assignments. This additional training is a necessary component of their development as Montessori observers of unfolding human development.

It also points to the need to populate the staff with Montessori trained personnel in a few key positions, especially in the leadership. It's difficult to say *how many* and even *where*, but major decision makers must understand the importance of sound developmental principles. At Bachman Lake Community School, the executive director and program director make program, staff development and parent education decisions from firmly grounded Montessori principles. A trained and experienced toddler guide directs a toddler environment and augments training for parent educators. Maintaining a coherent program philosophy is vital as staffs grow in number, programs and services expand, and Montessori trained advocates are spread more thinly through the ranks than we are accustomed to in our schools.

We recognized the need for a mental health component to our developing program. Explicit attention usually means a serious budget line item, or items. As teachers and heads of schools, we are well used to serving as informal counselors. We just have to know our limits and recognize situations that are beyond our capabilities and that require professional intervention. Home visits often have a therapeutic effect for mothers. The visits are for the child, but as relationships build, communication about stress, depression, and potential or actual domestic violence can surface during conversations. Not just the families but also the caregivers need support. Our Parents as Teachers educators are required to engage in a process called *reflective supervision* twice a month. These are confidential, one-on-one meetings with a licensed professional counselor. The

web of relationships is explored: parent to child, parent to Parents as Teachers educator, and Parents as Teachers educator to child. Many caregivers can be susceptible to the multiplier effect:  $x$  = number of families times  $y$  = number of challenges. An emotional precipice can be reached quite quickly, and staff members need the support not only of their peers but also of trained professionals.

As programs move from planning to operational we should all be alert for unexpected opportunities. As the Bachman Lake program took shape we noticed the absence of fathers in various meetings and in the increasingly busy office. A Fatherhood Program was conceived and set in motion rather quickly. The first meeting attracted one father. Within months we had a decent-sized core group who came back week after week. We captured the natural motivation that fathers of young children have, and overcame their feeling of being overlooked or on the margins of programs and activities directed toward very young children and their mothers. Many have made changes in their family routines and home environments that have far-reaching repercussions, and they have provided us with some of our most rewarding feedback.

A final and essential component of any service organization is sound business and regulatory operations. We have an unusually complex mix of private and public (both state and federal) funds for our schools and programs, but we try to maintain the mindset of being *audit ready* every day of the year, not just as audit season approaches. With any degree of lax or incomplete accounting, an organization cannot hope to attract new money or even maintain current and past friends. State and federal money comes attached with staggering amounts of regulation. There are at least two practices that will be helpful. First, hire people who thrive on digesting complex regulations and who can capture their essence in a few paragraphs. Like a gifted teacher, these people are gems and should be regarded as staff members of great value. Second, cultivate a certain sense of detachment to regulations or circumstances that are obviously counterproductive, but have to be lived with.

In our start-up phase at Bachman Lake we were all set with funding, a trained teacher, and eager parents for a toddler class. We just couldn't find a facilities arrangement that would allow us to have

a class more than two days a week. We went ahead anyway, made a point of including a full-sized one-way observation window, and encouraged parents to spend time watching their toddlers in action. It turned out to be by far our most powerful parent education tool. Parents couldn't believe the capabilities of their own children that they observed behind the glass, both in the area of work activities and social relationships. Many parents seriously adjusted their expectations for behavior and activities at home, and the impact on families and children far exceeded what we were expecting from a two-day-a-week program. On the regulatory front, we became aware of an Early Head Start regulation that required parent access to the toddler environment on demand. We tried to find some advantage in this situation and settled on inviting all parents in first thing in the morning for transition time, which in most cases meant diapers off, pull-ups on. Then parents sat down for breakfast with their children. Finally, as a child's attention turned after breakfast to an activity, we steered the parents out the door. Parents are quite satisfied with this arrangement, and they don't show up unexpectedly or ask for access during class time.



Bachman Lake Community School, without any primary, elementary, or adolescent programs at this time, is good in itself. It serves a meaningful number of families with well-designed programs suffused with Montessori principles. When the time is right for primary and elementary classes, the school will have a tremendous platform upon which to stand and grow. Here is a summary of key components of our program:

- Establish an authentic presence in the community based on solid evidence of the community’s interests, not on perceived needs generated by statistics or long-distance observations;
- Have an explicit guiding principle – Montessori;
- Operate well-executed programs with strong oversight;
- Include a mental health component – for families and for staff;
- Initiate and maintain sound business and regulatory practices;
- Look for unplanned opportunities (like a fatherhood initiative) and innovate with the personnel and resources available.

Many of us over the years have grappled with the challenges of bringing sound Montessori principles to a wider segment of the population. These four presentations at this conference today are a realization of those dreams on a small but significant scale. Hopefully, there will be many variations of these programs in the near future.

