

# FOLLOWING THE FAMILY: AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIRTH-TO-SIX RESEARCH PROJECT

by Jacqueline Cossentino

*Jacqueline Cossentino's research looks at the culture of the family as it pertains to four birth-to-six centers: Montessori Partners Serving All Children, in St. Paul, MN, Crossway Montessori Communities in Kensington, MD, East Dallas Community Schools in Dallas, TX, and Family Star Montessori School, in Denver, CO. These programs met for the first time in November 2013 and found commonalities like family focus, community outreach, political engagement, public-funding grants, foundation grants, and social services. The programs' intentions are to expand birth-to-six centers with a universal template for replication and building outward.*

In May 2013, the Trust for Learning, a collaborative fund supporting initiatives that focus on early learning and developmental education, awarded a research grant to the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS). The study, codirected by NCMPS senior

---

*Jacqueline Cossentino's Montessori career began as a parent, and quickly evolved into researcher and administrator, as well as university professor. An ethnographer by training, since 2001 she has drawn from her direct experience as head of an independent Montessori school and principal of a large, urban public Montessori school to produce an internationally recognized body of scholarship on Montessori education. Jackie's twenty-six years in education have included roles as a middle and high school English teacher, an elementary school principal, a professional developer for schools, districts, and museums, and a professor of educational leadership at the University of Maryland. Currently Jackie is a lecturer in Loyola Maryland's Washington Montessori Institute at Loyola. She received a B.A. in history from Smith College and an M.Ed and EdD from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

*This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Montessori from Birth to Six: In Search of Community Values, Minneapolis, MN, November 7-10, 2013.*

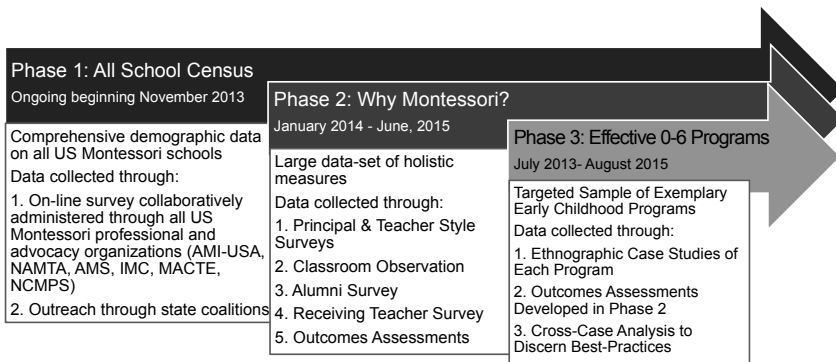


Figure 1. Research Framework

associate Jacqueline Cossentino and Steven Hughes of the Center for Research on Developmental Education, is titled *What, Why & How: A Framework for Advancing Research on Montessori Education*. The study aims to establish a framework for examining the practice and outcomes of Montessori education and consists of three, inter-related, projects.

In November 2013, the study launched a comprehensive census of all Montessori educational programs in the United States. The census is currently live at <[www.MontessoriCensus.org](http://www.MontessoriCensus.org)>. As of this writing, 850 schools have completed the thirty-item questionnaire. This data collection is the first effort in the history of the U.S. Montessori movement and is designed to achieve a complete and accurate count of all Montessori schools, teachers, and students.

Moving from broad demographic analyses that address the “what and where” of existing Montessori programs, the second phase of the study aims to answer the question “Why Montessori?” with a range of academic and developmental outcome measures. The third phase concentrates on how Montessori, particularly when implemented with fidelity and a strong focus on the first six years of life, can have lasting impact for a wide range of children, families, and communities.

*Following the Family* is a part of the study that is a multi-dimensional investigation of the structure and culture of a set of exemplary programs serving families of children between the ages of birth to

six. The core of the study entails the development of ethnographic case studies from each of the featured programs: Montessori Partners Serving all Children, in St. Paul, Minnesota; Crossway Montessori Communities, in Kensington, Maryland; East Dallas Community Schools, in Dallas, Texas; and Family Star Montessori School, in Denver, Colorado.

In November 2013, as part of the study, leaders from each of these programs gathered in Minneapolis to discuss insights from more than thirty years of innovative, family-centered service to their respective communities. While each of the four programs is unique, they share many common features. Despite the fact that all four programs have long been aware of the work of their peers, the November NAMTA conference was the first time these visionary leaders had shared a stage.

### **Back to the Future**

“I really wanted to get back to the original mission of Montessori,” explains Molly O’Shaughnessy, founder and executive director of St. Paul’s Montessori Partners Serving all Children (MPSAC). Serving the Twin Cities since 2009, MPSAC is the youngest of the four programs and is the only one directly linked to a Montessori training center, Montessori Center of Minnesota, also directed by O’Shaughnessy. In fact, the vision of the first *Casa dei Bambini*, launched in 1907 as part of an urban renewal project in Rome’s impoverished San Lorenzo district, animates all four programs.

Martha Urioste, the founder of Denver’s Family Star Montessori School, which opened in 1991 in a reclaimed crack house in one of the city’s most blighted neighborhoods, describes the mission as one of “community organizing.” Similarly, both Crossway Montessori Communities and East Dallas Community Schools were founded (in 1992 and 1978 respectively) not by Montessorians, but by community organizers seeking to use education as tool for social change. “Our focus is on families and children,” explains Crossway executive director Kathleen Guinan, “Montessori is how we achieve that focus.”

Indeed, while three of the four founders began their careers without Montessori training, they quickly embraced the methodology, with its focus on development, order, independence, and respect as central to

their respective missions. Guinan refers to Montessori as “the theory of action that governs the entire Crossway enterprise.”

At all four sites the theory is alive and fully visible. Visitors can see it in the design and care of the facilities, the manner in which new families are welcomed into the community, and in the unwavering commitment to providing the highest standard of Montessori practice to children and their families. Classrooms are clean, uncluttered, fully equipped with Montessori materials and directed by fully trained Montessori guides. So meticulous is the care of these environments that visitors are hard-pressed to distinguish these classrooms from those found in more affluent neighborhoods.

And that’s the point. “All children deserve the best,” says Connie Black MPSAC’s director of outreach, “how we take care of our environments says a lot.” Guinan agrees, “No-one can learn under stress; when children and families have access to beauty and order, everything calms down.” Making the connection between external order and internal development, East Dallas Community Schools founder Terry Ford explains, “We are committed to the social and emotional development of the child; we are about being human.”

Guinan, whose program revolves around residential education for single women and their young children, further emphasizes the importance of engaging the entire family. “What we’re really implementing here is an asset-based, family support model.” The women who come to Crossway represent vastly different social and economic circumstances, but all have encountered challenges that have left them vulnerable. Crossway’s aim is to assist these women in transforming their lives. In many cases, that means breaking generational cycles of poverty, substance abuse, violence, and familial dysfunction.

Transformation, according to Guinan, starts with fundamentally understanding the family as a system. “Children are always connected to their families; to attempt to see them as separate is a mistake.”...While much of the work of stewarding such an ambitious vision involves intensive community outreach and savvy political engagement, it’s how children and families are treated that makes these programs so distinctive.

Transformation, according to Guinan, starts with fundamentally understanding the family as a system. “Children are always connected to their families; to attempt to see them as separate is a mistake.”

While much of the work of stewarding such an ambitious vision involves intensive community outreach and savvy political engagement, it’s how children and families are treated that makes these programs so distinctive. Liza Davis, the former head of Cornerstone Montessori School, one of MPSAC’s affiliates, regards this commitment as paramount. “Inside here,” she explains, “my job is to make sure children have the full, pure, Montessori experience.”

The full, pure Montessori experience comes at a cost. All four programs are supported by a blend of public funding, philanthropic investment, and earned revenue. Both East Dallas Community Schools and Family Star Montessori School operate with Early Head Start funding. Three of the four programs operate charter schools through the elementary years, and all four programs direct significant organizational resources to institutional advancement through foundation grants, corporate investment, and private giving. How each program manages to balance its budget, maintain programmatic fidelity, and operate within a complex policy environment, are questions we expect the study will answer. We will report preliminary findings during the summer of 2014 and expect to release a complete monograph sometime during 2015.

### **From Research to Action**

When complete, we will report on the structure and culture of each of these remarkable programs, as well as their respective outcomes. Early indicators, however, are consistent with prior research documenting the transformative impact of high-quality early learning programs. East Dallas Community Schools, for instance, reports that 96% of its students passed the state reading assessment, four points higher than the state average and ten points higher than the average for Dallas Independent School District.

The qualitative outcomes are just as compelling. “When a mother sees, with her own eyes, how capable her toddler is, that she can set her own table, feed herself, and concentrate on work with purpose,” explains East Dallas Community Schools’ toddler

guide Charo Alarcón, “Nothing is ever the same.” Clearly these stories are compelling as examples of what is possible when individuals of vision and commitment take seriously the potential of very young children. Even more pressing, however, is the need for more children and families to have access to the quality of experience embodied in these centers. As a trainer who deeply resonates with the social mission first articulated by Maria Montessori more than a century ago, Molly O’Shaughnessy continually asked herself, “What are the key elements that will make Montessori accessible to many more people?”

Likewise, Ginny Trierweiler, former executive director of Family Star Montessori School and a child psychologist by training, is eager to “translate” the insights associated with fully implemented Montessori practice to a wider audience. Working in concert with these four centers, together with a wider task force of birth-to-six

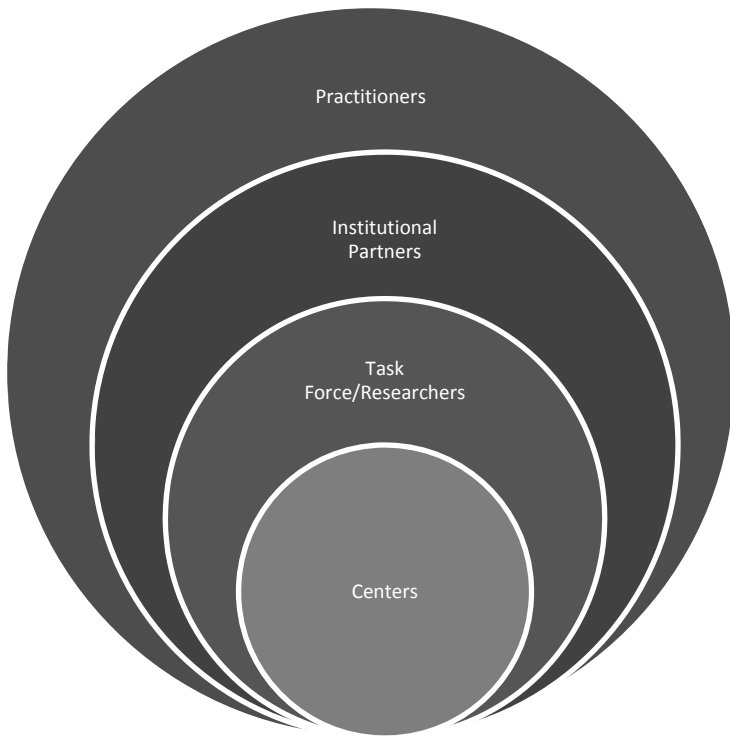


Figure 2: Expanding The Impact of Montessori Birth-to-Six Programs

experts, we hope to foster to a national community a practice that is focused on the widespread replication of these programs.

Building on the insights gained through research, the work of replication begins with understanding what makes these four model centers successful. Thus, this research constitutes a sustained focus on learning from the expertise of the individuals who launched these programs and then deriving principles that can support both the refinement and expansion of the models. We also aim to describe and analyze each center and share those descriptions and analyses with the wider community so that lessons can be known.

Expanding outward, the task force builds on those lessons, focusing on operationalizing a template for replication. Comprised of trainers as well as practitioners with expertise in the first plane of development, the task force will concentrate first on articulating a set of principles grounded in Montessori theory and practice. The principles will drive the development of an implementation guide, which will support practitioners aiming to develop new centers. In addition to the guide, the task force aims to provide support in the form of ongoing communication related to the birth-to-six Montessori practice. Institutional partners, including NCMPS, NAMTA, and the Trust for Learning are already working to develop infrastructures to support a community of practice. Visit <<http://tinyurl.com/po4dpyo>> to learn more about the project and to join an online community devoted to this work.

