

MONTESSORI EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

by Janet Begin

Janet Begin's paper is based on the recognition and recent discussion of early childhood education in America. Her research touches on the challenges of implementing Montessori birth-to-six programs at Cornerstone Montessori School, Crossway Community Montessori School, East Dallas Community Schools, and Family Star Montessori School. She examines program start-up, funding, regulations and oversight, staffing, and training in a complete summary that points to the next steps in Montessori advocacy. Based on the facts of each program, she covers common aims and perils and, most important, demonstrates the viability and success of the comprehensive family approaches at these schools.

Early childhood education is a topic of great interest and conversation lately in the United States as we continue to struggle with a seemingly unbridgeable achievement gap. Gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged (those in low-income families) open up early in the lives of children. According to Nobel Prize-winning

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Courtesy of Lynn Jessen

economist James Heckman (“The productivity argument”), investing in cognitive and social development for children ages birth to five in disadvantaged families results in better education, health, economic, and social outcomes, thus saving society money in the long run. In a policy brief commissioned by Ready Nation, Elaine Weiss echoes the same sentiment stating, “Research has demonstrated that supporting healthy early childhood development—from before birth through age 5—produces substantial educational, social, and financial benefits for children and their communities” (1). Because of the importance of early childhood education, it has become a prevalent part of the political conversation and President Obama has many initiatives geared at supporting a strong preschool education for all. President Obama’s early initiatives reflect alignment with the research of Heckman and Weiss by promoting and investing in universal preschool (U.S. Department of Education). At the same time, the federally funded preschool program, Head Start, is under scrutiny, and there are mounting questions about its long-term effectiveness (Samuels). In this climate, there are new opportunities to transform the landscape of early learning options in the United States so that all children, regardless of their family’s income level, experience success in school and later life.

One such promising option is Montessori education. Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of her educational method for social reform, stating that education “no longer matters only to children and their parents, but also to the state and to international relationships. It becomes a stimulus to every part of the social body, a stimulus to the greatest of social improvements” (15). She also advocated for a focus on early childhood education stating that learning from birth to age six is even more critical than the college years because these early years are when intelligence is being formed. In fact, Montessori’s early work focused on poor children ages two to six in the slums of Italy (Kramer). Yet, in the United States, most infant-to-age-six Montessori programs are private, with high-priced tuitions that make them inaccessible to children from low-income households. As reported by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, there has been a recent rise in the demand and availability of public Montessori education in the United States with over half of the public Montessori schools having opened their doors in the last ten years. Although some Montessori programs in the public sector include three- and four-year-olds, very few include toddlers and fewer serve infants (J. Cossentino. Personal communication. February 11, 2013).

The positive growth and reception of public elementary Montessori coupled with research indicating the transformative power of high-quality early childhood education, especially for disadvantaged children, suggests new opportunities for early learning through Montessori education. To better understand how public Montessori education might contribute to advances in children’s early learning, I looked to the ground-breaking organizations that have already entered this realm and asked what challenges and opportunities have four early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector experienced since their inception.

For the purpose of this research, I defined early childhood programs as those that serviced children from infant/toddler to age six (and above) and I considered these programs to be part of the public sector if they received some type of public funding (local, state, or federal monies for district, magnet, charter, Head Start, Early Head Start, or School Readiness programs). I considered a program to be Montessori if it met at least 75% of the criteria and

was working towards meeting the remaining specifications listed in the *Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector* (American Montessori Society) drafted and endorsed by The American Montessori Society (AMS), the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), the North American Montessori Teachers' Association, Montessori Educational Programs International, and the Southwestern Montessori Training Center in the late 1990s. One example of the criteria in this document is, "Provide professional Montessori in-service by experienced credentialed Montessori educators." Based on these definitions, I chose to examine the following four schools, all of which include publicly funded, early childhood Montessori programs:

- Cornerstone Montessori School (and Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School), St. Paul, MN (serves children ages 16 months to 9 years)
- Crossway Community Montessori School, Kensington, MD (serves children prenatal to 6 years)
- East Dallas Community Schools, Dallas, TX (now Lumin Education; serves children prenatal to 9 years)
- Family Star Montessori School, Denver, CO (serves children prenatal to 6 years)

My research resulted in the following findings in four critical areas of program development.

- *Program Start-Up and Operation:* These organizations created viable early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector; however, securing funding for start-up and facilities expenses and generating initial commitment proved challenging.
- *Funding:* These programs secured financial support from multiple public and private sources; however, acquiring funding has been labor intensive, and integrating multiple income sources across a birth to age six program has been complex.

- *Regulations and Oversight:* These Montessori programs were designed to address state and federal regulations; however, initial advocacy and education were needed, and regulations sometimes required extra resources and adjustments that contrasted with the values and practices of Montessori education.
- *Staffing and Training:* These schools all sought well-trained, committed, and unified staff as the foundation of their high quality Montessori program; however, this required careful selection of staff to ensure alignment with the organization's mission and a sustained partnership with high quality trainers and training centers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To better understand the role Montessori education should play in early childhood programming in the public sector, I examined programs currently operating in this realm. I gathered teacher and student demographics and general program information to confirm that each school met my study criteria for early childhood public Montessori, and to gain a view of the current context of each program. I also conducted interviews to gain insight into the opportunities and challenges that emerged during each program's development. I felt it was important to probe the thoughts of the people who were responsible for the existence and operation of the programs; therefore, I conducted semi-structured interviews where I could follow-up on participants' responses to gain deeper understanding of their experiences and insights.

I chose four schools as the focus of this research because it was a manageable sample size for this time-limited study yet large enough to provide variation. I did an extensive search on the internet and was able to find only a few programs in the public sector that served students under the age of three. I then contacted the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, which provided the names of four schools, three of which I had already identified during my preliminary research. For each of these programs, I chose to interview a minimum of two people. In two cases, I also interviewed a

third person because they were readily available and recommended as an interviewee. I chose to interview people who founded or led the program at some point since its inception because I wanted to examine opportunities and challenges from the perspective of program start-up and high level operation to better understand the opportunity for creating additional early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector.

I gathered demographic and general program information via the internet and by requesting that each school fill out a form. In order to collect information from school leaders and founders, I developed a one-hour interview protocol (see appendix A) and focused on the following four core areas: (1) Program start-up and operation, (2) funding, (3) regulations and oversight, and (4) staffing and training.

Early Head Start representatives from Washington, DC traveled across the country to see their Montessori program before granting the funding. Accordingly, participants noted the need for advocacy to convince legislators, local and state authorities, and funders that these Montessori early learning programs should be allowed and supported.

I chose these four topics because they emerged as the critical areas in program development and operation during my own experience starting a school, and they were confirmed during my preliminary research on state requirements for the design of early childhood programs. In each of these four areas, I developed two to four questions aimed at understanding the opportunities and challenges of launching and sustaining early childhood Montessori programs. Although it made data analysis more complex, I decided to use open-ended interview questions rather than multiple-choice surveys as a means of inviting and exploring participants' perspectives on these topics. For example, to understand how oversight groups, such as state childcare agencies, affected Montessori programs, I asked, "How do your authorizing/regulatory agencies impact your work?" During the interviews, I asked participants all of the questions in the protocol with the understanding that they could forego answering any questions, particularly if they felt a question would be best answered by another person in their organization.

Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, I analyzed the compiled text of all ten participants' responses to identify challenges and opportunities noted in each of the four content areas: program start-up and operation, funding, regulations and oversight, and staffing and training. Then I identified cross-cutting themes regarding the challenges and opportunities in each area and gathered information from program websites and other reference materials. Statistical information was collected and reviewed for each program to further inform my understanding of these themes. As needed, I followed up with participants via email or phone to pose clarifying questions or obtain additional program information. For example, when analyzing participants' descriptions of funding challenges, I noticed an overarching theme related to the complexity of securing funding. I explored this more fully by consulting the programmatic information I compiled and sending additional inquiries to understand the number of major funding sources reported by each program, who provided the funding, and how it was accessed. Then, I developed specific assertions related to opportunities and challenges (all four programs described six to eight primary funding sources). This same process was used to develop findings in each of the four areas.

RESULTS

Program Start-Up and Operation

The organizations created viable early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector; however, attaining funding especially for start-up and facilities expenses, and generating initial commitment, proved challenging. All four programs have been in existence for a number of years with the newest program being five years old and the oldest having been in operation for thirty-five years. As shown in appendix B, each program had modest beginnings with two starting from a single Montessori classroom, another starting from two Montessori classrooms, and the fourth starting with no Montessori classrooms but as a residential program for vulnerable women and children. Over the course of their existence, each organization has grown so that during the 2012-13 school year, they had from three to thirteen early-childhood classrooms (see appendix C) and a host of family support programs (see appendix D). The residential program also provided housing for thirty-seven mothers/families.

Not only have these programs grown over the years but they have also thrived in many ways. For example, in the spring of the 2012-13 school year, all programs had a student waitlist ranging from approximately 10% to 135% of their current enrollment. Furthermore, all four schools have qualified for a number of public funding sources and have continued to receive this support over multiple years (see table 1). Because of this public funding combined with private fundraising, all four programs have been able to serve students from disadvantaged families with individual programs serving from 61% to 74% students from low-income families during the 2012-13 school year (see appendix C). In addition, all of these schools have a history of securing multiple private donations and grants, accounting for approximately 15% to 35% of their annual budgets over the past few years, indicating that they have the approval of the awarding organizations. Third, demand for these schools is evidenced by the fact that all of these programs receive tuition from a portion of their families with some of these families paying full price. Finally, some of these programs have received multiple forms of recognition. For example, Crossway Community Montessori School was selected for the 2011/12 Catalogue for Philanthropy for Greater Washington and has also been named a top-rated organization on the site GreatNonprofits in 2011. Also in 2011, East Dallas Community Schools (EDCS) earned the nationally prestigious 2011 Educational Achievement Award from the American Psychoanalytic Association for its system-wide support of children’s emotional

	Local/State Childcare Funding		State Charter School Funding		Federal Head Start or Early Head Start Funding	
	Ages Funded	Years Received	Ages Funded	Years Received	Ages Funded	Years Received
Cornerstone	16 months-6 yrs	5	5-9 years	2		
Crossway	3 months-6 years	23	4-6 years	1		
East Dallas			3-9 years	14	prenatal-3 yrs	3
Family Star	2 months-6 years	22			prenatal-6 yrs	16

Table 1. Public Funding Sources and Duration as of the End of 2012-13 School Year

well-being. In addition, EDCS has received state commendations for student achievement in reading for the past six years.

Although successfully operating in the public sector, all respondents reported challenges, especially during start-up. When asked about the two biggest challenges in starting or operating their program, at least one participant from each program described funding challenges. One respondent commented that operations and funding are always tricky, but especially at the beginning when you have no history and no resources. Another participant explained that in order to convince people of the potential of their school and the value of funding it, they had to use the positive results of another early childhood public Montessori program. Participants from three of the four programs specifically noted that securing facilities was a particularly challenging aspect of start-up. One participant said it took eighteen months to find a suitable location and it was an enormous challenge to secure the large amount of money needed to purchase and renovate a building. Another participant from a program that engaged in a \$4.5 million capital campaign before securing their second permanent site, said their program had to start out in donated space next to a methadone center.

A second challenge reported by participants in three of the four programs involved finding and inspiring people to commit to both the non-profit and public aspects of their Montessori programs. One interviewee said that it was a big challenge finding people aligned with the Montessori mission of their school to launch the board, and who had the capacity and desire to start a nonprofit organization. In particular, she cited the need for people with various skill sets, giving examples such as CPA, attorney, engineer, grant-writer, and those experienced with purchasing and renovating buildings. Another person from a different program echoed that sentiment stating, "Finding the right people—board, staff, and families to partner around our mission—is a unique and exciting challenge" (Head of School. Personal communication. March 8, 2013). Another person from that program elaborated about finding appropriate staff for their program saying, "We listen carefully to motivation for Montessori vision and ensuring all children have access" (Executive Director. Personal communication. March 12, 2013). Participants also discussed difficulties with ensuring that constituents were

prepared to support the organization’s mission, and they especially noted the need for investment in teacher training.

Funding

Financial support was secured from multiple public and private sources; however, acquiring funding has been labor intensive and integrating multiple income sources across a birth-to-age-six program has been complex. All four of the participating Montessori programs had six to eight primary funding sources for the 2012-13 school year as indicated in table 2. This included at least one source of federal funding and one source of state and/or local funding for all programs. For instance, Family Star in Colorado reported three state and local funding sources including the local Denver Preschool Program, the Colorado Preschool Program, and the Colorado Child-care Assistance Program, which includes Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds. Most of these funding programs targeted

Funding Source	Cornerstone	Crossway	East Dallas	Family Star
Public: local (Denver Preschool Program)	√			√
Public: state				
Charter/district	√	√	√	
Childcare assistance (can be funded through local, state, and federal sources)	√	√		√
Public: federal				
Early Head Start			√	√
Head Start				√
United States Dept. of Agriculture (food)	√	√	√	√
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (administered through the states)		√		√
Entitlement grants	√		√	
Private				
Tuition and fees	√	√	√	√
Donations and grants	√	√	√	√

Table 2. Primary Funding Sources for the 2012-13 School Year

children who needed special assistance, and eligibility was always based on income and sometimes other factors as well. The Denver Preschool Program was available for four-year-olds from any Denver family although the amount of support was dependent on family size and income.

All of the early childhood education programs in this study also received private support in the form of tuition, fees, donations, and grants. All four programs had some students who were enrolled based on tuition and fees, with some families paying full price while others were eligible for reduced tuition based on a sliding scale determined by income level. Although some students pay tuition, it is a minority that pay full price since all of these programs seek to serve a majority (over 50%) of students from low-income families. One participant reported that 89.5% of the students served by her program attend for free. Another participant from a different program stated that part of the mission of her program includes serving students from low-income families, so at least 60% of the program's openings are devoted to these students, a policy she reported is articulated to families who enroll their children. A respondent from a third program reported that approximately 70% of the students served by her program attend for free because of Early Head Start or Head Start funding.

Finally, all respondents reported that fundraising is a necessary part of operating their program; funding sources included grants and donations from individuals, corporations, and community organizations. Participants from three of the four programs said such funding accounts for approximately one-third of their program's revenues, and a respondent from the fourth program reported 15% to 25% of her program's income is from private grants and donations. Some participants reported that some of their funders are specifically supporting early childhood programs for disadvantaged children, and some reported donations from funders who support Montessori education or "like what they see" in Montessori classrooms.

All participants reported that it is labor intensive to secure adequate funding. For example, in addition to collecting and managing program tuition and fees, staff from each of these programs applied for support from multiple funding sources, each with dif-

ferent application processes. Participants noted that one reason they need to pursue multiple funding streams is to address the various eligibility needs of the diverse student population in their programs. For example, in one program, only some students from low-income families were eligible for the limited number of Head Start funding slots so other state or local assistance was sought for other students from low-income families. Similarly, another program filed for a Preschool for All grant so they could provide services to some of their students who needed support but were not funded by other assistance programs. Participants also reported needing to invest time in multiple funding applications in order to fund afternoon care in their full-day programs since most of the public support allowed for only a half-day education for preschool students. Each of these individual applications can be time-consuming. One participant reported that for one type of county funding, staff spend approximately two hours per week supporting families in the childcare funding application process and working with county assistance officers to ensure the corresponding money is directed to their agency. Participants also reported that time and money must be committed to secure the income from other fundraising activities. One respondent commented that it is necessary to continually develop relationships with existing grantors and donors, and to conduct ongoing research on funding streams that relate to their mission. Participants from all four of the programs said their organization employs a development coordinator/director to help identify, secure, and manage the various grants and donations as well as stewarding donors. All programs have at least one person that works full-time on development, and one participant reported that her program has three full-time people doing development work. In addition to filing applications and attending to development work, staff time must be invested to address associated regulations while ensuring proper program operation.

When asked about challenges associated with the funding sources, one participant responded, "Negotiating them all—each one individually; they all have their own rules, regulations, and people" (Head of School. Personal communication. March 8, 2013). Another stated, "It is an organizational nightmare braiding all this funding together. It makes our work more challenging because the system, and associated funding, is compartmentalized and we need

to integrate it” (Chief Executive Officer. Personal communication, February 2, 2013). Respondents from a third program described the difficulty of managing fluctuations in funding caused by public dollars that are subject to annual legislative decisions, as well as private funding that varies from year to year. Participants also reported special challenges when approaching funders for the first time. In particular, applicants must find ways to prove that their Montessori programs can address the requirements set forth by the funding sources. For instance, programs such as Head Start have numerous regulations regarding student-teacher interactions and many of their funded programs use particular research-based curricula. Therefore, when a different kind of program applies for Head Start funding, in this case highlighting Montessori methods, materials, and student-teacher interactions, grantors want some sort of proof that this program will meet their regulations. In the case of one of the programs involved in this research, Early Head Start representatives from Washington, DC traveled across the country to see their Montessori program before granting the funding. Accordingly, participants noted the need for advocacy to convince legislators, local and state authorities, and funders that these Montessori early learning programs should be allowed and supported.

Participants also described complexity in making various funding sources work together seamlessly to ensure student support across the years from infancy to age six. In particular, different age groups are funded by different sources. For example, three of the four programs participating in this study receive charter funding for some of their older students and a lottery is required to determine admission to this part of the program. As a result, some students enrolled in programs for younger children are not allowed to continue up through the grades if they are not selected in the lottery. Respondents described different strategies that their programs use to ensure better continuity in these cases, such as designating a small service area to receive priority for enrollment in their charter school so that there are enough slots for that neighborhood and then recruiting infant to three-year-old students only from that service area. Another respondent reported that her program has a short enrollment period for their lottery and it is held early enough in the year that most families are not yet looking at school options for

the following year. Concurrently, the program targets advertising to families with children eligible for their toddler program who live in nearby nonaffluent areas.

Similar challenges were reported by respondents from a program supported by Early Head Start and Head Start funding. Because each of these funding sources focuses support toward children in different regions, those supported by Early Head Start are subsequently not eligible for support from Head Start (although some are able to continue in the program with support from state childcare funds). Participants from this program also noted that they lost many of their tuition-paying students when they became eligible to attend tuition-free kindergarten programs in district schools. Both advantaged and disadvantaged parents want their children to be enrolled in a district school for first grade, so these families seek enrollment during the entry (kindergarten) year to ensure a better placement. Respondents from this program said they are trying to develop a partnership with the district so children can finish their kindergarten year in the Montessori program and still be assured a seat in a good district school.

As noted above, participants described a host of possibilities when combining funding sources; programs have addressed related challenges by devising unique solutions such as structuring their service areas and lotteries to ensure better continuity for students up through the grades. Respondents from different states also reported unique rules related to the same types of funding sources, as well as a lack of clarity about what was and was not possible when navigating these sources for the first time. For instance, one participant reported that since their charter program, which starts at kindergarten, is not allowed to charge tuition, it has to be overseen by an organization that is separate from their early childhood program, which does charge some tuition, and funding and operations costs have to be split accordingly (since these programs share space and teachers). However, a participant from that same program reported that they came to an agreement with their charter-authorizing agency that allows preschool students who are not selected by lottery to attend the charter school and to enter kindergarten by enrolling on a tuition basis with the private organization as long as it does not overburden the combined program.



Alternatively, a participant from another program with a charter reported that it runs three different tracks: one that serves infants to age three and is supported through federal Early Head Start funds and private donations; another that educates students ages three to nine and is supported through state charter school funds, student tuition (paid by parents), and private donations; and a third that provides a before- and after-school care program for children ages three to nine and is supported entirely by private donations and student tuition (paid by parents). A respondent for this program reported that charter students can enter the lottery to start preschool at three years old and, once enrolled, are eligible to remain in the program through third grade; however, those who are selected by lottery but are not income-eligible for state funding, must pay for the first two years. According to this program's charter, 75% of three- and four-year-olds who are enrolled must be eligible for state funding and the other 25% can be tuition-paying students.

A participant from a third program reported that their lottery is for three-year-olds, but they only receive state funding for four-year-olds whose families are below the qualifying income level; they must raise funding for all other three- and four-year-olds because their authorizing agent does not allow them to charge any tuition.

Unlike the previous organization, this program is not able to allocate a certain percentage of their seats for income-eligible students. With this variation in funding sources and associated regulations from one school to another, coupled with the need for multiple income sources to support a comprehensive birth to age six program, it has been an ongoing challenge to ensure appropriate financial support for these programs.

Regulations and Oversight

These Montessori programs were designed to address state and federal regulations; however, initial advocacy and education were needed, and regulations sometimes required extra resources and adjustments that contrasted with the values and practices of Montessori education. All participants named multiple organizations when asked about the agencies to which they report. Each program is required to have childcare licensing and is overseen by a state agency, usually a human services department, in order to maintain their license for early childhood education and extended day programs. There is also one or more oversight agency associated with each of the public funding sources, and those agencies vary for programs in different states and some even within states. For instance, a participant from Colorado stated that their program reports to Region 8 Early Head Start as a grantee for that funding and to Denver Great Kids as a delegate because that organization is the Head Start grantee. All participants with charters indicated that they report to their state department of education, but two participants stated that they are also accountable to an additional organization for their charter authorization and oversight. In one case, the authorizer is Volunteers of America, and in the other case it is the local board of education. In addition to the oversight required for

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licensing and public funding, some participants indicated that they report to private funders or other organizations to which they have chosen to associate. For example, one program chooses to report to the AMI for certification of their toddler program. Another participant stated that they are accountable to Qualistar, which is an optional rating organization that is required by one of their funders. All of these Montessori programs have been able to address the regulations required of publicly funded and licensed programs, as well as the additional accountability required by other funders or accreditation organizations.

Participants noted that although their organizations could address the requirements of multiple oversight organizations, this presented initial and ongoing challenges. In particular, many of the regulations require extra resources. For example, one participant reported that it takes a great deal of time for site visits, paperwork, and reporting to address the requirements of the varied funding agencies. A participant from another program commented that the various regulatory agencies have their individual standards and extra time must be allowed for extra staffing hours to attend to these regulatory responsibilities. When asked specifically about standards and assessments, multiple respondents reported a wide variety of guidelines and tools that they are required to use, all of which take time for administration and reporting, not to mention the impact of teachers' time being absorbed in giving assessments when they need to be giving lessons. Participants also noted staffing regulations that resulted in extra expenses. For instance, one program is required to match the district's teacher compensation and benefit program, which is more generous than their organization's former program. Other participants mentioned requirements that call for lower student-teacher ratios than those recommended for a Montessori classroom.

Respondents who started a program that was the first of its kind in a state or county reported that they needed to invest extra time to study and address issues anew since regulations can vary by location, limiting the usefulness of prior work done by Montessori programs in other contexts. Some examples of this regulation variability were described in the funding section of this paper, such as inconsistencies across states in charter guidelines and allowed

modifications. An example of the extra efforts required when starting a new Montessori program was provided by a participant who is accountable to her local board of education. In this case, she described being required to work collaboratively with the local district to fit non-Montessori standards for evaluation and hiring with their Montessori organization. In addition to investing extra effort for a new Montessori program, participants noted that it was sometimes necessary to request reforms and changes that were particular to each program's unique location. For instance, one respondent talked about the need for filing waivers to allow Montessori practices, such as grouping students in multi-age classrooms and using cooking utensils in the classroom. Another participant from that program spoke about the work that was done to pass legislation so Montessori early childhood centers could apply for waivers to keep their Montessori materials. She stated, "It took a ground swell of Montessori parents, teachers, attorneys and legislators. It was helpful that we have four public Montessori schools and a Montessori charter in [our city]" (Board Member. Personal communication. March 7, 2013).

On the other hand, respondents noted that sometimes they just tolerate the negative impact of regulations instead of investing in making adjustments. For example, one respondent reported that they "lose points" when being evaluated by Qualistar because they choose not to address certain rating criteria (such as the requirement to have soft toys/stuffed animals in the classroom) that are not part of the Montessori curriculum. Two participants expressed the negative impact that they felt some of the regulations have on their program with one saying that our Montessori teachers feel constrained by the large number of regulations and they feel as if they are not being treated professionally since their judgment and methodology is minimized by these rules. For instance, some of the Montessori early childhood materials that teachers feel are serving an important developmental purpose are small or made of glass and therefore are not permitted according to regulations. Accordingly, a second participant commented, "It is tough to keep Montessori teachers if they have to follow rules that are against their beliefs about child development" (Chief Executive Officer. Personal communication. March 4, 2013).

Staffing and Training

These schools all sought well-trained, committed, and unified staff as the foundation of their high quality Montessori program; however, this required careful selection of staff to ensure alignment with the organization's mission and a sustained partnership with high quality trainers and training centers. When asked what factors they felt contributed most to the high quality of their Montessori program, participants from all four programs were unified in their conviction that it is most important to have a community committed to their mission with the backbone of that community being high-quality teachers. In particular, one participant stated that their program is successful because they have a highly trained staff with congruent training and shared values. A respondent from a different program commented that it is essential to find families and staff that are all partnering around the same mission and working together to pursue it. She went on to say, "Any time you have a solidified idea and everyone is united, it works. So having staff and parents united around AMI training makes us successful. Having everyone with the same training from the same center is important" (Head of School. Personal communication. March 8, 2013). A participant from a third program echoed this sentiment saying that the number one requirement for success is high quality, well-trained Montessori teachers who are passionate about their work. A participant from the fourth program emphasized the same point, saying that both the dedication of their staff and faculty to their mission, and expectations for high levels of training, are critical to the quality of their program. When asked what qualifications their teaching staff are required to meet, participants from all four programs said that Montessori certification is necessary and specifically that AMI certification is required or preferred. When asked about AMS certification, respondents from all but one program said they would consider someone with AMS certification. In terms of actual teacher qualifications, participants from two programs indicated that 100% of their lead teachers were Montessori-certified. Participants from the other two programs indicated that their lead teachers were Montessori-certified or in the process of receiving training either through a Montessori training program or from a Montessori-trained curriculum coordinator. The majority of the trained teachers hold AMI certification and three teachers from two different programs hold AMS certification.

Participants reported that they invested effort in identifying Montessori-certified staff to carry out their mission of providing Montessori in the public sector, and faced associated challenges, as well. Participants from all four programs said it is an ongoing challenge to find well-trained Montessori teachers. Three of these respondents were specific about the types of teachers they struggle to find, with one specifying infant/toddler teachers, another person saying primary teachers, and the third specifying AMI teachers. Another participant detailed the attention needed when hiring to ensure



a commitment to serving students from low-income households. All participants felt that the quality of their program was maximized by investing effort to find well-trained staff with a commitment to their program's mission.

Participants also reported the importance of ongoing, high-quality training, not only as a way to ensure an adequate pool of well-trained teachers, but also to ensure the quality and success of their programs. One participant said they send people for training in advance of when they need them because they always want to have someone "waiting in wings." Another echoed that sentiment, saying they support teachers in getting their AMI training to increase their applicant pool. Many participants talked about the importance of having a relationship with a training center. One participant felt the quality of their program is high because they have a training center in the same location as the school, and they have a mentor program and invest in professional development. Another respondent said, "We have aligned ourselves with a thorough implementation of Montessori based on AMI, and that has been critical in terms of the rigor of the Montessori standards. We also ensure lots of investment in our teachers and our entire faculty" (Chief Executive Officer. Personal communication. March 21, 2013). A third person reported that they have a close relationship with a training center and they engage the center's staff to support classroom assessments and professional development days. Another participant from the same program concurred, saying it is key that all their teachers are trained by the same institute.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I sought to understand the potential landscape for the expansion of early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector in the United States. Based on my analysis of program information and perceptions of program leaders in four Montessori programs in the public sector, I conclude that there is an opportunity to create Montessori early childhood programs that succeed in the public sector. In particular, Montessori schools are eligible for funding from a number of public and private organizations, and by combining these funding sources, it is feasible to support an organizationally sound program that serves an economically

diverse student population. Furthermore, with proper investment and some programmatic modifications, early childhood Montessori organizations can meet the state and federal regulations for program licensing as well as eligibility requirements for initial and continued funding. By recruiting and sustaining a high quality, committed, and unified staff, it is possible not only for these programs to be viable but also to thrive, growing over the course of their history, amassing strong waitlists, and earning various awards and accolades. In fact, the most promising news of all is that these programs can have a positive impact on the children they serve, the majority of which come from low-income families.

There are also many hurdles that must be overcome in order to initiate and sustain an effective Montessori school in the public sector, some of which are inherent to any public early childhood center and others that are unique to Montessori programs. In particular, it can be challenging to secure funding, especially for start-up and facility needs. This challenge is more intense for Montessori early childhood programs since they are not currently major players in the public arena and must prove that their approach effectively addresses state and federal requirements as well as the needs of public school families. Therefore, significant investment in advocacy as well as community and funder education is required during the initial start-up phase. Added complexity is created by Montessori's three-year age span within classes as well as curriculum materials that are designed for a multi-year progression of learning. This contrasts with multiple individual funding sources each of which spans only part of the six years thereby challenging efforts to ensure a continuous and coherent Montessori infant-to-age-six program. Additionally, some licensing and funding regulations, such as those that require or restrict specific curriculum materials, do not align well with a Montessori education. With advocacy and education, some of these obstacles can be removed, but others will likely need to be addressed by investing extra resources or making programmatic adjustments, some of which may constrain the potential impact of these programs on students' growth and learning. Lastly, since the backbone of a strong program is the teaching staff, the selection and development of these individuals requires significant investment. In particular, it is necessary to find, inspire, and prepare people to advance the

organization's public Montessori mission. This can be challenging given that most early childhood Montessori programs currently operate in the private sector, and job applicants may not understand the unique demands and rewards of working in the public sector. Furthermore, the demand for these teachers can outweigh the supply, and organizations must find ways to ensure the development of their own well-qualified workforce. This may require a sustained partnership with high quality trainers and training centers, both of which may be hard to develop in particular locations.

In addition to highlighting opportunities and challenges for early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector, this research also raises additional questions. First, all participants in this study attributed their program's success to their AMI training and certification programs, raising the question of what type of training is needed to support effective early childhood public Montessori programs. Also, all four programs provided an array of family support services. Accordingly, Heckman ("The productivity argument") asserted that early childhood educational programs are more effective in promoting success for children from disadvantaged families when provided in conjunction with childrearing resources and family supports. This raises a second question of how family support services influence the success of Montessori early childhood programs.

Overall, there is an opportunity for Montessori education to provide the early developmental support that is critical for the future success of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Results from this study support the argument that Montessori infant-to-age-six schools can enter the public sector and thrive. However, there are obstacles to overcome, and with few programs in existence today, there are minimal opportunities to connect with model programs and seek their support in addressing these challenges. For those who want to follow Maria Montessori's lead of introducing this educational option into the public sector for very young children, it is important to understand the challenges that these programs face and answer the questions that this research has brought forth. With further research and investigation, it is possible to provide the resources and promote policies that will enable more early childhood Montessori programs to flourish in the public sector, allowing

young children from economically diverse backgrounds and their families new options for effective early learning and improved opportunities for later success.

FUTURE DIRECTION

This research suggests several directions that, in concert, may support the continued development of well-designed and supported early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector. These include:

- Advocating for public policy that targets the revision of particular laws and regulations that currently impede the optimal implementation of birth-to-age-six Montessori programs;
- Educating funders regarding the effectiveness of Montessori education, the potential impact of early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector, and the role that these early childhood programs can play in improving children's opportunities for success;
- Developing research agendas and partnerships to study
 - short- and long-term outcomes of early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector,
 - the impact of varied training programs (especially AMI and AMS programs) on the success of early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector,
 - the significance of family support services on the success of Montessori early childhood education programs,
 - the impact of regulation-induced adjustments to Montessori programs on children and their learning during the period from birth to age six;

- Developing and disseminating a general guide, including state-specific recommendations, for the design and funding of early childhood Montessori programs in the public sector;
- Strengthening and increasing early childhood Montessori training options, as well as developing alternative models of training and development; and
- Forging partnerships between Montessori early childhood leaders and Montessori trainers and training centers.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Early Childhood Montessori Program Interview Questions

Program Start-Up and Operation

- How was your program started?
- Describe your 2 biggest challenges in starting this program and/or biggest challenges operating this program?
- What evidence/information regarding Montessori curriculum do you have to provide to authorizing agencies, funders, and families? Is there any research on the outcomes of your program?
- What 2 factors do you feel contribute most to the high quality of your (Montessori) program?*

Funding

- How is your program funded?
- How was this funding secured?
- How do you ensure student continuity from infant to end of program? (How does this work with the lottery and/or funding source?)*
- What are the biggest challenges associated with these funding sources?

Regulations and Oversight

- Which agencies do you report to?
- How do your authorizing/regulatory agencies impact your work?

Staffing and Training

- What qualifications are your teaching staff required to meet?
- What do you do to ensure an adequate supply of high quality Montessori staff?

*Questions were added after the first two interviews.

APPENDIX B

GENERAL PROGRAM INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS' ORGANIZATIONS

Name	Cornerstone Montessori School	Crossway Community Montessori School	East Dallas Community Schools	Family Star Montessori School
General Information				
Address	1611 Ames Ave St. Paul, MN 55106	3015 Upton Dr. Kensington, MD 20895	924 Wayne Street Dallas, TX 75223	2246 Federal Blvd. Denver, CO 80211
Website	mtcm.org/school	crossway- community.org	www.edcschool.org	familystar.net
Email	cornerstone@mtcm.org	sent via website	sent via website	sent via website
Phone	651-774-5000	301-929-2505	214-824-8950	303-477-7827
Start-Up Information as of the End of the 2012-13 School Year				
# Years of Operation	5	23	35	22
# Years Montessori	5	18	35	22
Function at inception	Montessori private school with a toddler and a primary (3-6) class	Residential program for vulnerable women and children	Montessori private school with one primary (3-6) classroom	Montessori district school with one primary (3-6) classroom
Role of lead founder prior to inception	Montessori Trainer	Community Organizer	Public School Teacher	Public School Principal
Experience of founding leader with Montessori	Extensive Experience and Certification	Awareness but no certification	Awareness but no certification	Awareness but no certification
Admission Criteria 2012-13				
Lottery	√ (for Elementary School)	√	√	
Income level	√ (for Early Childhood)	√	√	√
Pay for service	√ (for Early Childhood)	√	√	√
Licensing/Oversight Agencies 2012-13				
State Childcare Org	√	√	√	√
State Education Dept	√	√	√	√
Head/Early Start			√	√
USDA (food)	√	√	√	√
Others (specify)	Volunteers of America	local board of education		

APPENDIX C

STUDENT AND STAFF INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS' ORGANIZATIONS

	Cornerstone	Crossway	East Dallas	Family Star
Staff Information 2012-13				
# Lead teachers	6	10	13	13
% AMI certified	100%	40% (all 4 of the 3-6 teachers)	100%	85% (+1 in training)
% AMS certified	none	20% (2*)	none	8% (1)
# Assistant teachers	6	10	13	40
General Student/Classroom Information 2012-13				
# Total students	130	126	548	216 (includes some in other centers)
# on waitlist	60	173	over 200 (new each year)	25 (changes monthly)
Current age range	16 months to 9 years	3 months-6 years	prenatal-9 years	prenatal-6 years
Planned age range	16 mo.-12 years in 2 schools	3 months-9 years	prenatal-9 years	
# students/level				
0-18 months	0	12 (starts at 3 months)	248 (parent education only; prenatal to 5 years)	24 (2-14 months) (and 10 pregnant women/year)
18 mo-3 yrs	10 (16 months-3 years)	26	38 (15 months-3 years)	56 (14 months-3 years)
3-6 years	59	90	162	60
6+ years	61	0	100	0
# classes/level				
0-18 months	0	2 (starts at 3 months)	0	3 (2-14 months)
18 mo-3 years	1 (16 months-3 years)	4	4 (2 half/2 full;15 mos-3yrs)	7 (14 months-3 years)
3-6 years	2	4	6	3
6+ years	2	0	4	0
Student Statistical Information 2012-13				
% Low-income	61%	65%	70% (average for all 3 schools)	74%
% LEP/ESL	40%	3%	56% (average for all 3 schools)	15%
% SPED	15%	4%	11% (average from 2 schools)	14%

APPENDIX D

FAMILY SERVICES OFFERED BY PARTICIPANTS' ORGANIZATIONS

Services	Cornerstone	Crossway	East Dallas	Family Star
Intensive Family Programs (seminars, orientations, handbooks)	√	√	√	√
Parent-Child Environment (spaces designed for infants and toddlers and their parents to interact)	√	√	√	√
Prenatal Classes		√	√	√
Home Visits	√	√	√	√
Life-Skills Programming for Parents (ESL, Economic Literacy, Nutrition, Career Development)		√	√	√
Job Training for Parents (e.g. Montessori Assistant Training)		√		
Housing		√		

Source: The information in this table was provided by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

