

DESCRIPTION OF THE MARIA MONTESSORI LANGUAGE & CULTURAL CENTER'S (MMLCC) PROGRAMS AT BALLARD HIGH SCHOOL (BHS) IN A PARTNERSHIP FOR POSITIVE COLLABORATION WITH THE BHS DEPT OF FAMILY & CONSUMER SCIENCES AND SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

A unique collaboration between the Ballard High School Family & Consumer Sciences Department and the private, non-profit Maria Montessori Language & Cultural Center (MMLCC) began in the summer of 2003. Initiated under the Seattle School District's Community Alignment Initiative, an effort aiming at maximizing student success by partnering school resources with community educational activities, a Montessori program now occupies what was the vacant Early Childcare space at Ballard High. High school students who have interned in the program have completed the child development class taught by Eileen Knobbs, the head of the Ballard's Family & Consumer Sciences Dept. Ultimately the high school students will receive college credit toward degrees in early childhood education if they so choose to go on.

Some might question the value of having a Montessori program in a high school, but the Seattle School District is actually looking for ways to expand the Montessori presence due to rising parent demand. There are already Montessori kindergartens and early-grades at two Seattle public schools and there is talk about developing another Montessori program at the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School. Why this upturn in interest, and why in a high school?

The Montessori model for educating the young child was the original concept of Dr. Maria Montessori. She was Italy's first female physician. She was also a philosopher, scientist, mathematician, anthropologist, author, psychologist, lecturer, teacher and mother. She was an advocate for children's rights and social reform. During her lifetime she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times.

Early in Dr. Montessori's career, she dedicated her life to the study and observation of children. In 1907, having envisioned her concept of a model learning environment, she opened her first childcare program, which she named "Casa dei Bambini", in a suburb of Rome. This first "Children's House" brought together young children between two and a half to six years of age. Through her vision children were shown a way to develop independence and self-confidence in a place where they could practice living peacefully together. Furthermore, it offers opportunities for children to delve into concepts and gain understanding, using Dr. Montessori's creative hands-on manipulatives. Since these materials are designed to span developmental levels, young children build vocabulary and gain insight into areas of mathematics and science, as well as other related cultural subjects. Her original and innovative approach continues to validate human intelligence in the mind of a child and releases the vast potential of children who are taking their first steps into the 21st century.

The role of the Montessori lab school at Ballard High School is very special. It is the first of it's

kind to be established in a Seattle public high school. By November, BHS students enrolled in the early childhood development class will be prepared to begin their observations in the Montessori laboratory for learning. They will see 3-5 year olds who are developing skills for life. They will see children who are on a path of self-care, learning to care for others, and responsibly taking care of their environment.

The Montessori lab school is a learning community that encourages freedom with responsibility, where children are shown how to do very basic things for themselves, such as hanging their coats on coat hangers, changing their outdoor shoes into indoor slippers, and washing their hands. When they complete these tasks, they may choose from an array of beautiful individual "work" that is arranged neatly on the shelves throughout the environment. As each child completes their work, they replace it on the shelf for the next person. By November, children can carry out this process in a graceful and orderly fashion, taking personal satisfaction in this newly-acquired mastery.

BHS students in the early childhood development class have a regular Monday instruction on child development, taught by the staff of the Montessori lab school as well as drawing from other family and community resources. Through personal interest, some students participate in a semester of internship, gaining experience as assistants in the Montessori environment. During their early childhood development class time they will enter into a different experience in the Montessori "Children's House" at Ballard High School. This is an integration of their core curriculum day in a unique 'out of school time' experience where they participate in the life of the broader community; all of which is within their own campus.

When high school students choose to intern at this site, they are taking part in work-related experiences which involve responsibilities that are relevant and meaningful to them. When students choose a job or volunteer in a working situation in their community, they are building assets that nourish their personal independence. They also are increasing their awareness of good communication skills, and are valued for their individual talents and their personalities that contribute to a rich community life.

BHS students in the program last January were surprised to see 3-5 year old children already focused on advanced concepts in the areas of science, history, math and other languages. Since high school students are learning about stages of growth and development, they will also have real opportunities to notice, question and consider the needs of children who are at different levels of understanding, behavior and self-development. And because the Montessori model values age diversity in the community, it clearly defines a way to meet the needs of individuals. Young children in Montessori programs accomplish much and often exceed typical expectations. BHS students watch in awe as young 5 year olds perform multiplication into the thousands, make anatomically-correct drawings of pet crayfish, and write sentences with Montessori's movable alphabet.

Children are naturally curious about nature, the earth, its geography, continents, people, and languages. Dr. Montessori taught that 3-5 year old children are in a "sensitive period" for acquiring language, and this is precisely the time when the musical sounds of different languages are most easily absorbed. At the Montessori lab school, children experience English, Italian, and Chinese languages through group songs, movement activities, role play and drama.

While the Montessori program is tucked just off a quiet hallway west of the high school Library, the children do play outdoors and may occasionally take 'field trips' to the school library. The high school students are mostly intrigued, amused and protective. High school administrators believe that young children have a positive influence on the older students' behavior. The young ones enjoy their special status about the high school students. At one pep assembly, children sat transfixed while watching cheerleaders performed their fanciful antics. For the most part, however, the contact between younger and older "Ballard Beavers" is limited. Last spring, seven BHS students interned in the Montessori program. Currently there is one intern, but over 30 are enrolled in the prerequisite Early Childhood class.

Opportunities to connect with other departments are being explored. We have had high school students spontaneously make connections between one subject and another. For example, the week we were studying the sound of "S", two of the high school students working with us, borrowed a live sea star from a Biology lab and brought it to show the children. Ms. Knobbs' sewing class made red-and-black caps (the BHS colors) for our children to wear during fire drills. Students from the Horticulture Department created a space to plant scarlet runner beans along the fence of the children's outdoor play area. This Fall, the beans have climbed the playground fence and the children are picking the bean pods. As further cooperative efforts are made to fold the Montessori philosophy and operation into the Ballard High School community, we anticipate continuing positive outcomes. We invite the greater Seattle School community to take a look at what is happening here, and see if it is a model worth considering in other public schools.

Maria Montessori Language & Cultural Center
Casa Maria Montessori lab school at Ballard High School
Director Gail T Longo
Ballard High School
206-252-1124
Cell: 206-789-2942