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## Grassroots Grit: Two Tales of Impassioned Parents and Citizens Who Are Making Montessori Education a Reality for Public School Students

### Cincinnati

#### A Neighborhood 's School

The residents of the Pleasant Ridge neighborhood of Cincinnati were not amused.

So what if the largely white community of about 10,000 residents had abandoned its public school, that its enrollment was largely minority and not doing well? The district's plan to tear down the crumbling, 1913-vintage building and rebuild on land it had purchased a mile away, was a non-starter.

That was about five years, a few hundred meetings and a few thousand door-knocks ago. In late August a new, environmentally attuned, age 3-grade 6 school opened on the site of the old building in what is perhaps the first neighborhood public Montessori school in the country. And the neighborhood is happy. Enrollment in the program grew from about 300 last year to more than 550. The demographic mix has improved and the preschool grades better reflect the multi-racial population of the neighborhood and the school's two other primary attendance areas—Amberly Village and Golf Manor—that are outside Cincinnati city limits but within the school district.

Alumni have formed a foundation to support the school. Community partnerships have blossomed.

It has been a trek. Darlene Kamine, an attorney turned community organizer initially hired by the Cincinnati district to manage relations with the neighborhood group, is a good tour guide.

"This is a very active community," Kamine said. "A community that votes. The administration and board of education know that."

As residents of the neighborhoods were raising concerns about the district, 10-year facilities master plan that included razing their school, Kamine took to listening. She heard residents who, rather than accepting the district's plan, were asking how to bring a new population into a school that was failing and segregated. Residents were willing to talk and work. More than 100 attended frequent meetings.

Through years of meetings of neighborhood, school planning team, Community Learning Center and Local School Decision-Making committees, and difficult decisions, a community came together.

The first question was what sort of school would rebuild the community.

A number of options were discussed, including a Waldorf format. As Kamine tells it, a group of former Montessori teachers and administrators living and raising children in the neighborhood made the case that a Montessori program would be most effective in drawing families back to the school. The neighborhood agreed.

By the time it forwarded its recommendation to the board, Kamine said, the neighborhood was unified. "It was non-negotiable. It would be pure Montessori."

Others made the case that it was time to bring an environmental focus and pushed to build a school that would attain LEED certification.

It was an ambitious plan, actually providing a model to district and state policy makers.

The two elements galvanized the community, but there was convincing to do.

Teachers in the current building would face disruptions.

Supporters of Cincinnati's several Montessori magnets were not uniformly supportive. Some schools stood to lose enrollment, but the major concern was that in requiring that neighborhood students be admitted, regardless of age, experience or commitment to the Montessori approach, the district could be inviting problems related to student turnover and program integrity.

Some school board members were described as skeptical. The politics were complex. Voters turned out one school board member who had been an advocate of the neighborhood's plan.

But the board finally embraced the idea and a core of committed parents and educators set about sorting out the details.

Steve Simon, a lawyer whose wife, Maureen, had been one of the former-Montessori teachers advocating for a Montessori format, emerged as a leader of the neighborhood organization. He remembers the challenge.

"The board had approved it," he said. "We had a big celebration. Then we had to figure out how to do the transition, how to phase in the program."

One hurdle was finding places for children during construction. A Catholic church provided space for the school program and a Presbyterian church offered space for after-school care.

Balancing care for their two children, Maureen was a regular at meetings on the academic transition. Steve worked on community participation.

"Few of the teachers signed up quickly," he said. "Some got protective. This was all being made up as we went along and we wanted to get it up and running as fast as possible."

Teachers would face some difficult decisions. If they wanted to remain at the school, they would need to complete Montessori training.

Xavier University, home of one of the Montessori teacher education programs most experienced in supporting public schools, sent faculty members into temporary sites to support teachers and is offering on-site teacher education.

Teachers were given two years to complete Montessori training or move on.

According to Kamine, most of the positions have been filled with teachers who

have or are taking Montessori training. Some positions will be advertised nationally.

It was not easy. Some teachers did not like the choice. Others were moved unwillingly. But, said Kamine, "We have had not a speck of trouble from the union."

School leadership was also an issue and the LSDC oversaw a change that brought veteran Montessori administrator Maria Lagdameo in as principal.

Kamine, through the district's Community Learning Centers program, which she now directs, played a role in building an impressive array of community partnerships, including one with a local YMCA that will provide seamless after-school programming, including tutoring. A school foundation is raising funds for preschool scholarships.

The LEED-oriented planning meant not just environmental concerns, but a design fit for Montessori programs. The classrooms are larger than standard in the district—about 990 square feet. Floors are heated. Air circulates between ceilings and the floor above.

Kamine expects a silver LEED certificate to be awarded soon, making it one of the first schools in the state to achieve that status.

Broad-based involvement brought the community together. "The community owns this school," Kamine said. "When the principal sent out word that there could be a shortage of books, the gap was filled within hours." Hundreds, she said, attended two ice cream socials days before school began.

"You build such energy, doing something like this," Simon said. "I've never done anything like this in my life. This goes beyond our kids. We are integrating public schools."

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