



Feature Article:
A Tribute to Cleo Monson



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Grassroots Montessori



Cincinnati's
Groundswell to
Create One of
the Country's
Few Public
Neighborhood
Montessori
Schools

By Darlene Kamine and Ginger Kelley McKenzie

In 2002, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) adopted a policy committing itself to develop all schools in the district as community learning centers. The district was beginning a billion-dollar Facilities Master Plan to rebuild and renovate all its schools. They wanted these schools also to function as neighborhood hubs that would be open extended hours for community agencies and organizations to provide health resources, social services, and cultural opportunities for students, their families, and the surrounding neighborhood. Each school community was to establish goals, assess needs, and develop the kind of programming and partnerships that would support student success and contribute to the vitality of the neighborhood.

Pleasant Ridge Montessori

In Pleasant Ridge, one of Cincinnati's most racially and socio-economically diverse neighborhoods, the community set itself to the task of rebuilding what had been a failing school that reflected little of the neighborhood's diversity. To facilitate the

rebuilding and planning process for their new community learning center, CPS brought in a former juvenile court magistrate. Hundreds of school personnel and community members participated in the process.

After-school programming to provide extracurricular opportunities emerged as a top priority, as did health and wellness services. The school partnered with the YMCA to provide on-site after-school programming; the Cincinnati City Health Department offered a full-time nurse; and teaming with a local mental health agency provided an on-site mental health therapist to serve children and their families.

Another priority was the development of the Pleasant Ridge school facility as an environmentally sound and sustainable "green" building. Several community leaders influenced the architects, and ultimately the CPS Board

of Education, to make an additional investment in the design of the building. This citizen-led, grassroots effort resulted in Pleasant Ridge Montessori School being the first LEED-certified* public elementary school in Ohio. It was also the catalyst for the adoption of green and sustainable design principles for all CPS school facilities.

Yet, despite the promise of an environmentally cutting-edge school and partnerships ranging from the YMCA to various health providers, all of this was not sufficient to attract new families to the school. Enrollment continued to drop, hovering just above 300 students, far below capacity. The foremost priority—to create a school of academic excellence, which would become the school of choice for the neighborhood—remained unmet.

And so, just as the environmental enthusiasts were leading a grassroots

*LEED is an internationally recognized green building certification system, providing third-party verification that a building or community was designed and built using strategies aimed at improving performance across all the metrics that matter most: energy savings, water efficiency, CO₂ emissions reduction, improved indoor environmental quality, and stewardship of resources and sensitivity to their impacts. Developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), LEED provides building owners and operators a concise framework for identifying and implementing practical and measurable green building design, construction, operations, and maintenance solutions.

effort to dramatically change the plans for the physical facility, a group of young parents became involved in challenging the academic program. This group, mostly parents of infants and toddlers, asked themselves, "What would it take for us to send our children to this new school?" Their collective answer was a conversion to a Montessori program.

Pleasant Ridge and the Montessori Curriculum

CPS was a leader in public Montessori education, but only for the Montessori magnet schools that were created as an alternative to court-ordered busing. These schools earned a reputation as being among the best public schools in Cincinnati, resulting in an annual ritual of parents sleeping overnight on sidewalks to ensure their child's place for magnet enrollment. The young parents in Pleasant Ridge believed that a Montessori curriculum in a neighborhood school that would welcome everyone who lived in the attendance boundary would be the kind of school that would attract new, young families to the neighborhood. That school would allow the young Pleasant Ridge parents to remain in an urban neighborhood that they loved rather than follow the pattern of moving to the suburbs.

An energetic core of young parents, working with the community engagement facilitator, saw to it that their excitement about the prospect of a public neighborhood Montessori school reached all the way to the superintendent's office. The CPS superintendent responded immediately and encouraged the transformation of the school to a Montessori education model, but stipulated three conditions for granting the request:

1. Evidence of a sustained groundswell of interest in attending a neighborhood Montessori program.
2. Support by all sectors of the parent community, including current parents.

3. No displacement of existing families in the school.

The planning team consulted with faculty involved in the Montessori education program at Xavier University's College of Social Sciences, Health, and Education, who agreed to provide assistance in informing the community about Montessori. To ensure that genuine outreach was made to the current parents, several of the core group visited parents in the neighborhood's subsidized housing project and met with them in laundry rooms and other common areas where they would have the best chance of seeing the most people. Booths were set up at neighborhood festivals, and information was distributed at every public event in the neighborhood. The more than 300 parents who signed a petition in support of the change to Montessori evidenced the groundswell of support and the commitment not to displace current students.

On June 30, 2004, the Pleasant Ridge School Local School Decision Making Committee (LSDMC)—the site-based governing body of the school—voted to recommend to the board of education the change of curriculum to Montessori. Consistent, relentless advocacy and many more meetings with CPS administration and board members finally convinced the board to approve the transformation to Montessori curriculum in January 2005.

School-Community Planning Group: Spreading the News and Setting Expectations

The board's approval included a directive to develop a Montessori implementation plan. The planning team was reassembled to include members of the Xavier University Montessori faculty, all of the CPS Montessori school principals, a representative of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, one current parent, and an active group of prospective parents.

The first Montessori curriculum planning meeting was held on March

22, 2005, and focused on a simple but critical question—*What will it take to make Pleasant Ridge Montessori successful*



Jerry Speier Photography

Concentrating on important work

on Day One? To answer the question, the team studied the demographics of the school and the community and also studied successful models and missteps of other similar efforts. The team was guided as well by their own honest opinions and feelings, as many of them were potential customers who had to be sufficiently convinced to enroll their children in the program. Unlike many academic reform efforts, this was not an experimental undertaking for the sake of a research grant—this was about their own children.

The research revealed that there were very few public, non-magnet, neighborhood Montessori programs, and none they could find that were developed through grassroots community activism. The most significant challenge for which there was little guiding precedent was this: How to create a new Montessori program for a diverse socioeconomic spectrum while absorbing and transforming a traditional academic program with years of failing academic outcomes and a student body comprised of almost 100% economically disadvantaged students? As one of the parents articulated at a board of education meeting, the vision for

Pleasant Ridge Montessori was to become the "model for desegregation" for a school district that was more segregated on the 50th anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education* than on the day of the original Supreme Court desegregation order in 1954. For a neighborhood that was intentionally and proudly racially diverse, racial desegregation seemed achievable. Socioeconomic desegregation was the more complicated undertaking.

The nonnegotiable conditions developed by the planning team after consideration of the data and research were the following:

1. Qualified teachers prepared by the Department of Childhood and Literacy, Xavier University.
2. Fully equipped Montessori classrooms.
3. Enrollment reflective of the neighborhood demographics.
4. Bringing the whole neighborhood back into the school.
5. Full enrollment.
6. Parents educated about Montessori.
7. Community fully aware of the new program and new paradigm.

In its essence, the conditions for success on Day One were linked to convincing prospective parents and the broader community that the new school was going to be a quality program with a real Montessori curriculum, with proper Montessori materials, taught by qualified teachers. As the school was in a swing space in a dilapidated building outside of the neighborhood, and as there were no Montessori teachers or materials in place, the group had to sell a dream to a community skeptical about CPS—a group with high standards for their children's education and with the means to send their children to private or parochial schools.

In late spring of 2005, the planning group held information meetings promoted through their networks of friends and through local newsletters. One neighborhood resident, a principal

at a Montessori school on the other side of town, recruited some of her teachers to demonstrate Montessori teaching with their own materials. Open houses were held in various community centers and churches, and tables were set up at ice cream socials and festivals in neighborhoods within the attendance boundary to reinforce that Pleasant Ridge Montessori was to be a neighborhood school. Prospective parents who were active on the planning team hosted house parties for other interested parents to come with their children and begin building momentum among neighbors and friends.

These neighborhood events created so much energy that prospective parents on the planning team insisted that the program should begin immediately, rather than wait for the completion of the new school building in 2008. In May 2005, the group secured a commitment from the Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church to use space sufficient to house the 3–6 program until the new school building was ready. Xavier University agreed to provide Montessori training during the summer to prepare more teachers for Montessori certification. As CPS could not buy new Montessori furniture until the new school building was completed, used furniture and Montessori materials were purchased for a fraction of the cost from a defunct private Montessori program. One of the leaders of the planning team, who had Montessori training, agreed to be one of two 3–6 classroom teachers at the church.

To ensure sufficient enrollment to cover the costs of staff and operation, the Pleasant Ridge Montessori planning group launched another round of community events, backyard parties, local publications, and email blasts to convert the dream to reality by securing signed contracts for the fall of 2006. As preschool is not mandatory in Ohio, there is a cost for preschool tuition for those not eligible for Head Start. With only 11 subsidized preschool spots allo-

cated to the program, the planning team had to produce at least 40 tuition-paying contracts. Even the enrollment process was planned and staffed by volunteers from the planning team.

Two 3–6-year-old classrooms opened in the fall of 2006, at almost full capacity and with two certified and experienced Montessori teachers. The materials and the curriculum were genuine Montessori. The student body was racially, religiously, and socioeconomically diverse. Parents were fully engaged in numerous programs in preparation for the school year and throughout the course of the year.

Pleasant Ridge New Montessori Building Opens Fall 2008

The LEED-certified building garnered national attention, and in the fall of 2008, as the new school facility opened, enrollment exploded from about 300 students at the close of 2007 in the swing space to almost 600 students in the new, fully rolled out Montessori program. The 3–6 program more than doubled, while diversity and quality of the instruction continued to attract new middle-class families.

The lesson of the power of community driven reform is clear and compelling. Imposing a curriculum on a school as a quick fix, even a curriculum as popular as Montessori, would not inspire the excitement or energy needed for families disenchanted by urban public schools to come back into the system. Only customers whose children's education is at stake have the courage and commitment to insist on the full and true implementation of Montessori education. The engagement that developed through the local ownership of the planning process produced extraordinary parental involvement that touched not only the schoolhouse but modeled for the children the too-rare lesson of participatory democracy.

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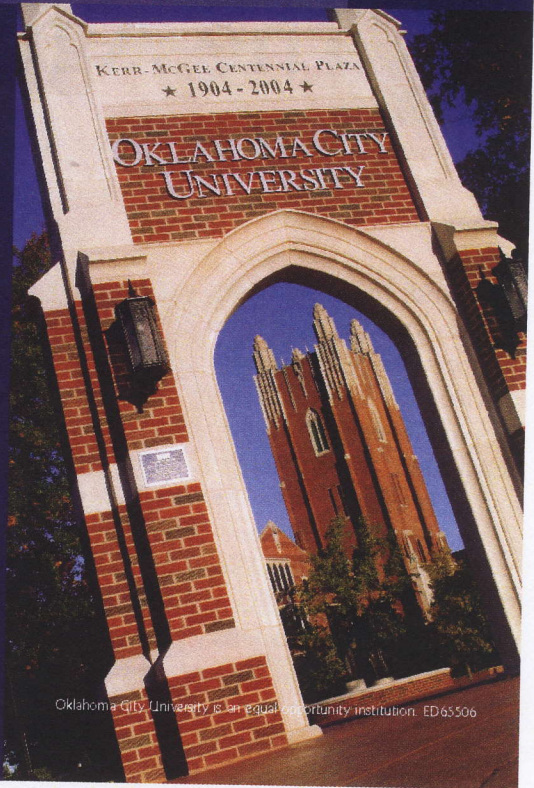
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