

TOP STORY

‘PEOPLE COME TO LOOK AT OUR SCHOOLS’

Study shows SC Montessori students outperform their peers

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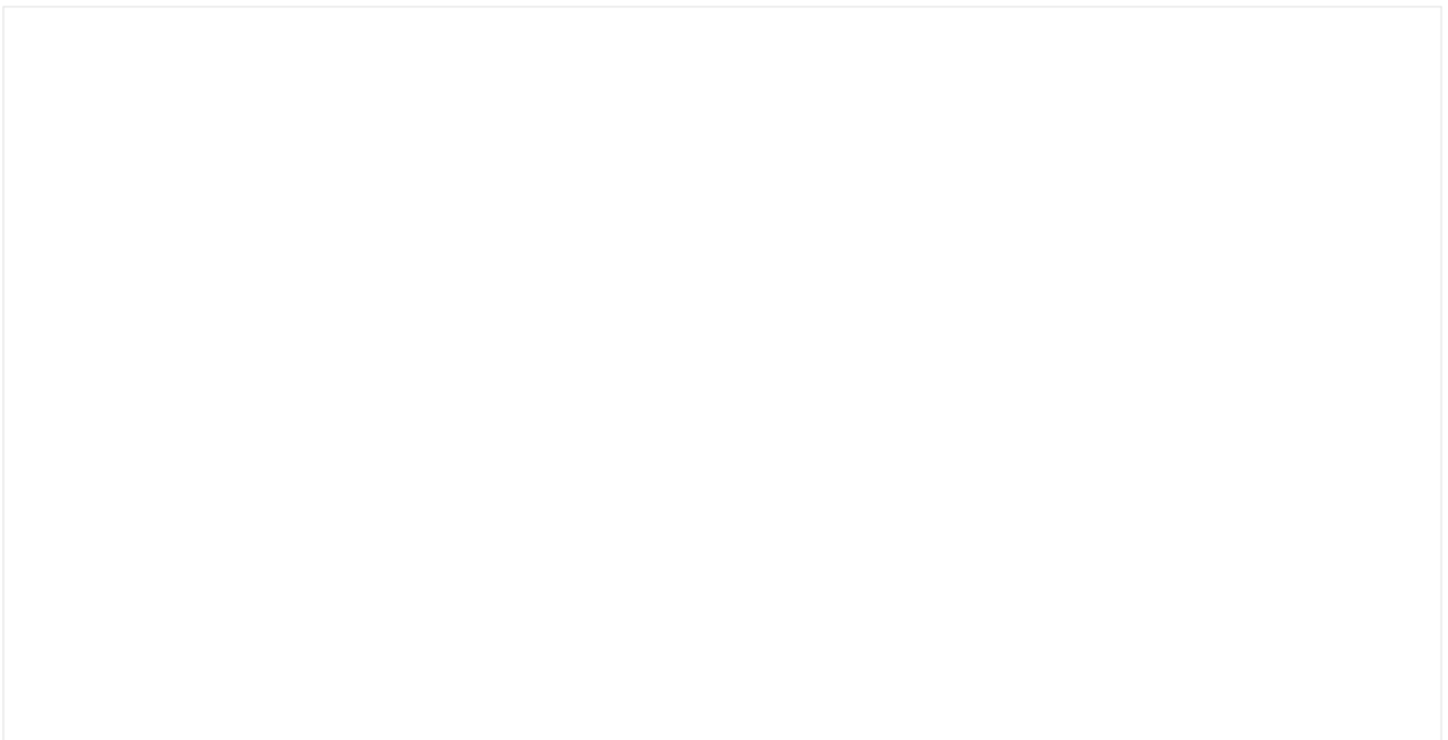
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Janiyah Welton, left, and Sophia Derrick work on lessons in Nicole Rousey's 4- and 5-year-old Montessori class at Lakeview Elementary School.

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South Carolina's first Montessori program in a public school opened more than 25 years ago, and now the state has the most public Montessori programs in the country.





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Lakeview Elementary School Montessori Classes

Proponents of the Montessori education model said the investment could be key to reducing the achievement gap for students in low-income households.

The data

A five- to six-yearlong study released last week by the Riley Institute at Furman University shows public Montessori school students in South Carolina consistently had higher achievement growth year over year than non-Montessori students in math, English language arts and social studies.

The most recent data gathered from the study for the 2015-16 school year shows the students outperforming their peers in science as well, but Brooke Culclasure, the principle investigator for the study with the Riley Institute, said the data was less consistent year-to-year.

In one year, Montessori students demonstrated more growth than non-Montessori students, and in another, they demonstrated less.

“It was very consistent — less consistent with science,” Culclasure said, and pointed to small sample sizes for social studies and science as one possible reason for the low consistency.

The study also shows Montessori students coming from a low-income household outperformed non-Montessori students of the same demographic in math, English language arts and social studies. Low-income students make up about 54 percent of the students in Montessori programs in the state — most of which are offered in Title I schools.

When divided into subgroups — black students, white students, females, males — the data shows Montessori students outperformed their non-Montessori counterparts over the span of three years.

“The outcomes, especially when looking at subgroups — low-income students and different subgroups of students — I think Montessori is, from what our study results show, very effective for all subgroups of students,” Culclasure said. “Another bigger picture takeaway is that Montessori can be effective for not just affluent, white families — and that is sometimes as it seems.”

Culclasure’s team also looked at executive function in students — goal setting, motivation, self-control, work habits and social skills — which showed students generally performed similar or better to non-Montessori students. Researchers administered tests to students for creativity and executive function, but teachers reported the students’ work habits and social skills.

The creativity test, called the Evaluation of Potential Creativity (EPoC), showed Montessori students exhibited significantly higher creativity than their non-Montessori peers. Culclasure said although the test isn’t perfect, it’s a good indicator of creativity levels.

“It’s a lengthy assessment and requires a lot of training and takes a long time to score, but it’s really good,” Culclasure said. “The children have drawings, and it’s got divergent and convergent thinking — it’s not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, and we didn’t find in the first years of the study any assessment that we felt comfortable with until this one came along.”

The study, released last week, is the most in-depth, comprehensive study on Montessori programs ever done in the United States.

When the data was released, California had the most public Montessori programs in the country, but since then, Culclasure said South Carolina has edged ahead to claim the title.

“They have a census and so they’re continually changing, and apparently, we’re back up to No. 1,” Culclasure said. “Given the size of South Carolina, it’s very impressive.”

The study was commissioned by the Self Family Foundation, which invested in Montessori programs more than 15 years ago through funding classrooms and paying half of students’ certification tuition.

The study is a way to show the foundation results to what they invested in, Culclasure said.

“We are an education research institute and shop, and we have knowledge of education practices and different models, but we’re not Montessorians per se, so I think they wanted an unbiased evaluation,” Culclasure said.

Worldwide, South Carolina has started to gain recognition as a leader in public Montessori schools, and Culclasure said international education leaders interested in the program visit the state.

“We are a leader — we are seen as a leader in Montessori, particularly in public schools, and that’s, I think, very impressive,” Culclasure said. “Montessori is very popular around the world, and people come to look at our schools. They come to talk to our teachers.”

South Carolina’s

Montessori history

South Carolina has 53 public Montessori school programs throughout the state, which serve about 7,500 students in 21 counties.

Barbara Ervin is director of the Montessori program at Lander University, the only higher education institution in the state to offer Montessori teacher training to education majors and one of a few in the country accredited by the American Montessori Society.

Ervin said the first public Montessori program in South Carolina was started in Enoree in the 1980s by Linda Mims, who went on to head the state Department of Education’s early childhood education office for several years.

“She was then able to have Montessori be one of the approved curriculum for early childhood, and she just had a platform then to kind of promote it,” Ervin said. “So I think that was one of the reasons that it took off very well.”

Ginny Riga, Montessori consultant with the state department and an expert referenced for the study, said South Carolina’s public school Montessori programs are unique because most of them are programs within traditional public schools.

“It seems like in other states, they were more inclined to start charter schools that were Montessori or open full schools that were Montessori,” Riga said. “If we didn’t offer that, it wouldn’t spread, because it’s very difficult to get an empty school building and start a new school — sometimes it just doesn’t happen.”

Montessori programs group a range of students together — for example, first through third grade students can be in a class together called Lower Elementary, or E1, and fourth through sixth grade students can be grouped into Upper Elementary, or E2.

“Children are very actively engaged and they’re moving at their own pace, and I think those two things are both key,” Ervin said.

It focuses on one-on-one teaching interactions where students can work at their own pace on different assignments. There are no honors classes, no letter grades for younger students and those who lag behind are not considered held back since most of the students come back to the same class the next year.

Most students are assessed by observation — rather than give a pencil and paper test, teachers will observe students while they do their lessons to determine proficiency.

“They can just work above grade level in any subject they are excelling,” Riga said. “Everyone moves ahead, and that’s another part of it that eliminates the stigma of grade retention.”

Greenwood County School District 50’s Montessori program has been at Lakeview Elementary School since 2015, and in that time, enrollment has grown 300 percent with a wait list every year.

Currently, the school has six Montessori classes and 117 students, and Principal Molly Smith said another class will be added next year.

“The Montessori method places the child’s emotional and social well-being at the forefront,” Smith said. “Children, beginning at age 3, are provided with a purposeful environment that supports collaboration while fostering independence and self-reliance.”

Riga said it’s heartening and empowering to see the study show gains for students from low-income backgrounds in Montessori classrooms.

“We have this achievement gap that’s been around forever, and it’s very difficult to find a program that’s going to close the achievement gap,” Riga said. “So when we saw that the results showed that the low-income children were scoring higher than low-income children in the traditional setting, that really says a lot.”

Teachers surveyed in the study most commonly listed concerns about their programs authenticity, need for more district support, too much student testing and a need for more professional development.

Riga said many teachers worry the authenticity of their school’s programs is at-risk because of their administrators.

“If you have a principal that wants the Montessori students to do a lot of test prep with worksheets or this kind of questioning — ‘Well, how do I know your teaching the standards? You don’t get grades,’” Riga said. “It comes because of a lack of understanding.”

Riga said parents and teachers involved in Montessori schools have said for years the model works for many students, although they are often met with skepticism and a myth that the program primarily serves affluent children.

The study, she said, proves otherwise.

“It just validates the fact that there’s a reason and there are good outcomes with it. That the children are actually not even learning just as well as, but even better than,” Riga said.