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PARENTING COLUMN

South Carolina has a lot of Montessori schools. Are they a good idea for your kid?

BY PAUL BOWERS PBOWERS@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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Murray-Lasaine Elementary School Montessori primary student Reese Pavongao works on her color skills Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018. Students are allowed to have family photos on their mats as they work on learning their skills. File/Brad Nettles/Staff

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My daughter came home from school one day with a piece of black yarn taped to her shirt. I started to worry.

It was our first week sending our kids to a public Montessori school, and while I knew a bit about the educational model, the mildly ominous symbol raised a question that I know other parents have asked before: Is this some kind of cult?

I can now report with some confidence that, no, Montessori schooling is not a cult. They just do things differently.

My daughter was 3 years old at the time, so she didn't offer much in the way of explanation when I asked about the yarn. As her teacher later explained to me, the students were learning about controlling their speaking voices, and the teacher had held up long threads to represent loud voices and short threads to represent quieter tones. They kept the yarn as a reminder.



Paul Bowers is a father of three living in North Charleston.

GRACE BEAHM ALFORD/STAFF

I've learned that voice control was an important early lesson because students are expected to spend hours a day concentrating on self-directed work. Particularly in the youngest age groups, children busy themselves at stations around the (usually large, usually naturally lit) room doing things like chopping vegetables for snacks, assembling puzzle maps of the world, and sorting tiles in order from one to 100.

The Montessori education philosophy, named for the Italian physician and teacher Maria Montessori, was meant to revolutionize education worldwide in the first half of the 20th century. Students in a Montessori school are expected to pursue self-directed work from a

range of options, and to master practical tasks like washing dishes and preparing snacks at a very young age. They are usually in classrooms with a three-year age range, such as 3 to 5 or 6 to 8.

Applying lessons she learned while working with the children of low-income families in Rome, Montessori went with missionary zeal to share her method with educators from the United States to India, right up until her death in 1952 in the Netherlands. Her key insight was that children were natural learners and could largely teach themselves, given the proper environment and a rigid structure to their day.

But instead of taking the world by storm, Montessori education became a niche. Particularly in a place like Charleston County, which has embraced school choice in its public schools, Montessori programs are just one of a menu of options for parents and students.

Maybe you're a parent perusing the options. I've been there, and I'm still learning. To answer some burning questions, I recently paid a visit to Charles Towne Montessori, founded in 1972 and the only school in South Carolina certified by the Association Montessori Internationale.



Students do their work in a younger classroom at Charles Towne Montessori on Monday, March 11, 2019. Paul Bowers/Staff

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Is this a hippie thing?

Maria Montessori started working more than half a century before hippies arrived on the scene, and her books are a little too cerebral to summarize on a crunchy parenting blog. Still, the philosophy retains a certain radical air, and her latter-day writings do reflect a broader vision of human flourishing and the abolition of all war.

Montessori schooling does owe its resurgence in the United States in part to the counterculture movements of the 1960s, but in some ways, it is more rigid than traditional schooling. Montessori famously rejected the idea of “playing pretend,” and teachers today still insist on calling the students’ activities “work.” My children come home and tell me about their work, and I tell them about mine.

The same goes at Charles Towne Montessori, which starts with students as young as 15 months yet expects more of its pupils than the typical day care.

“We don’t have toys. It’s work,” said Head of School Susan Burkhardt

A common misconception about Montessori is that the classroom is utterly free-wheeling or chaotic. Pay a visit to a classroom and see for yourself. It’s almost eerie how focused the kids are.

“The children are given a whole lot of freedom, but there’s a whole lot of responsibility that comes with that,” said Burkhardt.

How do the students stay on task?

Believe it or not, the students do cover the basics even when left to their own devices. The classroom sets of blocks, beads and other durable objects introduce children to concepts like phonics and squaring numbers at a young age, and those concepts get fleshed out in later years.

“We start with all concrete and move to the abstract,” Burkhardt said.

At Charles Towne, I visited an elementary classroom of 24 students and saw the older students doing a few things that looked familiar. They took turns in small groups listening to lessons from a teacher, then applying what they learned together. That particular day, they were doing something pretty old-school: Diagramming sentences.

Soon, Charles Towne will be adding another classroom to serve students up to grade 8. By that age, Montessori students are encouraged to do practical work in the real world. One famous Ohio Montessori school, Hershey Montessori, has the older kids working on a farm and selling their produce in town.

Still, there are guardrails.

“Montessori equated it a lot to the toddler level of development in that you’ve got children wanting to be independent and wanting to step out and wanting to explore, but they also need that fall-back,” Burkhardt said. “They also need to know that somebody’s there to let them do that freely, but to also keep them from doing something terrible.”



Students work together on diagramming sentences at Charles Towne Montessori on Monday, March 11, 2019.
Paul Bowers/Staff

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How does discipline work?

In the youngest classrooms, students who are acting out are encouraged to “calm their bodies,” sometimes by sitting still in a meditative pose. The idea is that kids can learn, from a very young age, to regulate their own emotions and control their own actions. Teachers also work with students on conflict resolution.

In general, Montessori schools are not big on punishment.

“The biggest consequence in this classroom is getting an assigned seat,” Burkhardt told me when I asked about behavior management in the elementary years.

Of course, as with parenting, part of the approach to discipline comes down to an individual teacher’s disposition. Montessori teaching is a little bit self-selecting in that respect.

“Montessori teachers tend to be peaceful people overall. I think people who adopt this philosophy are kind and gentle people,” Burkhardt said.

What about grades?

In a purist Montessori school, you’re probably not going to see any tests, letter grades, or even homework assignments. That can be jarring, but the teacher can give you detailed reports on how your child is progressing on very specific tasks, like identifying specific letters or identifying the parts of a book. I know, for example, that one of my daughters sometimes mixes up the roles of author and illustrator. We can work on that.

Montessori schools that receive public funding do have to make some concessions to the high-stakes testing regime of whatever state they are in, so teachers there simply grit their teeth during standardized-testing season. Even at Charles Towne, which is private, Burkhardt said the school gives one standardized test a year to ensure that families can point to at least *some* test scores when they transfer out to a more traditional school.



Students fan out across the spacious classroom at Charles Towne Montessori on Monday, March 11, 2019.
Paul Bowers/Staff

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Does it work in public schools?

It can, and often does.

One thing South Carolina's school system does shockingly well at is **Montessori education in public-school settings**. Starting with a single Clarendon County kindergarten teacher who decided to give the model a try 25 years ago, Montessori has grown and found some real success.

According to a **2018 report** from the Riley Institute at Furman University, South Carolina had more public Montessori schools than any state in the country except California. At the time of the study, 7,402 students were participating in Montessori programs at 45 public schools in 24 districts.

Bucking the stereotype of Montessori as a yuppie indulgence, the majority of public Montessori students in the state came from low-income homes, and 45 percent of students were racial minorities. Using test scores, researchers determined that Montessori students showed more growth than their peers in English, math and social studies. Montessori students had no clear advantage in science and writing, although the study found no real disadvantages overall.

The Montessori students also showed higher levels of creativity, better school attendance rates, and fewer disciplinary problems than their non-Montessori peers.

How do I know if they're doing it right?

There is no copyright on the name Montessori, and unfortunately some schools will **slap the name on a sign** and call it a day. There are a few international accrediting groups, like AMI and the American Montessori Society, but both set a pretty high bar.

In South Carolina, for example, only one school has earned certification from AMI (Charles Towne), and only one is in the process of accreditation with AMS (Murray-LaSaine Elementary on James Island).

When I wrote about the public Montessori study last year, I asked Montessori consultant Ginny Riga how to tell if a purported Montessori school was the real deal.

“I always say to people, ‘Go visit,’” Riga **told me** at the time. “Is this a good school? They have to go visit to determine it for themselves.”

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