

South Carolina's public Montessori programs can bridge achievement gap

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With the 2018-19 school year underway, our state has a lot to celebrate in public education. The work that began with the 1984 passage of Gov. Dick Riley's S.C. Education Improvement Act has yielded much progress, including a sharp increase in high school graduation rates. But challenges remain.

Near the top of the list of concerns are the looming teacher shortage and the persistent gaps in student achievement and attainment along racial and economic lines.

A 2018 report from the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement shows that South Carolina's teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers, with attrition among first-year teachers particularly high. And, according to the S.C. Commission on Higher Education, far fewer people are entering the profession. Over the past four years, the number of graduates of the states' colleges and universities eligible for teacher accreditation has dropped 30 percent.

An equally important challenge is the persistent achievement gap among South Carolina's students. Data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress show that low-income and minority students in South Carolina perform worse on math and reading standardized tests in the fourth and eighth grades than their wealthier and white counterparts, and that this gap is widening each year.

The results of a recent study of South Carolina's public Montessori programs, carried out by Furman University's Riley Institute, provide considerable evidence that the Montessori method has real potential for helping to address these challenges.

The Montessori approach contrasts strongly with the style of teaching and learning that takes place in many of our state's public schools. Traditional tests are de-emphasized so students can "learn for the sake of learning." Children explore personal learning interests at their own pace and work in multi-age classrooms to encourage peer learning. Long blocks of learning time foster concentration and focus, and teachers work one-on-one with students, rather than lecturing from the front of the room.

Since the mid-1990s, bolstered by considerable investment by the Self Family Foundation, South Carolina has been a leader in public Montessori. Our state has the highest number of public school Montessori programs in the nation, with about 7,500 students in 50 programs across the state, with a substantial concentration in the Charleston County School District. Montessori education has been expanding in South Carolina's Title I schools, which serve many low-income and minority students.

Despite this growth, there has been little research on how Montessori impacts public school student outcomes and teacher satisfaction. To analyze these questions, the Riley Institute recently undertook the most comprehensive evaluation of public Montessori ever conducted, in the United States and globally. Carried out from 2011 to 2016, the study compared students in public Montessori schools to demographically matched students in the state's traditional public schools.

While Montessori supporters question the value of standardized tests, South Carolina's public Montessori schools are required to administer them. Our study showed that, on average, public Montessori students experienced greater achievement

growth in English language arts, mathematics and social studies than their peers in traditional settings. Low-income Montessori students exhibited higher achievement growth than similar students in the matched comparison group. Montessori students also demonstrated better school attendance and student behavior.

Montessori teachers' attitudes toward their jobs also were surveyed. Three-quarters of the Montessori teachers in the state responded; of those, 98 percent reported that they love or like their jobs. Eighty-seven percent plan to remain in the teaching profession – a particularly important finding in light of the current teacher shortage.

Our study suggests that South Carolina's investment in public Montessori education is paying off through increased student achievement, better student behavior and positive teacher attitudes, and that it may help moderate the effects of poverty on student outcomes and increase equity among students. Our research team will further examine these and other considerations as part of a new Montessori research project, funded by the Brady Education Foundation.

We hope that policymakers, educators and parents consider these outcomes and celebrate South Carolina's leadership in bringing Montessori education to so many of our state's public school students.

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