

Montessori Middle Schools for the Twenty-First Century

Early adolescence is a time of tremendous change and challenge. From the age of 12-15, students face emotional, physical, social and intellectual changes.

They are growing faster than at any other time of life other than infancy.

They are learning to make the transition from childhood to adulthood.

What happens during these years can shape a lifetime.

Educational research supports the need for middle schools that address the unique needs of the early adolescent.

Montessori middle schools have been adapting the Montessori philosophy to the needs of early adolescents for over 25 years.



In this program, we will be visiting two of the oldest and most respected Montessori middle schools in the country: School of the Woods, a private Montessori school in Houston, Texas and Clark Montessori Junior High School, a public school in Cincinnati, OH.

Central to the Montessori middle school philosophy are:

Multi-aged Learning Communities
Grace and Courtesy
Hands-On, Theme-Based Learning
Individual and Group Work
Self-paced learning
Environmental Education
Community Service
Economic Independence



Multi-aged Learning Communities

Maria Montessori believed that children have a natural desire to learn and that they thrive in an environment that facilitates that learning.

The Montessori middle school, like all Montessori schools, is a multi-aged learning community. The older children serve as role models for the younger students helping everyone to understand the expectations of the classroom. The multi-age classroom is more like a family than a peer group enabling students to form bonds with classmates of all ages, helping to meet the rapidly changing social and developmental needs of early adolescents.

I was incredibly nervous because my own personal reason was that there was nobody here from my old elementary school. My first friend was actually an 8th grader. She was just real nice. She was in my group. We became really good friends and we still are.

Each day at the School of the Woods begins with a morning meeting. Here the students take the time to acknowledge the ways they appreciate their classmates and teachers:

I would like to acknowledge my small group, because yesterday we did really awesome.

(applause)

I would like to acknowledge all the teachers for making this a great cycle one.

(applause)



Acknowledgements help to establish an atmosphere of trust where students feel safe to be themselves. They quickly learn that those who acknowledge their classmates are often recognized themselves for their contributions to the school community.

Today there is also a suggestion to change the policy on access to the classroom's oven. A proposal is made and discussed. The students themselves handle the entire democratic process. Once all the pros and cons have been laid out, the students who made the proposal convene to restate it to meet the consensus of the group. The proposal passes by a wide margin.



Using this democratic process helps middle school students understand how the larger society functions in a meaningful way. They learn to discuss issues respectfully and resolve issues constructively.

At Clark, seventh graders attend a fall leadership camp to help students learn to take responsibility and work together to achieve a common goal.

In this meeting, the students are acknowledging their classmates who took leadership in a project that challenged them to work together.

Our fourth or fifth clue. We were at the one where we had to burn through the little string and after we got through that everybody was just sitting there arguing and Colleen was, "You know what c'mon" and everybody started following Colleen instead of just standing there. That's when we started cooperating and everything.

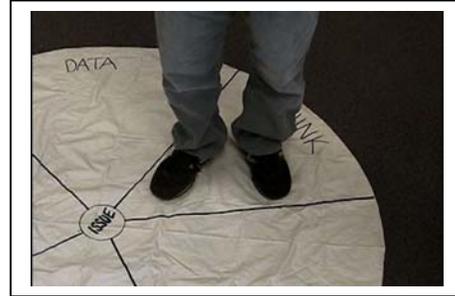


Grace and Courtesy

Montessori philosophy emphasizes that all members of the classroom community treat others with kindness and respect.

In addition to recognizing the positive qualities in classmates through acknowledgements, Montessori middle schools offer students ways to resolve conflict without adult intervention. At Clark, a conflict resolution wheel is used to sort out issues and feelings.

Students using the conflict resolution process:



I feel that is mean to talk about people and I feel that you should treat people the way you want to be treated. I want to be friends again and have a nice strong community and to do that when I hear other people talk about other people I am going to step in and be a leader.

The goal is to restore the sense of community within a classroom.

Hands-On, Theme-Based Learning

Academic content is taught through theme-based research projects and small group work.

Like all Montessori schools, an emphasis is on hands-on learning.



Students:

The cell membrane is the wall around the cell. It is permeable, just like a real factory in which there is a cargo bay and doors for workers to come through.

Vacuole. A vacuole is like a storage unit. It stores things that are not being used in the factory.

Understanding cell structure is part of the middle school science curriculum. Students were challenged to come up with a metaphor that explains how the cell parts function. These students used the example of a factory to explain the function of each cell part. Using a metaphor as a theme for this hands-on project helps students retain knowledge.

Teacher:

What variable affected the experiment the most?

Student:

At Clark, the theme of motion provided the focus for the third cycle of the school Year, including the physics of motion, motion on an atomic level in chemistry and the movement of ideas, as seen through the study of art.

For the art curriculum, students went to the Cincinnati Art Museum, to conduct research on Renaissance art which they later used to compose scripts for podcasts.

The podcasts covered the particular aspects of the art they were studying. Later the students returned to the museum to follow their classmate's podcast tours, broadening their knowledge of the museum's collection of artifacts and studying the "movement" of the idea of beauty, art, and subject over time.

The third cycle culminated with a visit from professional trapeze artists who gave the students hands on experience of the physics of motion.



Individual and Group Work

Children learn their academic content through a combination of individual projects and group work.

From early childhood, Montessori students are encouraged to develop independence. By the time they reach middle school, students have achieved a high level of discipline and usually work with minimal supervision.

(Teacher to Class) "I would like to check your planner where you just did your work and you prioritized your plan."

Students work with their teachers to establish their educational plan. The teachers regularly check-in with each student to ensure that they are meeting their goals for learning.

Group work not only provides each student with the opportunity to develop team building and leadership skills, it increases retention. Adolescents are entering the "age of abstraction." They are beginning to see the complexity of the world around them. Group discussion and debate engages their minds as they begin to think in a more abstract way.

Self-paced learning

Individual work encompasses research projects, literature, desktop publishing, personal reflection, and math assignments. These students are studying native American medicine wheels and then are challenged to do a personal assessment with specific questions.

“They give you two questions and you have to answer them. What is being reactive mean and what concepts of the Medicine Wheel can have a positive impact on the middle school community.”

Since individual work is based on personal contracts with the teacher, students are able to progress at their own pace in a non-competitive atmosphere.

Environmental Education

Montessori believed that nature was a source of inspiration for learning.

As part of the curriculum for the 8th graders at Clark, students raise funds and take a trip to Andros Island in the Bahamas. Here they study the local culture, learn to sail, and snorkel to study marine life.



“The atmosphere and the culture we learned first hand right after we got off the plane through the security and getting into the taxi with the crazy taxi drivers and trying to interview them as they speed down the road.

Many Clark students who have never ventured outside the Midwest, are immersed in the island culture, learning the history and crafts. The Montessori curriculum emphasizes studying world geography and culture from age 3.

It is not a vacation at all. We get to learn first hand about things we learned in advance from the different fish to the different coral. By the time we get there when we are snorkeling we are actually able to identify the coral and fish. Sailing is amazing. We actually get to, I was fortunate on my boat we had a captain and we were the first mates so we really got to really direct the sailboat pull it in and tie it up..”

Community Service

A major component of Montessori middle school education is community involvement and service. These students are Clark pack food for meals on wheels. Clark's steel drum band has become a major local artistic resource. The band plays benefit concerts for everything from the Sierra Club to the local youth drop-in center.



I've done probably over 300/400 hours of community service and that's another thing at Clark Montessori I wasn't used to was giving back to the community. Not only do we do the required amount, which is 200 hours throughout the whole school year, but we have intercessions where we do community service and after school we do community service.

Economic Independence

Montessori believed that middle schools needed to, “put the adolescent on the road to achieving economic independence.” At the School of the Woods, students operate several businesses. At lunch time they provide meals for the upper elementary students to raise money for a school trip. They choose foods that use a minimum of packaging wherever possible, manage the ordering and distribution and collect and manage the funds.



Conclusion

The Montessori middle school philosophy engages students by responding to their developing social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs as young adolescents. The hands-on curriculum and cooperative learning community helps to nurture their natural desire to learn. The Montessori learning community provides them with healthy ways to grow in a safe environment, learning the skills they will need to become independent adults.

Thanks to the students and teachers of the School of the Woods and Clark Montessori Junior High.

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The original Montessori Middle School model was pioneered by Dr. Elizabeth Coe at the School of the Woods in Houston. She is the director the Houston Montessori (Teacher Education) Center, HMC.

Marta Donahoe, with her colleagues, also designed a secondary model. She founded the first public Montessori high school, Clark Montessori and directs the Cincinnati Secondary Teacher Education Program, CMSTEP.