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Public School Stakes Its Future on the Montessori Way

By RICHARD COURAGE

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. - The old brick public school is sandwiched between Interstate 91 and the Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center. The surrounding neighborhood is run-down and starkly commercial. The available playground space is filled with parked cars.

Yet the Alfred G. Zanetti School consistently has one of the longest waiting lists under Springfield's districtwide program of school choice.

Zanetti owes its popularity not to some new approach to education, but to the methods developed by the Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori almost 100 years ago. It is one of only 245 public Montessori schools in the nation, most of them charter or magnet schools.

Dr. Montessori believed that learning is a natural process. Montessori teachers see their primary role as creating rich environments where children teach themselves by manipulating specially designed materials and interacting in mixed age groups.

John Vazquez is thrilled at how articulate and independent his children - Johnny, 3, and Katia, 4 - are becoming.

"Everything you see on those 'practical life' shelves you could find in your home," he says, pointing to neatly arranged trays displaying tweezers, dried beans, cutting boards, apples, plates and pitchers. "When Johnny gets home now, he wants to pour his own juice. I learned the hard way not to help, to let him do it himself."

It wasn't always this way at Zanetti. Until 1999, it exhibited "the classic symptoms of a failing urban school," said Josh Bogin, director of the city's magnet school program. It had low test scores, high absenteeism and a student turnover rate of almost 50 percent a year.

To reverse things, Peter Negroni, the superintendent at the time, decided to turn it into a Montessori school.

The school's transformation entailed retraining teachers and equipping classrooms with special materials, thanks in part to a grant for magnet schools.

Most teachers transferred or retired rather than take additional preparation, and the incoming principal, Analida Munera, had to hire 41 new teachers. After only eight weeks of a multiyear training program, they faced rooms full of pupils.

In the first year, 1999, only prekindergarten through second grade students were in Montessori classrooms, so the school operated with two very different educational philosophies. The strain of transition caused some teachers to leave. Others quit as a result of temporary layoffs faced each year by the district's teachers lowest in seniority.

Today, Zanetti's Montessori program extends from prekindergarten through eighth grade, and the school's

turnaround is evident. Its demographics have begun to approach those of the city as a whole. Of 478 pupils, 41 percent are Latino, 37 percent African-American, 19 percent white, and 3 percent Asian or American Indian. Seventy-three percent come from low-income families, a drop from 98 percent in earlier days.

Ms. Munera reports steady academic progress.

"Assessment, all the way down to the youngest classrooms, exhibits a record of success," she says, citing improvements in scores on city and state tests, especially in English language arts. The turnover rate has dropped to 5 percent.

A visitor to Siobhan Conz's Elementary 1 classroom, for 6- to 9-year-olds, observes A'kala pensively locating New York on a United States puzzle map. Joseph and Rosa kneel at low tables nearby, matching sound-alike words. Alexander reads "Lyle the Crocodile." Sheyla works with a square grid of tiles numbered 1 to 100. Periodically, without prompting, a child puts one activity away and selects another. The visitor goes unnoticed.

Ms. Conz moves purposefully from area to area. At one table, she shows Chris, an 8-year-old, how to demonstrate "word dominoes," a language game, to Monique and Elizabeth, both 7. "You present like I usually do, so pull your chair to this side of the table," she tells Chris.

Anitra Ruth, one of the teachers in the "Children's House" for 3- to 6-year-olds, said: "Multi-age classrooms are a huge benefit as older and younger children help and learn from each other. The experienced ones are my role models."

Some older students remember the transition.

"We used to all have our own desks," said Virginia Leonor, 13, an eighth grader. "Teachers wrote stuff on the boards, and we copied it in our notebooks." She prefers the new system but, with a shy grin, acknowledged that 10 years is a very long time to stay in any school.

Tamonique Johnson, also 13, recalled seeing the new materials for the first time. She especially liked doing long division with test tubes and colored beads. "It was easier to find the answer, but it was a longer process," she said. "You really got it after that."

The school's academic successes have not insulated it from broader problems in the district. Drastic budget cuts have led to increased class sizes, reduced benefits and two years of frozen salaries, which in turn have driven more trained teachers away.

These problems are not likely to go away soon. Springfield entered financial receivership last summer, a result of its worst fiscal crisis since the Depression.

Ms. Munera worries about replacing the trained teachers. Her vision of the school's future rests largely on establishing a Montessori training center at a local college.

Teachers also resent curriculum and testing mandates that undercut their professional judgments about children's individual needs. Rebecca Lauterbach calls standardized testing "a dark cloud" creating pressure to "force-feed facts instead of inspiring love of learning."

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