Montessori Middle School

A Sneak Preview

On Tuesday, December 3rd, we will have a special event for our Parent Night. Our Middle School consultant, Laurie Ewert-Krocker, will come to give us a presentation on what a Montessori Adolescent Program is all about. You will learn about what a day in the life of a student is like as well as about how the Montessori aspects of the program are special.

To entice your appetite to learn more about the program, here is a bit of a sneak preview:

Several main features of a Montessori Middle School distinguish it significantly from a traditional middle school. The main differences are:

- Emphasis on doing work that is real. Adolescents tend to have very little tolerance for doing work that they consider to be trivial or a waste of their time. Montessori adolescents run real businesses, they are responsible for live animals, they prepare daily meals and they are challenged to organize effective community service projects. The students know that all of these tasks are important and there are real consequences if they do not get done properly. This results in a far greater level of engagement and, naturally, all of the work they are doing is connected to their academic goals.

- There is also an emphasis on working in a farm-like environment. Dr. Montessori observed that adolescence is a time when children need to be outdoors more than ever and they need to get their hands dirty and take responsibility for animals that would not survive without their care. Because adolescence is a time of such rapid physical change and growth, students need big work and, because it is a time when they tend to be very self-absorbed, they need opportunities to care for other creatures. Again, all of this work is connected in various ways with the students’ academic goals.

- Middle School is a fragile time for children and, sadly, it is a time when too many of them decide that they don’t like school, that it is irrelevant to them. They can carry this attitude over to high school and students with tremendous potential are at risk of becoming serious underachievers.

Because of the unique design of a Montessori Middle School and because of the qualified and passionate teachers you will find in our programs, there is far less of a risk of this happening. Students are much more likely to stay engaged and be active learners as teenagers and adults.

This is just a glimpse of some of the things that Laurie will be presenting to us on December 3rd. As our school is giving serious, careful consideration as to whether or not this is the right time for us to add a middle school, we need all parents to come and learn more about the program, no matter what age your child is currently. If we do move ahead with the new program, we want to know that we have heard from everybody and considered every family’s point of view. If you can only come to one Parent Night this whole year, please make it this one!

Thank you’s

This month’s biggest thank you’s go out Shelly Wino-wich and Chad Cordell. Shelly ran another extremely successful and enjoyable spaghetti dinner and Chad made a whole lot of children very happy by building us the world’s most beautiful sandbox.

Please be sure and express your gratitude to Chad and Shelly when you see them. Their work has gone way above and beyond the expected!
CURIOSITY AND WONDER

Kathryn’s Class Overflows

Shades of autumn have begun to fade, leaving our community with questions of compassion about the well being of the many creatures in the process of hibernation and migration. “How will we know if our mammal friends have enough fat and fur to get them through the winter?” “How will we know if the monarchs have safely made their way to Mexico?” “And what about the birds, how do they know where to go and how to get there?” These are the kinds of questions being posed, the kinds of ponderings being voiced amongst the members of our community. They continue to write verses to their songs depicting hibernation and migration. They are inspired! As well as inspiring! Our extended day recently completed the chapter book, Because of Winn Dixie. We typically have the celebration the day after we complete the book. When the children noticed that a “friend” (that is what we call each member of our community) was absent (different friends on different days), they chose to wait until all could be present for the fun and festivities. The empathy was palpable! As nature prepares for slumber, the children continue to be curious, captivated, enchanted, and filled with wonder. Whether it be learning about a new syllable type, an equilateral, isosceles, or a scalene triangle, the secret of the table of nines, or that combining primary colors creates secondary colors, the children have a heightened awareness and a passion to know more.

GRATITUDE

From the Friends in Fran’s Class

“Does anyone want to share one thing for which they feel happy and glad about?” I began asking this question several weeks ago. Here are a few contributions: “I feel happy that I get to see my cousins.” “I feel happy that my mom is picking me up at 3:00 today.” “I am thankful for my new bed.” “I am thankful for my house and my family.” “I am thankful for my new lunchbox.” Initially, only a few hands would go up. Now, I’m noticing hands flying without hesitation. I’m also noticing the phenomenon of empathetic joy at work. For some reason, we are all smiling and relaxed. Apparently, neuroscience is attempting to explain these reasons. A brain ‘on gratitude’ can improve a person’s sleep, attention, and productivity. Also, unexpected findings from the National Academy of Science revealed that people who helped others had even greater health benefits. I always love when science can confirm what our grandparents told us years ago.

Primary II wants to send a big thank you to the Junior and Advanced classes for their kindness and leadership. They have assisted with P.E., art, and classroom support. We are thankful for Nancy Johnson for sharing her expertise (and humor). We utilized her art techniques to create beautiful cards for the Heartland of Charleston Nursing Home. We are thankful for Chad Cordell for building our spacious (and exceedingly attractive) sandbox. The children can hardly wait.

It is impossible to count all the many ways people contribute to our lives and well being when we begin pulling the thread…but try. Wishing all real peace and real happiness and a very Happy Thanksgiving season.
LEARNING ACROSS TWO PLANES

Montessori’s “Four Planes of Human Development” include the following according to the age of the child: “Concrete”…0-6 years, “Cosmic”…6-12, “Cultural”…12-18 and “Constructive” 18-24.

The Junior Elementary curriculum at MMS strives to build a bridge between the first two planes. The Montessori works that are specifically designed for the 0-6 year old are exactly “concrete”. The language material is tactile. The math material is color coded and also tactile. The practical life material is appropriate in scale and depth so that a primary student may learn to pour from a cup or use tweezers to improve pincer muscle skills.

This language is often mysterious to parents. We often hear, “Is my child learning the math he or she needs?” or “I just want my child to learn the right things.” Believe us parents, your child could not be learning in a better environment.

In order to describe the Junior Elementary learning environment most accurately, let’s examine the Geometry curriculum for the “Concrete to Cosmic” planes (0-6 and 6-12 years).

In Primary (0-6), your child was introduced to wooden blocks in the form of Geometric Solids: cube, sphere, cone, square based prism, triangle based prism, triangle based pyramid, square based pyramid, ovoid and ellipsoid. The students may learn to read the name of each solid and they may learn to locate each shape in the surrounding environment. They will most definitely hold each shape and get to know it by touch. They will know how many surfaces a cube has or the fact that a sphere, ovoid or ellipsoid has no edges.

Their first Geometry lesson in Jr. Elementary is to review the Geometric Solids. They will hold them again and they will learn the correct spelling of each shape’s name, again. They will practice Line Studies in order to learn how each shape relates to lines. What is the difference between a straight line and a curved line? What are parallel lines? What do lines look like when they converge, diverge or intersect? What is a point? How many points can you locate on a cube? Is a cone made of lines that converge to form a point? What is a ray? What is a line segment?

Once the student can identify lines and 3-D shapes, they will explore all of the relationships between geometric nomenclature and real functions of shapes and angles. For example: What are the seven basic categories of triangles? What are the names of the parts of these triangles? What is a polygon? How are angles formed? What are the parts of an angle? How do we measure angles?

The students will begin to recognize that our Universe is made up of all of these specific geometric relationships: that the stars, planets and moons are spheres and rotate around each other, that we can measure great distances by determining angles and triangular relationships and that our very own bodies comprise the same geometry.

In preparation for the next learning plane, “Cultural” (12-18) your child is learning that all of the “Concrete” objects and experiences that surround them have “Cosmic” importance. Ultimately, learning in this way will help your child develop a “Cultural” awareness that will build their character and strengthen their identity as they become “Constructive” members in our society.

*Definitions:
Concrete – to acquire the fundamental abilities that lead to the development of the whole person
Cosmic – to develop a construct of the universe in order to comprehend any one aspect of it
Cultural – to shape a personal mission and build the character and strength to enter working society
Constructive – to find one’s place in the world that has meaning beyond one’s own existence

HISTORY COMES ALIVE IN THE UPPER EL

Mountaineer Montessori has been lucky to have historian Stan Bumgardner working with the Upper Elementary students once a week this year on U.S. history. Stan was the creative director for the renovation of the West Virginia State Museum at the Culture Center and has written books and magazine articles on West Virginia and Charleston history.

The students started the year by learning about prehistoric cultures and European exploration of the Americas. As part of a lesson on the spice routes, they got to taste samples of bread spiced with cinnamon and sugar after first trying some less-than-appetizing bread with few added flavorings. They also had to guess which foods and spices originated in the New World and which ones came originally from the Old World. Some of the answers surprised both the students and the teachers.

Our approach is to cover the most important topics in U.S. history in a way that’s interesting and fun.

For instance, Stan’s lessons on the American Revolution will coincide with a novel study about George Washington. In addition, their current research on the European settlement of Colonial America will explore questions like these:
• Why were some colonies more ethnically diverse than others?
• How did a Bacon almost overthrow the early government of Virginia?
• Why did slavery flourish more in the American South than in the North?
• How did Pennsylvania take advantage of the Native Americans with fast runners?
• Why did one colony actually ask the king of England to take them over?
• Which colony owed a debt of gratitude to debtors?

So, how many of these can you answer? If you need a little help, maybe you could ask one of the Upper Elementary students to give you some hints. And be sure to share with your own children some things about history that interest you. For instance, maybe get them involved with researching your own family history.

Stan will continue to come into the class throughout the year as the students learn about the settlement of Colonial America, the American Revolution, the U.S. Constitution, slavery, the treatment of Native Americans, the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and 20th-century America. Later in the year, we plan to take the students on a field trip to one or more of the places they will be learning about. Stay tuned for more info about that trip...