

Why Montessori? A brief presentation of the reasons for developing Montessori Classrooms (Children's Houses) at St. Mary's School

(Adapted from a Catholic Schools Week presentation by principal Linda Dinkel).

Two years ago, we began transitioning our preschool and kindergarten programs from a conventional style of teaching to the Montessori Method. Why? In part it was because of the frustration level of our Kindergarten teacher. She had grown tired of trying to pour the ever-growing pitcher full of Minnesota State Standards, which tells us what every 5-year-old should know, into the heads of fifteen different students, all at differing levels of readiness. Montessori has an answer for that problem.

Partly it was because the education of the 3 to 6-year-old child—what they are ready to receive and when they are ready to receive it—simply cannot follow the same schedule for every child. One five-year-old might be ready to string sounds together and begin to read while her neighbor is still learning letter sounds. Both children are simply in their own stage of reading readiness. In a conventional classroom setting, how do you meet the needs of the first child without frustrating and eventually stifling the desire to learn of the other? Montessori has an answer for that.

And partly our move to Montessori is because American culture is struggling. It is rare to find manners, respect and courtesy in this world. Rare to find the pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness. And most tragically, it is getting rare to find faith in God. Montessori, along with its offshoot, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, has an answer for that as well.

Maria Montessori was a scientist and a devout Catholic, and her method of teaching is exceptional because her observations and understanding of the child is profoundly Catholic. It is NOT an easy method to implement, and yet a small Catholic school is an ideal setting. Thankfully, St. Mary's School has an answer for that!

St. Mary's School has been able to get many of the pieces in place for Montessori Classrooms...called Children's Houses. Our preschool and kindergarten teachers and one aid have their Montessori Teaching certificates and we've been able to purchase many Montessori materials for our classrooms. We've grown so much in this past year and the labor is bearing fruit. If you walk into the preschool, and especially the kindergarten room today, you would be amazed at the peace and quiet while students work independently on their chosen work. And they are thriving academically. This crucial beginning for the 3, 4, and 5-year-old will have an incredibly positive impact on their school years that follow, and we are more convinced than ever that this is absolutely the right road to take.

Now for the opportunities and challenges.

First, last summer I had a conversation about Montessori with someone that ended in a donation of \$60,000 to use for Montessori expansion. I didn't ask...it was simply given because they believed in what we are doing.

Second, last fall, we brought together the School Council, trustees, Fr. Omar and some parishioners past and present to hear from the vice president of the Schulze Family Foundation. He shared success stories of Catholic Schools who added all-day preschool that helped increase enrollment and income. Some of them even added 7th and 8th grade. He encouraged us all to think big because the time is ripe for Catholic Education. Three weeks after that, someone came forward with an \$800,000 matching grant to grow our Montessori program, add all-day childcare, and investigate 7th and 8th grade. We didn't ask...it was simply offered because they believe in Catholic Education.

And two months after that meeting, the Schulze Family Foundation offered the \$25,000 challenge grant. We never asked for this one either.

What an amazing 6 months! Believe me, if I had asked, I wouldn't have had the nerve to ask for that much! It is astounding...and humbling.

And if I had asked, I wouldn't have asked now, when we're still finishing up the capital campaign for safety improvements to the school. If it wasn't for the fact that God seems to be behind all of this, I'd say it was pretty poor timing. But I am encouraged by today's Gospel reading. Jesus tells Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Simon replies, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." Who are we to argue with God?

I have no real conclusion...not a nice, tidy, "this is where we're going next". God seems to want us to trust, pray and listen, take the next logical step, and remain receptive and patient. He has affirmed the school's direction with these donations and opportunities, and we're called to pray and respond to His lead and the challenges that remain to match the funds offered to us.

One final thought. I believe that every child who comes to St. Mary's School is an opportunity to plant the seeds of faith. Many of our families are committed Catholics, but I also know some do not practice their faith, and yet they choose to send their children to St. Mary's because deep down, they know God needs to be in their child's life, and in their lives. I pray daily for their openness to hear God calling them back to a deeper relationship with him. Because in the end, that's all that really matters.