

Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board

School Accreditation

This report was prepared following a two day visit made on behalf of the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. It considers how far the school follows the criteria set out by the licensing laws of the State of Iowa.

The report does not address the standards and quality issues which are the responsibility of The Department of Human Services, Des Moines, Iowa. Also the report does not provide any assessment of financial aspects of the school.

Receiving accreditation carries the expectation that settings will continue to work on the issues highlighted in this report and will remain committed to the ongoing development of their practice. Furthermore, that they will report to the MEAB office any relevant changes such as to premises address, ownership, hours of operation or to the age range of children attending.

The Montessori Children's House

1505 42nd Street, West Des Moines, IA 50266, USA

Date of previous MEAB accreditation: June 2014

Dates of re-accreditation visit: 2 and 3 May 2017

This accreditation is valid until 31 July 2021

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged from 18 months to 7 years.

Description of the school:

The Montessori Children's House was established in 1968 as a not-for-profit corporation. It is governed by a School Board of Directors and managed by the Head Directress, who is Montessori qualified.

The school is housed in spacious, well-lit, purpose-built premises that opened in March 2005, in an urban area. Children attending mostly come from the local neighborhood although some travel further. Each of the nine classrooms has its own toilet facilities. Each also has a secure outside area, which can be used to facilitate children's movement between the indoor and outdoor learning environment during the warmer months. The children also benefit from a large multipurpose room which is used for before- and after-school care, lunch, and as a break/recess room on days when the weather does not permit outdoor play. The children also have access to a large outdoor

space, which all classes share, with climbing equipment and opportunities to learn about the natural world.

The Montessori Children's House caters for children between the ages of 18 months and 7 years and is registered for a capacity of 186 children at any given time. There are currently 212 on roll, with the majority of children attending being between 3 and 5 years of age. On the first day of the re-accreditation visit there were 169 children attending during the morning and 115 in the afternoon. Across the school, five children attend for the afternoon session only. There is one morning-only and one full-day class for children aged 18 months to 3 years. There are eight classes for the 3 to 6 year olds, three are full-day, three are morning-only and two are afternoon only. The class for the 5 to 7 year olds is full-day.

The opening hours are 08:20 to 15:20, Monday to Friday during the school's term times. Before- and after-school care, specialist after-school classes and summer provision is also available; these services are offered in addition to the school programme, they are planned for and managed separately and are not covered by this report. Families are offered a range of flexible attendance options, particularly for the youngest children. There are afternoon nap facilities for those children who need this and who stay the whole day. The majority of children who stay all day are provided with a hot lunch, which is delivered to the school and served in the large hall or to the full-day classroom for younger children, all supervised by lunchtime staff. A small number of children bring their own lunch from home. The school has excellent links with services for children with additional needs and the capacity to provide well for the children with English as an additional language. All the children in the school benefit from specialist teaching in Spanish, art and music.

There are currently 26 members of teaching staff, all with appropriate Montessori and/or other qualifications. Fifteen members of the team have Montessori teaching qualifications, with one near to completing this training. Each classroom is managed by a team of two or three staff members. The Head Directress works full-time, as do ten of the teaching staff.

Summary

The school follows the principles of the Montessori approach through all aspects of its provision. It is a welcoming and supportive environment for all individuals and has a sense of social cohesiveness that shows in the happiness felt by the children who attend. Links with parents are very strong. Parents regularly attend school events in large numbers and volunteer in various capacities throughout the school year.

Children are treated with respect, and in turn they respect other members of the school community. Teachers prepare a rich and inviting environment that allows children to develop at their own pace and they support their learning through a

combination of following the individual interests of the child and providing well for the next steps in their development.

The school environment has plentiful resources available. A combination of Montessori materials and those made by teachers provides an ever-evolving collection of resources to learn from. The development of open-ended creative activities would enrich this provision further. The care of the environment is shared between children and adults; the trust shown to children to do this is excellent.

The team works hard to ensure that the school continues to provide excellent care and education. Whilst the current supportive study groups for staff encourage useful sharing of ideas, it would benefit teachers further if they were able to develop more robust peer-feedback systems and to enhance the self-reflective techniques used to assess their own practice.

This is a forward-thinking Montessori setting that continues to engage with the MEAB accreditation process. Since the previous MEAB accreditation the school has improved the provision of activities available during recess time, especially in the multi-purpose room.

The school provides an education which follows the principles of the Montessori approach and environment. This merits accreditation by the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. Consideration should be given to the following points for further development:

- offer open-ended creative activities that are accessible to children to freely choose throughout the school day;
- develop a flexible transition policy that fully considers the needs of both the parents of new starters and their children; and
- encourage staff members to enhance their self-evaluation techniques and identify clearly the continued professional development of their own practice.

Philosophy:

The school fully embraces the Montessori philosophy, which is clearly embedded in the everyday life of both the children and the teachers working with them. It is clear that the school operates as a community that both accepts and supports all its members. The priority afforded to the social development of children, in line with the Montessori approach, is strongly reflected in how children and teachers treat each other through their kind words and actions. The school shows that it 'follows the child' through the individual attention given to each one. The curriculum offered is very broad and the children have the opportunity to offer their input on its content. The trust shown to them by the adults is fully reflected in the way that children right across the age range are able

to manage choices independently, with support from teachers given only when it is needed. This helps build each child's self-esteem and self-discipline from the earliest age. The consistency of this approach to the child is very evident in the high levels of self-control, social cohesion and excellent behaviour throughout the school.

The rooms are arranged to allow for vertical age-grouping in each class: 18 months to 3 years, 3 to 6 years and the class of oldest students ranging from 5 to 7 years. The teachers appreciate the benefits this brings to the children and they help the children to make good use of the opportunities presented, such as older children role-modelling for those younger. Staff members have a strong understanding of Montessori principles and their implementation across all aspects of the school's provision.

The school's documentation is reviewed annually to ensure that it is current and relevant to meet statutory regulations and that it also meets the needs of the community it serves. The philosophy of the school is clearly stated in the Parent Handbook and on the website. Parents greatly value The Montessori Children's House for the high quality of its Montessori provision.

Learning and Development:

Each classroom's resources are clearly arranged into the different areas of learning, which children are able to access through their spontaneous choice as well as being introduced to new activities by the adults. During the morning session the majority of the work that children do is chosen independently, and throughout the school there is evidence that the activities selected provide appropriate challenge and are developmentally enriching. Adult-led group work is more frequent in the afternoon sessions, although children do still choose freely as during the morning work cycle.

Use of the outdoor spaces is limited by the weather and state regulations, which stipulate temperature ranges that children can be outside in. During the re-accreditation visit children all had timetabled outdoor play either before or after their 2½ hour work cycle. Some classrooms were also able to support children's free access to the garden area outside their classrooms for a large proportion of the afternoon, allowing a wider degree of choice and movement for these children.

Children in the 5 to 7 year olds class have daily work plans which include activities that they will complete during that day. These plans cover literacy and numeracy skills alongside other curriculum areas that follow the child's current interests. Children in this class are able to manage their own plan effectively and demonstrate a high degree of independence. The reading levels of some children in this class are well above age-related expectations.

Additional activities offered to children include music sessions, art sessions and Spanish language classes. Children are withdrawn from class to take part in these sessions, which are run by additional specialist staff. One of the classrooms is a Spanish immersion class in the afternoon, where only Spanish is spoken.

Children's developmental needs are well met through the provision of high quality learning opportunities. The rich selection of resources are tailored to meet current interests as well as provide further challenge and development, and staff members ensure that each day offers new learning opportunities. The team in each room draws up planning for each child and for the provision of activities that follow themes; these are made available in the room and are often reflected in the afternoon group activities planned for those staying all day. Teachers use written observations that are kept up to date to plan possible next steps in the children's development. Photographs are taken throughout the day of children engaged in activities, which provide both a broad evidence base for planning and assessment of learning as well as a means to communicate the child's progress to their family, as the photographs can be shared with parents and carers via a secure digital platform.

Teachers throughout the school understand the evolving nature of the child's needs and interests, and there are examples of staff members adding new materials to their room on the same day as a new interest is expressed. This is excellent practice. The environment is used effectively to support children's development and they show increasing ability in managing their learning as they progress through the setting. It is recommended that to improve practice further, freely chosen and open-ended creative opportunities are made available to children throughout the school day.

A particular strength of the school is the very high quality of social interaction that exists between the children. In each class students are considerate, supportive and respectful towards each other in a very relaxed and natural way. This was exemplified during the re-accreditation visit by one child walking by and then observing another child completing a tessellation activity. As they were watching they said, "I like your work," and when it had been completed, "Oh, you made it! High Five!" The genuine interest shown by children in each other's wellbeing is an excellent indicator of the high level of social and emotional development promoted at the school.

Prepared Environment: resources and materials

In every classroom the materials are freely available for all children to access. This is achieved with open shelving and spacious workspaces; the storage is ample and there is plenty of room for children to work both on the floor and at tables. All the rooms also have child-height sink units and worktops which allow children to fully participate in activities for self-care, including the preparation of their own snack. Classrooms are arranged to promote independence, and each contains appropriate equipment to assist the children in their daily lives.

The materials are ordered according to the areas of the curriculum. The range of resources available is substantial and they are of very good quality. In each class there is an appropriate range of Montessori materials and in some of the rooms these are complemented by an exceptional range of teacher-made and purchased materials to fulfill the requirements of the curriculum. Inclusion of open-ended creative activities within each classroom would further enhance the range of well-considered resources.

The large multipurpose room has been developed following the previous MEAB accreditation, to ensure the activities it offers covers all areas of learning and provides for the whole age range of the setting. This is of particular benefit to the children who use this room more frequently in colder months. Older children eat together in the large multi-purpose room whilst the 18 month to 3 year old children who stay all day remain in their own classroom for their lunch. After eating, these younger children sleep in darkened classrooms and, when they wake in their own time, they are able to return to their classroom so that sleeping children are not disturbed.

At lunchtimes when the weather is clement children aged 3 and above use the large shared outdoor space for play. Whether inside or outside, the resources are very well maintained by both staff and children. The teachers offer new materials when they believe they are required, and children remain motivated by what is available in their environment.

Montessori practice: independence, including independence at home, freedom, respect

Across the school children are trusted to take responsibility for their own learning; they can select resources by themselves and decide on the level of difficulty of the task, then set their own pace to complete or repeat the activity. This trust is extended as the children get older, as the teachers ensure they become able to manage their own daily work plans. The high level of trust displayed by the adults towards the children leads to an environment where children are self-assured in their choices and confident in their own abilities. Daily routines are consistent, which helps the children develop a secure understanding of what to expect in school.

There is a deep level of respect shown to children by teachers in the school. This is evident in the language the adults use with children, their sensitive and nurturing approach to emotional development and behaviour management, the time they give to children whilst explaining and introducing tasks, and through the high quality learning opportunities that they offer to the children. Throughout the re-accreditation visit children enjoyed time to explore and repeat activities, freedom to chat amongst themselves, to move around their learning environment, to manage their own work and plan ahead, and to also manage their own self-care. The freedom given to children is well considered and the teachers share their knowledge of the importance of encouraging children's independence with their parents.

Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records

The teachers in each classroom work as a team, taking joint responsibility for the record-keeping for the children in their class. They work with, observe and record progress for all children and are able to give feedback to parents/carers of any child in the class. Each team works together when planning for individuals and group activities, including those that may be related to the theme. Each room plans for its group of children separately.

Parents receive a wealth of information regarding their child's wellbeing and development. Each classroom's team is able to send the photographs taken during the day home and, during transition times when children are going home, is able to talk with the parent/carer about their child. Monthly newsletters are sent home from each class, as are termly notes from the Head Directress. Parents' evenings are held twice a year, just after reports are sent home. However, parents of children in the 18 months to 3 years classroom receive daily reports and the children in the 5 to 7 years classroom receive four reports each year. Parents are also able to arrange meetings with the class teachers on an 'as needed' basis.

The school provides 'ParentEd' classes which are offered three times a year. These are very well attended events that focus on both the theory and practice of the Montessori approach used at the school. Parents also attend musical concerts and other school events, and organise their own social events as a parent body.

There is a great deal of communication that takes place between the school and new starters, including children visiting the classrooms and meeting teachers before beginning, and bringing in a family photo book with them to the setting. However, the school should consider devising a settling-in policy in collaboration with staff and parents, to build greater flexibility to meet the needs of both children and their parents as they are getting to know their new environment.

The record-keeping system is uniform throughout the school, which helps transitions between classes and clearly shows a child's progress across their years of attendance. Visits to the new class are also arranged for children so they are able to see which class they are going to and to meet the children and teachers who will be there. Transitions to other schools when children move on are carried out on a similar basis. Information and reports that have been completed whilst the child has been at The Montessori Children's House are shared with the new school.

Links with parents are very strong. This is reflected in the popularity of the school, the high levels of attendance at school events, and the involvement of the parents in supporting the school.

Staff: qualifications, deployment, and performance management

The school has a very experienced staff team, the majority of whom have been at the setting for ten years or more. Of the 26 teachers, 15 have Montessori qualifications and 25 are educated to degree level. They are well led by the Head Directress who ensures that everyone who works in the school is qualified and has up to date knowledge of current policy and practice through continuing professional development opportunities.

Teachers have a lot of autonomy in their work. They are given the opportunity to support each other through practitioner study groups, which allow them to share good practice across the school. This reflective practice could be developed by encouraging all staff members to engage in peer and shared observations to help further enhance practice,

and by engendering more effective self-evaluation across the team. The school has a suitable set of policies that is introduced to all new staff during the induction process, and it is reviewed annually. Staff meetings are held once a month and in-service training sessions are held four times a year.

The school is carefully governed by the School Board of Directors and is managed very well by the Head Directress. She is responsible for the annual review of the school's development plan, as well as conducting staff appraisals. She liaises regularly with the President of the Board and Board members with specific responsibility such as finance.

The teachers throughout the school are fully engaged with the Montessori ethos. Their belief in this approach to nurturing the child is reflected in their efforts to implement it in all aspects of their practice. They have a thorough knowledge of the children in their care and fully endorse the excellent social cohesion enjoyed by children and teachers alike.

Name of Assessor: Jeremy Clarke

Date report submitted: 16th May 2017