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Montessori looks back — and ahead

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By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Special for USA TODAY

BEVERLY, Mass. — When Italian physician Maria Montessori opened a school in a Rome slum 100 years ago this month, she drew jeers and suspicion for her unique approach of putting children in charge of their education.

A century later, her ideas are a lot more popular. About 22,000 schools bear the Montessori name in 110 countries worldwide, according to the Association Montessori Internationale in Amsterdam.

In the USA, Montessori education penetrates an estimated 4,200 settings, including traditional public schools, experimental middle schools and even a center for elderly people who have dementia.

This year, educators will remember Montessori's origins and debate the future of an educational model that lets children learn at their own pace without grades or tests. Starting with a two-day conference in Rome earlier this month, events include a six-city North American tour of a Montessori legacy exhibit and a four-day conference in New York March 1-4.

As the movement takes stock of where it has been and where it's going, organizers are calling participants back to their roots with reminders that Maria Montessori relied on everyday material to educate disadvantaged young people. That tradition isn't always easy to follow, because the cost of outfitting a single classroom with hallmark materials now costs in the neighborhood of \$50,000.

"One of the biggest challenges is to make Montessori more accessible and affordable," says Heidi Rombola, director of the early-childhood program at Harborlight Montessori School here. More than 90% of U.S. programs are in private schools, according to data from Jola Publications, which publishes *Public SchoolMontessorian*.


Tuition rates vary by country and region, but they tend to rival those of private schools. At Harborlight, parents pay \$12,100 a year; just 20 of the 261 children receive a discount. Tuition helps stock materials that are meant to stimulate all senses, foster competencies and evoke children's curiosity. Fourteen mounted bells in the music room, for instance, cost \$1,100.

In immaculately ordered and naturally lit classrooms, materials play a prominent role. Children ages 3 to 6 pick their tools — a wet sponge, a textured globe, a model dinosaur skeleton — and work quietly, either alone or in groups of two or three. Down the hall, their peers do yoga on 10 mats in the library. Among the 7- to 9-year-olds, a boy reads


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a picture book in a recliner. A girl sits on the floor nibbling an apple. Another boy does fractions at a desk he moved into a walk-in closet.

"I was getting distracted, so I came in here," 8-year-old Scout McAloon explains.

For all their lack of orthodoxy, Montessori schools are achieving success, according to a study published in the September edition of the journal *Science*. Researchers from the University of Virginia and the University of Wisconsin-Madison found Montessori kindergarten students outperformed those in a control group in reading, math and social skills.

The Montessori label, however, is far from a seal of quality, because in the absence of any licensing agreement, any school can call itself Montessori.

Parents must investigate whether a school is accredited from one of two major certifying organizations and whether teachers are adequately trained.

Teachers worry pressures to make Montessori more accessible and keep schools in the black sometimes result in watered-down teacher-training practices at unofficial sites.

"There are outrageous shortcuts being taken in the name of Montessori," says David Kahn, executive director of the North American Montessori Teachers Association. "We have to find a way to maintain quality and continue our outreach to all children."

Meanwhile, Montessori continues to defend its methods in contrast to national trends that emphasize high-stakes testing. Typically, a Montessori student won't learn certain academic skills, such as reading or working with numeric patterns, until he or she expresses an interest. They almost always learn the skills, but not always on a predictable timetable, says Betsy Coe, past president of the American Montessori Society and upper-school principal at School of the Woods in Houston.

"When they get something, they think they're the first person in history to figure it out," Coe says. "At that point, they own it. But it takes more time" than conventional teaching.

As public schools increasingly offer Montessori through school choice programs, experts continue to weigh the merits of the methodology. Katherine Schultz, director of teacher education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, commends Montessori for its project-based approach to learning.

She also says she's "always worried that there's not enough open-ended playtime in Montessori schools" since the environment steers children to work constantly toward results.

Nevertheless, as the movement enters its second century, Schultz sees it serving as a long-term repository of insight on a philosophical landscape where ideas about learning come and go. "They hold some very important ideas about education, and because they are respected, they can keep a strong grasp of those ideas while the winds of school reform might change what school looks like in K-through-12 schools."

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