

Montessori Expansion

The first year, 2017-2018, of the Montessori Academy (MA) at the Early Learning Center(ELC) proved to be such a success that expansion is needed to keep up with demand.

Currently, the Academy offers a tuition-based daycare for children six-weeks to five-year-olds. This August, the Academy will be expanding to offer a free option for pre-k and kindergarten.

“Our first year of the Montessori Academy was a great success for all involved-children, parents, and staff,” said Lori Smith, the director of the ELC.

The MA served 38 children in its first year and currently has 80 registered for the upcoming term and a waiting list of those wanting to attend. Smith observes, “Providing choices for parents, in regard to their child’s care and education, is always good for the family and for the community at-large.”

The History of Montessori

Currently, the Montessori method of education is used throughout the United States, as well as worldwide, as an alternative to standard education. The model was created by Dr. Maria Montessori, the first woman in Italy to receive a medical degree. She practiced in the fields of education, anthropology, and psychiatry and believed that each child is born with unique potential to be nurtured and revealed.

The main three focused areas established by Montessori are:

1. Preparing the most natural and life-supporting environments for the child;
2. Observing the child living freely in this environment;
3. Continually adapting the environment in order that the child may fulfill his or her greatest potential, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Under a Montessori model, children have the freedom to explore subjects in blended classrooms where older students use their own knowledge by helping the younger students learn. Instead of lecturing, teachers are free to work with small groups of students and independent learners. This style is promoted to allow each student to learn at their own pace and create an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competitiveness.

Bringing the Montessori Experience to Baldwin County

A unique partnership between the Baldwin County Board of Education and Georgia College(GC), the Academy offers an alternative to standard daycare. The MA is housed in the Early Learning Center of Baldwin County and is staffed with a blend of GC employees and Board of Education administrators.

The Academy has access to a host of professionals provided by GC through the departments of nursing and psychology, as well as student teachers from the College of Education.

The movement to bring the Montessori principle to Baldwin County was spearheaded by Dr. Joseph Peters, dean of the School of Education at GC. His previous post at Chaminade University in Hawaii, allowed him to witness the advantages of the program.

“As dean of Education, I was the person with oversight for the programs, and saw firsthand the quality and benefits of Montessori education,” said Peters. “This over 100-year-old program has been used in diverse cultures throughout the world and continues to be advantageous in educating children.”

Peter stresses that choices in education in good for all parties involved. He says that first and foremost, choice leads to student success, since parents can match the educational environment to their child’s optimal learning conditions.

He adds, “It is good for parents because they can have more control over the child’s classroom environment and generally be in better contact with teachers to support learning goals.”

The program took one full year to plan and create the appropriate spaces for infants and toddlers at the ELC. Classrooms were specially fitted with kitchens and formula warming areas. A new playground was constructed with materials especially suited for the very young children.

A unique feature to working with the MA infants is the use of sign language. The babies begin learning how to communicate through signing before they can speak words. According to Smith, by providing a proven form of communication, the relationship between child and teacher is greatly enhanced because the needs are made clear.

Life skills are a large part of the daily curriculum at Montessori. Children past infant stage decide what they want for lunch, they prepare it, and clean up after themselves. There is also a specially fitted kitchen where children can learn to cook and is used often to make eggs, cookies, salads, and homemade ice cream.

“We are focused on creating the most independent and critically thinking child possible,” said Smith. “In addition to academic learning, we are teaching important life skills that will follow a child throughout their life.”

Teachers within the MA express how much different the experience is than traditional daycare. Brooke Michalic worked in other facilities and has high praise for the Montessori model. “It is so different from my prior experience,” she said. “It is a much calmer environment to teach in and the students thrive in leading younger children in activities.”

Having fun is also a component of the daily activities for each child in the MA. Multiple rooms are equipped with water activities that are a welcomed relief during hot summer days. Tricycles are stationed in hallways to allow students to learn to ride in a safe environment away from traffic on roads.

“We also have an indoor playground for those days when weather does not permit us to go outside,” added Smith.

With the future in mind, goals have been set to expand through elementary school and beyond. “I would love to be able to follow each Montessori child and witness what positive measurements we made in their life.

To find out more about the Montessori Academy, you can go online at www.montessorielc.com , call 478-457-2469, or visit the Early Learning Center located behind the Board of Education on South ABC Street.

Information from Dr. Peters for a possible sidebar

It is interesting to note that Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the founders of Google, credit their success to a Montessori education. A diverse group of others such as rapper Diddy, actress Dakota Fanning, video game creator Will Wright, Wikipedia creator Jimmy Wales, chef and television personality Julia Child, and WWII diarist Anne Frank all attended Montessori. Others such as Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell started Montessori schools. Fred Rogers, of Mr. Rogers neighborhood, pushed for the expansion of Montessori education. Even CEOs, such as Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, use similar strategies to support their company's success.