



## **BLACK RIVER MONTESSORI ELEMENTARY**

The elementary grades at Black River Public School follow the Montessori Method of instruction, with accommodation made for standardized testing requirements. This method differs from the style of instruction to which most parents and students are accustomed. In making a school choice for your child, parents are invited to carefully read the following information, ask questions and visit our classrooms to inform yourselves fully about what you should expect from the Black River elementary program.

### **Where Does Montessori Come From?**

Dr. Maria Montessori, the founder of the Montessori Method, graduated from the medical school of the University of Rome in 1896, and was the first woman to practice medicine in Italy. As a physician, Dr. Montessori was very involved with the care of young children. Through scientific observation, she came to see how children interacted with one another, learned through the use of materials she provided, and went through specific phases of development. Her approach to education was developed based on her observations, in collaboration with her background in psychology and her belief in the education of children as a means to create a better society. She continued to observe children around the world, and found that the universal laws of development she had recognized were common among children of all races and cultures. One hundred years later the Montessori approach to education continues to be respected and practiced internationally, and is continually validated by the results of modern educational research.

### **What is the Montessori Philosophy?**

Dr. Montessori believed that a truly educated individual continues learning long after the hours and years spent in a classroom because he or she is motivated from within by a natural curiosity and love for knowledge. Because Montessori education is successful in developing concentration, self-discipline, a love of learning and social skills with varying age groups, the child is better equipped to enter new situations and to easily adjust to new environments.

This creates the perfect foundation for Black River's educational mission and teaching philosophy. Already we have seen that students who came through the fourth and fifth grade Montessori classrooms are excelling in our middle school program.

## **What is Different Inside a Montessori Classroom?**

*Mixed Ages:* Classes are grouped according to the Montessori philosophy of mixed ages, in rooms of first through third graders, and rooms of fourth through fifth graders. Social and intellectual development is enhanced by this method of age grouping. Learning within these groups stimulates greater interest and encourages cooperation. The younger children learn through observation of the older children. In addition, the older student has the opportunity to become a leader and reinforce their knowledge as they help their younger friends. This legacy of responsibility and helping others is passed down in class.

*Independence:* The Montessori Method stresses that children learn and progress at their own pace so that fast learners are not held back, and slow learners are not frustrated by their inability to keep up. The program is designed to allow development at the student's own pace. It provides for a wide range of developmental needs of the student. Our Montessori-trained teachers present the curriculum in a manner that best fits the student, rather than making the student fit the curriculum. While core benchmarks and proficiencies in Language, Reading,

Mathematics, History and Science are required to advance through the grade levels, students are encouraged to stretch beyond these basic competencies toward higher cognitive levels of learning.

*Freedom and Responsibility:* The Montessori environment strikes a fine balance between structure and freedom. The concept of freedom associated with responsibility is gradually introduced from the first day. Montessori students have a wide variety of constructive paths to choose. They gain the skills and tools to accomplish their choices and they are taught the social values that enable them to make enlightened choices. Dr. Montessori believed that freedom does not involve simply being able to do what you want to do. It does involve being able to distinguish what is constructive and beneficial and being able to carry that out.

Why don't the classes mix very much? An important aspect of the Montessori Method, is the development of a learning community within each classroom. This community develops spontaneously as a result of a couple of key elements:

*Ownership of and responsibility for the classroom environment.* Everything in the room is geared toward the needs of the students and they are the key source of maintaining the daily order and care of the premises, plants, animals and materials.

*Responsibility for each other.* Though the students work independently a large percentage of the time, they have freedom in their social relations, limiting their actions only when they interfere with the rights of others. Working together and interacting across age groups helps a natural concern and empathy for others to arise. This manifests itself in a strong sense of community within the classroom. Students instinctively reach out with help for those who need it, and take it upon themselves to help correct inappropriate behavior if it occurs. Fostering this important sense of ownership and community is not accomplished in a larger and fluctuating group, particularly in the first half of the school year.

Individual classrooms interact together in ways that allow meaningful instruction to take place; for example, writing exchanges and literature circles. Teachers are free to establish classroom interactions that complement their academic goals. During the program's first year, some combining of classes was tried for Spanish, art, music and physical education. This yielded poor results for both students and teachers and was discontinued.

As previously noted, students also have the opportunity at daily noon recess to intermingle by pairs of classrooms which share a common schedule.

## Curriculum

The Montessori curriculum is a sequential program designed for independent learning and meshes seamlessly with Black River's rigorous middle- and high-school academic program. One important question that is often asked by parents inquiring about Black River deals with the scope and sequence of the Elementary Curriculum. At a glance, the curriculum is not markedly different from that of other schools. However, because our elementary classrooms are based on the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori, the method of delivery and the preparedness of the classroom environment distinguish our school. Here is a brief overview of the curriculum.

Language Arts is a curricular area rich with a multi-faceted approach. From Kindergarten through Fifth Grade, the Montessori approach to reading is literature based. Reading alone, in small groups, in Literature Circles or using the Accelerated Reader program, a student's primary encounter with text is through literature found in classroom libraries. In addition, Montessori provides a strong focus on building a solid phonemic base, beginning in the Kindergarten classroom and extending into the following grades. Attendant language skills, such as word study of compound words, prefixes, suffixes, and homophones to name a few, are part and parcel of every classroom. Writing is integral to each classroom, as well, in the form of journals, projects and reports, as well as Writer's Notebooks and creative writing. Students use the Six Traits of Writing, enhanced by Power Writing and the Collins Writing programs as a basis for skill development. Grammar skills are taught right along with reading and writing skills and begin with parts of speech, transitioning over time to sentence construction and analysis.

Spelling begins in Kindergarten with simple three-letter word construction with Montessori materials. Additionally in subsequent grades, students' spelling is individualized with the San Mateo Spelling Program. Students progress at their own rate with this integrated approach propelled by interest and ability.

In Mathematics, materials designed by Maria Montessori exemplify the use of concrete representations to teach abstract concepts. From the start in Kindergarten, students' work with numeration and the basic operations is always material-based. Students see and touch objects as they develop one-to-one correspondence critical for counting ones, tens, hundreds, and thousands. Materials are used to teach abstract concepts in every area of mathematics through the fifth grade. This aspect of the curriculum is singular to a Montessori environment. When studying basic operations: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, as well as fractions, and decimals, all concepts are presented with materials. Many of the same materials are used throughout the entire elementary program, from Kindergarten through Fifth Grade, with increasing levels of skill and depth of learning as students mature. Additional units of study included in the curriculum include time and money, temperature and measurement, ratio and proportion, and percents. Here again, materials are key to the first encounter a student has with each new idea. The discipline of geometry begins in Kindergarten and continues through Fifth Grade encompassing the study of lines, angles, triangles, quadrilaterals, polygons, and circles. The heart of the mathematics curriculum is a deep understanding of mathematical concepts through usage of materials that become so ingrained, that abstraction is a natural outgrowth of a student's work over time.

In the Montessori curriculum, the area of Cultural Studies embraces the wide panorama of history, geography, geology, zoology, botany and physical science. Studies in the cultural areas are material-based, beginning with the whole frame of reference in a given area and moving with increasing focus to its parts as students mature in their ability to investigate and synthesize information, concepts and ideas. Beginning in Kindergarten and continuing through Third Grade, learning often begins with nomenclature and quickly gives students an opportunity for research, hands-on exploration and project based learning. The Upper Elementary curriculum proceeds in the same manner, but with a fourth grade track and a fifth grade track. Here one additional emphasis is American history, a study that spans our country's Native American beginning through the Civil War. As a particularly rich element of every classroom, cultural studies encourage students to satisfy their abundant curiosity about the world around them.

Rounding out the curriculum are four subjects taught by specialists in their field: art, music, physical education and Spanish. Each of these disciplines is offered on a weekly basis to enrich the learning opportunities of each student.

Distinctive in its approach to learning, the Montessori curriculum is as wide-ranging as the interest and enthusiasm of the students within the classroom environment.

How are Reading and Math assessed? In order to place students accurately in the highly individualized Montessori program, assessment begins with a home visit by the teacher before the school year begins. Students are assessed at the beginning of the year in Math using Albanesi Montessori assessments, and then are re-evaluated throughout the year when needed.

All students undergo an informal reading assessment at the beginning and end of the year in sight words, oral reading comprehension and vocabulary. At the end of the year this is repeated, with 5th graders also being assessed in silent reading comprehension. Spelling is also assessed at the beginning of the year and throughout the year so the student is placed and maintained at the correct level.

Writing assessments are given to all students (integrating with the middle school and high school program) at the beginning and end of each year, with their English portfolio then passed on to the next year's teacher.

The Montessori Method has been criticized in the areas of reading instruction and language arts. How does the Black River program deviate from Montessori in these subjects? Black River does supplement the Montessori curriculum in this area. The founder of our elementary program has her Masters degree with a

specialty in reading and writing, and was part of the team that developed outcomes for the school's reading and writing curriculum. Elementary students follow the Collins Writing Program, which is wholly integrated with the reading and writing program of Black River's middle and high school curriculum. Students use writing workshops and participate in literature circles along with read-alouds, independent reading and other activities to meet their daily reading and writing requirements.

**What is Project Term?** The final four weeks of the school year are Black River's unique experiential education session. Through field trips and hands-on activities, students gain educational experiences that are difficult to provide in a more traditional setting. It is an opportunity for teachers to share their areas of expertise with students. Students in grades 4 and 5 select four mini-courses, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, for two weeks each. An abbreviated Project Term is offered for grades 1-3.

Some examples of elementary Project Term offerings are:

Literature for Lunch  
Orienteering  
Sailing

American Sign Language  
Creative Drama  
Calligraphy

Beginning Tae Kwon Do  
Bailamos - Latin American Dance  
Arts and Crafts

**Why aren't all the students in the same grade doing the same activities?** Teachers at Black River enjoy a large degree of autonomy in their classrooms. Though the entire staff adheres to the demanding Black River curriculum, they are free to work within their classrooms in ways they deem best suited for each particular group of students. The Black River administrative team recruits teachers who thrive in an environment where they alone are responsible for the learning of their students and are therefore not directed by the administration or district office on how and when to teach each objective. For this reason, though instructional goals are shared, the means of achieving them will vary. In teaching the same concept one instructor may use a field trip; another, a classroom demonstration or guest speaker; and yet another, a hands-on project. It is the policy of Black River administration to encourage this independence in our teachers as a means of fostering the innovative and enthusiastic teaching that has yielded our superior results.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What are drop off and pick up times?**

Morning Kindergarten: 7:55 – 11:10

Afternoon Kindergarten: 11:55 – 3:10

Elementary 1-5: 8:00 – 3:10

Middle School/High School: 8:10 – 3:00

**What is a typical day like?** Montessori instruction is based on experience which shows that children do their best work when allowed a 3-hour uninterrupted work cycle. In order to accommodate other subjects considered important, children spend the morning in this uninterrupted work period, and then in the afternoon receive instruction in Spanish, music, physical education or art, along with additional classroom time.

**What's up with yoga and the candle?** At a time chosen in each classroom, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students share a poem, candle and a few minutes of basic stretching and quiet time. The three-wick candle – lit by the teacher and a representative student from each grade - is a community builder and a calming moment. Poetry is selected by students in turn, and reflections are shared after listening. Studies show that learning, memory and alertness are enhanced by daily stretching and physical movement; students benefit as well through building physical flexibility and promoting calmness and focus.

**How do lunch and recess work?** Students eat lunch in the lyceum. Kids are seated, use conversational voices and enjoy a relaxed meal. Classrooms in grades 1-3 eat three classrooms at a time. Recess is scheduled either before or after lunch. All students in grades 4-5 eat at the same time and share similar recess. At this time

students are free to choose their own activities, including playground equipment, kickball, soccer, 4-square, jump rope, etc...

**What about Tulip Time and holidays?** In keeping with Black River's emphasis on academics, as a general practice classroom parties and other non-instructional activities are rarely scheduled. Where feasible, holidays are recognized through academics and community service. One class, for example, spent time on Valentine's Day decorating cookies for the residents of the Alzheimer's unit at Fountainview. Classes are not interrupted for Tulip Time events.

**Does the school provide transportation?** It is the responsibility of parents to provide transportation to and from school. The school will assist to help interested families establish car pool arrangements. Bussing is provided for field trips and sports activities.

### **What is the philosophy on field trips and community service?**

*Field trips:* Once students have shown that they are responsible in maintaining the classroom environment, choosing their work with care, and working in harmony with others, they are given freedom beyond the classroom. It is a principle of Montessori education and a goal in Black River Public School's emphasis on "experiential learning" to encourage children to access the outside world as a doorway to instruction. Field trips are a natural outcome of the children's questions about their work and the need to research sources outside the classroom for their answers.

Children become part of the community at large when they study at the local library or visit a museum or retirement home. Students explore society beyond the school as a means to:

Experience the cooperative effort required for a functioning community;

Discover specific contributions that others are making to their society;

Develop an awareness of the meaning and value of work;

Develop further their independence and behavioral standards;

Supplement their classroom studies with real-life, hands-on experiences.

*Community Service:* Community service was established as a part of the school's founding Mission Statement and is required of all Black River students in grades K through 12. The K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students are responsible for 10 hours of community service and the 4th/5th graders are responsible for 15 hours. Many of these activities are generally handled as a class through nursing home visits; work in the school and community. Fulfillment of these requirements will vary by classroom.

**How can parents get involved?** Who do I ask and what kinds of things can I do? Opportunities abound at Black River for parents to be actively involved. Teachers encourage and appreciate your support. The Black River Parent Organization meets regularly and welcomes new members to assist in special events. Elementary parents currently are involved in a variety of ways, from greeting cars during morning drop-off, to chaperoning field trips. Parents should talk with the Parent Organization or their child's teacher to find about ways they can be involved. Parental involvement is valued as an important part of a child's academic success.

**More Questions?** Our website is full of valuable information and includes a calendar of events. We invite you to visit for a school tour, open house, or attend an information meeting to learn more about our program.

If you are interested in reading more about Montessori education, we encourage you to visit your library or bookstore with the recommended reading list. If you have any questions, please let us know. We will be happy to help!

## Recommended Reading List

Here are some introductory books on Maria Montessori and Montessori education.

Lillard, Paula P. (1996). *Montessori Today*. New York: Random House. Order through [NAMTA](#) or from your local bookstore. ISBN 0-8052-1061-X, 207 pages, bibliography, index.

*Describes Montessori theory and contemporary American Montessori schools serving ages ranging from birth to adulthood.*

Lillard, Paula P.; Jessen, Lynn L. (2003). *Montessori from the Start*. New York: Schocken. Order through [NAMTA](#) or from your local bookstore. ISBN 0805211128. 304 pages.

*What parents can do to help their youngest children in the process of self-formation.*

Montessori, Maria. (1948). *To Educate the Human Potential*. Madras, India: Kalakshetra Publications. Order Clio edition through [NAMTA](#).

*Describes the needs of the elementary-aged child in the process of acquiring culture.*

Montessori, Maria. (1949). *The Absorbent Mind*. Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House. Order Clio edition through [NAMTA](#). U.S. edition can be [ordered online](#) through Amazon.com.

*Discusses the development of infants and young children from birth to three years. Gives a clear explanation of the basis of Montessori theory and method.*

Montessori, Maria. (1956). *The Child in the Family*. Chicago: Henry Regnery. Order Clio edition through [NAMTA](#).

*A series of short essays about the child, the family, and the school, with a philosophical emphasis.*

Montessori, Maria. (1973). *From Childhood to Adolescence*. New York: Schocken. Order Clio edition through [NAMTA](#).

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