

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 first through third grade Montessori classrooms are excelling in our upper elementary 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.

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. Reading, writing, mathematics and science are part of the daily focus. Students also receive instruction in Spanish language, music, art and physical education.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are drop off and pick up times?

Elementary: 7:45 - 3:10 (School starts at 8:00am for grades 1-5)

Middle School/High School: 8:00 - 3:00 (School starts at 8:10 for grades 6-12)

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, 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, 4th and 5th grade students share a poem, candle and some classes do 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. In the first through third building you may find a similar experience through use of BrainGym.

How do lunch and recess work? In the lunchroom, students are seated, use conversational voices and enjoy a relaxed meal. When finished, they clean the tables and sweep the floors. During recess, students are free to choose their own activities (playground equipment, kickball, soccer, 4-square, jump-rope, etc. are available when weather permits).

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 the last two weeks of the school year (afternoons only) for grades 1-3.

Some examples of elementary Project Term offerings are:

Literature for Lunch
American Sign Language
Tae Kwon Do (beginning and advanced)
Orienteering
Creative Drama
Everday Science

Sailing
Greek Gods & other mythical creatures
Arts and Crafts
Classical Music in our Daily Life
Knitting
Environmental Science

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 our 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.

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.

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.

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

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. Fourth and fifth grade 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 Scantron testing, as well as 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. Our popular Accelerated Reader program serves as an additional ongoing appraisal tool for teachers. 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.

In fourth and fifth grade, 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.

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 Alzheimers 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 wherever possible to help interested families establish car pool arrangements. For field trips and sports activities, students will travel on the 30-passenger buses owned by the school.

What is the philosophy on field trips and community service?

Field trips: 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 local venues. 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. Further information about volunteer opportunities and how service-based learning is incorporated into our curriculum can be found in the registration materials packet available in the main office. The 4th/5th graders are responsible for 15 hours of community service and the 1-3 grade students for 10 hours. These activities are sometimes handled as a class through nursing home visits, work in the school and community, etc. Ultimately, the fulfillment of these requirements will be the responsibility of each student and his/her family.

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. 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, as well as the Six Traits and PowerWriting programs. 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.

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. Our Parent Organization meets regularly and welcomes new members. Elementary parents currently are involved in a variety of ways such as greeting cars during morning drop-off and chaperoning field trips. Parents should talk with their child's teacher to make suggestions and to find about ways they can be involved. School-wide, parents are part of committees and focus groups, coaching, tutoring, clubs, Book Fair, Project Term and more. Parental involvement is valued as an important part of a child's academic success.

More questions? Please check with the main office (355-0055) and we'll be happy to find the right person to answer your questions. Suggested resources for additional Montessori information may be found on our school web site, under the Elementary link.