

January 22, 2012

Dear Washington State Legislators,

Congratulations on winning a federal grant for early childhood education! It is exciting to know that the US public, legislators, and public school educators are accepting current brain research and the significance of the “formative period” as described by Dr. Maria Montessori over 100 years ago.

I have come to the following conclusions during my lifetime of work with young children:

1. All children from 2 and one-half to six years learn through their senses and benefit from a high-quality, sensory learning experience, such as a Montessori school, in which the individual is valued and respected.
2. The ideal situation for most children, 2 ½ to 6 years, is to learn in a classroom setting for three hours in the morning, and to spend the afternoon with the mother or father. This is what I suggested for my own grandchildren.
3. Due to the number of working mothers in our society today, however, many parents need full child care. With understanding, love and listening in the home, the child can thrive in both settings during their early years. Full child care centers must provide, however, a variety of learning and social experiences in a kind and respectful setting for the all-day child to thrive.
4. It is actually enriching to the young child to learn from other loving and knowledgeable adults who set behavioral guidelines in the classroom in a fair and equitable manner. Many of today’s children are not given limits at home. This child can open up to justice, grace and courtesy in his early, formative years when in a predictable, happy, and consistent environment.

Forty years of early childhood experience: I have taught or overseen the early education of thousands of children, ages Birth to 6, as well as thousands of adults in Montessori education, both in the US and Asia for forty years. Assisting young children to learn to their full potential is my passion. Preparing teachers to meet the needs of children is my great love.

MTP of WA/Montessori Plus Schools: Montessori Teacher Preparation of Washington, and our school for children, Montessori Plus School, was registered as a faith-based non-profit corporation in 1981. Our two schools in Kent are currently licensed by the Department of Early Learning, and our training program by the WA State Workforce Coordinating Board. Three schools in Federal Way, two in Kent and one in Newport Hills, as well as many throughout the entire state, were begun by graduates of our training program. Hundreds of our graduates now teach throughout western Washington, as well as in Pullman, Spokane, Yakima, and the Tri-Cities. We currently are approved by the Department of Homeland Security to grant I-20’s to qualified adults. We hold three classes concurrently with over seventy adults in training, both in Kent and Everett. More than fifty new teachers have internships this year in thirty Montessori schools in this state.

Montessori education of young children a hidden asset in most States: Due to misunderstandings, lack of information and unsatisfactory experiences with Montessori education, many traditional early childhood experts and bureaucrats for decades have shunned Dr. Maria Montessori's ideas as outdated and uncreative. With increasing research now available, professors and even federal and state agency leaders are now taking a fresh look at Montessori as an educator ahead of her time. According to Dr. Angeline Stoll Lillard, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, Montessori's 100-year old theories and experiments can now be validated by current brain research. Interestingly the most defining quality of Montessori schools is the "language of respect" which brings the child to joyful learning.

Accreditation: Not only is our teacher preparation program accredited by our national organization, the Montessori Institute of America, but it is also accredited by the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education, which, in turn, is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Our 240-hour training program meets and surpasses the required standards of MACTE (macte.org) and the USDE. It is a program of learning for teachers that integrates all aspects of the child and teacher, i.e. spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional and physical. (Please see our website at www.montessoriplus.org for our comprehensive brochure and details about our program.) MTP's graduates gain skills in over thirty competencies and are sought around the world. They must complete a 720-hour successful internship for the level 2 ½ to 6 years under the guidance of an experienced master teacher.

Faith-based and integrated program: Our program for children is faith-based and has provided an integrated and comprehensive learning program for young children in this state since 1981. In these past thirty years we are happy to have had the opportunity to see hundreds, even thousands, of young children, usually two and one-half to six years, or six months to two and one-half years, learning by doing, organizing their tasks, gaining self-confidence and a love of learning. One of our parents told me that his two and one-half year old child came home and began to show new organizational skills. He realized that many of these progressive tasks were the same that he learned in his introductory weeks at Microsoft!

Parents and teachers see the difference Montessori makes: Principals and teachers in Kent, Auburn, Renton and Federal Way bring their children to our schools, as well as to other Montessori schools in these areas. Young mothers often see such a change in their children that they decide to become Montessori teachers. We have learned from our many parents, over the past four decades, of the successes of their children and the enormous credit they give to our Montessori program.

Montessori is a middle-class movement: The children at Montessori Plus Schools do not come from wealthy families. Most of our family base is middle class parents who struggle and sacrifice to pay their child's tuition. Since we participate in DEL's tuition reimbursement program, we also accept children from low income families, who through DEL, pay only 60 percent full-day tuition. I am sure that many of our parents will qualify for this program and would love to be considered for it as long as it is offered at Montessori Plus School.

Please find below my comments regarding the HB2448 Bill:

1. Educational directors should be allowed to do what they do best: educate. Supplemental organizations should provide services such as health, nutrition and family support so that the director and teachers can concentrate on the children.
2. Interaction with parents through classes taught by trained Montessori teachers, with observation of classrooms, reading and discussion of interesting early childhood books, and role playing about respectful language, can change the outlook of many parents toward children.
3. I recommend early intervention for low-income mothers in programs that provide education through in-home visits, with demonstrations to the mother on how to work with children and what to say to them.
4. Birth to Three years is a critical period in the child's life. Montessori training programs for this level provide an amazing, new model for the independence and self-confidence of the youngest children.
5. Although Bachelor and AA degrees may give the children a mentor with wider vision and vocabulary, specific training in how to lead children into learning is even more important. Our Montessori children are almost always reading by age 4 ½ without pressure. They teach themselves! The 5 year old is adding decimal beads, bars and cubes to find the sum and to write it. S/he is making maps of the world or US and labeling the states by name. It is easy when someone shows the child how to do it, not by telling them how!
6. Our classrooms already monitor the progress of each child by recording lessons given to them, and by observing their own use of the materials on a rug or table. Through observation the teacher observes the child's mind at work.
7. Extensive reporting of outcome data could become a financial burden on small centers which would be required to hire additional staff for this task. Funds should be provided for this requirement.
8. Our schools enroll young children for 3 hours per day x 180 days = 540 hours per school year. We recommend that five year olds spend six or six and one-half hours per day in active, hands-on, creative individualized learning. Most of our 5-year-olds attend 1,170 hours per year, not including summer school.
9. Research on the efficacy of Montessori learning for young children is now available. Many new research projects have been accomplished, such as "Optimal Developmental Outcomes, The Social, Moral, Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions of a Montessori Education" by Annette Haines, Kay Baker and David Kahn; and Angeline Stoll Lillard's The Science Behind the Genius.
10. Legislators and Children's Alliance personnel should go out and observe early childhood programs. It would be fascinating to any open-minded person to observe Headstart in the educational wing of the Holy Spirit Church in downtown Kent, and then to walk down the hall to observe at Montessori Plus School. We invite you to visit and see the difference.

HB 2448 discriminates against faith-based organizations and parents: Unfortunately Montessori Plus School will not be able to participate in this program if legislators set up rules that discriminate against faith-based programs, as I read in the bill: Programs must be "free from religious instruction, activities,

symbolism, and control or influence.” The religious component of Montessori Plus School comprises a small part of our whole program, but it is the very heart of our school and we cannot sacrifice it. Seventy-five percent of our parents are from other countries and many religions, but they feel comfortable with and value our faith.

It is strange that we have spiritual freedom with our current program, as licensed by DEL, but this new program would not allow us a spiritual component. Our training program, one of the largest in the US, is not asked to remove any spiritual content for its teachers, and continues to be accredited by MACTE, and thus the USDE. The federal government approves our training program. Why cannot we include a spiritual component?

To conclude, we know how to provide a comprehensive, high-quality early learning program that fits with current brain research, allows for freedom of movement, and choice, as well as mentors respectful language. **I ask you to reconsider and to allow faith-based organizations to participate fully in this program, and to consider the Montessori model of early childhood education, as well as the traditional model, in your curriculum planning and legislation.** Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sharlet J. McClurkin, Director

Montessori Plus Schools/Teacher Preparation of WA