

The Importance of Strong Montessori Leadership

As in any school, leadership in public Montessori programs is crucial. In most public Montessori programs, the instructional leader will hold the title of Principal. In some programs the Principal is assisted by a *Montessori Coach*, *Program Coordinator* or *Lead Teacher*. As a rule of thumb, the more Montessori knowledge there can be at the top, the better for the program. The ideal instructional leader for any Montessori school is an individual with a Montessori diploma from a highly respected training center. Without this theoretical and practical background, leaders are significantly impeded in their ability to

- ❖ Evaluate Montessori instruction
- ❖ Communicate with teachers about their work
- ❖ Make programmatic decisions consistent with Montessori tenets
- ❖ Represent the program to parents, public officials, and other stakeholders

In most public Montessori programs, administrators will need to have state certification, which limits the pool of individuals with strong Montessori experience. Likewise, some individuals without formal Montessori training demonstrate the capacity to lead a Montessori school. These individuals have usually had direct experience with Montessori education. These individuals are able to articulate the logic and language of Montessori and – just as important – they are aware of the gaps in their knowledge and seek opportunities to fill those gaps through ongoing consultation with Montessori trainers and/or continuing adult Montessori education.

This rubric presents types of responses to key interview questions for the position of instructional leader. Responses that indicate strong knowledge of Montessori theory and practice are represented on the left side of the rubric. Because the language of Montessori theory and practice is specific, interviewers should listen for words and phrases such as **normalization**, **work** (including **work cycle** and **work period**), **prepared environment**, **materials**, **independence**, and **concentration**. Interviewees who demonstrate no use of this vocabulary or who confuse self-direction with free play or center-based work do not have a strong foundation for leading a Montessori school.

Sample Principal Interview Rubric

Question	Strong Knowledge of Montessori theory and practice	Some awareness of Montessori theory and practice	Answer characterized by misconceptions, partial understandings
<p><i>What are the “non-negotiables” for you in terms of ensuring authentic Montessori practice within a public school environment?</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classrooms must have a full complement of Montessori materials. 2. Classroom must be staffed with Montessori-trained teachers (guides)- from a highly regarded training center. 3. Lengthy work periods (ideally three hours in the AM & 2 hours in the PM) must be preserved. 4. Classrooms must be mixed-age, and in three-year spans. 5. The environment must be meticulously prepared and maintained, free of clutter and equipped only with Montessori materials or extensions that have been shown to support student development. 6. Students who are working well in a Montessori environment will be able to succeed on standardized tests. Difficulties children are demonstrating must be addressed early. 	<p>Some of the activities may have to be adjusted to meet accountability requirements, but I believe that Montessori education, done well, is an effective way to meet those requirements; and that many students exceed standards when learning in a high-quality Montessori school.</p> <p><i>Such an answer indicates a general awareness of Montessori, including that some key elements differ from traditional schooling, as well as a willingness to learn more.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students should work in “centers” 2. Teachers should differentiate instruction 3. Montessori may not work for all students 4. Any answer that indicates a lack of awareness of significant difference between Montessori and traditional early childhood education.
<p><i>What are “look for’s” in a high functioning Montessori 3-6 classroom?</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In a “normalized classroom¹” most children should be working independently – most three-year-olds will choose to work alone and observe older children work. It should be difficult to locate the teacher (guide), who would most likely be on the floor, working with an individual child. 2. Teacher (guide) should spend about 60% of his/her time presenting individual lessons, 20% responding to questions and/or needs and 20% observing and recording student activity. 3. The room should be clutter-free, with no extraneous “activities” or wall decoration. Shelves should be dust-free, orderly, with materials ready for use. 4. Adults should not be interfering with students’ work. 5. In a classroom with a full complement of 3-6 year-olds, sandpaper letters and movable alphabets should always be out and in use. 6. The interviewee refers to the “areas” of the primary environment: language, math, sensorial, practical life, cultural studies. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children should have a high degree of choice in the work they do. 2. There should be one Montessori-trained teacher and one para-professional in every class. 3. Children should be engaged in hands-on activities, using Montessori materials. 4. The classroom should be orderly and clutter-free. 	<p>Answers that indicate lack of awareness of</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mixed-age grouping 2. The “prepared environment” ie: the candidate speaks of “lots of stimulation/wall décor” or “lots of play” 3. Choice or “spontaneous activity” in student work. 4. Having Montessori-trained staff.

¹ “Normalization” is Montessori’s term for healthy human development. Most often used in reference to children between the ages of three and six, it is used to characterize both individual children and an entire classroom in which activity is purposeful and children are operating with concentration, independence and a sense of calm. Normalization is sometimes associated with Vygotsky’s concept “zone of proximal development” and Csikszentmihály’s concept of “flow.”

Sample Principal Interview Rubric

<p><i>How do you see early intervention and tiered instruction (Response to Intervention) fitting into the Montessori model?</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Early intervention and Montessori are synonymous. Every child, effectively, has his or her own Individualized Educational Plan. 2. Tier 1 is the most important part of the early intervention process – Montessori pedagogy allows for ongoing adjustment of instruction based on the students’ needs and interests. Therefore, I should see every child engaged in individualized work and the teacher (guide) observing and recording activity. 3. Following the child means basing all instruction on close observation and record-keeping. I want to see guides keeping detailed daily records on lessons presented, work students have mastered, and patterns in student work cycles. 4. Effective early intervention means that we are catching difficulties early. By the middle of the child’s first year in the program, we should see evidence that the child is moving toward normalization. If he or she is not – that child needs the attention of an entire team to determine what adjustments can be made to meet his or her needs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Montessori education is differentiated instruction, and a great benefit of early education is the opportunity to identify and resolve difficulties early. 2. Teachers should be observing students at work and offering lessons and/or support based on the students’ interest as well as evident challenges. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher should constantly check for understanding. 2. Students should be assessed and grouped according to ability. 3. Montessori may not meet the needs of all students; those with significant delays or issues may need to be placed in an alternative program.
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