

Using Montessori to break the cycle of poverty

In these exceedingly gloomy economic times it's uplifting to hear news of people being helped out of poverty and homelessness – **Keith Whitescarver** reports on a long-running program in Washington, D.C. that includes Montessori education.

A remarkable education enterprise is taking place for a group of single mothers and their young children in Kensington, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D. C. The families in this enterprise came from dire economic and social conditions in the D. C. area. All were in poverty. Some were homeless. Most came from abusive backgrounds. Now, however, all of them are gaining the educational, professional, and personal tools that are necessary for success in today's society and economy at Crossway Community.

A story of transformation

Betty and Eric are examples of how Crossway Community can change lives. Four years ago, 19 year-old Betty and her infant son were experiencing the bleak and soul breaking existence of life on the streets. Betty was a prostitute and drug user. The father of her child was incarcerated and no longer in her life. Her son's chance for a successful life looked grim. Betty had worked herself into this situation, incrementally, as she sought to survive on her own after her sole financial and emotional support, her mother, committed suicide when Betty was 15.

Fortunately, the lives of Betty and Eric were transformed after entering the all-embracing program at Crossway Community. Today, Eric is academically and socially thriving in the on-site Montessori school. His mother notes that Eric is "smart and independent," and she is glad that he will "have more opportunities than



Children at Crossway Montessori program, Kensington, Maryland

[she] did growing up." Betty is enrolled in Montgomery College as a business major. She supports herself and Eric by working part-time as a pediatric assistant where she learns skills that will serve her well in her future career. In her own words, Betty acknowledges "Crossway Community has taught both of us to expect more out of life."

Education as the key to success

Crossway Community is the innovative, non-profit organization where these transformations are taking place. The organization has been successfully breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty for over twenty years. Nestled in a renovated school building ten miles from the Capital Building and the White House, Crossway has served hundreds of economically disadvantaged families. The focus is on a model of community development that supports young mothers and their

children with housing, education, and a carefully orchestrated network of wraparound services.

Three educational endeavors are at the heart of the model. One is an infant and primary Montessori program for children from 3 months to 6 years old. Supported with before and after school programs, the school has spacious classrooms, a beautiful outdoor area (complete with a garden), and committed teachers and assistants. In addition to the families who live at Crossway, the school attracts a number of children from nearby neighborhoods.

The second is the Family Leadership Academy. In this classroom, mothers are taught to be independent, productive citizens and role models for their children, both through courses in financial literacy, nutrition, and childhood development, and through the personalized, direct support of resident mentors and teachers. Community is at the heart of the

Crossway approach. Mothers learn to live and work in relationship with others—and learn how to ask for help, how to work as a team, how to give and take in ways that build a foundation of trust, self-advocacy, and purposeful living.

The final educational element is the Community Lifelong Learning Center. Nearby residents are steered to the campus through a variety of recreational, cultural, and civic events. The goal is to further Crossway's mission of fostering community, creativity, and learning for all families.

Because of the success of Crossway Montessori, another educational component will be added next fall. An agreement with the local school board will allow for the opening of a charter Montessori school. The charter school will launch with 3 and 4 year old children in 2012, eventually expanding to grade three (age 9).

An organization on the move

Convincing the school board of the value of a charter Montessori school was a huge victory for Crossway Community. Montessori schools are an



Children working in the garden at Crossway Montessori programs, Kensington, Maryland

is a cornerstone of the charter school movement.

Crossway Community is located in Montgomery County, Maryland, a bedroom community of Washington, D.C. The county is one of the most affluent counties in the United States. Like many areas in the U.S. though, there are pockets of deep poverty. Most of the adults living here are highly educated. Many work directly for the national government. The county's tax

to the poor and homeless in the neighborhood. It was in the spirit of Zacchaeus, the righteous New Testament civil servant, that the founder of both the soup kitchen and Crossway Community, Kathleen Guinan, began her effort to eradicate poverty in the D.C. area. Over the years, that one small beginning has evolved into a varied network of services reaching thousands of homeless men, women and children.

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increasingly popular choice in the United States for public school districts looking to improve their educational outcomes. Frequently, publicly financed Montessori schools are offered by school districts as a charter school, a school that offers an alternative curriculum and governance style and is freed from some of the legal and bureaucratic requirements of traditional public schools.

Charter schools are highly contested, however. Even though the number of such schools is growing in the United States, these schools still face a great deal of criticism from people who fear that they may further erode the American public school system.

Wealthy, suburban school districts, in particular, are indifferent, or even hostile, to charters. Typically, suburbs are able to financially support schools at high levels and have student populations that come primarily from families that value education and have adults that can provide learning opportunities outside of school. Consequently, school leaders do not see a need for the experimentation that

base allows for per pupil spending of \$15,181, second highest in Maryland. The county's civic leaders take justifiable pride in their public schools, and school officials, until recently, had viewed the charter school movement as a nuisance and sideshow to the big job of school improvement.

This past July, however, after reviewing Crossway's charter application, the school board joined the charter movement. Impressed by the quality of the Montessori program and swayed by Crossway's twenty-year history of providing families with the opportunity and resources to reshape their own lives, the county is fully supporting the creation of a separate, but connected, Montessori school on the Crossway campus.

Education as social reform

The origins of Crossway Community can be traced to 1972 when a small group of people opened a soup kitchen, Zacchaeus, at a Greyhound Bus Terminal just six blocks from the White House. Mother Theresa of Calcutta was on hand to give the first bowl of soup

Coming out of a background of community organizing, Ms. Guinan realized that traditional efforts in fighting poverty were not working. It was her vision that led to a comprehensive approach of Crossway Community that relies on multi-generation education. A Montessori-trained colleague, Ann Byrne, provided the impetus to including a Montessori classroom. After just one year, the strength of Montessori in this model was obvious to all, and it became an integral component of their educational framework and infuses all programs

Crossway Community is thriving and has proven successful in changing lives. Their success has led to increasing recognition in the worlds of both education and social change. The next phase for Crossway is to take advantage of a heightened profile to expand their model elsewhere.

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