



# Community News

The Montessori School of the Berkshires, 55 Pittsfield Road, Lenox, MA 01240 (413) 637-3662

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## Dear Families,

Although we've been thinking "green" in terms of our new campus and sustainable development, we're also trying to find small ways to bring the importance of recycling and the environment to the forefront of our lives. With this in mind, we were delighted to find the Think Recycle program which promotes recycling of used inkjet cartridges, laser cartridges, and cell phones.

When we send in these items, the school actually earns funds for each qualifying cartridge and cell phone, and, for every 12 items, Think Recycle sponsors the planting of a tree. We're excited about this small way we can promote recycling and sustainability.

So please bring in your old cell phones, as well as used ink and toner cartridges. We have a Think Recycle box in the entryway. We also have another box that can be placed in the community, so if you would like to help collect more items, please let us know. And thanks for thinking "green"!

*Todd Covert, Head of School*

## Summer Camp July 2009

This year's Montessori Summer Camp will have two sessions: July 6 through 17, and July 20 through 31. The camp will have an early childhood as well as an elementary component. Registration forms will be available mid-March.

### Construction Camp, July 6-17

Kids love to create forts, miniature houses, sculptures, puppets, and more! This session will focus on building and creating with recycled materials. The youngest children will use recycled materials for a variety of projects. Older children will focus on woodworking, fort building, and creating models.

### Crafty Cooking, July 20-31

During this session children will be following recipes, exploring ingredients, and growing and harvesting foods. Children will practice food preparation skills, learn about container gardening and explore how to use foods in craft projects. Older children will also create food to enjoy and share, and even invent new recipes.

Each two-week session costs \$400. The camp runs from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. Extended hours (8:00 am to 4:00 pm) are available for \$100 per session.

Berkshire Montessori School, Inc. admits students of any race, color, national, or ethnic origin to all the rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students at this school. It does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national, or ethnic origin in administration of educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and other school-administered programs.

## What's Happening in the Classrooms?

### Children's House

During group time, the Children's House students have been learning conflict resolution songs and skills. Through scenes with puppets, discussions, and music, the children have been thinking about how to communicate and act in caring ways.

To prevent the spread of germs (this has been a rough year for sickness!) the children have a new hand-washing lesson and have been learning a hand-washing song.

Both classrooms have a new procedure of children washing their hands when they come into the classroom in the morning.

Children's House students with older siblings have enjoyed having their older brothers and sisters join them for lunch. More elementary lunch guests will be joining the class in March.

#### **Sung To: "Skip to my Lou"**

Wash, wash, wash your hands,  
Wash, wash, wash your hands,  
Wash, wash, wash your hands,  
Wash with soap and water.

Rinse, rinse rinse your hands,  
Rinse, rinse rinse your hands,  
Rinse, rinse rinse your hands,  
Rinse them under water.

Dry, dry, dry your hands,  
Dry, dry, dry your hands,  
Dry, dry, dry your hands,  
Dry off all the water.

### Elementary

The elementary students have been relishing their Friday cooking projects. Over the past few weeks the students have made biscuits, French toast, egg nog, and Egg Foo Yung. In the weeks to come they will be trying nut-free granola, Stregna Nona pasta sauce, and "I Can Top That" baked potatoes. The multipurpose room always smells delicious on Friday mornings!

Elementary students have also started taking mini-field trips based on particular children's interests. The most recent trip was to AniMagic in Lee where students learned techniques to make their own stop-motion claymation movies. To create our own in-school claymation studio, we are looking for a webcam that's Mac-compatible. If you know of anyone who would like to donate an old webcam, please let us know!

This month the elementary class will begin an interdisciplinary study of the Kennedy Park watershed. The project, undertaken in collaboration with the Housatonic River Museum, will begin with an exploration of the history of Kennedy Park. Stephanie Bergman will then help the class learn about watersheds and the water cycle and how these concepts apply to Kennedy Park. Stephanie will then lead the students in an investigation of the chemistry of the stream behind the school, as well as a study of the macroinvertebrates living in the stream. At the conclusion of the project, students will have the opportunity to present at the Berkshire Environmental Educators Network's Youth Environmental Summit (YES).

Finally, elementary students are preparing for their Great Brain presentations and the Great Brain Fair on March 27. See page 4 for more information.

## In the Classroom: My Day as a (Montessori) Substitute

by *Geoff Bell-Devaney*

I recently had the pleasure of substitute teaching in the Children's House at The Montessori School and what a pleasant surprise it was!

You see, I am currently enrolled in a Masters of Special Education program and have been doing a lot of subbing at elementary schools in the Berkshires over the past several months. I have been in a variety of classes ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade, and have seen a range of teaching styles and settings.

While not un-versed in the basic principles of Montessori education, spending a day in the Montessori setting was very informative to me, particularly in light of my recent exposure to conventional education.

When I stepped into the Montessori classroom last week, the first thing I noticed was how quiet it was. I saw how the children were very independent in their focus on what they were doing, which was different from the classrooms I have been in, where the kids are waiting (and often resisting or ignoring) instruction from me.

Rather than me having to gather everyone's attention to tell them what to do, the children in the Montessori classroom were, from the start, already engaged in the process of doing it. And this carried on throughout the day, with children moving from one task to another, stopping to ask for assistance only if they needed a supply or help with a lesson.

One might assume, had they no understanding of Montessori philosophy, that general chaos and boredom would ensue, but this, of course, was not the case. There was an aura of calm in the classroom that I had not experienced in any other (and this was in the Children's House, no less) and

it almost seemed from my perspective as if the whole thing were a precise instrument, with everyone freely playing their parts.

As I observed the newer members in the class exhibiting more of a tendency to be distracted, and the ones who had been there longer being more engaged (please note that I said the newer members, not younger ones), I could see how the foundation for an effective culture of independent learning begins from the first year and deepens as the child grows. Overall, there was a level of engagement and cooperation that I have not seen in any other school.

Typically, when I am teaching in a regular classroom, a lot of time is spent making sure everyone is following me and staying on track—we have a strict schedule to adhere to. This makes it very challenging as a teacher because inherently you will find children who either don't want to learn, are struggling for one reason or another, or are finding the material too easy and are bored. The teacher must juggle not only the instruction of the material, but keep an eye on those children who are acting out or falling behind. And with the federally mandated instructional guidelines, there is tremendous pressure to stay on track.

When I was in the Montessori classroom it was different. The children were almost teaching themselves. The level of engagement was very high. The level of distraction was very low. I did not spend my time telling the children to keep their voices down or to stay in line. I spent it assisting them with needed supplies and guiding them to new lessons. In fact, I did not have to tell the children much. They, for the most part, knew what to do. Rather than constantly having to keep an eye on the

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## In the Classroom . . . (continued)

group to make sure they were following me, I was able to help them as needed, in ways that empowered them, not the other way around.

It was also very apparent to me that there is a strong framework within the Montessori classroom in which the children work. That is, they have the structure to explore and learn and receive guidance when necessary, and are able to engage in the process of learning on their own.

In the other classrooms in which I have taught, there is also structure, but it is inherently different. It is more rule-based, rather than designed to develop a culture of educational self-empowerment. The rules are in place primarily to maintain discipline in the classroom.

Unfortunately, those rules do not extend, because of the inherent “top down” conventional educational processes that are in place, to the children having a framework in which to explore things on their own, in the most creative, effective, and empowering ways. The rules are in place so that the children can follow, rather than lead.

Furthermore, the typical classroom is one that simply does not work if the teacher is ineffective. Because the students rely so heavily on the ability of the teacher, their educational experience is compromised if the teacher is incompetent.

In the Montessori classroom, I saw children learning on their own, in ways that worked for them. They did not need me to “teach” them, as much as they needed me to show them “how to learn.” And these are skills that only blossom with time and contribute to an effective engagement with life.

I came away from my experience in the Montessori classroom with a renewed belief in the Montessori philosophy and a respect for what the Montessori teachers have accomplished at the school. More importantly, I left with a sense of pride at how my son and the other children at the school have helped established and are maintaining a learning environment that is organized, respectful, and effective.

It is amazing to me what children are capable of when given the opportunity. It seems to me that the regular classrooms I am in are designed to keep them on track, rather than flourish. The structure and culture that our Montessori school provides allows our children to take the stage and learn, rather than “be taught.”

Incidentally, like any parent, part of me wonders how my child would measure up against other kids of the same age in the regular school system. From what I have seen, my son would have no problem at all with the information being taught in his grade level.

### **Great Brain Fair, March 27, 2:45 to 3:15 pm**

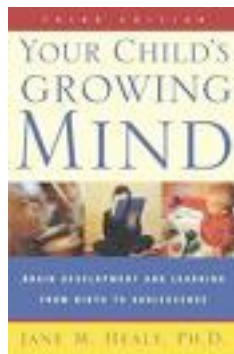
The elementary students have been becoming experts on topics of their choice. Over the past few months they have been asking questions, researching answers, and building presentations. We invite you to come to our Great Brain Fair on Friday, March 27, from 2:45 to 3:15 pm, and learn all sorts of wonderful information about magnets, lizards, money, robots, atoms, pioneers, art history, China, seasonal fruit, sapphires, electrical storms, g-force, the earth’s crust, ice age mammals, and the Great Barrington airport!

# Book Reviews: How Our Children Think

by Meagan Ledendecker

I find I often don't have time to read much for myself these days, but over the past few months (yes, it's taken me that long . . . only a few pages a night doesn't get one very far) I've been enjoying two books about brain development and how children learn.

*Your Child's Growing Mind: Brain Development and Learning from Birth to Adolescence* by Jane M. Healy, Ph.D. is a must-have for anyone with kids. Healy begins the book with an overview of basic brain development in infancy, school-age, and adolescence, while also giving attention to different tracks children may take. In thinking about children's timetables and learning tracks, Healy makes a decidedly Montessori-ish point:



“Children must have time to do their own mental growing. Parents and teachers are the ‘scaffolds’ for the process, but the child is the true magician, with an instinctive need to learn, to master, and to seek out the right challenges.”

Healy also provides important information about how the brain works and explains such components as how brain hemispheres affect children's learning. As in all she covers, Healy provides easy-to-digest explanations. For example, in how the hemispheres handle information, she details how the left hemisphere is the “splitter” and the right hemisphere is the “lumper.” She also offers advice about how to encourage efficient use of the hemispheres. These kinds of practical tips for parents interested in supporting their child's brain development are scattered throughout the chapters.

Some of the most fascinating parts of the book delve into the mental processes children use in reading, writing, and spelling, as well in math and

science. The book is well worth a read for this understanding alone, as well as for Healy's overarching reminder that, “Learning is something that children do, not something that is done to them.”

In *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* Frank Smith, Ph.D., presents two points of view about learning, one that he calls the “classic” view and the other he terms the “official” theory. The classic vision is basically that we learn effortlessly from those people around us with whom we identify. The official view is that learning is hard work and requires effort and external control.

I have to be honest and admit that I've really only just started reading the book, which was recommended on a Montessori listserv. Based on what I've read in the first few chapters, I have to agree with the listserv poster that this book should be required reading for anyone whose child attends a Montessori school.



“Learning can be effortless, continual, permanent—and also pleasant—through it won't take place in the absence of comprehension, interest, or confidence,” explains Smith. “We can learn without effort if we are interested in what we are doing (or in what someone else is doing), free from confusion, and given assistance when we seek it.”

Sounds like a Montessori classroom to me! In fact, both of these books can provide Montessori parents with a deeper understanding of how children learn in a Montessori setting. With that in mind, both of these books can be purchased through the Suggested Reading section of the school website (Amazon provides credits for the school to purchase books for the library).

# What do children really get out of Montessori?

by *Tim Seldin, The Montessori Foundation*

The Montessori approach is often described as an “education for life.”

When we try to define what children take away from their years in Montessori, we need to expand our vision to include more than just the basic academic skills. Normally, Americans think of a school as a place where one generation passes down basic skills and culture to the next. From this perspective, a school only exists to cover a curriculum, not to develop character and self-esteem.

But in all too many traditional and highly competitive schools, students memorize facts and concepts with little understanding, only to quickly forget them when exams are over. Studies show that many bright students are passive learners. They coast through school, earning high grades, but rarely pushing themselves to read material that hasn't been assigned, ask probing questions, challenge their teacher's cherished opinions, or think for themselves. They typically want teachers to hand them the “right answer.” The problem isn't with today's children, but with today's schools. Children are as gifted, curious, and creative as they ever were, when they're working on something that captures their interest and which they have voluntarily chosen to explore .

Montessori schools work to develop culturally literate children and nurture their fragile sparks of curiosity, creativity, and intelligence. They have a very different set of priorities from traditional schools, and a very low regard for mindless memorization and superficial learning.

Montessori students may not memorize as many facts, but they do tend to become self-confident, independent thinkers who learn because they are interested in the world and enthusiastic about life, not simply to get a good grade.

Montessori believed that there was more to life than simply the pursuit of wealth and power. To her, finding one's place in the world, work that is meaningful and fulfilling, and developing the inner peace and depth of soul that allows us to love are the most important goals in life.

Helen Keller, inspired by Montessori, wrote:

“I believe that every child has hidden away somewhere in his being noble capacities which may be quickened and developed if we go about it in the right way, but we shall never properly develop the higher nature of our little ones while we continue to fill their minds with the so-called basics.

Mathematics will never make them loving, nor will accurate knowledge of the size and shape of the world help them to appreciate its beauties. Let us lead them during the first years to find their greatest pleasure in nature. Let them run in the fields, learn about animals, and observe real things. Children will educate themselves under the right conditions. They require guidance and sympathy far more than instruction.”

Montessori schools give children the sense of belonging to a family and help them learn how to live with other human beings.

To reduce these principles to the most simplistic form, Dr. Montessori proposed that we could make peace by healing the wounds of the human heart and by producing a child who is independent, at peace with herself, and secure. Dr. Montessori envisioned her movement as essentially leading to a reconstruction of society.

Montessori schools are different, but it isn't just because of the materials that are used in the classrooms. Look beyond the pink towers and golden beads, and you'll discover that the classroom is a place where children really want to be — because it

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## Children get (continued)

feels a lot like home.

### The Outcomes of a Montessori Education

*Academic Preparation:* Montessori prepares students both for higher education and for life. On an academic level, Montessori helps students attain skills that allow them to become independently functioning adults and life-long learners.

*Intrinsic Motivation:* Innate desire drives Montessori children to engage in activities for enjoyment and satisfaction.

*Internalized Ground Rules and the Ability to Work With External Authority:* Montessori students are normally comfortable with ground rule that set the boundaries for their interactions within the school community. Because these ground rules become internalized, Montessori students normally learn to behave appropriately whether or not teachers are present.

*Social Responsibility:* Montessori children tend to be quite sensitive to the rights and needs of others. They tend to make a positive contribution to their community.

*Autonomy:* Montessori students tend to become self-directed, composed and morally independent.

*Confidence and Competence:* Montessori students tend to become confident, competent, self-reflective and thereby successful. They are generally not afraid of failure and learn from mistakes.

*Creativity and Originality of Thought:* Montessori students normally become confident in express their own ideas and creativity. They recognize the value of their own work, respect the creative process of others and are willing to share regardless of risk. Montessori students tend to take great satisfaction in self-expression.

*Spiritual Awareness:* Montessori students are often exceptionally compassionate, empathetic, and sensitive to the natural world and the human condition.

## Drama in the Upper Elementary

by Dana Harrison

In Drama this year we have been doing some traditional acting exercises and games, as well as group building work in pairs and larger groups. Another big component has been curriculum or life-based dramas. These are dramas we create in the classroom and act out together as though they are true—with no eye toward performance.

Around election time we did a 5-week unit on democracy in which the students created a fictional Massachusetts town in colonial times called Montville. They created jobs and families for themselves and then we experienced together some of the hardships endured by colonists under British rule. In a town meeting the students decided to fight for a democracy and the drama ended with their own presidential election (the candidates bore a striking resemblance to Meagan and Joey) on November 4—coincidence intended!

We did a unit exploring and becoming the characters out of the class read-aloud book, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Most recently the children have been in role as a group of experts called Absolutely Amazing Advice who help “visitors” solve problems. This has generated lively and eloquent discussions among the “committee” about bullying and teasing and different ways words vs. violence hurt and ways to solve these real life dilemmas.

Still to come, a unit on Shakespeare, a possible field trip to see Shakespeare & Company’s touring production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and lots more. This is truly a wonderful group that I feel very honored to spend time with every week.

### Bring in Your Box Tops!

We’ll be redeeming the 10¢ Box Tops at the end of March, so please send them in!



## *In Appreciation . . .*

Thank you to Govane Lohbauer for fixing the elementary sewing machines.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who has helped with the Capital Campaign. Thank you also to Giovanna Fessenden, Marya LaRoche, Emily Rechnitz, and Didier Steven, for volunteering to serve on the Development Committee with Meagan Ledendecker and Board member, Karen Advokaat.

Thank you to the elementary families who have signed-up to bring in food for our Friday cooking activities.

We also appreciate Anne Harrison's presentation to the elementary class about collecting food for those in need. The food collection box is in the entryway. Please bring in non-perishable items!

*Check out our Wish List on [BerkshireMontessori.org](http://BerkshireMontessori.org)!*

## *Upcoming Events & Reminders*

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of the Berkshires

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Chris Hieber, Meagan  
Ledendecker, Lori Nadig,  
Tiffany Whilding-White

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Remember to visit the  
Montessori Blog for insight  
into the classroom!  
[www.BerkshireMontessori.org](http://www.BerkshireMontessori.org)

**Friday, March 6, 11:00 am-12:00 pm**  
Family Sharing Day.

**Friday, March 6, 12:00 pm Dismissal**  
Half-day for staff professional development.

**Monday, March 9, 7:00–8:00 pm**  
Parent Group Meeting.

**Thursday, March 19, 6:30-7:30 pm**  
Community Meeting.

**Friday, April 3, Conferences**  
School closed for Parent-Teacher Conferences.

**Monday, April 13, 7:00–8:00 pm**  
Parent Group Meeting.

**Thursday, April 16, 6:30-7:30 pm**  
Parent Education Night: History, Geography, Science.

**Friday, April 17, 3:00 pm**  
School closes at 3:00 pm for Spring Break.

**Monday, April 20 – Friday, April 24**  
School closed for Spring Break.