

## Growing River

I have had the honor to work in education for almost 20 years. I have taught students from kindergarten all the way up through masters candidates in college. Of all the ages, I found working with high school students to be the most rewarding, knowing it was where I could make a great difference. Teenagers are at an exciting time in their lives, learning and exploring what it means to be an adult. They have a deep curiosity for the world, and are pushing boundaries to find their way. They need positive role models and caring adults to guide them during this critical and formative time in their education. Yet somehow, intentionally or not, our current education system has missed the opportunity to foster this creativity and independence, leaving them to play a passive role in their education. This is why creating an adolescent education experience based on the Montessori method of following the individual and helping them explore their world is what is needed in our community.

After just a few years in the traditional high school classroom, I discovered that many of the structural pieces of the traditional education system are keeping us from being able to meet the needs of the next generation of students. I found myself falling into the same ruts and routines that have plagued high school education for years. I would lecture and test students on information that was in the book and in the standards, but it only had tangential relevance to their lives. We would do labs and projects that the students enjoyed and were more engaged with, but because of the number of students, I was never able to give them the feedback that they needed to continually improve their work and to truly grow as students and as individuals. I had 150 students in groups of 30-35 moving in and out my classroom every 45-55 min. This structure made it virtually impossible to build the meaningful relationships necessary for guiding students through their adolescence.

After several years of caring deeply for my students but being consistently disappointed in their academic performance, I had a revelation. High school education has been structured to prepare students for the jobs of the past, not the jobs of the future. We know that being independent, creative, and collaborative thought-leaders who are self-aware, and think critically, is what will be required for our students to be successful in their future, yet we fail to teach and model these in ways that are relevant for them. This is what propelled me to investigate and implement more innovative, instructional practices such as Project Based Learning, Standards Based Grading and Whole Child Education. These methods emphasize student-centered instruction, provide students the timely and critical feedback they need for self-improvement as well as the emotionally supportive environment they need. While traditional schools are beginning to explore these methods, Montessori adolescent programs have been based on these principles from the beginning.

Further research in this area has led me to learn more about the the work of Maria Montessori. As my family was investigating educational options for our own young children, the Montessori philosophy of following the child, resonated with us. I want my children to be in a school that

guides and respects them. A place that will embrace every part of who they are, foster their innate curiosity in the world, and challenge them to learn and grow physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively. This is what brought our family to River Montessori Charter School in the first place. Everyone there places priority on the whole child to ensure that each student receives the necessary skills they will need to be successful.

In our community, there seems to be many options for Montessori Education for preschool age children, a few at the elementary age, but none for adolescents. The attention to all aspects of a child is just as important, as that child grows into their pre-teen and teenage years. They are becoming more adult-like very quickly and looking and acting more like adults. Yet we know that their prefrontal cortex (the part of their brain that controls complex decision making and moderates social and emotional behavior) is not fully developed.

We know adolescents need:

- A **safe place** to explore the world physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively.
- A **challenging environment** to learn how to communicate, collaborate, and interact as an adult and with understanding adult role models.
- The **perseverance** to get through the challenges that are inevitably going to cross their paths.
- The **adaptability** and cultural awareness to interact with people who have different backgrounds and opinions.
- The **critical thinking skills** to navigate and filter through the vast amounts of information available to them.

An adolescent program based on the teachings and philosophies of Maria Montessori can meet these needs. It has a lower ratio of students to teachers that allows for the development of meaningful relationships and the individualized attention necessary for personal growth. It will drive the rigorous instruction through student centered projects to build greater ownership and depth of understanding. It will facilitate relationships for students to apply their learning beyond the traditional boundaries of school, by building an authentic connection to the community. By addressing these challenges, this adolescent program will prepare our future leaders for the world that awaits them while providing a structured place for them to explore passions, produce authentic work and receive honest feedback within a supportive environment. One that focuses on the whole child.

We have an amazing opportunity to create a new adolescent education paradigm for our community that is based on research and the scientific understanding of how students learn best. It will be grounded in all aspects of the child to help them develop into the kind, thoughtful, productive and healthy citizens. This is why our family chose River Montessori for our children, and why I, as an educator, believe so strongly in the creation of this adolescent program for our community.