

## Not Just a School

I have always been a big believer in public education. And, as I was the PTA president of our son's public elementary school, it was particularly hard for me to explain to anyone how we came to the decision to take our son out of public school and enroll him at the Montessori School. "Was the PTA too much drama?" people asked. "Is there something going on in the schools that we should know about?" Sure, there were issues, but we weren't so much moving our son "from," as we were moving him "to."

And what was it about the Montessori School that drew us in? Was it the pedagogy? Frankly, no. While the School's explanation of the educational theory behind the teaching all sounded persuasive, sentence-by-sentence, at the time that my husband and I paid that first check, we were still chuckling about the strangeness of what we had privately dubbed "Montessori-speak." Although we very much hoped that our child would absorb some of the community and intellectual values that a Montessori education promotes, we worried that it really might not be a good fit for him. The children we saw at the school were diligent and passionate about their work. Based on our experience in public school, it sometimes seemed to us that our son's true passion was figuring out how to get out of work, not into it.

Was it the teachers, then? Friends whose children were at the Montessori School talked with unabashed awe about the extraordinary and talented teachers at the school. In our visits observing the classes, we saw firsthand how masterfully the teachers ran the classrooms with a perfect mix of nurture and challenge. While that was an undeniable part of what drew us to the school, we really had not been dissatisfied with the quality of teachers that our son had had in public school.

So then, what was it that truly impressed us, and what finally moved us to come to The Montessori School? It was the other parents. When we first visited the school, we happened to be there at the end of the day during pickup, and the front lawn was filled with kids playing – and with parents talking with each other, listening to each other. I overheard a conversation about composting and part of a conversation about political prisoners. Kids were laughing and running from tree to tree. Parents weren't monitoring their kids too closely – which seemed somehow respectful of the children's space and play. I thought of the families I knew who had kids at the school. The parents all seemed like people we'd want to be around: smart, thoughtful, committed, and sensitive.

I know that's not the most noble reason to join a school, but here was our reasoning: kids are greatly affected by their peers – and we imagined our son being with passionate, thoughtful kids who are growing up in households with passionate, thoughtful parents – parents who are raising families consciously, parents who recognize that education is a lifelong family commitment that can't easily be compartmentalized.

And we were wrong about our son not fitting in. OK, he was delighted when he learned that there wouldn't be report cards, and I think he did enter the school with a passion to see what he could get away with. But watching him grow in the Montessori environment

has been like watching a person who was afraid to get wet walking in the mist and, step by step, getting soaked. We're gradually seeing his classroom activities turn into after-school enthusiasms. Learning the names of the elements (via Tom Lehrer's Elements Song!), helping with home composting, and memorizing states and capitals using a geography app are starting to displace wizards and Wii. He reads more than ever. He pushes us to get him to school early and then thanks us for driving him there. He recently told me that he was hesitant to do anything that would make him miss "valuable class time." And when he shows us how he does complex multiplication, all I can say is that we now see the very real fruits of that "Montessori-speak" pedagogy.

But still, when I reflect on why we love this school, and why are grateful to take our son here every day, it is really the same reason that brought us here in the first place. I love morning drop off, popping into the parent room, and pick up. It's a chance to check in and chat for a bit with other families – families whom I greatly respect and have come to care deeply about. Being engaged with these families is inspiring. It makes me want to be a better person.

I don't think I have rose-colored glasses on. I know there have been passionate disagreements about the direction the school should take. But isn't that how it should be? Because at the root of it all, we are so much more than just a school. Our work, our values, our social connectedness have woven us together into a complex, extraordinary, thoughtful, caring, vibrant community - one that by its very nature will continue to evolve and grow.

- Jeffrey Busch