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Montessori School assistant teacher Lorrie Kennedy with student Sam Czaja Monday.

Montessori School celebrates 100 years of child-centered learning

By ANNA GUSTAFSON
Hour Staff Writer

REGION — Students at the Montessori Schools in Norwalk and Wilton have minds of their own and they're not afraid to voice them. Toddlers decide what they want to eat and when, elementary students hold their own version of town meetings and middle school students promote open-mindedness and cultural diversity.

From cutting their own carrots to working on multiplication problems and science projects on taste buds at their own pace, students are taught to be self-sufficient while still seamlessly integrating group work and a sense of community into their individualism. Such integration has played a pivotal role in the philosophy of the Montessori School that is now celebrating its 100th anniversary.

"Even at the earliest state, children are working on independence; they're self-constructing in conjunction with others," said Dana Brunell, the school's development director.

This child-centered arena was a founding principle of Maria Montessori's first Montessori school, the "Casa dei Bambini," located in a gritty part of Rome. Montessori, the first female physician in Italy, officially opened her school in January of 1906 to work with low-income children stuck in



Olivia Smith helps classmate Nico Gutierrez count his times tables at Montessori school Monday.

pockets of society people had forgotten about or avoided.

Today, as many as 8,000 Montessori schools exist around the world, with about 5,000 in the United States. Approximately 250 students from the surrounding area — Norwalk, Wilton, Westport, Weston, New Canaan and Brookfield — attend the Wilton and Norwalk campuses combined.

Montessori believed children have an innate desire to learn and simply need the right environment

and tools to teach themselves, Brunell said, which is why the school promotes self-confidence, and discipline through simple acts such as toddlers setting the table for their own snack or elementary school students learning the alphabet through learning sounds associated with letters instead of memorizing the alphabet.

Existing at the Wilton and Norwalk schools are "tenants of

School celebrates 100 years

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respect, confidence and the courage to take a risk and the empowerment of being trusted," said Mary Zeman, the school director.

Because of such elements, Zeman said "it is easy to see how the building blocks toward education for peace come naturally and maybe that is why the words 'passion' and 'compassion' both for education and for good will towards others are stated in our mission and implied within our school at all times."

In Montessori classrooms, children are grouped by age, with children three years apart being in the same group. There are no multiplication tables or drills and no teacher at the head of the room dictating demands.

Instead, students meander at their own pace, using materials such as blocks and beads to learn about math. The teacher is an objective observer because "this is not an adult centered environment where

adults impart knowledge," Brunell said.

Self-reliance seeps through learning as well as through class communication, and sixth-graders Maeve Serino and Abby Leighton said they especially enjoy the student-run weekly meetings.

"It's run by a student diplomat, and other students can write down topics they want to talk about at the meeting," Serino said. "It really helps solve problems."

Because students don't have a rigid schedule set by teachers, they learn time management — a skill crucial when they make the transition to high school and adulthood, said Steve Slaughter, the director of admission whose three children attended the Montessori school in Wilton.

Alongside time management, students learn confidence — especially through public speaking, said Mary Reinhardt, the head of the toddler and primary classes and Katy Bailey, the upper elemen-

tary director.

Eighth graders Caroline Wood, Michaela Haynie, Peter Rosiello and Scott O'Brien agreed with teachers that the focus on self-reliance prepared them for their jump to high school next year.

"This school will help me in the future because it taught me to be open towards all people and not to judge people," said Haynie.

To celebrate their 100th year, the schools are holding three informational sessions. The first will be today at 7 p.m. at the Montessori Middle School in Norwalk and will address education of the toddlers through sixth-graders. The second will be Jan. 11 at the Wilton campus at 7 p.m. and will discuss seventh and eighth-grade education. The last session will be Jan. 18 at the Wilton campus at 7:30 p.m.

Anna Gustafson may be reached via e-mail at agustafson@hehour.com