What to Look for in a Montessori Head Start Classroom

The Montessori approach to human development, grounded in scientific observation of children, takes as its starting point the observation that children are driven from within to learn and grow. First developed in Italy in 1907, Montessori education is now used in over 15,000 schools in 154 countries around the world; roughly 9% of these are government funded. Recent research shows the power of Montessori to elevate outcomes for children from under-resourced communities. Montessori is rare in Head Start-funded programs, but is in use in Head Start in at least 5 states. When you visit a Montessori Head Start classroom, here are some things to look for:

Environment

- **Three-year, mixed-age classes** include children ages 3-6 in the same classroom.
- **Beauty and order** characterize the physical environment.
- **Calm, non-stimulating wall decor** supports deep concentration.
- **Larger class sizes** support children in learning from each other as well as from the guide (teacher). Some programs may utilize a Locally Designed Option in order to provide class sizes larger than 20.
- The environment provides **connections to nature**, either through direct access to the outdoors or by bringing natural elements inside (live plants and animals; wood and natural materials).

Children

- **Individual and small-group instruction** predominates. Many children may be working and playing at individual tables or mats on the floor; others may be working and playing in pairs or small groups. Typically, the guide works with just one or a few children at a time while the other children play and work independently.
- **A quiet hum of conversation** is ongoing, and children are free to move about the classroom.
- Children are engaged in **Montessori activities**, which include activities of practical life; activities for refining the senses; and language, mathematics, and cultural activities. The Montessori curriculum includes detailed lessons addressing all the domains and standards of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework.
• Children practice **self-discipline and courtesy**, waiting for a turn with a desired activity, walking carefully around others’ work, offering help to classmates, and more. Social-emotional development is strengthened through direct lessons as well as through multiple informal opportunities for self-discipline to emerge.

• Challenging, interesting, hands-on **literacy and math activities** engage children’s attention and concentration.

• Children have a **high degree of choice** about what to work on, where and with whom to work, and how long to engage with any particular activity.

• **Children with special needs and abilities are fully included** in the Montessori classroom and supported through push-in services if needed.

**Adults**

• At least one lead guide (teacher) holds a **Montessori credential** from a MACTE-accredited teacher preparation program.

• **Observation** is a key tool for assessment, particularly formative assessment

• Adults **focus on the strengths and capabilities** of the children and families. Each child’s inner teacher is honored.

• **Parents/families are viewed as children’s first and best teachers.** The program places priority on knowing the children’s families, being in relationship with the families, respecting the families’ expertise and helping them value their own knowledge.

• Adults support children and families in a **culturally responsive** way.

**Structure of the Day**

• **Long blocks of uninterrupted time** for children to choose their own activities (ideally 3 hours at a time) support concentration and minimize transitions.

• **Very little time is spent in whole-group gatherings.**

• **Children participate actively in transitions**, cleaning up their own work, setting the table for meals, and more.