EDITOR'S NOTE:

After more than one hundred years, most educators acknowledge that the Montessori Method is a great way to give young learners a strong foundation for a lifetime of learning. Just mention 'Montessori' and almost everyone you meet will say something like, "Oh, yes, my kids went to Montessori," or they know somebody whose children are in Montessori Today, very few parents have to defend their choice to enroll their preschoolers in Montessori.

In the last thirty-some years, after seeing how well Montessori worked for their preschool children, a new generation of American parents began to push school administrators to add Montessori Elementary programs. In addition, by the time their children were old enough to enter Elementary, many families had added a new sibling to the family mix and were not only asking for Montessori Elementary but were also looking for a Montessori Infant/Toddler program. Whereas most Montessori schools were defined by their Early Childhood program for three- to six-year-olds, schools began expanding in both directions to accommodate the growing demand for more Montessori.

Montessori Elementary is now almost as widely recognized as the Early Childhood program. Perhaps more so, because many parents whose young children grew up in a Montessori Children's House are returning to their Montessori roots after dissatisfaction with what they have found after transferring their children to traditional elementary programs (public or private).

Is it so surprising, then, that families who have relied on Montessori Early Childhood and Elementary are now pushing for the natural extension of Montessori into the Secondary level? What is a Montessori administrator to do? In many ways, this seems a no-brainer, especially when we are all too aware of the pressures and stress experienced by adolescents, competing for, what they believe, are limited spaces in the best colleges that will ensure their future success. Sadly, we all know or have heard about high school students who have been crunched under the demand of many hours of nightly homework and the never-ending stress to learn more, learn faster, and out-perform their peers.

The stakes are high for our adolescents. In some cases, it is truly life-or-death concerns that are driving parents to want something better, healthier, and saner for their high-school-aged children (and for themselves). While we intuitively suspect that a Montessori Secondary program ought to be possible and preferable, Montessori educators and parents often feel that they are in somewhat uncharted territory; however, just as Montessori expanded into Elementary, Montessori Secondary programs are now a reality. If your children are in Montessori or if you a Montessori teacher or educator, now is the time to consider Montessori Secondary, because the future is here!

by Tim Seldin, President
The Montessori Foundation

Despite the fact that people often have the impression that Montessori is just for Early Childhood, today many Montessori schools offer an Elementary program. Montessori Middle School programs (for grades seven and eight) are becoming fairly common, and Montessori Secondary programs (high school) (for grades nine through twelve) are developing steadily from coast to coast, and have readily been accessible in Europe for many years. As you may recall, Anne Frank was enrolled in a Montessori Secondary program in Amsterdam before the German occupation.

Perhaps your Montessori school already has an Elementary program, and you are considering expanding to a Montessori Middle School. I'll let you in on a little secret: Montessori Middle and High School programs are not that difficult to develop!

I find that many Montessori educators, as well as parents, are surprised by this statement. They have the idea that a Middle or High School has to be large, expensive, equipped with facilities like those found in the local schools, and well beyond their schools' means. The simple fact is that, once you know how to do it, setting up a Montessori Middle School program is no more difficult than establishing an Elementary program. Obviously, schools can build enormous, very expensive facilities and plan for enrollment in the hundreds. But, in practice, Montessori Middle and High Schools can be best understood by envisioning another highly successful, innovative, and not very expensive comparable model: home-schooling for grade 7 to 12.

Montessori schools are not the same as home-school family settings, but there is often a fair amount of similarity among the more effective home-schooling families and small Montessori Middle and High schools. Again, everything depends upon the individual family. I'm not thinking of those families that are simply putting their children in front of the computer and enrolling them in some sort of online virtual school program.

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As the parents of children attending Montessori schools, you’ve undoubtedly heard about the success of former Montessori students. You may have also heard how brain researchers have discovered the connection between Montessori and what neuroscience tells us about the way children learn. As leading neuroscientist, Dr. Steve Hughes, puts it, “Montessori came up with the whole package. Nobody else comes close to developing a replicable system that is as effective in meeting the full scope of children’s needs.”

Instead, I’m describing programs where communities of young middle and high school students learn together collaboratively and extensively go out into the community. Montessori Secondary programs have many faces, but they all tend to have many things in common as well.

The development of Montessori Middle and High School programs is important to the entire Montessori community. In the eyes of many people, ‘real’ education begins with high school, despite overwhelming research that clearly shows that the most important years in the formation of a child’s development are from birth to age six, not high school and college. Secondary Montessori programs support this theory, and their students and graduates offer the proof that most clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of Montessori education as a whole.

How Montessori Evolved in North America

Let’s begin by briefly looking at how Montessori evolved in the US and Canada from its roots in Early Childhood education to today’s expanding community of Elementary, Middle, and High School programs.

Montessori education first came to America in 1911 and spread rapidly. By 1920, there were more than one thousand Montessori schools in the United States. Then, for various reasons, including the disruption of World War I and Great Depression, Montessori as a movement all but disappeared in North America, while continuing to expand elsewhere around the world.

Montessori was rediscovered in the US during the early 1960s by an influential community of bright, well-educated parents who demanded a much more vibrant education for their children. Within a few years, thousands of Montessori schools had been founded, and Montessori insights were introduced to the mainstream culture. Today, we estimate that there are more than 6,000 Montessori schools in the US and more than 22,000 schools in at least 110 countries.

When Montessori returned to the US and Canada in the early 1960s, schools only offered programs for children age 3 to 6. By the early 1970s, parent demand led many schools to extend the Montessori program up into the Elementary grades, but there were only a handful of Elementary Montessori teachers available. At the time, the only way to become an Elementary Montessori teacher was to spend a year at the Montessori Center in Bergamo, Italy.

Some schools were able to sponsor teachers through the course in Bergamo, and there is a strong network of Elementary Montessori teachers who brought back keen insights and skills; however, for most schools, the proposition of sending someone to Italy for a year was unrealistic. Initially, many schools simply asked experienced Early Childhood Montessori teachers to open new Elementary programs without any formal training.

By 1980, Elementary Montessori teacher education centers were established in the US and Canada, and, today, while some Montessori schools end at age six, many more offer Elementary classes as well.

The evolution of Montessori at the Secondary level has followed a similar path. Although Secondary Montessori schools are not yet common, they are no longer rare. We estimate that there are approximately one thousand Montessori Middle School programs for students aged 12 to 14 (grades 7 & 8) in North America today. With the development of charter schools and public Montessori schools, this number is rapidly growing. Montessori High School programs for students aged 15 – 18 (grades 9 – 12) are evolving more slowly, but they are also beginning to develop across North America and around the world.

Most Montessori Secondary programs are small. Unlike most public middle and high schools with an enrollment of 1,000 to 3,000 students under one roof, most Montessori Secondary programs have an enrollment of fewer than 100. Some begin with an enrollment between 10 and 20 students. For want of a better word, we often describe these small programs as being similar to a ‘boutique,’ a small shop that offers goods or services that are very specialized and difficult to find, along with a very high degree of personal service, care, and attention.

As one example, our Lab School, the NewGate School in Sarasota, Florida, has been graduating very successful students from the 12th grade since 2004. With an enrollment of about 40 students, NewGate is definitely a ‘boutique.’
There is no possibility that a student will be lost in the crowd.

Montessori Middle or High School programs come in all shapes and sizes. Some resemble the small high schools of another era, such as the Clark Montessori High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. With an enrollment of about 600 students from grades 7 through 12, it is a close-knit community and has a very strong sense of identity.

High School at University Circle (Cleveland, OH); the Westwood School (Dallas, TX); the Montessori School of the Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, USVI); and NewGate School in Sarasota, FL.

The Common Threads of Montessori Middle and High Schools Programs

The years of early adolescence are usually the most challenging time in almost any child’s life. This is a time of transformation. It is also fair to say that, because of overlapping developmental influences, most teenagers are not particularly academic in their orientation. While they may excel in school, they often do so primarily to make their parents and teachers happy and, eventually, be accepted to a good college.

What they really want to do is spend time with their friends. Knowing this, Montessori Middle and High Schools place tremendous emphasis on the relationships among the people of the school community. Montessori Secondary teachers are trained mentors and guides in addition to subject-matter specialists who deliver content.

Adolescence provides the opportunity for students to begin to grow into the adults they will soon become. This is the time for them to: develop a sense of who they are; articulate what they believe; and learn to get along with other people. It is truly an education for life.

Montessori schools that expand up into the Middle or High School years are so valuable, because parents and teachers can see the evidence of maturity and enthusiasm in these young adults. And I say this, recognizing that there is tremendous social pressure among so many families (and in so many students) not to stand out. For many students, it is much more comfortable to fit in, to be like everyone else, and it’s very difficult for a family to resist the temptation to enroll their child in the local public school or an independent school that looks much like all the other schools they’ve always known.

Teenagers in Montessori Schools Often Wish They Had More Friends

There are definitely trade-offs for those students who choose to stay in Montessori. But there are incredible benefits as well.

Those benefits are mostly in terms of mental health, self-confidence, social skills, and what increasingly is called executive-functioning skills (maturity, self-control, the ability to take personal responsibility, and the ability to manage one’s time and resist temptation). You can see how those skills pay off. Because Montessori Secondary programs are small, there is a strong bond of trust among students, teachers, and parents, which often allows an active travel program. I remember overhearing a conversation between two girls, one a Montessori Middle School student and another from a traditional school. The non-Montessori student was excited about their class trip to King’s Dominion amusement park outside Richmond, VA; the Montessori student was going to Japan!

The Need to Move

Montessori schools have always focused on learning by doing, and at no stage of life is this more important than in the years between 12 and 18.

During these years, their bodies are changing so rapidly, that they really love to move. They need to move at school; they fidget when confined to a desk or a classroom. They get up and down, often taking their work outside. Some older students even find it enjoyable to tuck themselves away in a classroom of younger children to work or read, reminding them of where they’ve been. They also
love to run and test themselves physically against each other and against external physical challenges, such as: hiking, running, swimming, sailing, or just about anything that involves movement.

The brain is formed by moving, not by simply sitting and listening; therefore, Secondary Montessori programs build in as many opportunities as possible to allow students to move around, work with their hands, and master practical life skills. From the experience of hundreds of interesting and practical hands-on projects and challenges, the undirected behavior of early adolescence gives way to a sense of personal satisfaction, high motivation, and the renewed ability to focus seriously on academic work.

An Atmosphere of Respect

Like all levels of Montessori education, the hallmark of Secondary Montessori programs is an atmosphere of kindness, warmth, and mutual respect among students, teachers, and parents. They radiate a safe and supportive emotional climate and a deep sense of community.

We take for granted that our students are bright, responsible, and motivated. With the rare exception, they are all college-bound, and very capable young people. Secondary teachers facilitate the learning process, serving as mentors, cheerleaders, and guides, challenging and enticing students to benefit from their middle and high school education. They coach students to think deeply, work diligently, and come away with lasting understanding.

The goal is to help students learn how to learn and trust their own ability to discover and think logically. We seek to foster their curiosity and self-motivation. While the academic expectations tend to be very high, we don't believe that competition and stress are the best ways to motivate learning. Over and over again, our students hear us say that our primary goal is to challenge them to think for themselves, to think deeply, and to think about others.

The Basic Elements of a Secondary Montessori Program

Secondary Montessori programs are primarily intended to serve as the logical next step for a student who has come up through the Early Childhood and Elementary Montessori programs. One Montessori Secondary program may draw students from several different Elementary Montessori programs. It is also possible to accept a limited number of older students who are coming from other more traditional schools, but only after careful consideration for their potential success in the Montessori Secondary program.

Montessori Middle and High Schools today blend various aspects of the Enkinder model with elements developed by exemplary secondary schools of all kinds. For example, in some programs, Middle School students spend one week out of every six working, and sometimes staying, at a land lab, where they study, build shelters, cultivate crops, and recycle. These kinds of 'Practical Life' activities are essential. They provide direct learning experiences that involve the young adolescent in meaningful learning activities.

Other basic elements of Montessori Secondary programs include:

- Curriculum based on interdisciplinary, thematic instruction; multi-cultural perspectives; discovery-based learning; individual and small-group learning projects; authentic and performance-based assessment; small advisory groups; community service; internships; and land-based studies.

- Curriculum that is developmentally based and appropriate to meet the growing intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of adolescents, giving students ample opportunities for self-expression, as they construct personal meaning about their studies and themselves.

- Evaluation of students on a logical, objective basis instead of emphasis on academic competition among students. Students should not be graded on a curve; rather, they should be evaluated individually against clearly stated academic objectives, through a wide variety of authentic assessment techniques, including portfolios, long-term projects, and self-evaluation.

- Use of a variety of teaching styles and modified assignments and assessment strategies to meet individual student's learning styles and special interests.

- Faculty who serve as mentors and facilitate the process as their students learn how to: observe; listen; read critically; gather information; and learn from hands-on experience.

- Teachers who strive to help their students develop self-esteem; independence; responsibility; compassion; openness to new experiences and learning; and effective and satisfying social relationships.
Membership in a community based on kindness, safety, trust, and mutual respect that supports young adults learning the skills of living in the adult world.

Meaningful introduction to social issues of the community in which they live, both through the curriculum and through field experiences, volunteer efforts, and internship projects.

Conscious promotion of students' personal spiritual and ethical development.

Encouragement of innovative thinking and entrepreneurial skills.

How to Create a Montessori Secondary Program

New Montessori Middle School programs typically begin with a small group of seventh graders and add on a year at a time. The enrollment gradually builds in size over the years, as more families and their students elect to continue with the school through the upper level(s). This presents a tremendous challenge for many schools, because parents and students are normally reluctant to be part of what they perceive as a 'fragile' new program.

Many factors contribute to this, all of which are tied to our culture's image of what a middle or senior high school should look like. For example, parents and students alike tend to expect a fairly large enrollment of several hundred to more than a thousand students, allowing students to choose among a wide range of friends and extra-curricular activities. And yet, school-reform experts, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, call for the creation of much smaller learning communities (sometimes called 'houses' or 'academies')—a Montessori concept for sure!

Although mixed-age groups within a classroom are essential at the Montessori Primary and Elementary levels, there is no one model of organizing secondary programs. Some middle schools combine grades seven through eight only, others group students in grades seven, eight, and nine. Schools that extend to grade twelve may offer three mixed-age levels: grades seven to eight; nine to ten; and eleven to twelve. Still other schools offer two levels: grades seven to nine and ten to twelve.

Ideally, each 'house' has its own suite of classrooms and meeting areas; however, most schools are forced, by budget or limited space, to adapt themselves to existing facilities. Each house is centered around a commons room designed for reading and quiet study. Each commons room also contains part of the school library. At one end of the common, there might be a small stage used for debates, student presentations, guest speakers, and performances.

Several smaller rooms are adjacent to the commons. These are designated for seminar groups; each has a large conference table and seats up to ten participants. Another room is designed as a math lab, where students work alone or in small groups, and the room is equipped with a wide range of mathematical apparatus.

Another room serves as a science lab with a large attached greenhouse. The lab is equipped for the life and physical sciences, with corrosive-resistant work surfaces, sinks, Bunsen burners, aquaria, animal cages, and secure storage for chemicals and equipment. For safety, the labs have an emergency shower, eye wash, and a ventilated fume hood. Another room houses an art studio and craft workshop, encouraging students to engage in the arts as their interest, workload, and schedule allow. The craft workshop provides tools for building model structures from wood, paper, and other materials. Older students often construct dioramas, models of ancient buildings, little machines, or re-creations of historical artifacts.

Finally, a small but complete kitchen is important, allowing students to prepare their own meals. Many Montessori Middle School programs operate a small lunch business. Students purchase the ingredients, prepare the day's meal, serve and clean up, collect lunch fees, and keep the business books.

Not every student is the right fit for a Montessori Secondary program. Ideally, we look for students who have grown up in a strong Montessori program. We also consider students from a different background, who want to be part of this community of learners and are self-motivated, mature, and well educated. We are a community of diverse talents and backgrounds, held together by our mutual respect, friendship, and appreciation for the opportunity to participate in a unique and enriched educational experience. The primary factors that we look for in admission are related to personality and character.

The Montessori Foundation has advised many schools through the process of organizing new Montessori Middle and High Schools. We are currently working with the Center for Guided Montessori Studies to design and launch a new Montessori Secondary teacher education program soon.

By now, we hope that we have piqued your interest about Montessori Secondary programs. For more information, please feel free to contact us at 941-729-9565 or email us at timseldin@montessori.org. Our staff at The Montessori Foundation can help!

Tim Seldin is the President of the Montessori Foundation and Chair of the International Montessori Council. His more than forty years of experience in Montessori education includes twenty-two years as Headmaster of the Barrie School in Silver Spring, Maryland, which was his own alma mater from age two through high school graduation. Tim was the co-founder and Director of the Institute for Advanced Montessori Studies, the Center for Guided Montessori Studies, and currently also serves as the Head of the New Gate School in Sarasota, Florida. He earned a B.A. in History and Philosophy from Georgetown University, an M.Ed. in Educational Administration and Supervision from The American University, and his Montessori certification from the American Montessori Society. Tim Seldin is the author of several books on Montessori Education, including How to Raise an Amazing Child, The Montessori Way with Dr. Paul Epstein, Building a World-class Montessori School, Finding the Perfect Match - Recruit and Retain Your Ideal Enrollment, Master Teachers - Model Programs, Starting a New Montessori School, Celebrations of Life, and The World in the Palm of Her Hand.

Tim is the father and step-father to five former Montessori students and the grandfather of a new generation of Montessori students. He lives on a small vineyard north of Sarasota, Florida with his wife, Joyce St. Germaine, and their many horses, dogs, and cats.

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