



 REPORT DIVERSE CHARTER SCHOOLS

City Garden Montessori School

Building an Anti-Racist Community

DECEMBER 17, 2018 — KIMBERLY QUICK

Every student who arrives during morning drop-off at City Garden Montessori School is greeted by staff members with a “good morning,” smiles, and hugs. The children and the adults have an easy rapport, asking each other questions about their plans for the day or excitedly sharing news about an upcoming trip. At this school in a gentrifying area of St. Louis, Missouri, this ease is unique not only because it is cross-generational but because the school itself is cross-racial in a time and place where that is all too rare.

Moreover, the school is just a welcoming, kind environment, a place where adults make a point of knowing every student and parent’s name. “Some of us know pet names too,” says Liz Harris, the school’s secretary and admissions coordinator. “Here at City Garden, we pride ourselves on exhibiting radical hospitality.”¹

But like with most things at City Garden, there is strategy behind that philosophy. The school leaders certainly want to establish a nurturing environment for each child, but the morning greeting also allows them to greet and assess the mood of every child (and, if possible, interact with the parents who drop them off.)

Consistent with its Montessori approach, City Garden seeks to address the needs of the whole child, from academic learning to social and emotional development. But the school’s vision of community also extends beyond its walls, its students, and its families. City Garden’s commitment to radical hospitality manifests itself in its desire to ensure that children and families, whether or not affiliated with the school, feel heard and welcomed by the school.

The Exceptionalism of City Garden

City Garden is not only an integrated haven in a segregated city, but also an active voice for racial justice and reconciliation. Realizing its power to both reflect and change its neighborhood, the school commits itself to harnessing its unique position to push for effective public policy and sustainable community, advocates at the state and local levels, and works with its neighbors to engage in anti-racist and anti-bias dialogue. At the same time, its free, public Montessori model offers a unique pedagogical experience to children who otherwise might be unable to afford it.

DIVERSE CHARTER SCHOOLS

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History and Demographics of City Garden

City Garden was founded as an affordable, private Montessori preschool by Trish Curtis and Mary Mitchell in 1995. Ten years later, when the mothers of two students—one white and one black—sought schools for their children, they led the effort to pursue the expansion of City Garden into an elementary school program. In Fall 2008, City Garden opened as a charter school, enrolling children in kindergarten through the third grade.

If You Can't Find It, Create It

When Christie Huck, a young white parent with a background in social justice and community organizing, moved into the diverse Shaw neighborhood of St. Louis in 2005, she enrolled her son Jude in an existing Montessori preschool program named City Garden. The preschool, founded by Trish Curtis and Mary Mitchell ten years earlier, had moved from an old tavern to a small home to a church basement, all while maintaining its vision and reputation for providing high-quality early education at very affordable rates. Joel Achtenberg, who served as a board member of the original City Garden before transitioning to the board of the charter, recalls how resourceful school leadership had to be in the early years. “When [the preschool was] in the tavern, the bar was still there. So where the bottles used to be, we put books,” he explains.

A goal of the preschool was to serve children for whom a Montessori education would likely be inaccessible, and, as such, the school featured a high level of racial and socioeconomic diversity in an otherwise segregated educational landscape.

Montessori schools have existed for more than one hundred years, when Maria Montessori opened her first classroom in a tenement building in Rome in 1907. Today these schools still maintain their distinctive features: multi-age grouping of children within the same classroom, uninterrupted work time with as-needed intervention from adult guides (teachers),

and a guided choice of work activity. Montessori classrooms are also outfitted with specific tools and learning materials that help children understand concepts at both abstract and concrete levels.

As Christie Huck's son moved through the preschool program, she and a diverse group of parents began to research public schools that both embodied the spirit of Montessori and maintained the benefits of a racially integrated environment. It quickly became clear that there were none.²

Huck partnered with another City Garden parent to visit potential schools for their children. That parent, Reine Bayoc, was a black woman who herself had gone through St. Louis public schools, attending more diverse schools through the city's well-regarded interdistrict desegregation program. The program, called Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC), aimed to desegregate predominately white, higher performing county districts with the predominantly black, lower performing city district. While data indicates that VICC improved the academic performance of black students who transferred into county districts, the program placed a disproportionate burden on black families to move—and sacrifice their local schools. “Reine and I both had very strong feelings about the type of school we wanted to send our children to—both really wanting diversity and of course a great education, but also a place that would really see them for the whole person that they are,” Huck says. They wanted to find a school that “would know and appreciate our children.”

“The schools in the district at the time were really struggling,” Huck recalls, “so the district was on the verge of losing its accreditation. We visited schools together and couldn't find a school that met the needs of our kids and families. We started talking obsessively about what we were going to do, and thought about homeschooling and lots of different things.”

Remaining dissatisfied with their school options, the women approached Trish Curtis and asked about the potential for the school to expand into the early elementary grades. Curtis expressed to them that she had considered it, and mentioned the concept of charter schools as one option. Huck and Bayoc began to explore this possibility. Huck, who was between jobs at the time, took the lead in gathering support for a tentative charter school project.

Together with parents in the community, Huck, Bayoc, and Curtis worked to envision a charter school that would implement the Montessori model, serve the same neighborhoods as City Garden, and reflect or increase the diversity found in the preschool program. “Over the next couple of years, we invited people to meetings,” Huck recalls. “Reine and I would host at our houses or in the park nearby. It was always with our kids, always a potluck. It was very, very informal, but along with City Garden teachers, we ended up creating a vision for what became the charter school.”

Securing the infrastructure to establish the new school proved more challenging. Bob Sweeny, now the director of development at City Garden, aided these efforts. Sweeny, also a parent at the preschool, describes having to “sell” the idea

of a charter school to community members. “You see a lot of these for-profit companies try to run charters, and they’re running the business aspects of them, but they don’t know the community—they don’t understand the people in the community, they rarely understand the history of it.”

Charters in St. Louis were relatively new, but garnered bad reputations due to poor academic performance and questionable financial management. Adding to the skepticism, their introduction into the city interacted with complex racial dynamics from the beginning.³ After a 1998 law introduced charters to Missouri, then-mayor Clarence Harmon, who is black, gave a speech at the conservative, Koch brothers sponsored Heartland Institute, extolling the potential of charter schools. A year earlier, Harmon had risen to power by defeating the city’s popular, four-term black mayor; Harmon received 94 percent of the white vote in that race, and was seen by many black residents as being elevated by white voters and big business.⁴ Later, when the state cut off funding for St. Louis’s long-standing desegregation program, another mayor, a white man named Francis Slay, set out to remodel the district like a business operation, and the former CEO of the Brooks Brothers clothing chain was named district superintendent. He had no specific education sector experience, and soon complaints of low teacher pay, declining enrollment, closures of historically black schools, and inflated administrative salaries were rampant. When City Garden parents proposed starting a charter school in a largely black neighborhood, they had to contend with more than just procedures—they had to rebuild trust.

Initially, the group of City Garden advocates felt the community’s hesitation. Sweeny remembers canvassing and hearing people express their anxiety that “we’ve been sold this snake oil before many times, and we are wary of who you are and what you are saying.” Huck and other founders sought to prove themselves to parents by canvassing the neighborhood, frequenting local businesses, making connections with preschools and daycare facilities, and following up with a diverse group of families who might be interested in different educational options for their children. Beyond simply visiting sites, the hopeful school founders sought, as Sweeny stated, to “involve [themselves] in the community ecosystem,” a process which involved accounting for community needs in the school design and writing of the charter. It also necessitated that the school prove itself through a pilot elementary school program that the Charter Planning Committee launched in 2007. This intimate program of sixteen students brought together children of the founding parents and their neighbors in kindergarten through third grade.

“We knew it would be really critical for us to start this program with a diverse set of families. It was always central to our mission and vision to create a racially and socioeconomically integrated school,” Huck explains. She adds that, while people of many backgrounds lived in the neighborhood, their children went to separate and inequitably resourced schools, with white children largely attending private and parochial institutions.

Meanwhile, the school leaders needed to find a charter authorizer and funding. “Universities were not thrilled about the idea of acting as sponsors or authorizers,” Huck explains. Leveraging connections with St. Louis University, the founding team started to cultivate them as a potential sponsor, but the school was not initially interested. Nevertheless, the City Garden team continued to write their charter; they applied for a U.S. Department of Education charter start-up grant, which they were eventually awarded. This \$560,000 grant eventually convinced St. Louis University, and the broader community, that beginning a new elementary program was possible. Huck and the Charter Planning Committee took the charter to the state board in February of 2008.

In Fall 2008, City Garden Montessori School opened as a charter school with fifty-three students in kindergarten through third grade receiving free, state-funded public education. It continues to offer a Montessori preschool program, which charges tuition on a sliding scale.

Building and Sustaining Diversity

Since its official elementary program opened in 2008, the school’s population has consistently increased, and City Garden now serves 278 students from preschool through the eighth grade. Since its opening, City Garden has prided itself on its successful maintenance of a racially diverse student body. In the 2017–2018 academic year, 51 percent of its students identified as white, 40 percent as black, 3 percent multiracial, 5 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Pacific Islander. About 39 percent of its children are eligible for federal meals programs.⁵

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Currently, City Garden operates one school in a beautifully renovated former factory located in a neighborhood that, until recently, was known as McRee Town. Now, through gentrification, that neighborhood has been “rebranded” as Botanical Heights (due to its proximity to the St. Louis Botanical Gardens). This transition and demographic shift immediately becomes apparent by walking around the streets that surround the school. One block from the school, a gutted and boarded up building sits next to a contemporary, remodeled house that recently sold for well over a half-million dollars.

A core tenet of City Garden’s mission and charter is to provide a free, high-quality, and diverse Montessori education to the children who live in its surrounding neighborhoods. To maintain its character as a neighborhood school and attract a diverse group of families, school leadership decided early on to draw its own catchment zone, as permitted by Missouri

law. Today, that catchment includes the neighborhoods of Botanical Heights, Forest Park Southeast, Shaw, Tiffany, and parts of Southwest Garden. In 2008, this decision all but guaranteed that a significant portion of the student body would be students of color and students whose families are low-income. “When we were opening,” explains Huck, “creating a neighborhood school was one way to ensure a diverse student body. There were no other policy mechanisms that we could use to ensure integration, so we were very intentional about the geographic target area that we set, which at the time was one of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse parts of the city. It was about 60 percent black and 60 percent low-income.”



A GROUP PHOTO FROM THE CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI SCHOOL AND THEIR COALITION FOR NEIGHBORHOOD DIVERSITY AND HOUSING JUSTICE. SOURCE: CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI CHARTER SCHOOL FACEBOOK PAGE.

Today, that level of diversity is less certain. In recent years, population losses within the city’s neighborhoods have been most significant among black residents, and several reliably majority-minority neighborhoods are slowly becoming majority white.

In 2000, Forest Park Southeast, a neighborhood completely within the catchment zone and less than one mile from the school, was more than 80 percent black with a poverty rate of 48 percent⁶ But when both for-profit and nonprofit developers began to build private and commercial residences in the area, young professionals—largely white and affluent—flocked in. Similarly, the neighboring Botanical Heights area used to be a predominantly low-income and black neighborhood, known for elevated crime rates. In partial response to this, the Garden City District Commission demolished almost three hundred historic buildings and replaced them with suburban-style, single-family homes meant to attract an upper-middle-class tax base. While they were successful in doing just that, the decision effectively displaced

long-term residents of color and reduced the availability of affordable housing in the area. Between 2000 and 2010, Forest Park—which did benefit from some nonprofit involvement in securing area affordable housing—still saw a 30 percent loss in the black population, a 26 percent loss in families earning less than \$50,000 per year, and a 55 percent increase in the median rent. In that same period, Botanical Heights experienced a 42 percent loss in the black population, a 67 percent loss of families making under \$50,000, a 53 percent decline in the number of Section 8 renters, and a 28 percent decrease in available rental units.⁷

In many ways, City Garden has become an anchor in a changing neighborhood. However, its leadership also acknowledges that its presence in the area may have played an unintended role in precipitating some of this demographic shift. As its reputation grew and its test scores improved, some families of means began to move into the neighborhood in order to apply for the school. Before establishing City Garden Montessori, “we were hoping that we would be successful, but we frankly had no idea that we could or would end up impacting our neighborhoods the way we have,” Huck acknowledges.

Considering the quickly-changing composition of the surrounding areas, City Garden’s ability to maintain its African-American enrollment numbers is impressive, and reflects the intentionality of its recruitment practices. “We’ve absolutely spent more time and energy trying to connect with African-American families and lower income families... We’ve done very little formal advertising because, especially since we are a neighborhood school, regional or city-wide advertisements wouldn’t do us that much good,” says Huck. “So it’s been mostly grassroots efforts to connect with families, and engaging our current families” to recruit within their networks. Recruitment season begins in November with the annual open house, usually followed by a tradition called the “Romp and Stomp,” in which volunteer families, students, and staff canvass the surrounding communities, handing out flyers, yard signs, and door hangers with information about the school and its admissions process.

City Garden uses a random lottery to admit new students within the catchment zone, with a preference for siblings and children of staff members. (Due to this preference, many staff members with children choose to live inside the catchment zone to ensure their eligibility.) Families may only apply for admission for students up to second grade, which would place them into the “lower elementary” program in the Montessori pedagogy. According to the school, this practice is to ensure that students have had sufficient exposure to Montessori’s unique style of teaching and learning before moving into upper grades. Students currently apply to a lottery for just City Garden.

Despite its best efforts and its stable racial heterogeneity, the school remains concerned about the declining number of its students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. School leadership has considered altering its catchment zone to increase socioeconomic diversity, but positive outcomes from such changes are far from guaranteed. “We have and will

continue to look at [our catchment zone],” an administrator shared. “But the reality is, if we change it, we probably have to change it dramatically. If you move it outward a little bit in any direction, the population gets a bit more affluent and white.” Radically expanding the catchment conflicts with City Garden’s identity as a neighborhood school.

Undeterred in its quest for more diversity, however, the school began to lobby legislators for policies that would allow them to use a weighted lottery system, whereby they could effectively guarantee a minimum percentage of admitted students from low-income backgrounds. Working with the Charter School Association, City Garden and other schools successfully lobbied for legislation that allows some form of an admissions preference. However, school officials are still trying to determine what is allowed by the law, which permits a preference for “high risk students”—but fails to adequately define that term. “There is some debate still whether or not we can actually use free or reduced lunch eligibility as an indicator. We’re fighting pretty hard to be able to do that and are working with folks to try to make sure that is possible. If it is not, then we’ll continue to advocate to get the language included so that we can,” says Huck.

City Garden’s Unique Approach

City Garden Montessori’s Middle Years program, comprised of seventh and eighth grade students, occupies the second floor of a large renovated industrial building. From their upstairs hub, the seventh graders design, staff, supply, and manage their own small businesses, which they call, collectively, “school store.”

By the time the children reach the Middle Years Program, nearly all of them have been classmates for more than five years, and many of them are neighbors. “We have such a good time learning and just figuring stuff out together,” eighth-grader Avery explains, adding that City Garden fosters “a nurturing environment where we are all friends.”

A couple of years ago, when the Middle Years students started to establish their small businesses, that cordial spirit across race and difference was tested when a group of black students proposed starting a black-owned and -operated business within the school. Some adults in the building were concerned about whether such a move would stoke division in an otherwise cohesive student body. But City Garden’s culture and commitment to anti-racist pedagogy and action rendered the children more capable of navigating this tricky subject than many of their parents even realized. Amongst the eleven-years-olds, the proposal initiated a nuanced conversation around race, exclusion, empowerment, and fairness.



SOURCE: CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI CHARTER SCHOOL FACEBOOK PAGE.

The ability to articulate how one’s own identity interacts with power and privilege is an alarmingly uncommon skill, but City Garden starts building that capacity in its students early. So by the time these young people reached their pre-teen years, students were able to differentiate between the injustice of segregation and the empowerment of marginalized groups, and apply that framework to the black students’ proposal. Conflict was resolved before it fully began, and the business moved forward.

From when students enter—as young as two years old—to when they leave the school in the eighth grade, City Garden seeks to cultivate an environment of not just diversity and inclusion, but also of empathy and racial justice. It also dedicates itself to doing the same work with adults—from the charter’s board and staff, to parents, to members of the surrounding communities. This commitment manifests itself in the school’s use of the Montessori model for educational equity, its rededication to reducing achievement and disciplinary disparities, its community advocacy, and its comprehensive anti-bias, anti-racist training and practice.

Remixing the Montessori Model

While the school’s location and outreach efforts certainly attract new families to apply, its adherence to the Montessori model sets it apart from almost all other public school options in the city.

In the United States, the vast majority of Montessori schools are private institutions. Both the curriculum and the schools themselves have a reputation for being progressive—but they also have a reputation for being “whitewashed” and Eurocentric. City Garden is aware of this perception, but refuses to let it limit their own thinking about the potential of the pedagogy. Faybra Hemphill, director of racial equity curriculum and training, contends that Montessori curriculum can—and should—be enhanced to acknowledge and respond to multiculturalism. “I absolutely agree and acknowledge that the Montessori model has been implemented in a way that is Eurocentric, but it’s not inherently Eurocentric just because a European person created it,” she explains. “If I’m being really honest, I’d say that Montessori has been co-opted by white supremacy culture...that that culture and elitist classism have taken Montessori and made it unavailable to the very children that it was created to serve.” Hemphill believes that City Garden’s very existence—as a public school which implements rigorous anti-racist training for both students and teachers, and where concepts of culture and identity are intentionally built into the curriculum—counters that perception of elitism.

City Garden’s thinking about Montessori education aligns with the research of Dr. Mira Debs, executive director of the Education Studies Program at Yale University. Debs found that, while Montessori’s reputation of serving predominantly affluent white children is rooted in fact, *public* Montessori programs mostly serve children of color, and have sometimes been established by communities of color for the purpose of desegregation or as an alternative to “no excuses” charter schools prevalent in communities of color.⁸ Today, City Garden is a central member of Montessori for Social Justice, a network of Montessori schools and teachers committed to dismantling systems of oppression and amplifying voices of color within the Montessori schooling movement.

Lower Elementary (first through third grades) lead guide Anne Lacey points out that the Montessori curriculum provides more exposure to culture through the humanities than do the state standards, and that the Montessori embrace of individuality and out-of-the-box thinking offer a solid foundation for interrogating identity. “A lot of the cultural studies material in Montessori is far beyond what is required in a traditional school. . . . It allows [children] to see interdependence more; it allows them to see that they have a role in the world and to think about what they want that role to be. It has a social justice component; it provides tools so they can compare and contrast cultures without a hierarchy placed on top.”

With encouragement and support from the school, Lacey adds to the already-rigorous social studies curriculum by teaching students to understand and appreciate difference. “Children put difference on a hierarchy, and that’s something they’ve been acculturated into,” she explains. “Adults do it all the time as well, and children have already picked up on it by the time they are six, seven, and eight. So I work on this with the children. A lot of that work is getting them to understand identity—to be able to say, ‘This is my identity, a part of who I am. But this is an am, not a value judgment.

Saying I *am* does not mean that I am better than somebody or worse than somebody.’ But I also work with them to think about what society tells them about their I am and how to resist that on individual and group levels. And I try to get the kids to see that difference isn’t scary. It’s an opportunity, something to learn about, something to share.”

City Garden guides and administrators do this additional work while still adhering to Missouri standards, including administering state standardized tests. This fact is a source of tension among some teachers and families, but most staff view it as an opportunity to build academic rigor. “I don’t think [the Montessori curriculum and state standards] have to clash,” says Lacey. “When I am going to say whether a child is at, above, or below grade level, I’m going to use state standards for that.” In truth, Montessori and state standards overlap significantly, but lessons tend to exist in different sequences, with some state-evaluated concepts appearing well before or after they would normally be presented to Montessori students. The school encourages teachers to adapt and re-sequence the Montessori materials according to state standards, create lessons to fill any holes, and determine which Montessori lessons that do not align with state standards can (or must) remain. Currently, City Garden is working with its guides to codify both its modified curriculum as well as the procedure for making adjustments within each developmental plane: primary years, lower elementary, upper elementary, and middle years.



SOURCE: CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI SCHOOL.

Academic Achievement

Despite—or perhaps because of—these challenges, City Garden is one of the highest-performing public schools (district or charter) in the city. Awarded an impressive 91.3 percent score on the 2017 MSIP 5, the Missouri school accountability system, City Garden recently became the first charter school in the state to receive a ten-year charter renewal due to high performance.⁹ In 2017, the percentage of third through eighth grade students scoring proficient or advanced on the mathematics MAP assessment was the twelfth-highest in the city, out of eighty-nine schools; in language arts, it was the seventh highest of eighty-four schools.

However, though the school has earned accolades for its strong general academic performance, the school still wrestles with disparities between the test outcomes of its white and black students. While 74 percent of all its students scored in the proficient or advanced range on the state’s language arts test, just 53 percent of its black students hit the same benchmark. In mathematics, that gap is even wider, with lower average scoring overall; 47 percent of all students scored proficient or above on the MAP, but only 22 percent of black students scored the at that level¹⁰

City Garden principal Dr. Nicole Evans says that narrowing these disparities while raising all scores is the school’s top priority. “For us, it’s our work,” she insists. Evans describes the disparities in terms of an “education debt”—and explains that she uses that phrase in lieu of the more commonly used “achievement gap” because the concept of debt better accounts for the active legacy of racism— which requires a remedy, rather than a difference that too many conceive of as innate.

“One of the first things we do when we look at our test data is ask, ‘How are our black children performing?’” says Evans. “It’s uncomfortable, but the debt exists, and if we pretend that it doesn’t, it’s going to get larger and larger.”

One of the methods the school uses to attempt to pay off that debt is through a strategic use of their Montessori model. In some ways, scaffolding, check-ins, and interventions are already built into the Montessori classroom: guides routinely place students into small groups for short lessons, have one-on-ones with children, and allow children with different strengths and challenges to move at a customized pace. Lacey explains, “We call Montessori teachers ‘guides’ because we are guiding the children, not telling them what to do. When children come into my classroom, I want them to know two things. First, that they can learn. Second, that they can make educational goals for themselves... If they know that they can learn and know how to get there, we have forward momentum.” After building the students’ confidence, the high level of observation in the classroom, each of which has two teachers, allows the adults to identify who is struggling or thriving. Teachers determine the individual needs of each child and formulate a plan that may include a variety of supports. “So that could be working with a teacher every day, or it could be reading or SPED services, or a special homework opportunity. And for their strengths, you cultivate those to keep their self-esteem going, because once that tanks, you lose momentum,” Lacey continues.

Sandy Bowers, a second-year teacher at City Garden and the parent of a child in its Primary program, makes similar calculations in her classroom. “When I do have a volunteer in my classroom, they are going to work primarily with my students of color or those who need extra support,” she says. “We highlight the students who need individualized learning plans, and brainstorm what things we can do to get them extra support.”

In other ways, the Montessori approach presents a particular challenge. In mathematics, for example, Evans points out that students of all backgrounds lagged behind their peers in other schools due to curriculum misalignment. “We realized that there were nine standards that were on the state tests that were not even taught in the Montessori curriculum,” she lamented. Now, the school continuously works to plug those holes for everybody and offer additional after-school tutoring to children who need to catch up the most. Bowers also recognizes that differing terminology, particularly those pertaining to math concepts, pose a problem. “Some vocabulary terms get lost in translation between what [students] are used to and what shows up on the standardized tests. For example, the state calls carrying over “regrouping,” [and the Montessori curriculum] calls it exchanges.”

Discipline and Social Interventions

When students require non-academic interventions, they often visit Kristina Mavers-Vogel, City Garden’s family support coordinator and social worker. Mavers-Vogel wears many hats: she counsels students, teaches units on character education and service learning, meets with and connects families with community resources, and coordinates between the school and its community partners to bring direct services, such as free hearing and vision screenings, to students.

Mavers-Vogel, who worked at a community mental health agency and a school before coming to City Garden nine years ago, was impressed with the school’s commitment to having a full-time counselor/social worker, despite its limited budget. When she first arrived, “they had around sixty kids in the charter school, yet they were hiring a full-time social worker just for those students,” she says. “I liked that I could be in one school, so I could actually form relationships with the families, with the students. I can be there for the students that are working on skill-building and developing social-emotional skills, and I can be there in the moment if something comes up.”

Though the school has grown every year, it remains committed to addressing its students’ emotional and social needs through both targeted and general interventions. Several school leaders contend that the Montessori philosophy of whole-child development requires a greater emphasis on students’ social and emotional development than in traditional schools. As the school grows—but the number of social workers stays the same—Mavers-Vogel finds herself having to spend more of her time linking families with community and mental health resources, but she also continues to work with students one-on-one.

City Garden identifies students in need of assistance through interactions initiated by parents, teachers, and students themselves. “One of the advantages of being a small school is that I’m around and very accessible,” says Mayer-Vogel. “It could look as easy as, ‘Hey, Ms. Kristina, can I talk to you for a minute?’...Or parents can [formally] request [an appointment], and if the teacher agrees, then we will go forward.” Most interventions, however, are initiated by one of the school’s four Care Teams. The teams are grade-level based, and consist of Mayer-Vogel, the school principal, teachers, and any other school-based adults relevant to a particular situation.

When presented with a situation, the team develops an action plan, which might include school counseling or social work as a critical step. “The plan might call for a student to work with me, whether on anxiety, self-esteem, or coping with strong feelings. Or I might be listed as an intervention for that student—as a safe place for them when they’re feeling really angry or upset. Something happens and they have the option to take their break in my office, to come in as quickly as they can and beat up the punching bag in my office, or the pillow.” Occasionally, she will “push in” to classrooms to assist students who have consistent behavioral issues.

This comprehensive, multifaceted system of interventions is part of City Garden’s philosophy of behavior management, which it calls “conscious discipline.” Rather than focusing on consequences and punishments, conscious discipline seeks to teach the child how to exhibit good behavior, solve conflicts, and repair wrongs to which they might have contributed. Dr. Evans sees this method as not only child-centered and developmentally appropriate, but also as more effective than its alternatives. “I could swoop in at every incident, hear it out, and dole out consequences. I could do that, but the likelihood of that incident happening again is going to be great—because I, the adult, have swooped in to fix something that didn’t go well. So our model is to make it child-centered.”

Rather than focusing on consequences and punishments, conscious discipline seeks to teach the child how to exhibit good behavior, solve conflicts, and repair wrongs to which they might have contributed.

“Conscious discipline is teaching children how to recognize feelings, how to calm down from feelings, and what to do with them,” she says. Students in conflict with one another are taught to first recognize their own feelings and motivations, understand how to handle them in non-harmful ways, and recognize the impact that their actions might

have on other members of the community. They then talk to one another, trying to seek solutions and “clean up” the situation. Guides and administrators spend the first six weeks of school modeling this behavior for students and teaching them how to engage using this process.

Like all ventures, this method is not always successful, and certain student behaviors necessitate other types of action. Dr. Evans described a recent incident, in which one student used a racial slur in reference to a classmate, which was deemed severe enough to trigger a meeting with parents, a class-wide restorative justice circle, and some additional consequences for the offending child. Still, according to the most recent available data from the Civil Rights Data Collection, City Garden had no in-school suspensions (and only two out-of-school suspensions) in the 2015–16 academic year; by contrast, that same year, St. Louis public schools had an 11.45 percent out-of-school suspension rate¹¹ (Both of the suspensions at City Garden were given to white students who did not have individualized education programs—defying national data showing that black students and students with disabilities are most often subject to suspensions.) Christie Huck pointed out that last year, the school only had one suspension, and the biggest decline in office disciplinary referrals came from faculty referring fewer black girls for behavioral infractions.

A Commitment to Anti-Bias, Anti-Racist Development

From its beginning, City Garden has had dual commitments to student and staff diversity and social justice—the idea that wealth, opportunities, and access should be distributed equitably. For instance, the school designed the bounds of the catchment zone to enable families of various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds to attend.

However, a few years after Christie Huck became executive director, it became apparent that such efforts were important—but insufficient. “I began to solicit feedback from our parents, and particularly our African-American parents about how things were going. And I feel fortunate that some of them were very candid with me,” she recalls. Parents reported incidents of racial insensitivity, like being ignored or silenced in parent meetings, getting mistaken for other black parents by white families, or their children experiencing racism or other unjust treatment at school.

One parent, the mother of a black fourth-grader who has been enrolled since pre-K, says that her son had a kindergarten teacher who was racially biased. This teacher, who is no longer employed at the school, gently corrected or laughed off the behavior of white children but used harsh disciplinary language with black children. The parent describes her experience: “I was a parent who was very involved at the time. I would come in once or twice a week and help cut out shapes, or help a kid learn, or do some type of shelf work. I would see [my son’s] white counterparts who were playing

[around], and she would redirect them and just say that they were just busy, or very active.” Her son and the other black children in the class did not receive that benefit of the doubt, however, and the “misbehavior” of those five-year-olds was noted on their school reports.



SOURCE: CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI SCHOOL.

Stories such as these inspired City Garden to reevaluate whether and how its structure reflects and/or helps dismantle racism and identity bias. “They pushed me, and us, to really take a step back and say, okay, we’ve got bigger, deeper work to do to really live up to and live into the things that we set out to do,” says Huck. Rather than simply focusing on building and maintaining school-wide diversity, Huck and others saw a need to approach equity through a more comprehensive lens and develop an action plan. The school developed a mission statement which reads, in part, as follows:

City Garden seeks to act as a catalyst for racial equity by redefining education, by developing the whole child in an excellent, inclusive, Montessori school; by reimagining community, by creating spaces and systems that help to restore our collective humanity; and by reinvigorating our world by creating a culture in which individuals and communities thrive without disparities or barriers to success.

Additionally, the school’s leadership decided to participate in some anti-racism training, and announced that determination and the increased focus on this area in a parent newsletter. After the newsletter went out, a parent of a preschooler reached out to the school. That parent, Dr. Kira Banks, is a professor of psychology at St. Louis University, a former racial equity consultant for the Ferguson Commission, and a diversity and inclusion consultant in the area. When

Dr. Banks asked how the school planned to implement this training and focus into its future work, Huck explained that City Garden was looking into materials published by a nonprofit organization called Teaching Tolerance. Banks said that she had a better method.

“Too many schools jump into it, and the teachers aren’t prepared to teach it, the parents aren’t prepared to hold it, and the kids don’t have any sort of framework or background, and then it backfires,” explains Banks. “Somebody gets mad or somebody gets uncomfortable. And then it stops and people don’t want to touch it again. Then come the horror stories about how we tried to do that.”

To avoid this dilemma, Banks recommended that the school leaders first look at themselves and their team. From 2011 through 2012, the leadership and administrative teams spent a year seeking to better understand racial bias within their school community, reflecting on their roles in that process, and training themselves to better understand how to do better and create meaningful change. Banks met with this group every other week throughout the school year and helped them create a strategic plan to dismantle racism in the school environment.

The next step, they decided, was to organize intensive training for the entire staff. “We wanted to do the work first with the adults in the organization before we went anywhere near the work with the children,” remembers Huck. It was also important to secure a board mandate to do this work, so that any efforts were not easily abandoned after early pushback from select parents, staff, and donors.

The school named its commitment “Anti-Bias, Anti-Racist” (ABAR). All of City Garden’s staff that experienced ABAR’s early years describe the time as one of upheaval—but also as a period of great development and identity-building for the school. As the school revisited its practices with regard to hiring, evaluations, and board diversity, some funders and several staff members left City Garden, stating discomfort or a difference of opinion. At the same time, the school had to make the difficult decision to dismiss certain board members and teachers whose actions failed to align with the new institutional commitment.

Over time, the school’s ABAR work was embedded into the structure of the organization. Two of the more unique manifestations of this can be found in the school’s internal teacher/staff training programs as well as the school’s external and community work.

ABAR Staff Development

Staff cultural competency development is baked into even the earliest stages of hiring and onboarding staff, and it continues throughout staff members’ tenures at the school. All of City Garden’s staff attend three weeks of orientation

before the academic year begins; new staff attend another week of professional development in addition. A portion of the orientation includes a three-day Analyzing Systemic Racism workshop, facilitated by trainers from the nonprofit organization Crossroads; additionally, Faybra Hemphill facilitates two or three additional sessions to help staff process this training. “It’s setting goals, expectations, and outcomes for the entire year and sharing with teachers the resources they need to pass this work onto the students,” says Hemphill.

However, this type of training is not limited to the summer orientation. City Garden recently launched a partnership with Embracing Equity, an anti-bias, anti-racist professional development program led by a Montessori leader of color. The group comes into the school to run full-day workshops for staff that focus on ways to recognize and dismantle white supremacy in educational settings.

School principal Dr. Nicole Evans ensures that faculty and staff understand and appreciate the importance of ABAR work before they are even offered a position at the school. Guide Sandy Bowers remembers Evans asking her a tough interview question when she applied for the job: “What is your working definition of racism?”

Evans says that she does not expect a perfect answer when she asks this question, but she does require a response that shows a willingness to acknowledge that racism is real and destructive. “We know that most people are not going to have the same definition that we have because we’ve done a lot of work around this, but it does tell us where you are in the journey, and how long we might have to bring that person along if they are going to be here. If someone says, ‘I don’t like to talk about race; I don’t see color’—we already know that it’s not going to work.”

ABAR Work Connecting the School and the Community

City Garden maintains a presence in each of the neighborhoods that comprise its catchment zone by participating in neighborhood associations, advocating for sustainable housing policy, and inviting parents and organizations into the school to engage in conversation and build camaraderie.

These interactions and collaborations take several forms:

Colorbrave: City Garden regularly invites parents and community members to engage in what they term “courageous conversations” about race, privilege, and identity during facilitated Colorbrave sessions. Providing free dinner and childcare so that adults of different backgrounds can participate, these open conversations range in topic from Engaging across Difference, Rethinking Columbus Day, The Real MLK, and Solidarity for Communities of Color. In recent years, these events have packed City Garden’s common space with a multiracial crowd of adults—many, but not all, of whom are parents at the school.



SOURCE: CITY GARDEN MONTESSORI CHARTER SCHOOL FACEBOOK PAGE.

Neighborhood Engagement and The Coalition for Neighborhood Diversity and Housing Justice: In 2014, City Garden coordinated with local organizations such as Habitat for Humanity–St. Louis and Washington University in St. Louis to commission a study of its surrounding neighborhoods, the stated needs of its long-term residents, and the role that the school could play to ensure that any future growth be equitable and sustainable. The report offered several recommendations, including ways to maintain housing stock diversity, bolster housing subsidy programs, and push back against real estate tax abatement practices that allowed very-high-income homebuyers to lower their tax burdens while displacing lower-income residents.

The report resulted in the establishment of various initiatives hosted by the school, including the Coalition for Neighborhood Diversity and Housing Justice, a group of experts in housing, finance, and city government who meet once a month to discuss fair housing, accessibility, and working against displacement through gentrification; resource fairs; and financial literacy workshops for community members, which are often co-sponsored by local nonprofits such as Forward Through Ferguson and Park Central Development.

In addition to these enterprises, school leaders also seek to interact directly with many of the surrounding neighborhoods' most underserved residents. For example, in Tiffany, a predominantly black neighborhood, a real estate developer called a community meeting to hear opinions about its latest venture. City Garden officials attended the initial meeting and realized that while black residents were present, they were rarely called upon to speak. School officials then

contacted and worked with the developer to ensure that information about future meetings would be more equitably distributed, and helped set up several small roundtables to give marginalized residents more opportunities to be seen and heard.

The school also worked with the Botanical Heights Committee, a neighborhood association, to ensure that, if they did decide to grant developers the opportunity to bring more bars and restaurants to the neighborhood, both current and long-standing community members would have the opportunity to be partners, employees, and employers of those establishments.

Engaging City Garden Parents: City Garden recognizes parents as a critical factor in sustaining a school culture that combats white supremacy, and hosts numerous opportunities for parents and families to continue to develop their own racial consciousness. While Colorbrave is open to everyone in the community, City Garden offers parents their own intensive Crossroads ABAR training during the summer. Roni Rodgers, a black mother of five- and eight-year-old students, attended a three-day parents-only training this summer, and credits it with opening her eyes to the complex struggles of parents from different backgrounds. “It allowed everyone to open up to each other, and to understand why those barriers were even there in the first place,” she says.

Parent Adriano Udani had a similar experience at the Crossroads training, but left with a different key takeaway. “One of the most useful exercises we did was an inventory of City Garden, placing it on a spectrum from a progressive institution that’s changing institutional arrangements, changing consciousness surrounding identity, to an institution that’s just here to support white supremacy,” he explains. “The variation in where the parents put City Garden was, I think, important, in the sense that there was a racial pattern. White parents were more likely to put it closer to the progressive end, while parents and guardians who were people of color put City Garden on a lower end of the spectrum.”

This type of parent engagement allows families to build the skills to productively talk to their children about identity while simultaneously granting the school the chance to get honest feedback from the people it seeks to serve.

Next Steps for City Garden

Not long after its establishment, City Garden began fielding inquiries about expanding its student body and building new schools; until recently, though, this was not a priority. “We have been asked over the last several years to consider replication or expansion, and we’ve really held off because we have felt very strongly that we needed to have a solid

foundation,” says Huck. “We needed to make sure we’d gotten our current school and organization to a place we felt was strong enough to prioritize serving our current students and their families and live into the values we’ve committed to before doing anything else.”

Recently, however, school leaders’ thoughts on the subject began to shift: they began to feel that they could continue improving outcomes for current families while also expanding the size of the existing school and establishing additional campuses. Huck and the leadership team have been working with Bellwether Education Partners to compose a strategic plan to accomplish this without sacrificing any of the needs of its current student body.

Cleverly, the new strategic plan is based on the Montessori Triangle, a three-pronged approach to education that emphasizes preparation of the child, preparation of teachers and other adults, and preparation of the environment—all in service of the child.

The first corner of the triangle—preparation of the child—centers around closing achievement gaps and expanding the school’s ability to serve more children. City Garden intends to double the size of its flagship campus, open a second school in 2021, and then expand its network to a total of four schools—with a total of about 2,400 students— by 2028.

As part of this plan, City Garden leadership now must wrestle with the question of where to locate its newest school buildings. In a highly segregated—but quickly gentrifying—city, the school’s leadership grapples with somewhat competing site priorities: *Where can we build a diverse school? Where can we serve the largest number of marginalized students and families? And, where can we even find a building?*

While City Garden’s ideal situation would maintain the focus on diversity and integration fundamental to their mission, that promise is difficult to make this early in the expansion process. The city’s levels of segregation and rapidly changing economic landscape make it difficult to site schools that will remain reliably diverse. And while serving marginalized families is a key goal, Christie and her team want to be careful that their presence in transitional neighborhoods does not have unintended, adverse effects.

“It is definitely true that there are lots and lots of people in neighborhoods that have experienced tremendous amounts of disinvestment and have been marginalized for hundreds of years in our region, that need and deserve and want schools like City Garden,” she says. “I also think we have to be mindful that going into a neighborhood or set of neighborhoods where that is true, that we could end up shifting the market and the demographics of the neighborhood,” as has happened in their current catchment zone. “We need to prioritize accountability to communities of color and do some radical listening to find the best way forward.”

This expansion also requires significant funding, with the strategic plan calling for \$15 million in fundraising over the next several years. The school estimates that it will need to raise about \$1.8 million per year through 2026.

The other necessary resource for expansion happens to align with the second prong of the school's plan: building a pipeline of state-certified teachers trained in Montessori methodology. Currently, there are very few teacher preparation programs that offer the training and certification required to teach in public Missouri schools. This void poses significant hiring challenges for City Garden (and other public Montessori schools). City Garden's strategic plan proposes establishing an institute to provide training, certification, and continuing education, to both its own staff as well as others, with a focus on preparing teachers of color. According to Huck, the program would "integrate and embed ABAR values and framework and curriculum."

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Additionally, City Garden is currently exploring potential partnerships with local universities like St. Louis University and Harris-Stowe—a local historically black university—to provide teachers (and aspiring teachers) with opportunities to earn higher education credentials, including a bachelor's degree for aspiring teachers who do not yet have one. It hopes to accept its first training cohort in a pilot program next year.

Finally, the strategic plan seeks to centralize the school's community outreach work into a well-resourced Center for Equity. This center, housing committees like the Coalition for Neighborhood Diversity and Housing Justice, would partner with civic leaders and organizations to create conditions in which the community can thrive and where children from all walks of life could have equitable access to City Garden. The Center would also take the lead in building relationships with people in the neighborhoods served by the school, focusing on developing community partnerships, listening to their needs, and engaging in activism and advocacy led by the community. "We don't want to be colonizers, going into a community thinking we already know what they need," explains Huck. "We need to be listeners."

"Ultimately we hope that this can all be part of a broader vision for desegregating the neighborhoods in our region," she adds.

Conclusion

Although City Garden is proud of its identity as an intentionally diverse school, its leaders emphasize that they are not simply pursuing diversity for diversity's sake. As executive director Christie Huck stated in her testimony before U.S. House of Representatives Education and Workforce Committee members, "As long as our schools are segregated by race and income, the most vulnerable children will continue to be written off and denied opportunities to thrive and live out their full potential. . . . This does not just hurt the children and families who are directly impacted, it damages our communities and society as a whole."

City Garden honors this interconnectedness in a multitude of ways: it develops curriculum that empowers children while providing them with the skills to form strong identities and embrace difference; establishes robust family and community outreach efforts based on listening to their needs and co-creating action steps; and builds a system of internal accountability and training to ensure that school leadership and faculty practices what they preach. As the school grows into a network, these ideas of equity, justice, and community will continue to serve as its guiding principles.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from interviews or observations by the author. Many of the facts regarding the strategic plan and disciplinary philosophy come from internal documents from City Garden.
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3. Valerie Strauss, "The sad story of public education in St. Louis," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/09/07/the-sad-story-of-public-education-in-st-louis/?utm_term=.2c533fdab0ac.
4. "Racial Split in a Primary Disturbs Core of St. Louis," *New York Times*, March 10, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/10/us/racial-split-in-a-primary-disturbs-core-of-st-louis.html>.
5. City Garden internal data; Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
6. Janine Bologna, Nava Kantor, Yunqing Liu, and Samuel Taylor, "The Right to Stay Put: City Garden Montessori School and Neighborhood Change," Washington University in St. Louis, June 2015, https://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/city-garden_final-report.pdf; Richard Rothstein, "The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of its Troubles," Economic Policy Institute, October 15, 2014, <http://s3.epi.org/files/2014/making-of-ferguson-final.pdf>.
7. Janine Bologna, Nava Kantor, Yunqing Liu, and Samuel Taylor, "The Right to Stay Put: City Garden Montessori School and Neighborhood Change," Washington University in St. Louis, June 2015, https://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/city-garden_final-report.pdf; Richard Rothstein, "The Making of Ferguson:

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8. Mira Debs, “Racial and Economic Diversity in US Public Montessori Schools” *Journal of Montessori Research* 2, no. 12 (November, 2016), http://www.academia.edu/25439052/Racial_and_Economic_Diversity_in_US_Public_Montessori_Schools.

9. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MSIP5 School APR Supporting Data—Public, 2018, https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/Reports/SSRS_Print.aspx. St. Louis City Public Schools received a score of 68.2 percent.

10. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MSIP5 School APR Supporting Data—Public, 2018, https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/Reports/SSRS_Print.aspx.

11. City Garden Montessori School, U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection 2015–2016, <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=s&eid=534269&syk=8&pid=2275>; St. Louis Public Schools, U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection 2015–2016, <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&eid=28024&syk=8&pid=2278>.



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