

# A Century of Montessori

Innovative methods of educating kids are still paying off

By Jocelyn Isidro

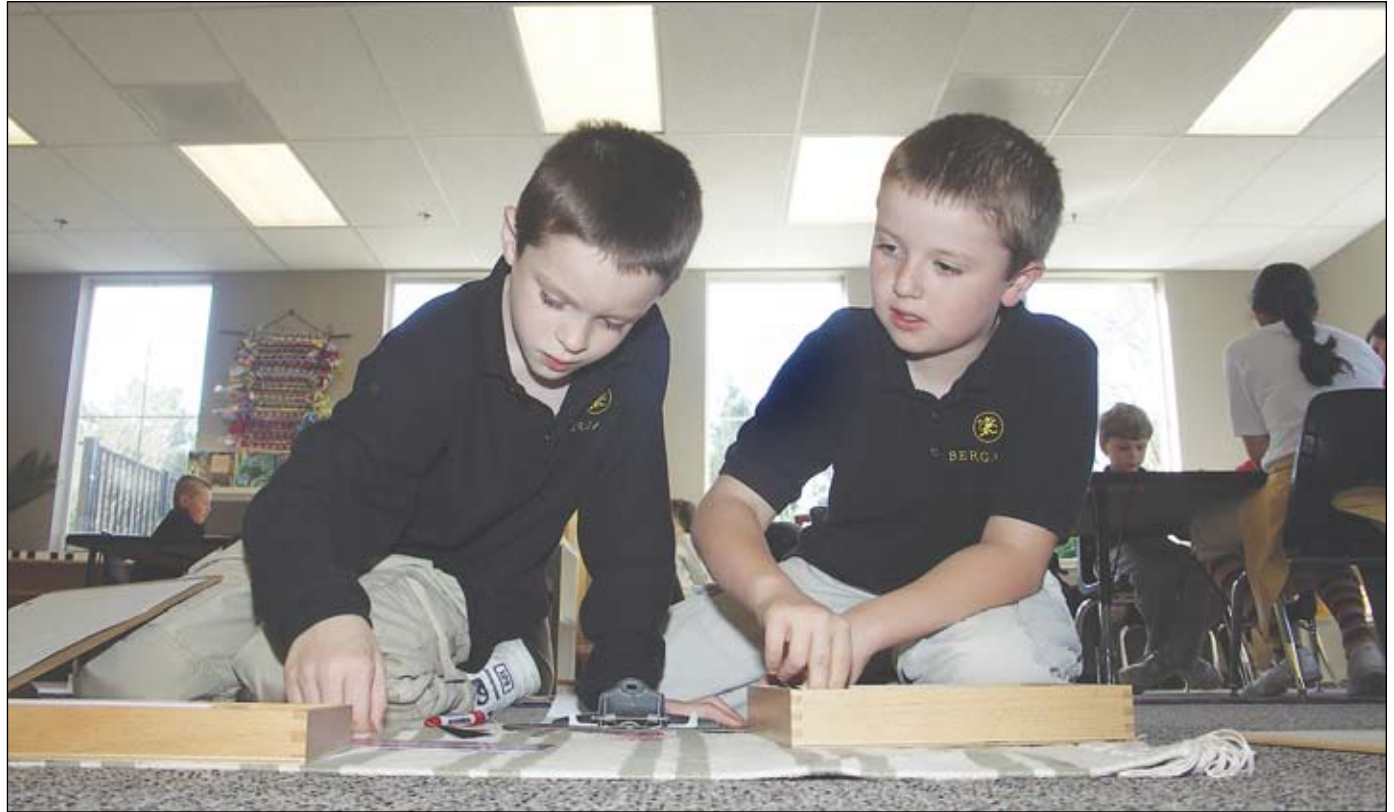
**N**o homework. No rote learning. No grades or tests. Would you send your child to a school managed this way? If you did, it probably would have Montessori attached to its name.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the Montessori method of schooling, developed by Italian physician Maria Montessori. It encourages looking at the “whole child” and tailoring education to an individual child at an individual level of development.

Montessori observed that children will keep doing something until they feel a sense of mastery and so no grades or tests are needed. Materials are provided so they can learn to form basic concepts with guidance, but without memorizing facts, completing worksheets or conforming to a rigid structure. Children learn in multiage classrooms so they can progress at their own intellectual level while remaining in their social peer group. Homework is not assigned, but can be completed if the child wishes.

You might think you’ve never seen Montessori methods in action, but in fact her influence on education shows up everywhere. Go into almost any kindergarten in the world and you’ll see children sitting at chairs, desks and tables that are child-sized. Seems like an obvious thing, but before Montessori’s methods came into prominence, children were considered smaller versions of grownups and used adult-sized furniture.

Teacher Charlene Payne, who works at the Bergamo Montessori



Third-grader Nickolas Hilton and second-grader Jack Kaspari work on a grammar exercise at Bergamo Montessori School

School in the Pocket, says her job is “to observe the child and provide him or her with whatever they need either emotionally or academically.”

---

**Maria Montessori was the first woman to graduate from medical school in Italy in the early 1900s—an unheard-of event.**

---

In a traditional Montessori school, the kids follow a schedule of tasks

including “good habits,” “work sessions” and “quiet reading.” Students have specific educational goals for which they are responsible. The “directress,” as the teacher is called, is there to direct activities rather than tell students what to do. Independent thought is encouraged.

When a child interrupts with a simple question, Payne says gently, “I would like you to answer your own problem yourself, which I’m sure you can.”

Montessori was the first woman to graduate from medical school in Italy in the early 1900s—an unheard-of event in that time and culture, where the only career options open to women were mother, nun, schoolteacher or nurse. Her father

was ashamed of his brilliant daughter, who was gifted in math and science, but her mother encouraged her to excel. Montessori enrolled in medical school although she was not welcomed and in fact was often jeered at by male students. Nevertheless, she graduated at the top of her class and became known as one of Italy’s and the world’s premier educators. Perhaps because of the discrimination against her, Montessori never married, although she did have a son, Mario.

Montessori became interested in pediatrics and psychology and gave up a university chair and private medical practice to work with impoverished children. In those days, insane and special-needs individuals were housed together in wretched conditions. One



First grader Yahsmeene Duffey works on a math problem

Pam Lynn, founder of the Bergamo Montessori schools, says that some studies show that children who have been taught under Montessori methods score higher than their public school peers on cognitive, academic, social and behavioral skills.

So why haven't public schools adopted more of Montessori's methods?

day, she observed these challenged children after dinner, making games out of leftover crumbs on the floor. Montessori realized the children were sensorially deprived. She pulled some of them out of the general population and trained them for a year, developing her concepts of materials-based, individually geared learning. The children, she found, were able to learn. She was then asked by the government to develop her program for "normal" children.

---

## Montessori's visionary methods are likely to continue to influence world education.

---

In the Sacramento area, several schools offer a Montessori education, including the private Bergamo schools in the Pocket and Woodland, as well as the public California Montessori Project schools with several campuses in Sacramento.

"Public schools have to protect what they have," says Lynn.

Nevertheless, not every parent agrees that Montessori is good for every child.

Land Park resident Judy Painter describes herself as a former Montessori fan. Her children went to a Montessori preschool for several years. But she lost enthusiasm over time.

"For my kids, it just didn't work well. [My oldest daughter] did not work well independently," she says.

Nevertheless, Montessori's visionary methods are likely to continue to influence world education. Montessori thought that the world could be saved by children, specifically by "placing all the children in our world at the center of society and assisting them in becoming the transforming elements leading to a harmonious and peaceful humanity. Education," she said, "should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities."

In 2107, on the bicentennial celebration of Montessori education, she may prove to be correct. ●