

RIVER VALLEY CHARTER SCHOOL
INTERNAL MONTESSORI AUDIT REPORT
October 24 through 28, 2016

School Statistics

Location: 2 Perry Way, Newburyport, MA 01950
Grade Levels: Kinderhaus – 2 classrooms, Elementary 1 – 4 classrooms, Elementary 2 – 4 classrooms,
Middle School – 5 classrooms
Enrollment: 288
Sending Towns & Enrollment: Newburyport - 164, Amesbury - 44, Newbury - 29, Salisbury - 23,
West Newbury – 16, Other - 10

Audit Team

Andy Willemsen, Director
Jonnie Lyn Evans, Assistant Director
Laura Hunt, Academic Program Coordinator
Colin Vandenburg, Middle School Coordinator

Introduction

River Valley operates as a Commonwealth Charter School, offering a public Montessori curriculum to students in grades K through 8. The charter is held by a Board of Trustees, who are responsible for broad governance of the school and for hiring the school Director. River Valley is structured as follows: two Kinderhaus classes, four Elementary I classes, four Elementary II classes and a Middle School with four core areas of instruction. Due to state limitations, River Valley is not currently able to offer pre-school enrollment, limiting the school's ability to provide a traditional Montessori Children's House environment. Students are enrolled through a public lottery, requiring only an informational application. River Valley is designed to have 32 students at each grade level, resulting in a maximum enrollment of 288. The current waiting list stands at 607, indicating the strong interest from families in all five sending towns. The school actively seeks to enhance its Montessori foundation through its mission to connect to the history, culture and ecology of the Merrimack River Valley.

Mission Statement

The mission of the River Valley Charter School is to provide a rigorous academic program based on the Montessori philosophy and rooted in the history, culture, and ecology of the Merrimack River Valley. Students will reach their full potential as scholars and become self-reliant, productive members of society. They will be adept at critical thinking and creative problem solving and will be fully prepared to succeed in future schools, careers, and civic life.

Data Collection Tools

Several tools were used to review the River Valley Charter School's current practices. These were used for the 2014 audit as well.

1. Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector

This document is widely used to assess the fidelity of public Montessori programs to high quality Montessori learning environments. This tool has been used in previous audits. The *Essential Elements* represent a commonly used standard collaboratively drafted and endorsed in the late 1990s by The American Montessori Society, the Association Montessori Internationale, the North American Montessori Teachers' Association, Montessori Educational Programs International, and the Southwestern Montessori Training Center.

2. School Documents, Protocols & Policies

In order to inform the *Essential Elements* analysis, the following were reviewed:

- a. River Valley Charter School website
- b. River Valley Charter School Annual 2015-2016 Report to the Charter School Office
- c. River Valley Charter School Parent Handbook 2015-2016
- d. River Valley Charter School Budget 2015-2016
- e. River Valley Charter School Staff list and credentials
- f. River Valley Charter School American Montessori Society membership information
- g. River Valley Charter School Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan
- h. River Valley Charter School Code of Conduct
- i. River Valley Charter School Progress Reports
- j. River Valley Charter School Classroom Inventories
- k. River Valley Charter School Teacher Schedules
- l. River Valley Charter School Curriculum Maps and Learning Goals
- m. River Valley Charter School Enrollment Process
- n. River Valley Charter School 2015 External Montessori Audit
- o. River Valley Charter School Montessori Training Budget
- p. River Valley Charter School Parent Education Information

3. *Montessori Classroom Observation Sheets*

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS) has created observation tools to be used in individual classrooms. The RVCS Audit Team modified these forms to customize them to our specific conditions. Specifically, the RVCS version of these observation tools include measures of professional practice which are tied to our Educator Growth work, and absent from the NCMPS forms. The RVCS team also limited the number of descriptors in order to allow the observers to focus on core elements of the Montessori environments. Forms were modified to suit the Kinderhaus, Elementary and Middle School environments.

4. Classroom observers also used the *Work Engagement Observation*.

The dual purpose of this form is to do a quick evaluation of student engagement and to review Montessori materials in use. Section One is a snapshot count of student engagement. It is tallied twice in each classroom visit- at the start of the observation and at the close. The numbers reported below are an average of all tallies within all classes at that level. Section Two indicates materials in use during the observation and gives a picture of what Montessori materials were being used at each level on a particular day. This portion of the form was not used to evaluate Middle School or Specialists, where Montessori materials play only a minor role in instructional practices.

5. Panel Discussions

The final tool used was open discussions with various groups: Kinderhaus and Elementary teachers, Middle School teachers, specialists and students. The questions asked to promote conversation were “What do you see as the greatest strengths of the school and what are its challenges? What would you like to see happen to improve the school for all members of the community?” Participants had the opportunity to reflect and talk about the school’s strengths and challenges and thus appreciate existing conditions. They were then invited to comment upon what they would like to see happen to move the school to an even higher level of excellence.

Results

Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector

| Area & Number | Component | ✓ | Notes |
|----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1 Montessori Teachers | Employ Montessori teachers who have Montessori credentials for the levels they teach. | ✓ | All K-6 head teachers are Montessori trained or certified. Additionally, in 9 of the 10 K-6 classrooms, the assistant teachers are also Montessori trained or certified. Middle school faculty has strong knowledge of the Montessori Method for adolescents and expertise in specific content areas. The Middle School Coordinator is AMS certified in Elementary I and II. The Academic Program Coordinator is experienced and Montessori-trained at the EL I-II level. |
| 2 Recruitment | Maintain an active and open recruitment for Montessori credentialed teachers. | ✓ | All classroom teacher openings are posted on various education websites, including common Montessori websites and the school's website. |
| 3 Training Budget | Budget for future Montessori teacher education for non-Montessori credentialed teachers. | ✓ | The school's budget routinely includes a line item for Montessori training. Four teachers are currently receiving training funded by the school. |
| 4 Professional Development | Provide professional Montessori in-service by experienced credentialed Montessori educators. | ✓ | Michael Dorer has provided Montessori guidance during August and September PD days. The school is an active participant in local and national conferences. Additionally, credentialed in-house administrators are guiding professional development initiatives during the current school year. |
| 5 Ongoing Consultation | Contract for on-going internal and periodic external Montessori consultation and/or professional support as a follow up to Montessori teacher education. | ✓ | This audit represents the bi-annual internal Montessori review conducted by River Valley administrators. Professional support as follow up to this audit and Montessori training are provided in-house by the Academic Program Coordinator and the Director, both certified Montessori educators. Montessori professionals conduct the bi-annual External Montessori Audits. John Freeman, Director of a Montessori Magnet School in Hartford, CT, will be visiting RVCS to provide consultation in December 2016. |
| 6 Assistants | Employ one paraprofessional per classroom, each having received Montessori orientation for that role. | ✓ | All K-6 classrooms have either a lead teacher and an assistant teacher or co-lead teachers. All assistant teachers are either Montessori trained or have received Montessori orientation. |
| 7 Curriculum Coordinator | Employ an experienced Montessori teacher to serve as curriculum coordinator. | ✓ | River Valley's Director, Andy Willemsen, the Academic Program Coordinator, Laura Hunt and the Middle School Coordinator, Colin Vandenburg are all experienced and credentialed Montessori teachers. |
| 8 Administration | Employ a building principal/educational leader who has knowledge of Montessori principles and curriculum through Montessori coursework, Montessori Administrator Credential and/or annual conference exposure. | ✓ | The RVCS Director, Andy Willemsen is a credentialed and experienced Montessori teacher. The Assistant Director, Jonnie Lyn Evans, has over ten years of Montessori administrative service, as well as two years of Montessori classroom teaching. |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|---|
| 9 Curricular Commitment | Maintain commitment to the core Montessori curriculum and instruction even with changes in administrative staff. | ✓ | No administrative staffing changes were made in the last year. All key administrators have Montessori experience. |
| 10 Communication | Sustain the support of the central administration through high profile communications about program development. | ✓ | As a Commonwealth Charter School, RVCS is its own school district, and reports to the state Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign (OCCSR). The OCCSR approved the school's Annual Report and results for the RVCS Accountability Plan. Communication with state accountability personnel is ongoing. |
| 11 2.5-6 Age Range | Recognize that the best implementation process is to begin with the 2.5-6 age group and add one age at a time for a gradual progression. | n/a | While the recognition of the importance of the multi-age program exists, limitations and restrictions on town and state funding for early childhood programs prevent RVCS from offering enrollment to pre-school aged students. The existing Kinderhaus classrooms are excellent examples of high quality Montessori environments. |
| 12 Parent Education | Provide Montessori parent education programs that promote understanding of Montessori principles and curriculum. | ✓ | Prospective and new parent orientation sessions, as well as parent nights in each classroom provide essential information regarding the Montessori Method. In addition, the Director offers monthly morning meetings with parents as well as sending home 'Director's Notes' regularly which outline key aspects of Montessori education. In spring of 2016 the school hosted a parent education evening focused on the Montessori cultural curriculum. Plans are underway for a similar evening in spring 2017 with a focus on literacy and writing. |
| 13 Admissions | Develop an admission process that informs parents about the nature of Montessori and seeks the necessary commitment to the program | ✓ | This process is well established from the first contact at the Enrollment Information Sessions through Kinderhaus screening and New Parent Orientation. The Assistant Director holds multiple information sessions for prospective families, and offers additional Montessori education sessions for parents during Kinderhaus screening days. |
| 14 Montessori Materials | Offer a full complement of Montessori materials purchased from Montessori dealers. | ✓ | All K-6 classrooms are equipped with a wide array of Montessori materials. The RVCS Foundation funds a \$5,000 annual grant to assure the ongoing acquisition of Montessori materials for all levels. Materials and classroom furniture are sourced from high quality Montessori vendors. |
| 15 Prepared Environment | Develop a classroom design that is compatible with Montessori "prepared environment" principles | ✓ | The overall beauty of K-6 classrooms was impressive, with materials thoughtfully presented and kept in good condition. Furniture is purchased from Montessori distributors, and suits the developmental needs of the children. All K-6 classrooms have tiled and carpeted areas for student learning, as well as in-class water sources and dedicated bathrooms. Large group, small group and individual learning areas exist in all K-6 rooms. Plants are present in all rooms, and animals in many. E1 rooms provided peace corners, and E2 rooms all offered upholstered seating options. Middle school classrooms provide flexible environments that foster both group and individual learning spaces. |
| 16 Work Periods | Create uninterrupted daily work periods of 90 minutes to 3-hours, considering the 3-hour work cycle as ideal. | ✓ | All K-6 classroom have uninterrupted work blocks of at least 90 minutes scheduled every day. The current schedule for specials and instrumental lessons has put pressure on the continuity of the work period, with increased interruptions to the three-hour work cycle. There is broad consensus that the specials programs are of high quality and offering meaningful learning to all students, yet teachers are feeling the stress of the tight scheduling and the many demands on student's time. |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|-----|---|
| | | | The middle school schedule includes 120-minute learning blocks for science and humanities classes, and a minimum of 60 minute classes for mathematics and language arts classes. The specials schedule is working well for the middle school program. |
| 17 Integrated Specials | Integrate specialty programs (music, art, physical education, etc.) around the uninterrupted work periods. | ✓ | As mentioned above, the breadth of enrichment classes included in the RVCS curriculum presents ongoing scheduling challenges. Great care and planning are invested in minimizing the impact on the morning work periods, so that all classrooms have at least three days with a three-hour work period, and work periods of at least 90 minutes on other days. |
| 18 Age Groupings | Apply the appropriate multi-age groupings: 2.5-6, 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-18 necessary for the diversity, flexibility, and reduced competition integral to Montessori. | n/a | RVCS recognizes the importance of these multi-age groupings, but is unable to offer a 2.5-6 program due to limitations and restrictions on town and state funding for early childhood programs |
| 19 Progress Reporting | Use a process of reporting student progress that is compatible with Montessori and includes parent conferences and authentic assessment tools such as observation, portfolio, performance assessment with rubric, etc. | ✓ | RVCS progress reports have been updated to align with Montessori curriculum and reflect student progress toward learning goals. Both faculty and parents report positive feedback from this effort. Additional emphasis has been placed on parent conferences, which occur three times annually. Performance assessment data is reflected in progress reports. Teachers at all levels are piloting an innovative approach to portfolio assessments, and will solicit feedback from parents and students as the year progresses. Portfolio use is strongly and consistently implemented at the MS level culminating in Celebrations of Learning in the spring. |
| 20 Assessment | Implement state mandated assessments in such a way that the character of the Montessori program is not compromised. | ✓ | RVCS uses the MCAS as its state mandated assessment tool. Though these remain high-stakes tests, the current administration has attempted to reduce the impact of these tests on daily school culture. The faculty also use a variety of internal assessments to assist in progress report data. Teachers and administration continue to develop assessment tools that align with the Montessori philosophy. |
| 21 Professional Development | Budget for continuing education through Montessori workshops and conferences. | ✓ | The budget continues to reflect an investment in Montessori workshops and conferences. |
| 22 Memberships | Maintain membership with one or more of the professional Montessori organizations and seek Montessori accreditation to assure consistent quality. | ✓ | RVC is a member of the American Montessori Society and the Montessori Schools of Massachusetts. |

Montessori Classroom Observation Data

The tables below represent the results of nearly 50 classroom observations conducted during the audit. Observation data was collected on over 40 individual descriptors of high quality Montessori education, representing five domains – Procedures & Routines, Grace & Courtesy, Student Work Habits, Instructional Environment and Professional Practice. The *Work Engagement Observation* tool was used to evaluate the nature of activities among students. Examples of these two observation tools are included in the Appendix.

These data are also averaged/compiled across the classrooms, so represent four classrooms at the E1 and E2 levels, two for Kinderhaus and five for middle school.

Summary of Classroom Observation Data

NC=Not Consistently, G=Generally, C=Consistently

| | Procedures & Routines | Grace & Courtesy | Work Habits | Instructional Environment | Professional Practice |
|----|-----------------------|------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| K | C | C | C | C | C |
| E1 | C | G | C | C | C |
| E2 | C | G | C | C | G |
| MS | C | C | C | G | C |

Work Engagement of Students

| | Engaging in work | Using work as a prop | Choosing work | Receiving help or in a lesson | Wandering | Behaving disruptively |
|----|------------------|----------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| K | 67% | 8% | 11% | 11 % | 3% | 0% |
| E1 | 56% | 12% | 9% | 18% | 5% | <1% |
| E2 | 60% | 8% | 6% | 22% | 4% | 0% |
| MS | 89% | 3% | 1% | 4% | 3% | 0% |

Work on Montessori Materials Observed

| | Math | Language | Other: Cultural, Practical Life, Sensorial |
|----|--|--|---|
| K | Golden beads, blue & red rods, addition strip board, spindle box, tens boards & beads, bead chains, spindle box, hundreds board, | Moveable Alphabet (x3), word ladder, matching cards, object box (x2), sandpaper letters, upper/lower case letters, | Snack preparation and serving. Puzzle maps, continent maps, tweezer work, eye dropper work, pumpkin art, |
| E1 | Stamp Game, Bead Bars, Bead Frame, Checkerboard, Golden Beads, Hierarchical Materials, Yellow Decimal Mat, Racks & Tubes, Bead Chains, Geometric Shapes, Dynamic Addition, Fraction Insets | Verb Box, Word Study Tower- antonyms, Reading, Short Vowels, diphthongs and diagraphs- word study, phonics materials, cursive, parts of speech, capitalization | Puzzle Maps, Calendar/Months of the Year, Pin Maps, 5 Kingdoms, Vertebrates, Living/Non-Living, Leaf Observation, Roman Numerals, Farm, Timeline of Life, Mystery History work, Dishwashing |
| E2 | Peg Board, Fraction pieces | Symbolizing materials, cursive, | Maps of America, constitution work, Dead & Famous work, |

At the Kinderhaus and E1 levels, Montessori materials were evident and in use in all classrooms. This observation confirms the commitment of the faculty at these levels to use Montessori materials as a central component of a high quality Montessori program. The number and diversity of materials in use increased from the 2014 Internal Audit.

At the E2 level, Montessori materials were rarely observed, and most student work was paper-and-pencil based, with workbooks such as Wordly Wise and Jump Math featuring prominently in student activities. Use of lap top computers was also a significant portion of student engagement. Teachers support the use of these tools, and have expressed that students are less engaged with the traditional Montessori materials. E2 teachers also stated their belief that a diminished presence of materials at this developmental stage is appropriate, given the increased role of technology in the classroom and as students move toward abstract work and reasoning.

Data on materials use was not collected for the middle school level, as students are working consistently at the abstract level. While the use of Montessori materials is not generally expected in the middle school classrooms, data for student engagement was particularly strong, and learning environments were rated well.

It is notable that the results of the Classroom Guidelines showed no areas where the criteria were not generally or consistently met. This observation indicates not only positive efforts on the part of the staff and students, but increased consistency across each level – a stated desire of the school community.

Stakeholder Discussions

Panel discussions were held with teachers from all levels, specialist teachers and students. In order to encourage open feedback, discussions were led by administrators with no supervisory role for the given level. K/E1 and E2 teacher panel discussions were led by Colin Vandenburg. The Middle School teacher panel discussion was led by Laura Hunt, and student panel discussions were led by Andy Willemsen.

Kinderhaus & E1 Level Meeting Summary

What do you see as the greatest strengths of your level and what are its challenges?

Strengths- Kinderhaus teachers felt fortunate to experience children at such an early age, where they have a natural desire to learn, students have less to be concerned about and teachers are really able to honor the child. Teachers at these levels also felt very strong about how great the teachers all are and how there has been an increased connection between the classrooms. There was a strong appreciation for how well stocked the classrooms are with Montessori Materials. This has not always been the case and they appreciate that Laura does the buying for teachers.

Challenges- Some of the challenges include the feeling that the third years are out of the room a lot. There are lots of comings and goings and special education pull-outs. Teachers feel like more connection/communication between support staff/specialists and teachers would clarify expectations and improve the consistency of work being done to support students with special needs.

What do you see as the greatest strengths of the school and what are its challenges?

Strengths- Teachers feel like they are more closely connected with other levels than they have ever been. They love the autonomy that they have as teachers. The flexibility allows them to be creative with their practice with students. They feel like the work around the Teacher Growth Team tribes has been really positive and that they feel like people are open about feedback. There is also lots of opportunity for PD which they felt has been a strength in the past as well as present.

Challenges- The taking on of new initiatives falls under both a strength and a challenge. They feel like the number of interruptions in the classroom could be examined to see if we could shoot for fewer. They group recognized that there is a special education dynamic associated with some of these interruptions, but perhaps the specials schedule is a contributor. They would love to see a traditional work period come back.

What would you like to see happen to improve the school for all members of the community?

The groups talked about trying to make Monday's sacred with no interruptions. Would it be possible to move more of the interruptions to Friday? There was also another call for a full Children's House 3-6.

E2 Level Meeting Summary

What do you see as the greatest strengths of your level and what are its challenges?

Strengths - Overall there was nice sentiment in this focus group about where the school stood and the general culture of the building. Teachers felt that the school maintains a supportive environment where there is strong collaboration and they can share ideas easily, knowing that there is likely to be shared excitement behind those ideas. Other strengths included teachers feeling like they are able to successfully meet students where they are developmentally and academically. This is a result of having a deep knowledge of their students and families. The 3-year cycle obviously contributes to this positively. Teachers also pointed to an improvement in the communication with parents, going-outs and student's abilities to practice and become proficient speaking in front of an audience.

Challenges- Teachers stated that they felt like there had been an increase in the number of interruptions in the classrooms, leading to a fractured 3-hour work cycle. They also felt that they dealt with a huge range of needs and abilities which while was stated as a strength, was also perceived as a challenge of the level. The ever-present Public vs Montessori dynamic continues to influence operations, but teachers feel like they are perhaps getting more and more used to this.

What do you see as the greatest strengths of the school and what are its challenges?

Strengths- This group felt like the school had made real progress with more vertical conversations happening between levels school-wide. They really appreciate the amount of freedom and trust that the school places in the teachers. They feel like we graduate strong, creative students who are strong critical thinkers. Place-Based Education is really something that has taken off and that the school has embraced and succeeded with. They appreciate the high level of parent support (drivers). Also mentioned was the commitment problem solving and the student-centered approach. The 20-minute conference also feels like a gift to both the teachers, parents and students.

Challenges- One of the teachers felt strongly that we need to have more students- or start another school so that more children can take advantage of this kind of education. Yet another call for a high school. Another teacher felt strongly that a 3-6 program would fill many of the wholes that we see in the kids as they move up in levels. The building and grounds is adequate but not ideal. Teachers expressed some mild frustration about testing and the judgements associated with those tests. They'd like to hear more from alumni. The experience last year with the panels was a highlight and we'd love to hear more from the alums.

What would you like to see happen to improve the school for all members of the community?

As so often is the case, 'time' is a major challenge for teachers. They voiced the desire for time off for progress reports. Some teachers also felt like they would like to try and make it so they could get 30 minutes for lunch. They recognized the ability to accomplish this with the team teaching, but don't like to burden their teaching partners. They also mentioned that they really enjoyed the community building work that has been done periodically at the beginning of staff meetings and wished for a little more of that to continue to build strong relationships between staff members. While an increase in vertical conversations between levels has been apparent, they wondered about having more specific conversations about the gaps they see in transitioning students. Greater interaction with Middle School students. There was also a proposal to mix up teachers for a day from time to time.

VANS, VANS, VANS

Middle School Level Meeting Summary:

What are the strengths of the Middle School?

The Middle School team feels that the one of the biggest strengths of their program is how well students are truly known as individuals, and as a result what a strong voice and sense of self their students have. Another key strength is the hands on exploratory interdisciplinary work that is a large part of the program through scimanities and project groups. Students in large part drive the work they are doing and are called to reflect and publicly speak

to the work they are doing. One of the tools that allows for these strengths to come through is the amount of time the team can meet together and talk about students. Changes to the schedule that also contribute to these strengths are the content labs and the Friday flex time.

What are the challenges of the Middle School?

The Middle School team feels that most of the challenges of its program center around balance. How to balance what we believe is important to teach and the demands of traditional or private high schools when students transition out; between a strong schedule and flexible time; between fun and a relaxed attitude and formal instruction; between student behavior and boundaries; and between time teaching and time planning and collaborating. Teachers would like to find even more ways to collaborate (Science and Math). Teachers continue to be challenged by low math skills coming in from E2.

What does Montessori look like in the Middle School?

There is a strong correlation between the strengths of the middle school program and the presence of Montessori in the middle school. The strong student voice and sense of self, and flexibility of the program and the knowing of students as individuals are Montessori vanguards. The teachers also feel that the middle school's sense of community and welcoming and open mindedness stems from its Montessori core, as does the sense of place and global awareness. There are physical space issues that could serve to strengthen the presence of Montessori-maker space, space for practical life, etc.

Specialists Meeting Summary

What do you see as the greatest strengths of your level and what are its challenges?

Strengths- Specialists love that they have the ability to be creative as teachers. There is some mixed feeling about the single age groups vs mixed. It did feel (at least to one teacher) that we are missing something in not have the older students there to help support the younger. They do like that the current model allows for smaller class sizes which allows for increased flexibility. They also praised spelectives for being a unique experience for MS students.

Challenges- The gym teacher reports that the current schedule and gym equipment set up creates challenges when it comes to transitioning between classes. Having students at the end of the day means that they are often tired and have more trouble with focus. Having extra support in the room is really appreciated (if a teacher stays to help). There is an observation that students have a tendency to call for help too quickly.

What do you see as the greatest strengths of the school and what are its challenges?

Strengths- Specialists feel like the school is well connected between the different levels/ages. They appreciate their community with each other as specialists. They observe that there is a strong relationship between teachers and administration-they feel like everyone is on the same team which feels great. There is a great deal of helpfulness with students and teachers. Teachers feel like students are celebrated for who they are, and that the school honors their individuality by providing opportunities for them to explore their passions.

Challenges- There were some questions around the amount of freedom that younger students have- is it too much? Also, is there not enough responsibility being placed on Middle School students? A sense that perhaps the kids are too sheltered? This idea was met with some resistance, and that perhaps these were not bad things?

What would you like to see happen to improve the school for all members of the community?

Specials teachers would like- a new building, bigger gym, another van, and a kiln!

Student Panel Summary – Elementary I & II

What do you feel is working well/positive about RVCS?

- Students immediately focused on their teachers, stating that the faculty was kind, tolerant and supportive. They feel that the teachers know and value each of them as individuals.
- The individualized nature of the instruction was appreciated by the students.
- Students value the amount of independence and choice in the work that they do.
- Small lessons were mentioned as a positive, as well as the amount of student voice in lessons.

- There was consensus that RVCS is “a good learning community” where students feel that learning is important and are motivated to learn.
- There is flexibility in the pace of the day – students are allowed to take breaks.
- Students felt that specials are working well – the mixing of classes is seen as a positive.
- The three-year cycle gives kids and teachers a chance to really know each other.
- Students appreciate the freedom to move around as they want to – to be active and independent in the classroom.
- The Montessori hands-on learning is appreciated. Going around the school to measure things was given as an example.
- Students appreciate the ability to work at their own pace.
- “You get to be yourself.”
- Students mentioned and embraced the duality of responsibility and freedom.
- The opportunity to work with and teach other students was seen as a positive, along with the opportunities for leadership.
- Due dates are seen as a positive – “they help you keep organized.”
- Having lunch in the classroom increases a sense of community.
- Not having desks was seen as a benefit.
- Pancake breakfasts.

What is not working well at RVCS?

- The first comments focused on transition times.
 - Dismissal – you can get trampled if you’re out in the hallway when bikers and walkers get called.
 - Specials transitions feel chaotic.
 - The hallway is usually noisy.
- The loss of the Library Special for E2 was lamented.
- There is no auditorium, and the gym isn’t great for assemblies.
- Students felt that at times one student’s transgression resulted in consequences for the entire class. They felt teachers should focus more on the kids causing the problems.
- No swings on the playground.
- We don’t get a Halloween party.

Student Panel Summary – Middle School

What do you feel is working well/positive about RVCS?

- Students immediately cited the strong connections between students and teachers. They felt that the teachers knew who they were as learners, and that there was a high level of trust and respect between teachers and students. The consensus was that the teachers care about the whole child.
- The high quality of the teaching was also an initial response.
- Students liked the “discussion based learning” that takes place in the middle school classrooms.
- Students felt that they had a voice in their learning, and that there was both choice and flexibility in the curriculum and the ways in which they are expected to engage with the curriculum.
- Several students cited the work happening with the Portfolios centered on the Seven C’s, and felt that this was a positive way to view and report on their learning.
- Field trips and the hands-on learning approach were also cited as positive elements of the middle school program. Archaeology project and constellation project were cited as examples, along with project groups.
- The mixture of academic groups was seen as a positive, and that some classes were mixed grades and other were single grades. The opportunity to see nearly all other middle school students through the various groupings was appreciated.
- Students also reported that there were good relations between the 7th and 8th grades – the 8ths were accepting and open to socializing & friendships.

- The whole group agreed that bullying was not a factor in their daily experiences. One student said that there was a “tiny bit” of bullying, but that it was no big deal.
- The internet connections are better this year.

What is not working well at RVCS?

- Lockers – this was the first item mentioned. More the quality of the lockers than the space around them.
- Not enough free time to choose who you want to hang out with.
- The loss of the electives on Friday afternoons was seen as a drawback. The 8th graders liked having this as a “reward” at the end of the week.
- The uneven homework load was cited as a problem. Students want teachers to coordinate when the load for projects will increase in each subject. They feel like it’s a roller coaster – some weeks are light and others have too much. They agreed that if you took the average of all the homework it represented a reasonable load.
- Group projects were seen as a problem due to the grading impact. If you have a partner who doesn’t pull their weight, it impacts your grade, even if you did well with your responsibilities.
- Students would like more time to print documents in the mornings. Two printers seemed like a good idea to them.

What does it mean to you to be a Montessori student?

- Independence.
- “The Nock is like a stick – just straight and stiff. We’re like a rubber band.”
- The teachers are with you, not against you.
- You get to follow your own path.
- You have more choice – project groups are a good example.
- Teachers are more engaged and more engaging.
- You have more responsibility – but with support.
- We learn from each other.

Summary

Based on the measurement and observation tools used, as well as the feedback from school stakeholders, the Audit Team finds that River Valley Charter School’s Montessori program represents a high quality model of Montessori education in the public sector. Results on the *Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector* indicate a school-wide commitment to the Montessori philosophy, while balancing the demands of state accountability and high-stakes testing. The commitment to the school’s mission is evident at all levels of the program. All K-6 classrooms present a learning model closely aligned to the core Montessori philosophy, and the middle school environment serves as an excellent example of an adolescent Montessori program while balancing the expectations of the high school level. Observations of the school climate and culture, as well as reports from faculty and students, consistently demonstrated an environment that emphasized academic learning while also honoring student voice, individualized learning, hands-on experiences and the importance of holistic education.

Areas for Continued Focus

- **Scheduling Challenges:** While the enhanced specials offerings are universally seen as meaningful learning opportunities for students, the interruptions to the daily work periods in grades K-6 remain a concern. RVCS meets the expectations of a 90-minute work period established by the *Essential Elements of Successful Montessori Schools in the Public School Sector*; but the administration and faculty both recognize that a three-hour uninterrupted work period is ideal. Given the special education requirements, as well as the need for common planning time for level teams, some level of compromise from this ideal is inevitable. As noted by our external auditor last year, “This challenge is endemic to all publicly funded and the great majority of private Montessori schools.”

Initial Action Steps:

- ✓ Collect schedule from other public and private Montessori schools to provide perspective and possible scheduling options for RVCS.
- ✓ Consider scheduling more specials on Fridays
- ✓ Give classroom teachers a choice of which days to have the morning work cycle shortened/interrupted.
- ✓ Examine the impact of returning to the three core specials – Art, Music and P.E.
- ✓ Convene a working group of K-6 teachers to examine scheduling options.

- **Montessori Materials Use:** Though observations indicate consistent use of Montessori materials in Kinderhaus and E1, the question of Montessori materials use in E2 should be formally addressed.

Initial Action Steps:

- ✓ Visit public and private Montessori schools to assess the use of materials at the E2 level.
- ✓ Discuss the use and role of materials with E2 faculty to establish agreement on desired expectations.
- ✓ Articulate the role and rationale of materials at the E2 level in a document that can be shared with students and families.
- ✓ Align materials use with RVCS Curriculum maps.
- ✓ Identify non-Montessori hands-on learning experiences that support the RVCS curriculum maps.
- ✓ Examine the role of workbooks at E2 and E1 levels.

- **Montessori Materials Inventory:** A uniform system for inventory of Montessori materials in grades k through 6 should be adopted and used with fidelity. The results of this annual spring inventory will lead to the replacement and upgrading of Montessori materials for each classroom every year. This effort will align with the support requested by the Director and offered by the RVCS Foundation. The Academic Program Coordinator, with the support of the Director, should oversee this process.

Appendix

RVCS Montessori Classroom Observation Sheet – Kinderhaus & Elementary

Observer: _____ Date _____ Time _____

Classroom _____ Level _____

NO = Not Observed 1 = Not Consistently Observed 3 = Consistently Observed

| Instructional Environment | NO | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|----------|----------|----------|
| shelves are clean and uncluttered | | | | |
| materials are in the correct sequence within each shelf | | | | |
| materials are kept in good repair | | | | |
| overall environment is beautiful and welcoming | | | | |
| a full spectrum of Montessori materials is available in every area representing the majority of materials on each shelf | | | | |
| wall displays are attractive, current, relevant, appropriate amount, uncluttered | | | | |
| whole group and small lesson areas are defined | | | | |
| daily schedule posted – as appropriate for each level | | | | |
| | Procedures and Routines: Students... | | | |
| transition independently from one activity to another | | | | |
| follow directions cooperatively and in a timely manner | | | | |
| assist in the maintaining of the room, as appropriate for their age | | | | |
| handle materials with respect | | | | |
| get help from each other and the teacher in the manner consistent with class protocol | | | | |
| respond to a bell or other signal to- stop, look and listen | | | | |
| gather materials for their work as needed | | | | |
| clean up and put away work in proper location when complete | | | | |
| know the system for filing work in folders, binders, and bins | | | | |
| | Grace and Courtesy: Students... | | | |
| use quiet and peaceful voices | | | | |
| speak next to each other quietly, not across the room | | | | |
| move carefully and calmly | | | | |
| demonstrate compassion, grace & courtesy | | | | |
| | Work Habits: Students... | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| exhibit persistence and confidence in their efforts | | | | |
| exhibit curiosity and creativity in their efforts | | | | |
| engage in work that fosters critical thinking | | | | |
| work in self-selected groups to solve problems and assist one another | | | | |
| are engaged in meaningful follow up-work | | | | |
| have opportunities for independent work choices daily | | | | |
| are attentive during small group lessons | | | | |
| are attentive during whole group instruction/meetings | | | | |
| Professional Practice: The Teachers... | | | | |
| BTIY – demonstrate evidence of positive and respectful relationships with students | | | | |
| BTIY – establish structures and routines that result in a stable, safe environment | | | | |
| BTIY – demonstrate high expectations for all students | | | | |
| BTIY – demonstrate creativity and flexibility in instructional plan and approach | | | | |
| behavior supports concentration in the classroom; models purposeful interaction | | | | |
| follows the rhythm – present, circulate observe | | | | |
| voice is quiet- not heard above others | | | | |
| approaches children at their level | | | | |
| presents in various locations throughout the classroom | | | | |
| uses a lesson plan/ record keeping system | | | | |
| observes classroom regularly, has recording system | | | | |
| confers with other adults quietly | | | | |

Notes:

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| RVCS Montessori Classroom Observation Guidelines | Middle School |
|---|----------------------|

Observer: _____ **Date:** _____ **Time:** _____

Classroom: _____ **Number of Students:** _____

NO = Not Observed 1 = Not Consistently Observed 3 = Consistently Observed

| Prepared Environment: The teacher has prepared... | NO | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| shelves and walls that are clean, uncluttered, attractive and relevant | | | | |
| plants, pictures, and work samples that are displayed beautifully | | | | |
| areas for group and individual work | | | | |
| students to assist in the maintaining of the room, as appropriate for their age | | | | |
| opportunities for independent work choices daily | | | | |
| Procedures and Routines: The students... | NO | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| follow directions cooperatively and in a timely manner | | | | |
| handle materials with respect | | | | |
| transition independently from one activity to another | | | | |
| respond to a bell or other signal to -stop, look and listen | | | | |
| Grace and Courtesy: The students... | NO | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| use quiet voices and calm movements | | | | |
| use steps of peaceful conflict resolution | | | | |
| are inclusive in group work | | | | |
| are respectful of the opinions and comments of other students | | | | |
| Work Habits The students... | NO | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| exhibit work engagement | | | | |
| exhibit persistence and confidence in their efforts | | | | |
| exhibit curiosity and creativity in their efforts | | | | |
| exhibit compassion, grace and courtesy | | | | |
| engage in work that fosters critical thinking | | | | |
| use personal organization systems to be accountable | | | | |
| Instructional Approach: The teacher... | NO | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| follows the rhythm-present, circulate, observe | | | | |
| uses intentional movements, careful and calm | | | | |
| confers with other adults quietly | | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| shows evidence of positive and respectful relationships with students | | | | |
| has structures and routines that result in a stable, safe environment | | | | |
| demonstrates high expectations for all students | | | | |
| demonstrates creativity and flexibility in instructional plan and approach | | | | |

Notes: