



School Profile: Urban Montessori Charter School
By: The Institute of Montessori Education

Located on two Oakland, California campuses, Urban Montessori Charter School is a tuition-free, TK-8th grade institution that Director of Instruction Jen Heeter describes as a place that works tirelessly to ensure students feel safe, comfortable, and welcome. “A child is not going to take in anything academically if they aren’t feeling safe or comfortable within the environment,” she says. “That can be challenging if they’ve already been in multiple schools or come in with negative habits or negative school patterning.”

To help all students feel welcome and included, Urban Montessori works hard on following through with its commitment to diversity and equity. “When students show up here, they need to have equal opportunities to curriculum resources and teacher attention,” says Heeter. Putting that into practice is challenging for a variety of reasons, ranging from unconscious bias in staff to profound differences in familial and cultural approaches to discipline, education, and redirection.

Transitions for new students are often the hardest part, so before each school year begins, teachers come two weeks early to participate in professional development training on topics such as trauma-informed practices, social justice work, and anti-bias, anti-racist (ABAR) education.

Heeter says only a small percentage of families enroll students at Urban Montessori specifically because of the methodology; many have never heard of Maria Montessori. “If only a small percentage of families are choosing us because of Montessori, then we have a lot of work to do in the intake process to make sure families know what the Montessori pedagogy and values consist of. You can put a diverse group of children together in any space, but unless you’re specifically teaching them how to collaborate on differences, there are going to be issues.”

In teaching that collaboration, Urban Montessori uses a three-pillar approach: the Montessori pedagogy is the foundation, and arts integration and design thinking are the processes through which students approach that pedagogy. In 2013, the nonprofit organization Ashoka named Urban Montessori a “changemaker school” for its focuses on peace education, building empathy, and community problem-solving.

Witnessing the students band together to resolve difficult issues is one of the most rewarding parts of Heeter's job. "We work when they get here on their emotional naming, so they can name what's going on for them and be able to work through it," she says. "In our middle school program, children are able to have restorative justice conversations. We've taught them to do conflict resolution with their teachers and the adults in their lives, so they feel empowered to advocate for their needs. Some students who have experienced trauma were outside their classrooms every day screaming in the halls and not being able to problem-solve or regulate. Now [those same students] are successfully working in their classrooms, participating in the school business, and are able to navigate their emotions in a more balanced way."

Since it first opened in Fall 2012, Urban Montessori has experienced steady growth but frequent turnover in administrative staff. Heeter hopes that as the school works out some of those growing pains, facility stabilization and eventual expansion to more campuses will follow, as well as a teacher recruitment pipeline. "We're still in our infancy," she says. "The public Montessori sector is really a niche environment, and it's hard to find people who can speak to all of those pieces, so [in future] I envision more organic, spontaneous, and integrated Montessori programming."

See **Urban Montessori Charter School** by attending TIME's Montessori Back to School Conference on Saturday, October 12, 2019!



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