

Montessori went down to Georgia

Collaborating for policy change



BY ANNIE FRAZER

Dr. Mia Ford, principal at Huntley Hills Montessori and Elementary School in DeKalb County, Georgia, had a problem. She was always looking for Montessori teachers, but when she found them, she couldn't hire them. "Every hiring season, I've had at least three or four applicants with Montessori training interested in a job, but because they didn't hold a Georgia certificate, I was unable to hire them," she says. "Now I'll be able to hire them for our Montessori classes!" Thanks to Georgia's new Montessori teaching certificate, Dr. Ford and other Georgia principals can now hire trained and experienced Montessori teachers to fill openings in public Montessori schools.

Georgia's new teaching certificate was adopted by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) in May 2018 after a sixteen-month collaboration with Montessori Partnerships for Georgia, a nonprofit working to expand access to Montessori in Georgia through a network of public and sliding-scale Montessori schools. Holders of the new certificate qualify to teach in a public Montessori classroom at the age level that corresponds to their training. The certificate is open to any educator who meets the following criteria:

- Holds a Montessori credential (or letter of equivalency) at the appropriate age level from a

- MACTE-accredited training center
- Has a bachelor's degree in any subject
- Passes the GACE (Georgia's equivalent to the Praxis) for the appropriate age level
- Passes the Georgia Educator Ethics Test
- Completes a 3-credit-hour course on exceptional children

As the executive director of Montessori Partnerships for Georgia, I was closely involved with the push for certification, which had been a goal of our organization since our founding in 2014. Here are some things we learned along the way:

1. Build on similar accomplishments in other states

Citing the example of other states got us in the door and made space for our very first conversation with the GaPSC about Montessori teacher certification.

In our initial email reaching out to the GaPSC, we mentioned that South Carolina, Connecticut and Wisconsin had already established processes



Montessori Partnerships for Georgia

by which trained Montessori teachers could receive state recognition. The response: "Since you suggested that several other states recognize Montessori certification, it may be of interest to us too."

As we moved forward in the process of developing the certificate and getting it adopted, the example of other states continued to be useful. In designing our certificate, the staff of the GaPSC reviewed policy language

from several other states. And in their presentation to the 18 commissioners who took the ultimate vote to adopt the policy, the staff shared a map of the six other states that by then recognized Montessori credentials for state certification.

2. Involve MACTE

The involvement of Rebecca Pelton, president of the Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE), made a big difference in our ability to move state certification forward in Georgia.

Rebecca came down to Atlanta to join our first meeting with the GaPSC, and her ability to speak the language of mainstream teacher preparation and program accreditation helped establish credibility and a sense of being on the same team. I remember sitting silently at the table, watching Rebecca and the GaPSC staff juggle acronyms that flew right over my head, and feeling very thankful that she was there. By the end of that meeting, we had made the decision to set up a Montessori Certification Task Force and design a new certificate for Georgia.

As we began to outline the certificate rule, a key to our success was MACTE's willingness to issue letters of equivalency for certificate-seekers who had earned Montessori credentials before their training centers were accredited. Here in Georgia, where an AMI teacher training center with almost 50 years of graduates has just recently become MACTE accredited, the letter of

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equivalency will make it possible for many excellent Montessori teachers to serve in the public schools.

Finally, as the Commissioners were preparing for the vote, information from MACTE about their accreditation requirements helped the Commissioners understand and value the depth of preparation that Montessori teachers undergo.

3. Show Montessori in action

To turn curious bystanders into Montessori allies and advocates, let them see Montessori children and teachers at work.

After our very first meeting, we invited the staff of the GaPSC who would be working on the Montessori certificate to attend our Montessori Tour and Conversation—an introduction to Montessori essentials, fifteen minutes observing at each level from toddler to adolescence, and a chance for reflection.

After watching toddlers wash dishes and put them away; primary children work with sandpaper letters; elementary children turn cardboard boxes inside out to make huge geometric solids; and adolescents engage deeply in math seminar, the GaPSC staff was excited about Montessori and eager to learn more. “Let’s write a rule that works for Montessori” became their rallying cry.

4. Pull together a diverse group

To define the outlines of the new certificate, the GaPSC created a task force that included leadership from

several state agencies, higher education, and the Montessori community. We were able to recommend representatives from MACTE and from AMI, AMS, and PAMS training centers, as well as a public Montessori principal and teacher. With skilled facilitation from the GaPSC, the task force held two full-day meetings to outline the rule. Having voices from diverse organizations represented made our final outcome stronger and more credible.

5. Call on your network to comment

Every voice makes a difference, and even a few people speaking in support of a new idea can bolster it significantly.

During the public comment period, we reached out to our network to invite comments in favor of the certificate. This had a big impact. Right after the new certificate was adopted, the Executive Secretary of the GaPSC stopped me to say, “We’ve never received so many positive comments for any rule as we did for the Montessori certificate. We heard from people as far away as California and Washington, D.C.!”

How many comments were part of this massive outpouring of public support, I wondered? Exactly 18.

Next steps

The new Montessori certificate went into effect July 1, 2018. So far four certificates have been issued, with ten more in process. At least three teachers have been hired under the new rule to teach in public Montessori classes. By 2021, every teacher in a public Montessori

class will be required to hold a Montessori certificate at the appropriate level.

The new certificate opens up a much larger hiring pool for our state’s public Montessori schools and lowers a significant barrier to districts opening new Montessori programs. I hope it will set the stage for a flowering of public Montessori across the state of Georgia and will inspire other states to enact similar rules.

Annie Frazer is the founder and Executive Director of Montessori Partnerships for Georgia, a nonprofit that expands access to Montessori through a network of public and community-based Montessori schools.

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