

Montessori Public Policy Initiative

What is the MPPI, and where did it come from?



BY **WENDY SHENK-EVANS**

The Montessori Public Policy Initiative (MPPI) was born out of a shifting education policy landscape that created dissonance between fully-implemented Montessori and newly created regulations and rubrics. In the late 90s and early 00s, more and more states were revising child-care regulations, implementing Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) and taking other measures both to improve early childhood education and to capture federal dollars connected with education initiatives.

While the goal of bringing high quality education to all children is one that Montessorians share with the broader education community, unfortunately, Montessori educators were not at the table as policy makers worked to both articulate and regulate quality in the hopes of improving early childhood offerings in their states. The result was a policy landscape in which several essential components of high-fidelity Montessori, such as higher adult-child ratios and three-year mixed age groupings, were often constrained. In this new landscape, Montessori programs increasingly faced threats both to high-fidelity Montessori implementation, and, in some cases, to their very existence as they faced a host of policy issues. Schools were forced out of compliance with Montessori accreditation standards as they had to make programmatic changes to meet child-care

licensing requirements. In some states, schools received low ratings in their state QRIS system, which both indicated to the public that they were low quality programs and prevented them from participating in child-care subsidy programs.

At the same time, Montessori was expanding dramatically in the public sector, highlighting the need for recognition of the Montessori teaching credential, crosswalks to state standards, program evaluation tools that align with the Montessori model, and increased education of charter boards and school districts regarding how fully implemented Montessori classrooms operate.

coordination of efforts in a historic collaboration between AMI/USA and AMS. 20 states had advocacy groups comprised primarily of individuals who did not have a background in public policy but who were motivated by an urgent need to protect the fidelity of their programs and the existence of their schools.

Since then, Montessorians throughout the United States and across multiple affiliations have been working together to modify policies that were enacted without our input, and our efforts have had several victories. We have successfully amended child-care regulations, educated licensing specialists and QRIS raters about what to

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It was in this context of existential threats that MPPI emerged. Teachers and administrators began tackling advocacy work and reaching out to their national associations for assistance dealing with new policy obstacles. In response, AMS and AMI/USA had begun to work on public policy issues independently, but soon recognized the need to work jointly if progress was to be made; policy makers who were being approached independently by Montessori educators gave us a clear message that the Montessori community needed to come together, clarify their requests, and speak with a unified voice. In the Spring of 2012, AMI/USA and AMS created pilot Montessori advocacy coalitions in six states. By 2013, MPPI was underway as a platform for

expect in a Montessori classroom, devised strategies that afford high-fidelity programs certain exemptions, and gotten the Montessori teaching credential recognized in several states.

The coordinated efforts of Montessorians both nationally and within states has been key to the many accomplishments our state advocacy groups have landed. We recognized early on that speaking with one voice and articulating what unites us is critical to policy work and the advancement of Montessori education in the United States. With slight variations in trainings and accreditation standards, it was imperative that the collective Montessori community have, and communicate, a

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What is public policy?

- Public policy encompasses laws, regulations, courses of action, and funding priorities created by a government entity or its representatives.
- Public policy is created at the federal, state, and local level, and seeks to address a problem or issue, sometimes proactively, and other times reactively.
- It is “public” policy because it is made on behalf of the public, but the policies regulate and impact both the public and private sector

shared definition of Montessori in public discourse, research, and advocacy efforts. The development of the Montessori Essentials in 2015 was a critical step in providing Montessori educators across the country a unified means through which to articulate what Montessori is. United advocacy efforts are not only pertinent within a state, but across states. Even though most Montessori advocacy work is done within each individual state, the states talk to one another, so building a body of consistent policy from state to state is so important. Using the Montessori Essentials as the foundation for policy work from state to state ensures that when Chief State School Officers, Superintendents, or early childhood policy makers are at conferences or consulting one another and comparing notes, they have all heard the same message from the Montessori community.

Since its inception, MPPI and our state advocacy groups have largely been operating from a reactive state. Teachers and administrators were mobilized to action when confronted with policies that forced them to compromise the Montessori environment and, in some

How can I be an advocate?

Advocacy work takes everyone’s involvement and is ongoing. Here are a few ways to get started:

- Get involved in your state advocacy group. Find your group here: montessoriadvocacy.org/state-groups-. MPPI can help you start one if your state does not yet have a group.
- Invite licensing specialists, charter board members, state legislators and other policy makers to your school so they can see Montessori in action and be advocates on the inside.
- Get involved with child-care and education advocates beyond Montessori. Many states have NAEYC affiliates and other groups advocating on behalf of children. Your involvement ensures that the Montessori voice will be incorporated into their advocacy efforts.
- Learn more from MPPI at upcoming conferences. MPPI will run advocacy workshops and have information tables at the AMI/USA Refresher Course in New Orleans, the MEPI Conference in SC, and the AMS Conference in DC.

cases, made it impossible to meet program accreditation standards. But advocacy work isn’t ultimately about any one school; this work is about children and advancing an educational model that not only meets each individual child’s needs but also unleashes their potential. We want as many children as possible to have access to the rich array of benefits an authentic Montessori education provides. That means we need to shift from reactive state to proactive.

Author and activist Naomi Klein asserts that “it’s that interplay between a vision of the world we want instead, and a horror in the face of what our current system is producing that both catalyzes people into movement and keeps them in the movement.” There is still much work to be done amending policies and regulations that impede Montessori implementation and educating policy makers. But as we continue to dig into transforming the policy landscape, we must also articulate our “vision of the world we want” and consider how we can inform the future landscape. We are establishing a seat at the table in state and national education conversations, so we have the opportunity not simply to protect our programs but to inform and reform the broader educational landscape. We as Montessorians have a profound understanding of the environment as teacher, of how confidence, concentration, independence, and self-regulation under gird all aspects of development, and of the life-long impact of a child-centered education. Our public policy successes ultimately mean that more children have access to these gifts of a Montessori education.

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