

What does it mean when Montessori Community School says we “Follow the Child”?

Montessori school philosophy or mission statements often use the term “follow the child”. We say that our classrooms are designed to allow teachers to *follow the child*, allowing the child’s interests and natural desire to learn to direct his or her choices in a well-prepared environment. While this is an applied, fundamental principle of most primary (preschool) Montessori classrooms, schools which have elementary, middle or high school students find they must redefine what they mean by this term in light of the reality of academic benchmarks, testing, and transitions to traditional schools that their older students experience.

At Montessori Community School (MCS), which goes through grade eight, the faculty gathered throughout the 2007-2008 year to explore what it means for us to say we “follow the child”. Our intention was to clarify for faculty and parents the interpretation of this concept as children mature and as their sensitive periods change.

In summary, the faculty identified the pathway of “follow the child” at MCS as follows:

*At the primary level (3-6):* The age of the absorbent mind, independence and order

In a carefully prepared environment, 3 and 4 year olds make independent choices from materials that cover all aspects of the curriculum. The teacher is primarily an observer, inviting students to lessons that they are developmentally ready for, and offering appropriate corrections to help the child develop independence over the 3-year cycle as he or she pursues personal interests.

Five year olds will receive some direction from teachers to assure that fundamental skills receive adequate practice before the child enters first grade. For example, the teacher may require handwriting practice and reading every day, or hold group lessons with the five year olds to proceed through a determined scope and sequence in math, science, or geography. Most of the child’s choices, however, are primarily self-directed.

*At the lower elementary level (6-9):* The age of imagination

Students receive more direction in their work choices than they do at the primary level. There are expectations that students work in all core areas on a regular basis. Lessons are given to individuals or groups in a specified scope and sequence, and students are often required to complete follow-up work. Significant time is available for students to pursue particular interests or to work on individual projects and research: in many cases these will have priority over teacher-directed choices as long as the child is focused and purposeful.

Students move through their morning work cycle, balancing independent choices, follow-up assignments, and daily expectations such as penmanship, math practice, reading, and writing. They are usually expected to record the work they have completed each day. Homework is rarely assigned.

*At the upper elementary level (9-12):* The social age; the age of reason

Lessons are given primarily in small groups, and follow-up assignments are given regularly to provide skills practice. Students now plan their day in advance and write down their daily goals. There is the expectation that students will complete follow-up assignments by a reasonable deadline alongside their own choices. Student goals are reviewed daily and weekly. If a core curriculum area is ignored in a student’s daily goal-

setting, the student will be re-directed to do core work first, then make personal choices. Most students learn to achieve a balanced rhythm of choice and assignments over the course of a week. Homework is regularly assigned in mathematics, reading and some writing projects. All students are expected to complete a major writing assignment in the second half of the school year.

*At the adolescent level (ages 13-14): The moral age*

Most work comes from teacher directives at this level. Teachers give assignments and due dates, and students then determine their daily schedules to complete their work on time. Research projects, performances, and community service ideas are often student-initiated, though these efforts must be balanced with core assignments. Homework is regularly assigned in all subject areas.

*Summary*

At MCS, we agree that teacher expectations for student work choices move more toward core curriculum choices as students get older. The core areas for the primary level include practical life, sensorial, language/cultural, and math. The core areas for elementary students are language, math/geometry, cultural (history, biology, and geography), and “other” (art, practical life). The core areas for adolescents are humanities (history, geography and philosophy), science, mathematics, literature and language studies, and second language studies.

A balanced work diet is expected to be developed over time, allowing for personal choices within the framework of specific, sequenced lessons. It is of primary importance that students learn to balance freedom and responsibility as they mature. It is the responsibility of the teacher to limit the possibilities for choice to some degree to help students learn this balance in a controlled and safe environment that still acknowledges personal interests and initiatives.