

### Distance Learning Update

In making the decision to continue distance learning for the period between now and when staff is vaccinated, we knew that not everyone would agree - parents and staff alike. We want to offer our thought process, to highlight the considerations we prioritized, and to acknowledge, again, how challenging these times are for families, for parents juggling work and supervision of exhausted children, for children feeling isolated from their peers and done with distance learning. Still, we think we have made plans with your children in the center; plans that in the long run have their needs for consistency, your choice of a Montessori approach, even in the midst of our current challenges, and connection to a community who is working through something hard together, as priorities. We've made these plans keeping in the forefront also, the safety of staff and families who are caring for the children during a time when we are 'almost there' and yet still in a very unpredictable, unsafe situation, particularly with regards to the potential for dangerous new sources of infection.

What follows in this letter will resonate with some of you and not with others. Please, take what you need from it and leave what you don't.

### Please stick with us

We are under tremendous pressure as a school community to 'do what other schools do' - as we always are - and yet what we will do as a small Montessori school, if we are staying grounded in our approach and long term goals for children, will necessarily be different. We are trying to stay focused on what will offer safety, consistency, a variety of topics for the children to explore, and daily, quality, small-group connection and instruction from their guides. As we work towards coming back, we have the children's well-being in mind also, and are planning to come back at a time when it is more likely that uncontrolled community spread can be managed - allowing your children to come back, settle in, and finish their year without the chaos of random and possibly school-wide shutdowns due to high community rates, quarantines, or sick staff.

The staff has considered and reconsidered, in depth, hybrid options and still we come back to: *offer consistency to the children until we can offer something better than what we are doing now*. When a child knows what to expect it creates a foundation of predictability that provides security, even in the most challenging times, and in turn builds a capacity for flexibility, needed especially in the coming months. The unpredictability of a hybrid model without vaccinations and during a time of significant community spread in our county was ultimately why we decided to keep the program largely the same - and interrupt the children's schedules when the trade off is truly something better for them.

### We remain committed to both Cosmic Education and extra skill-based work

Questions both parents and staff have raised are, "Are the children getting enough direct instruction? Are they getting enough skill-based work? Are their skills actually progressing? Why aren't they following through with their 'big work'?"

Every component of a Montessori environment is developed with the utmost intention - from the arrangement of the room, size of the furniture, items on (and not on) the shelves, to approach to

work and to community living. The Guide's interactions with each child are given the same intention... all to support an environment that fosters each child's humanness, and the unique characteristics of each age group. This environment provides for the child's needs, allowing all of the child's energy to be 'available' to access their optimal self each day. I think of it as a "recipe" that makes the space in which a child can thrive and almost effortlessly engage in the kind of work and learning we find so valuable for them.

In Distance Learning, despite how hard staff is working to support meaningful, skills-based academic growth and as many other components of the method possible, and though there is no doubt how hard you all have worked to create space and routines at home to support the same, we don't have the "recipe." Children aren't in the same space literally or emotionally and don't have the energy, stamina, or freedom that comes from all their developmental characteristics being fostered to engage in the kind of learning we cherish.

Several weeks back we began shifting to account for this; for children not being able to sustain independent practice and interest in a concept. We decided to provide more direct instruction for the youngest children. Now the LE guides are increasing instructional time for the third-years. Guides in UE are continuing synchronous learning a majority of the day with significant support from specialists. Children do need direct, continued support with lagging skills. At the same time, we are staying grounded in our commitment to you and your children by offering, to the extent we are able, Dr. Montessori's vision for the elementary child: an integrated approach - an endeavor to 'sow as many seeds' of interest as possible from all subject areas. Not all the seeds will germinate now, but they are there, helping the children's minds to organize and assimilate information; to make connections and begin to see the interconnectedness of all things. We want to put a variety of interesting topics and conversations in front of the children, even now, especially now. We feel that we can only do this well when the children have access to their guides 5 days a week.

We are choosing a Montessori approach, too, as we consider coming back together as a community on-site. Over the next weeks we will begin intentionally preparing the children for ways of thinking and ways of being that will support them in the huge work ahead of them – transitioning back to in person learning and living in a community with their peers each day. We believe this is extremely important in helping the children build and sustain their capacity for resilience as we work towards the other side of the pandemic. Done well, and done so the children can tap their amazing ability to bounce back, this will take time and care; we do not want a transition to be abrupt and chaotic for the children; the children need to know that their adults 'have got this,' and we are looking forward to your continued good questions, expressions of your children's needs, and partnership as we prepare our community to transition.

Among all the challenges that this year has presented, there are also opportunities. We know parents are balancing child care/supervision with work, and we want to encourage you to give yourselves grace. Embrace and retain the learning that comes from being part of a family and participating in the work of the home. Your child's school day can be much more than minutes in front of a computer or work packet. Please ask for as many minutes of supervised

accountability as you need. Some families need their children to be supervised in a Zoom room all day, while others need many opportunities for family time. Reach out to your guide or school administration if you need more of one than the other.

### Ideas for moving forward at home

Take time often to talk about how strong and resilient children are. There are many wonderful stories to share about people and children working successfully through extremely challenging times. Children can do hard things! Many children are struggling right now in many ways and it will help for them to hear that they will be okay; that there are adults around them that are working towards getting them safely back to a more normal way to spend their days.

Understand that you might not see the 'big work' you may be used to seeing from your child. The characteristic 'big work' (literally on big paper with big problems - and intellectually in terms of the capacity for rigor) of Montessori children is not necessarily attainable for many children in their current state of mind. To force the expectation too pointedly for this kind of work without the whole 'recipe' to support it happening naturally for the children, is putting too much pressure on children who are already exhausted by circumstances. That being said, remain hopeful because children are exceedingly resilient. As mentioned, we are working carefully to plan for their re-entry to the environments and their re-engagement with the work we know is best for them and they will move quickly back into that routine.

Until then, you can keep reinforcing the idea that this is temporary – "it's going to feel so good to be doing a big work with a group of friends!" "When we get to come back, I keep thinking about you using the materials on the shelf – you'll never want to stop working!"

Acknowledge the variety of learning opportunities and different skills than what they might do in our school in a normal year. It's okay to support the children in being satisfied that they checked all the boxes and finished up - and still expect neat, thoughtful work – even if the will to take things further and explore deeply isn't there right now. You can acknowledge that there are two different kinds of work: "Wow, you did finish up everything – checked all the boxes – and submitted work right away. Sometimes that can be satisfying. Right now, in distance learning, a lot of your work seems that way – when you are back to school, you'll know what that work is like *and* you'll also be able to get back to your big, wonderful, group work that is so much fun - and the best kind of learning for your brain!"

One way – probably the best way right now – to get children involved in the kind of work you may not be seeing is to have big, interesting, on-going family projects. Not fancy and not expensive – just something you are all interested in doing; building something, painting something, putting together scrapbooks or slide shows... fixing bikes, arranging a new space in your home, learning a new way of cooking... is there a cause you are interested in you can support by developing a project at home? Likely you've done many or all of these things already! I don't suggest any of this lightly – as Montessorians we have the experience multiple times a day of giving 4 children a story or presentation and having them take off with the idea in

8 different directions – and then we try and keep up! It pays off, though, because with the right project the children become more independent and stay engaged longer. *And* it's normal, especially now, for some projects to fizzle. Then it's good to stick with the idea that 'we finish what we start' and some of our work as adults is helping the child come to a graceful finish with projects in which they've lost interest or can't sustain on their own.

Embrace messiness and mistakes. We know that you are all experiencing the messiness we always see in our Montessori environments - the messiness that allows children to choose right - and wrong, sometimes! Therein lies the opportunity for discussion and the most meaningful learning about who they are as learners and members of their communities and families. We invite you to continue to embrace that messiness even though it is exhausting. Supporting your children in responding to and verbalizing mistakes and growth happens primarily through modeling (how do you respond to and verbalize your own mistakes and growth?) and to a lesser extent, direct teaching. I read an absolutely fantastic book called *Mathematical Mindsets*, by Jo Boaler, that you might find inspiring – even though it is about math, it is mostly about developing a growth mindset in children. The language in it is excellent if you are looking to incorporate more language into all your interactions with your children that can inspire friendliness with error! The [“youcubed” website](#) by the same author is also perhaps an interesting resource for you.

#### Moving forward at school

In our letter last week, we committed to offering socializing opportunities at school for children with their classmates and staff. Each class will be invited to come to Cornerstone one afternoon a week, from 1:00 to 3:00, beginning the week of February 22. During that time, children will play outside with friends and have small group meetings with their guide, specialists, and support staff. All of our Covid protocols will continue to be in place: children must wear masks, not have any Covid symptoms, and quarantine after travel for 14 days, per state guidelines. These opportunities will be optional, and we recognize that some children will not be able to or wish to attend. Any all-class activities, such as read-aloud or collective, will be shared on Zoom for children at home to participate. Details will come by February 17 with the specified day for each class.

As you've heard many times, at this point, this year has challenged all of us in unforeseen ways, and we all look forward to life returning to “normal,” whatever that will look like in a post-pandemic world. We thank you for your patience and commitment to Cornerstone. We're almost there!