

# the montessorian

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# Farm-to-Table: Practical Learning for the Real World

by JEFFREY LEVINE

Near North Montessori's Farm-to-Table program is giving new meaning to real life learning.

Leveraging relationships between production, consumption and recycling, Farm-to-Table illustrates direct connections between Farmessori, Sandwich Shoppe and the school's sustainability goals. According to Urban Farm Coordinator Joe Phillips, the lesson is learned with participation.

Through Farm-to-Table, "[students are] experiencing the practical life economics of supply and demand, and also a type of market-based system," Joe said. "They're involved in nurturing the crops, harvesting the crops and then they have the option to personally buy back those crops in the form of a finished prepared meal [at Sandwich Shoppe]."

"I've seen younger kids come up and be excited to ask if the tomato in the pizza sauce is one of the ones they helped pick," added Sandwich Shoppe teacher Jamee Warrenfeltz. "They get excited seeing the fruits of their labor."

The system stretches from the farm on Wood Street to tables in the classroom, with students planting, picking, preparing, ordering and consuming the food throughout the ever-running Farm-to-Table cycle.

"These exchanges are essential to the operations of the entire program," Jamee explained. "There's been many times when parents have asked why there isn't a way to order Sandwich Shoppe online, but having it in person gives the older and younger children the opportunity to build relationships with one another, and do it through different exchange opportunities."

In addition to feeling invested in healthy lunches they can order, Farm-to-Table also puts students in direct contact with another very real product of this process: waste.

"When we compost at the school, it's taught as an ecological and ethical responsibility," Joe explained. "But when we compost at the farm, it's really taught as more of a cycle that when plants die their scraps are used in our compost and that in turn feeds the future crops. It's really a way to teach a closed system and illustrate that our waste stream never really leaves the farm."

Operating under real-world conditions is crucial to the Farm-to-Table model. Students at both Farmessori and Sandwich Shoppe must consider costs, expenses, potential investments, as well as advertising, customer service and, not least of all, taste. Similarly, the more closely Sandwich Shoppe and Farmessori work together, the more meaningfully the mission of the Farm-to-Table program is realized.

"I often explain to students the difference between a learning garden and a working farm," Joe said.

"One of the differences is that learning gardens are kind of haphazardly designed with a little bit of everything. That's great for teaching about a lot of different plants but that's not what we're doing.

"We're really about creating efficient rows of a few different types of vegetables that we know Sandwich Shoppe needs and they've asked us to grow. That's the supply and demand part. I feel like what you lose in variety you gain in real understanding of what it takes to maximize those few food crops that you've chosen."







*'If the produce can be used commercially this brings in the fundamental mechanism of society, that of production and exchange, on which economic life is based.'*

— MARIA MONTESSORI

This real-world approach begins in 3-6 as practical life—cutting with a knife, using real glassware, baking—and culminates in the 12-14 economics curriculum, where manual skills are replaced with an emphasis on self-care, care of others, care of the environment, global mindedness and active citizenship. The gradual transition positions students to appreciate their role and impact within a “global” system, whether it’s around the corner or around the planet.

“It’s tough for children to think even a year down the road,” Jamee explained. “Every year I put together a video that highlights the history of Sandwich Shoppe. It gets kids excited and it emphasizes that what we’re doing now is leaving a legacy. That’s why you have to be mindful about the choices you make.”

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Jeffrey Levine is the Communications and Events Manager at Near North Montessori.



# Diversity Is Our True North

by JEANNETTE SCHAR



Nothing more clearly defines the NNM community than its diversity—of race, economics, ethnicity, education, experiences and family structures. But being diverse, understanding what it means and frankly discussing it are wholly different matters.

“Diversity doesn’t just happen. We have to give parents, children and, really, our whole community the tools to speak openly about our uniqueness and differences,” Diversity Director Brian Corley explained. “We have to be intentional in the lessons we can bring to the community that builds each individual’s confidence to live authentically and inclusively in an increasingly diverse world.”

Brian works closely with the school’s Diversity & Inclusion Committee’s five task forces involving curriculum, hiring, socio-economic conditions, learning differences and sustainability. Together, they initiated programs aimed at parents, faculty and staff, as well as students.

A cornerstone of these efforts is SEED (Seeking Educational Equity & Diversity), which hosts monthly meetings among parents and staff to promote and deepen interpersonal dialogue.

“This knowledge can empower us all to know better where we came from, who and where we are, and what we can do,” parent and SEED co-facilitator Tina Sullins said regarding race, privilege and systems of power. “This wholly supports the learning and curriculum around cultural competency for our children.”

The Diversity Series is another opportunity for parents to discuss difficult topics of race and diversity. Utilizing narratives from film, this three-part series began in September with a screening of “The Greens.” Written, directed and co-produced by alumnus Sam Spitz (’04), the film chronicles Sam’s personal journey as a white college kid who gets to know Teddy, a black barber who spent most of his life in the Cabrini-Green public housing complex. The film points to the

importance of exposing youth to diversity and the results of socialization and segregation. The second film in the series, “I’m Not A Racist...Am I?” will be shown in February.

Diversity at NNM does not merely look inward but also outward by building relationships with fellow Chicagoans. At the forefront of this anti-racism effort is the parent-led Moral Mondays program, which fosters interpersonal, community and legislative actions, said Jennifer Roche, a Moral Mondays leader. Recent Moral Mondays events included a screening of the documentary “Cracking the Code: The System of Racial Inequality,” participation in Chicago Police Board meetings, a partnership with Mothers Against Senseless Killings and much more.

Other important efforts include robust diversity and inclusion-oriented discussions among students with age-appropriate curricula. Brian recently presented a collection of short stories and poetry to 6-9 and 9-12 classrooms. “My Name is Hussein” explored and honored religious differences while “A Priceless Lesson in Humility” presented an eye-opening examination of how humility is fundamental to inclusivity.

The Representation Project, an organization that inspires challenges to limiting stereotypes, was also incorporated into the school’s diversity efforts. The school’s library has shelves stacked with wonderful books featuring diverse characters, authors and illustrators. NNM librarian Maureen Peifer also leads diversity-themed discussions during Junior Great Books lessons for children starting in third grade.

For 9-12 and 12-14 students, social justice issues are examined through the mini BLOTCH and BLOTCH programs, which help students learn and speak about systemic issues related to social justice.

“Through BLOTCH, our students are learning how to be effective allies to the most disenfranchised members of society,” Brian explained. “They are putting into action the belief that ‘difference is not a deficit.’”

“Social injustice affects us all in one way or another,” said parent and SEED co-facilitator Sylvia Tamashiro. “Montessori teaches us we are all interconnected. My child’s experience at Near North is a daily reminder that Montessori education is peace education and, for me, without the vigorous striving for justice, there can be no peace.”

More information about NNM’s efforts to foster diversity and cultural competency is available on Brian’s blog, [diversity.nnms.org](http://diversity.nnms.org).

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 Jeannette Schar is a parent at Near North Montessori and has children in the 3-6 and 9-12 levels.



# Montessori Meets the Real World

by LIZ BRANDT



It's one thing to say Near North Montessori prepares students for the real world and it's another thing altogether to empower them with skills to explore the world on their own.

Fridays are special to junior high students because they leave the familiarity of their classrooms and venture into the city. Combining practical skills – reading a map, taking public transportation, exploring different neighborhoods – Flex Fridays provide formative experiences for students to build on during their teenage years and beyond.

"So much of what our students need lives outside of these four walls," Junior High Director Chris Ambroso said. "Sometimes we have to take our kids outside of the building to provide a real world experience that has a real world impact."

Although a teacher accompanies each group and ensures they're back for afternoon carpool, it's the students who take active roles in their journeys. The process starts early in the week as students plan their Friday schedules, coordinating every aspect of the trip, including travel directions, timing and costs. If something unexpected happens along the way, they have a group discussion

and decide how to get back on track. Sometimes this means missing an activity because they are running behind schedule or making alternative plans if a destination is not what they expected.

In addition to practical skills for navigating the city and learning to work within a group, Flex Fridays also serve to bring classroom work into more vibrant focus. Recently, a junior high class visited Hull House Museum on the Near West Side after learning about settlement houses and the role that feminist social reformer Jane Adams played in Hull House's creation. Not only did the students get to see an early settlement house, they also experienced more than a century's worth of history and were able to put the neighborhood into a broader context.

Similarly, trips to see outdoor art in Pilsen, conduct research at the Harold Washington Library in the Loop, go ice skating on the Midway Plaisance in Hyde Park, and tour an urban farm in Back of the Yards, along with other destinations, provided valuable learning experiences and encouraged students to seek more cultural reservoirs on their own.

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## Montessori Meets the Real World

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After a recent Flex Friday, several junior high students asked their parents to let them make a weekend trip downtown on their own. The trip got off track when they boarded a train heading in the wrong direction but instead of panicking, they remained calm, asked a policeman for help and resumed their adventure. Experiences like these help students to approach the city as an invaluable resource and allow them to move beyond a visitor's cursory perspective.

Flex Fridays provide a process-based learning experience where students are free to explore and fail and learn from their mistakes and try again. It also provides an organic environment for students to work together in small groups under real world conditions, to utilize the resources around them and to think creatively. It also forces them to build confidence in a variety of different roles, since introverts and extroverts alike are required to contribute.

"Employers are becoming increasingly reliant on creative, team-oriented managers who can approach issues in ways that rapidly evolving technological tools can't address," Head of School Audrey Perrott explained. "Companies need employees who can lead a group of individuals to a desired outcome. Technology can't replace leadership, communication, confidence and knowing your place or city, all essential traits for students to progress through life as confident problem-solvers."

If Flex Fridays helps students to gain a better perspective of Chicago, Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH) and Montessori Model United Nations (MMUN) expose them to new experiences across the globe. In the last four years, NPH has welcomed more than 120 members of the NNM community to Honduras, with a second location in Guatemala added for this spring. An alumni trip is also in the works.

Last year's MMUN delegation took Near North students to the Henan Province of China and this year's delegation is headed for Rome. For the program, NNM students are asked to research and take on the positions of their adopted country before meeting with other international students assigned to represent different countries from all around the world. Tackling issues that range from poverty and education to nuclear power and war, students work together on solutions, drafting resolutions just like diplomats at the real UN. Because of the transformative nature of both the NPH and MMUN trips, Near North is currently exploring ways to offer financial aid so every eighth grader has an opportunity to participate.

For NNM students, it's not enough to sit in class and learn from a textbook. The classroom extends down the block, into the city and across the world.

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*Liz Brandt is a Development Assistant at Near North Montessori.*

## Music Makes the World Go 'Round

by JEFFREY LEVINE

If Near North band director Dan Stark didn't see the school's job ad in "The Reader" 20 years ago, the band program would probably look a lot different than it does today.

Only a handful of students were enrolled in band at the time and they practiced as one ensemble regardless of age or skill level. Dan knew when he took the job that the program had room to grow. It didn't take him long to get more students excited about playing music.

"The beauty of school is to expose kids to new things. It's intensive and rewarding," Dan said of learning how to play an instrument. "For kids who like to be challenged, putting that together in an ensemble is a process. That's why musicians rehearse. Then, performing that challenging piece is one part of music that kids love. It's what keeps them going forward."

In addition to trying something new and challenging, playing an instrument provides students with opportunities to improve teamwork,

discipline, precision, spatial intelligence, positive habits and creativity. With so many engaging things for students to work on, Dan expanded band participation every year, eventually creating a concert band, a jazz band and an intermediate band. Today, 35 students participate in the program, many playing in more than one group.

Dan uses the multiple ensembles to choose appropriate music for each skill level while also incorporating more diverse and interesting musical pieces for performances. Venues range from the Little Theatre to Block 37 to Lincoln Park Zoo to Tuesdays at the Triangle, but the enthusiasm stays the same. The beginning band's spirited rendition of "Let it Go" from the movie "Frozen" at a concert last spring had listeners almost leaping from their seats.

"Music broadens their horizons because they're being exposed to different music from different cultures," Dan explained. "I listen to a lot of music for the age groups and I try to select music that is challenging and has a melody that I think kids can relate to. I





DAN STARK AND CONSTANTINE ALEXANDER



MARA MACMAHON



OWEN COOK

don't want it to be some esoteric thing. I want them to leave band humming that melody."

Where students take that melody once they leave school, however, is as varied as the students themselves.

**Owen Cook ('08)** is a senior majoring in physics at Lawrence University in Appleton, WI. He's also a music minor specializing in the trumpet, as well as a teaching assistant for a class entitled "The Physics of Music." It isn't the first time his Near North music lessons influenced other parts of his life.

"Playing music absolutely strengthened my work ethic and discipline. I find myself able to sit down and work a lot better than many of my non-musician friends. When you're practicing a really hard passage, you strategize and make plans, which you can then apply to almost anything. It helps you see things and break it down into steps," he said.

"What you learn in music is stuff you can carry over to your everyday life," added **Mara MacMahon ('03)**, who played piano while at Near North. "One of my earliest experiences in self-discipline was having to practice every day. Over time it went from developing this discipline

to the ability to be self-critical. When you're learning a piece you have to listen to yourself and be honest and ask what parts need work."

A Washington University in St. Louis graduate with a degree in illustration, Mara has had plenty of opportunities to hone her craft and refine her art. After working in computer graphics, she recently accepted a job at DreamWorks Studios doing character work for films.

Jazz trumpeter **Constantine Alexander ('06)** took the experiences he had with music at NNM and turned them into a career goal. He plans to release an album of original compositions after graduating from Chicago's Roosevelt University in December.

Constantine wishes all students had the same experience with an instrument that he did.

"I think [band] should be mandatory for at least one semester. Once they do it they'll love it, even if they hate it at first," Constantine said. "That's how I felt. I know a lot of people that, after they didn't like it, loved it."

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Jeffrey Levine is the Communications and Events Manager at Near North Montessori.

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