

# Assessment for Public Montessori

2015-16 White Paper

Colorado Montessori Association

## ABSTRACT

This document provides a recommended framework and best practice for aligning assessment expectations for public school systems with the larger programmatic goals of Montessori learning. Historically, these two objectives (state assessment and authentic Montessori practice) have been at odds with each other. This document proposes a solution that can break the conflict by offering a new accountability structure that aligns to a Montessori school's intended design. The guiding framework in this document shall then be used by CMA to guide advocacy efforts on proposed test reform policies and legislation.

## The Opportunity

In Colorado today, policymakers ranging from local school board officials to U.S. Senators and Representatives are debating the merits of our current public school testing system. Within this debate, there exists an openness to make changes. The current assessment model in Colorado (PARCC/CMAS) is one that is poorly aligned to Montessori educational theory and practice. Further implementation of this system therefore will undermine efforts to expand access to authentic Montessori programs in public settings. For this reason, the Montessori community must advocate for reform of the system, by advocating for a solution that encourages, rather than discourages, a school's use of Montessori practice.

## History

### Assessment/Accountability

Two major policy reforms served as the foundation for the state assessment model that we have today.

First, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law (a time-limited reauthorization of the Federal "Elementary and Secondary Education Act" or ESEA) established a requirement that all states use a standards-based assessment instrument that can measure student achievement and academic growth and that this data be used to evaluate the strength of schools and districts. In the event that schools or districts show persistent low performance on these instruments, they would be required to either be closed or turned over to some other type of management organization (such as a charter organization or an arm of the state department of education). Colorado complied with NCLB through passage of its own state assessment law. This law specified compliance through administration of the CSAP - an assessment that was unique to the state and to our state academic standards.

In recent years, NCLB deadlines arrived with expectations for significantly higher levels of proficiency on these assessments than any states have been able to achieve (for example, that 100% of students would be proficient by this time). The difference between the law and actual results made clear to most observers that changes needed to be made to the federal law; however, Congress has yet to pass a reauthorization. This failure on the part of Congress means that the US Department of Education (USDOE) has been accommodating states through a waiver process. Because the USDOE has the authority to grant waivers, they are establishing their own policies outside of Congressional declarations. This has resulted in the second wave of major policy reform. Colorado responded to the NCLB waiver by passing state laws that did the following: Colorado adopted the Common Core State Standards for Math and Language Arts as our state standards, Colorado adopted the PARCC assessment as the tool to evaluate schools against these standards (and a

variant of PARCC – CMAS – for Science and Social Studies assessments), Colorado began using test data as a way to not only evaluate schools and districts, but also to evaluate teachers and to break tenure protections. These policy reforms have now taken hold in Colorado. PARCC is being used for the first time during this spring (2015) semester.

### **Public Montessori**

Montessori programs first arrived in the United States in the early 1900's with presentations from Maria Montessori herself. There was immense public attention given to Montessori programming with major American figures (such as Thomas Edison) promoting its use. The Montessori Method was quickly recognized as a strong educational method and it stood out for its ability to promote independent thinking, creativity, and executive functioning. In the next phase of public education in America however, a large emphasis was placed on an education system that mirrored the economy of the day, which was industrial and the factory model. With this push, Montessori schools were largely left out of the public education system and reserved more for families with the means to pay private school tuition. Montessori schools grew in number in America, but largely as private schools and largely in the early childhood/early elementary environments.

As our economy has shifted from an industrial model to that of a knowledge economy, greater attention has been paid to Montessori education and in particular how to expand Montessori programs in public settings. Over the past 20 years, the United States in general and Colorado in particular has seen immense growth of public Montessori schools. No longer do Americans believe that Montessori programs should be available only to the economic elites.

### **Assessment conflict**

Early expansion of Montessori programs occurred largely with an implied assumption that state standardized assessments would be a part of the public program. Schools complied with the expectations of the state accountability system, schools administered CSAP, and later TCAP, and now PARCC; however, this work was done with knowledge that the assessment model was a poor fit with the Montessori program. It placed pressure on schools to shift away from Montessori practices to something different (which looks more and more like typical learning practices of non-Montessori schools). Greater awareness began to develop among practitioners that the accountability system was corrupting Montessori practice. The most recent assessment program promoted through PARCC is forcing a shift that will cause an even greater reduction of Montessori practices if we seek to manifest the results that the assessment is looking for. This shift is not because the Montessori model is weak, but rather because the PARCC assessment is intentionally designed to shift practices towards specific teaching methods.

## The Solution

The state assessment system is designed to address a public need for knowing that our schools are providing a quality education to all students. This in itself is not in conflict with Montessori practice. To the contrary, Montessori Education embraces assessment – especially frequent formative assessment. The difference is that Montessori educators desire assessment that is aligned to, encourages use of, and helps inform Montessori practice. As a result, the state should provide a waiver option for schools who desire an assessment system outside of PARCC/CMAS.

In order to be granted a waiver, Public Montessori schools must have systems in place to demonstrate that students are making clear academic gains. This system must consist of three parts: 1) Use of a nationally-recognized academic skills assessment, 2) Demonstrated evidence that the school's program offers a way for students to master the state's academic standards, and 3) Regular evaluation of a school for meeting nationally-recognized standards of Montessori school quality. Further detail is provided below:

### I. Use of a nationally-recognized academic assessment instrument

There are three criteria that should be used to determine a proper assessment for public Montessori schools:

- 1) The assessment should be able to mirror federal expectations in that it can provide proxy scores for a student's "grade level proficiency" and year over year academic growth.
- 2) The assessment should pull from a large national sample so that summative results can be compared relative to other schools and demographic populations.
- 3) The assessment should measure learning outcomes and guide future instruction in the context of Montessori pedagogy.

The CMA does not have a recommended assessment to be used. Currently, two assessments in use by Montessori schools that align to our criteria are the [NWEA MAP](#) assessment and the [SRI/SMI](#) (Scholastic Reading/Math Inventory).

The CMA does not endorse PARCC or CMAS as assessment instruments. The PARCC/CMAS assessments are based on pedagogical expectations that are not aligned with the Montessori method.

### II. Standards alignment

The paradigm guiding education in America today is that it is a state's job to identify core learning standards for all students. These standards should communicate a minimum set of knowledge and skills that all students should graduate with. The

Colorado Montessori Association embraces this paradigm for public programs with the exception that we do not feel such mastery should be strictly connected to grade level. Montessori classrooms are designed around the theory that learning occurs in leaps of understanding after deep engagement with lessons and materials versus acquiring knowledge in a straight linear progression. As such, students remain in a classroom through a three-year cycle where they are introduced to, work on, and eventually become proficient in the core learning standards of all three grades. Montessori students may not show proficiency on grade level tests within the three-year cycle because they are being tested on content that they have yet to be introduced to. However, Montessori students consistently demonstrate grade level proficiency and/or advanced at the end of each three year cycle (K, 3rd, 6th, 9th, ACT).

The Montessori curriculum is aligned to the CCSS and CAS. (An example of an alignment is here) There are a variety of approaches for measuring student proficiency on standards within the Montessori Method. Record keeping of lessons that are aligned to these standards is a best practice today for public Montessori schools. This record keeping also captures anecdotal observations for how students have demonstrated progress towards mastery of the lessons and standards.

CMA does not have a recommended record keeping system to be used. Current record keeping systems in use by Montessori schools that have a standards alignment include [MRX](#), [Montessori Compass](#), [Montessori Made Easy](#), and [Montessori Workspace](#). Other in-house products have been developed by some schools, particularly for secondary environments.

### **III. Montessori School Performance**

Schools should be encouraged when conducting their root cause analysis of their data and completing their Unified Improvement Plans to consider frameworks of quality Montessori implementation.

CMA does not recommend a specific quality rubric for all Montessori schools however several current quality frameworks in use by Montessori schools include: The [Montessori Essential Elements Rubric](#), [AMI Accreditation](#), or [AMS Accreditation](#).

### **Call to Action**

CMA plans to advocate for policy reform of the state testing system and also asks for its members to begin advocating for this reform as well. In particular, we are urging reform that allows for a pilot program for public Montessori schools to voluntarily waive out of PARCC/CMAS so long as they can propose a credible replacement system that includes three parts: academic progress monitoring, standards-aligned student record keeping, and strategic improvement planning supported by a Montessori quality framework.

## **About CMA**

The Colorado Montessori Association is a powerful voice for Montessori advocacy providing a forum for networking and professional growth in the Montessori Community. It is a highly functioning, evolving professional organization, unified in its vision, respectful, purposeful and inclusive.