



AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY

ACCREDITATION TEAM REPORT

for

Valley Montessori School

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November 29 to December 2, 2005

The Authentic American Montessori School Protocol

Visiting Team appointed by the American Montessori Society:

Patricia Feltin, Ed. D.	Eton School, Founding Director AMS Commissioner Bellevue, WA, AMS 3-6 trained
Marie Dugan	AMS Former Executive Director & Commissioner Wilmington Montessori School, former head Wilmington, DE, AMS 3-6 trained
Sharon Dunn	Woodinville Montessori School, Middle School teacher Woodinville, WA, AMI 3-6, 6-12; AMS 12-15 trained
Judith Martell	Montessori Children's House of Durham, former head Durham, NC, AMS 6-9, 9-12 trained
Joanne Oh	AMS, Director of Professional Development West Side Montessori School, former assistant head New York, NY, AMS 3-6 trained

In preparation for its work, the accreditation team carefully reviewed the school's self-study report sent to them in advance of the scheduled on-site visit. The school used *The Authentic American Montessori School* to complete the self-study. During the on-site visit, the team performed the tasks listed below:

- Toured the facilities and observed programs and operations.
- Reviewed documentation provided by the school.
- Conducted interviews with school staff and other school stakeholders.
- Verified the school's compliance with the required AMS standards.
- Verified other AMS accreditation criteria (Educational Nature, Educational Outcomes and strategic plan.)
- Developed a report of findings through consensus and agreed upon the school's adherence to the standards.
- Developed a recommendation regarding accreditation for AMS School Accreditation Commission approval.
- Conducted a brief exit interview with school staff.

I. The School Profile (Primary Nature of the School)

Valley Montessori School is a non-profit private school that embraces the philosophy of Maria Montessori. It was founded in 1976 in the Livermore Valley, located about 60 miles northeast of San Francisco. Livermore is a multi-ethnic, primarily suburban, area that includes a broad socio-economic population.

The school has 490 students, infants through eighth grade. There are 16 classrooms; one infant, 3 toddler, 7 primary, 3 lower elementary, 1 upper elementary and 1 middle school. They are now, since 2002, housed at one location, having changed six times during the previous 28 years. The beautiful new specially designed building is tucked into a hillside blending respectfully into its environment. There is exemplary use of natural light. The setting affords rich vistas of the town and mountains. Because of expanded enrollment, the school is quickly outgrowing classroom space.

The Board of Trustees has responsibility for the governance of the school. Their recently-revised By-Laws clearly reflect the board's fiduciary responsibility and their role in long-range planning. There are seven trustees, who are all school parents, except one member, who is an alumnae parent. Each board member has been chosen for the specific skills and talents that he or she brings to the group. The committees of the Board are Technology, Development, Financial Planning and Strategic Planning.

The board works closely with the Executive Director, Mary Ellen Kordas, who is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school. The Executive Director has been with the school since 1976, when the school was founded as a small Montessori proprietary school by Elizabeth Marshall. In 1996, the school became a not-for-profit, board owned school. Mary Ellen has been closely guiding VMS in its stability and growth, while not losing sight of the vision and mission.

Pursuing school accreditation demonstrates a community's commitment to self improvement. Valley Montessori School received accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in 2004; they will undergo a full accreditation visit again in 2007. It takes reflection and extensive gathering of documentation to demonstrate adherence to the accrediting body's Standards. The AMS visiting team worked hard to review and validate the school's programs and supporting materials.

Commendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the Executive Director as an outstandingly committed, nurturing, supportive and professional leader of an excellent school. Universally, people expressed a sense of connectedness with her. Valley Montessori School (VMS) leadership has successfully created an "open door" atmosphere. This is a tremendous asset to the school's success and wellbeing.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the Board for taking on the challenges of new directions for school development and improvement since the building's completion. Members bring individual strengths and a collective sense of responsibility forward to their many tasks and show clear understanding of appropriate and necessary board roles and tasks. The school is fortunate to have the leadership of this seven board members with the skills and commitment to maintain strong financial stability

3. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the VMS community for its hard work to realize its vision of a shared campus physically, socially and emotionally.
4. The AMS Accreditation Team commends VMS for the fact that its parents express great support for all aspects of the school: its leadership, its program, and its teachers. They have a deep commitment to Valley Montessori, based on their confidence in the positive, vital role an education here plays in their children's lives. Their support sustains and nurtures the school.
5. The AMS Accreditation Team would like to express deep appreciation to the VMS administrators, faculty, trustees, staff, parents and children for their hospitality and their warm, gracious welcome to their school. The spirit and soul of VMS have been clearly and consistently evident throughout our visit.

Recommendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that a nominating committee be added to the committee structure to study and screen the parents for board membership. With a new committee structure in place, it would help the board in an ongoing way.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the Board of Trustees seek assistance in the process of developing a succession plan for the key administrative personnel of the school. The Executive Director is working closely with the Board to develop a timeline and specific guidelines for the school's Strategic Plan to ensure that new personnel will have Montessori experience and expertise.
3. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the school create a position for managing the facilities. The large building and grounds demand proactive maintenance, which is best done by a single person.

II. Guiding Principles and Mission

The Guiding Principles were developed by the administrative team in 2004. The staff and Board review the statements on an annual basis. This document ends with, "The heart of our school is the quality of the relationships we have with one another."

Commendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends all members of the school community for their expressed respect for and trust in one another, a cornerstone of their Guiding Principles.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team commends members of the school faculty and leadership for sharing a rich, thoughtful commitment to the philosophy of Dr. Montessori, the nature of modern Montessori schools, the importance of pedagogy, and the vitality of reflection.

Recommendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the staff and Board of Trustees continue to review and make a commitment to its tenets.

The Mission Statement was revised following an October 2004 “World Café” session of fifty stakeholders. The School Mission and Philosophy Committee worked with input from the Café and presented the provision to the staff, parents and Board of Trustees for discussion, consensus and approval.

Valley Montessori School honors the imagination, mind and heart of each child. Guided by the work of Maria Montessori, we create an environment where children are inspired to realize their academic, personal and social potential.

The Imagination

The child is challenged by the classroom environment, which inspires self-paced, individualized and guided discovery. The curriculum prepares the child for academic success while stimulating creativity, curiosity and the love of learning.

The Mind

The child is respected as an individual. Self-esteem, independent learning and self-confidence are fostered by the daily activities of the classroom community.

The Heart

The child is an essential member of the global community, working for peace and a better environment. Through cooperative activities, the child develops a respect for others and a desire for peaceful problem-solving.

Commendation:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the school for forming a task force committee comprised of parents, students, staff, Board members and administrators to review and refine the school’s mission.

Recommendation:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the school revisit its mission statement with the goal of transforming it into a concise statement. It would be helpful to revisit the connotations of the terms imagination, mind, and heart in order to better clarify and articulate their import.

III. The Educational Nature

The Infant, Toddler and Primary Programs

The early childhood classrooms at Valley Montessori School are prime examples of Montessori education.

The Montessori Learning Environment

The Infant, Toddler and Primary environments have large windows that bring in natural light generating an airy, spacious atmosphere. The rooms are clean and aesthetically pleasing. There are clearly designated areas, and the placement of the furniture allows for unhindered movement and easy access to all materials. All furnishings are child-sized and most are fabricated from wood with a natural finish. Much of the furniture

was superbly crafted on the premises by the school's carpenter. The top of the shelves are at the students' eye-level ensuring easy visual and physical accessibility to the materials. The teachers have arranged the furniture using a variety of configurations, ranging from a curved row of shelves to a circle of four single tables with a plant in the center. The majority of working experiences are in the form of table work and to a lesser degree, floor work.

The majority of the wall displays are placed at the children's eye level. They are kept to the bare minimum, and the overall neutral tone does not distract from the materials on the shelves. The materials are well maintained and placed in a logical, orderly manner on the shelves. It is clearly evident that the teachers have put a great deal of thought and care into the environmental design of the classrooms.

Montessori Learning Activity

The Infant and Toddler environments have developmentally appropriate materials that are arranged sequentially and provide for experimentation and manipulation. Some of the children are choosing work independently and successfully completing the work cycle.

The Primary environments include a broader spectrum of language activities in comparison to the other areas. With the exception of art and gross motor materials, an adequate range of practical life, sensory motor, math, music and cultural subject materials are available. The art activities did not seem to go further than the availability of basic materials such as crayons, markers, colored pencils and paint. Other than one classroom (they have monthly artist studies as part of their cultural subject curriculum) there did not seem to be adequate exploration of various art mediums (e.g., clay, wire, textiles, wood), techniques, artists, art forms and art appreciation. Gross motor activities seem to be limited to outdoor recess periods, and the classroom materials did not have gross motor activities built into them (e.g., gross motor transfer).

All materials are easily accessible to students and the placement and sequence of the materials are set up to encourage students to make independent, as well as, spontaneous choices. Each classroom has scheduled an average block of work time that is one and a half hours long. However, in practice, the activities scheduled before and after seem to eat into the block of work time decreasing the length of uninterrupted time. However, the frequency of such instances was difficult to determine given the brevity of an on-site visit.

The Montessori Learning Relationships

The Infant classroom houses children from the age of six weeks through eighteen months. The Toddler classrooms accommodate children from the age of eighteen months through three years. The teachers are the primary role models in helping the infants build the groundwork for respect of self, peers and the environment.

The children in each Primary classroom range in ages from three to almost six years old. Throughout their time in school, all students are actively engaged, primarily in independent work with some children engaged in parallel activities and occasional pairs working collaboratively. Only one instance of small group work (a teacher working with two children) was witnessed during the duration of the on-site visit.

The Montessori Spirituality

The teachers of the Infant, Toddler and Primary environments are highly aware that the whole child is an entity made up of the mind, body and spirit. The teachers are mindful of the children's individual, psychological, and emotional needs and differences. An authentic joy and love of learning permeates throughout the school. The wonderment and awe the children experience as they go about their day is due to the nurturing spirit that is deeply inherent in the environments' design. In addition, there was a marked emphasis on Grace and Courtesy and community throughout the Early Childhood classrooms.

What the Montessori Teacher Is

The Infant, Toddler and Primary teachers are dedicated to the education of their students. They are deeply committed to the spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being of their students. Their high regard for Grace and Courtesy, especially empathy, is evident in how they consistently model Grace and Courtesy to their students and parents. The teachers are firmly committed to their role as facilitators and are passionate advocates for their students. Their unwavering, selfless dedication is evident in the tone they set in the environment. The teachers are a strong cohesive unit who are receptive to implementing the best evolving strategies in their efforts to better support their students' overall development.

What the Montessori Teacher Does

The Infant and Toddler teachers are well-versed in child development and use this knowledge to provide an environment that is sensitive and supportive of the individual developmental needs of a child. The teachers keep detailed observations on each child, and their daily records enable them to adapt the ever-changing needs of the children, thereby, connecting the classroom as an extension of the child's home life.

The Primary teachers appear to be knowledgeable and well-versed in early childhood education. Their thoughtful design of the environment and the classroom materials are strong indications of their understanding of and sensitivity to their students' development. The teachers keep regular observations on each child. However, the level of detail and focus in the recorded observations is inconsistent from classroom to classroom, and from child to child. The faculty, and students, would greatly benefit from the implementation of standards and guides that would help the faculty fine-tune their observation and record-keeping skills.

The Lower Elementary Program

The Lower Elementary classrooms present thriving learning environments that are immediately recognized as fully-prepared Montessori classrooms led by highly competent adults.

The Montessori Learning Environment

The Lower Elementary classrooms are designed to provide adequate physical space appropriate to the needs of the students, excellent natural light (with incredible mountain vistas), clearly defined curricular areas, and appropriately-sized furniture. The classrooms are clean and orderly, although the coat-hook area was problematic with crowding of bulky

coats and backpacks in a small area. Understanding of functional classroom layout is apparent with patterns of movement, visibility by teachers of children at work, and accessibility well supported across all three classrooms. Most materials are in appropriate sequences and are readily available to students. Math shelves are not consistently organized in order of increasing challenge. The classroom walls display pertinent material and occasionally highlight children's work (with most art displayed in the hallways) without being overly distracting. These are clearly well-supported classroom environments with the full breadth of Montessori materials supported by teacher-created additions.

Montessori Learning Activities

The cycle of activity in these classrooms is generally very well balanced: students have a clear voice in their daily choices while being guided by reasonable adult expectations and assignments. There is a noted absence of the stress or rush often seen in students at this level who are "work-plan" driven. The students can verbalize how they make their choices and seem genuinely in control of their learning activities and personal paces. Their work is for the most part careful and thoughtful, developmentally appropriate, and they have a clear sense of completing their work cycles—with genuine pride.

There is a commitment by the teachers at this level to protect an extended morning work period. All "specials" are reserved for the afternoon, so the morning flows well from morning circle to individual work period, sprinkled with individual and small group lessons. Students move easily from one choice to the next, guided by the schedules that they write each morning. While teachers exhibited appropriate understanding of the Montessori curriculum, they were not readily able to articulate the school's minimum requirements of mastery, and written material indicated a lack of attention to this as well.

There is some inconsistency between classrooms in the presentation of math sequences and some arbitrariness in math material display on the shelves. While practical life opportunities were well connected to cultural studies, there were not many practical life opportunities on the shelves (sequences and skill-building exercises) for daily student choice.

The Montessori Learning Relationships

The 3-year cycle is protected in all classes at the Lower Elementary level, and is working wonderfully: children of different ages work together cooperatively, offer assistance regularly, and clearly demonstrate a sense of community and cooperation that requires little adult "nudging." There does not seem to be a sense of the students verbally differentiating between younger and older students as is often found at this level as social distinctions begin to grow—this is a clear indication of carefully chosen language by the adults and a well-evolved classroom community.

Montessori Spirituality

There is such a strong sense of an honoring of each other at this school: between teachers, between teachers and students, and between students. It is a verbalized, strong commitment of the staff to foster care and respect throughout the school experience, and the commitment to respect of the child is very evident. Multiple unsolicited examples of encouragement and caring for each other were noted throughout the observation period.

What the Montessori Teacher Is

The teachers have a sense of themselves as role models and guides in their classrooms: they are prepared with individual lessons, moving unobtrusively about the classroom seeking opportunities for lessons, but not interfering when students are engaged. Their tone in both movements and voice is respectful of the children's work, and there were no unnecessary interruptions of the group throughout the work period. The teachers were excellent listeners and efficient in their listening by reflecting children back to settle their own issues or answer their own questions when appropriate. Students treated their teachers respectfully and had clear and healthy bonds with them. The teachers exhibited facility with and knowledge of Montessori lessons and sequences across the spectrum.

What the Montessori Teacher Does

There was evidence of observation of students and note-taking on record, but this was more sparse than would be expected at this time of year, and no teachers were observed taking notes on students during class time. There was considerable variance in the level of detail in curriculum planning, but teachers were able to verbalize clearly where they were headed with any given area. All teachers were committed to supporting an environment of strong student participation in the educational process.

Parent communication opportunities seemed to be limited due to the long school day and the drop off/pick up process, but there appeared to be a strong sense throughout the school that parent-teacher relationships and communications were more than satisfactory. Weekly newsletters were used as a regular teacher-parent connection and teachers were available to parents by email and phone.

The Upper Elementary Program and The Middle School Program

Valley Montessori School's Upper Elementary and Secondary environments are operating in accord with Montessori principles. Students have choices within limits, work within schedule structures, yet also have free work time, access to appropriate materials, and learn as individuals and in small and large groups responsive to their cognitive and social/emotional needs.

The Montessori Learning Environment

Each classroom in the Middle School and Upper Elementary areas is set up as a prepared environment. Middle School rooms are essentially designated for specific curricular areas, e.g., Mathematics, Social Studies, etc, as described in the VMS self-study document (p. 20), but must now double in function due to the full capacity enrollment. Space has become a concern for the Middle School faculty, for it is now at a premium though the lovely building is new.

Upper Elementary space flow and usage is somewhat less structured; space seems ample. All in-classroom libraries are adequate for the immediate program. Rooms have fine natural and artificial light, appropriate flooring, technology resources, and an overall aesthetically satisfying appearance. Students have sufficient floor and table workspace for books and supplies; they also have lockers for personal use. Montessori materials are

maintained in an organized fashion of ascending challenge, as indicated in the VMS document.

Teachers also have desks and storage space inside their classrooms, as well as support storage space in a resource room. The size and scale of rooms and furnishings fits the age of child easily; water and restrooms are present in each. An array of audio-visual/computer/ tactile/literary materials, enhanced by visual charts and pictures, meets the need to address varied learning styles. Children's work adorns classrooms and halls.

Montessori Learning Activities

The Middle School follows a schedule of delineated class times, e.g., Algebra or Spanish, and study halls for work periods. The block system is helpful for Social Studies and Language Arts. Class rotation works around individualized math groupings. Upper Elementary schedules accommodate specialists; generally, a format of individual and group lessons and open work periods is followed. In both environments, students engage in varied work opportunities, demonstrating their ability to initiate and/or participate in lessons, make choices, and complete work cycles. Curricular disciplines are integrated. Levels have Montessori and other materials and resources for all activities. The Upper Elementary math program includes some Montessori materials not a norm for such an environment; they are used in concrete lessons for children with learning differences.

The Montessori Learning Relationships

Middle School includes 6th, 7th and 8th grades, with full 6th year humanities integration to be firmly in place by February of 2006, thus increasing their vertical age norms. Upper EI includes only 4th and 5th year students. In both levels, students engage in all-class, group, and individual learning experiences. The program shows evidence of cooperative and peer learning, community building and peer leadership. Self-knowledge includes students meeting goals, doing presentations, and assessing themselves. Socialization and enrichment, and external and internal community service opportunities are offered. Students interact with one another and with adults confidently and comfortably.

The Montessori Spirituality

The Upper Elementary and Middle School communities reflect an observable aspect of Valley Montessori: everyone cares, feels connected, has trust, and both shares and experiences respect and appreciation. Adults act as models; students know they matter. Each of these levels participates in activities allowing for students, teachers and parents to contribute to the wider world, whether locally (Food Banks) or globally (Heifer Project), reflecting the component of spirituality that entails serving others and acting on behalf of peace. All levels include peace education and peacekeeping opportunities. Parents and students express a sense that the safety, the spiritual environ, is a key factor for coming to and staying at VMS; it is also a reason teachers choose to be here.

What the Montessori Teacher Is

Qualities listed in the VMS Upper Elementary narrative well capture keys to this criteria: "The Montessori teacher is a lifelong learner...an observer of children...a role model...spiritual...empathetic...aspires to improve her abilities." Professional development experiences are an important part of teachers' lifelong learning; the VMS administration

evidences happiness to support all teachers who choose to participate in such endeavors. The Montessori teacher is also someone prepared to grow and flex, to be strong in knowledge yet human in error, to be ready with humor but serious as appropriate. Given the nature of older children, some additional qualities of a Montessori teacher that have great impact are passion for subjects taught, clarity on methodology, ability to do research, oral skill, respect for proven resources and methods, and eagerness to learn about new tools and approaches that can be helpful. All of these qualities were both demonstrated and verbalized by Upper Elementary and Middle School faculty.

What the Montessori Teacher Does

VMS teachers provide clear lessons, supportive instruction, opportunities for choice, and strategic pathways for learning. They use varied feedback and assessment tools including students' written goals and self-assessments, although teachers' written progress reports within the Middle School level and between Upper Elementary and Middle School have some inconsistencies in rubric language. Teachers knowledge, follow-up, observe and interact with students, keep records, and communicate regularly with the many adults in their community: their team members, parents, teachers at other levels, and administrative staff. A long-term, in-depth, detailed curriculum scope and sequence addressing all ages of students encompassed within a level would provide a key addition to the school's complement of historicity and program documentation.

Commendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the real attachment of all staff members to VMS. They express great respect for the work of the school and demonstrate professionalism in their positions.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team commends VMS for seeking out and providing for faculty members who will continue to maintain the excellence of the program. It has made hiring AMS credentialed teachers and Montessori trained childcare staff a priority.
3. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the school for how the learning process essential to a Montessori education is honored at all levels.
4. The AMS Accreditation Team commends VMS for its efforts to fully outfit classrooms with appropriate didactic materials.
5. The AMS Accreditation Team commends faculty, staff and administration because they keep the idea of following the child at the forefront of their consciousness and work.
6. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the school for demonstrably including children with special needs as part of their community.

Recommendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the administration and faculty examine and strengthen,
 - a) *Infancy through Lower Elementary*: The effectiveness and the logistics of all internal faculty and team meetings throughout all the levels so as not to precede or coincide with drop-off times, lunch breaks, playground duty or personal time.
 - b) *Early Childhood*: The effectiveness of enabling early childhood faculty to participate in statewide and national professional development experiences.
 - c) *Elementary*: The elementary level teachers' commitment of time to peer observation (between classrooms and between levels), and to professional development opportunities outside of school
 - d) *All Teachers*: The participation of Faculty members in professional development; they are clearly encouraged by the offer of administrative support offered.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the administrative supervisors implement a formal structure to ensure consistency in the follow-through of the faculty's child observations, recordkeeping, classroom planning and practices.

IV. The Nature of the Outcomes

The Infant and Toddler and The Primary

Independence - The Infant, Toddler and Primary students independently choose activities and successfully complete their work cycle. Most of the Infant and Toddler children, while they are independently choosing activities, are still learning to complete the work cycle and continue to require a teacher's assistance. The Primary students work independently and autonomously with occasional guidance from teachers, which is either sought out by the child or offered by a teacher.

Confidence and Competence - The Infant and Toddler children seem to feel secure and confident in their environment. The materials in the indoor and outdoor environments allow them to confidently explore and make sense of their world. The teachers' acknowledgement of their abilities further enhances their self-esteem. The overall tone of the environment is peaceful and nurturing.

The Primary students displayed a level of confidence and competence as they worked purposefully throughout their day. They took intellectual risks, at times with teacher's encouragement and self corrected as needed.

Self Reliance - The Infant, Toddler and Primary environments are designed to foster independence and autonomy in addition to respect for other children's work. The instant and frequent availability of teachers, however, may counteract further solidification of independence, critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Natural Curiosity - The Infant, Toddler and Primary students' delight in seeing their teachers each day indicates a genuine joy in coming to school. Their entry is enhanced by the teachers' warm and cheerful daily greeting and the following invitation to explore a particular activity. The Toddlers and Primary students' success, as well as, attempts are celebrated with joyful appreciation and an eagerness to share such experiences with others.

Able to Handle External Authority - The Infant and Toddler environments are designed to help the children successfully internalize the classroom ground rules and procedures, in addition to the need for respect toward other children's work. They are autonomous beings who are able to function successfully without proximal support from the teachers. The Primary students have clearly internalized the classroom routines and procedures. They work autonomously throughout the day as they meet the challenges of social interactions. Additionally, they understand the need for respect toward other children's work and space.

Social Responsibility - Each Infant, Toddler and Primary student is an integral part of their individual classroom community. In each level's group gatherings (e.g., group snack, group lessons, circle time), with few exceptions, the children behave responsibly and within the boundaries set by the teachers. The children seem to take great joy in caring for their environment individually, as well as, with a friend.

Academic Excellence - The Infant, Toddler and Primary environments and the teachers promote independence and provide the freedom of choice to experiment that, in turn, builds self-esteem and self-confidence that will be the foundation of all future learning. The programs are individualized and designed to address developmental needs of each age group. The structure set by the teachers enable the students to be successful in their academic preparation.

Spiritual Awareness - The students are very compassionate and empathetic. They have a strong sense of community as evidenced by how they interact with one another. Most children seemed to take enjoyment in helping each other and displayed great sensitivity and thoughtfulness toward one another. For example, after the class settled back into the classroom after recess, one student graciously went around offering to refill the water cups of her classmates.

Citizens of the World - The students have learned who the other individuals are and are aware that they are part of a larger community outside of their classroom. They are becoming cognizant that their actions have consequences in others' lives, such as upsetting others by damaging their work.

The Lower Elementary

Across the Lower Elementary level the students demonstrate an internalized and well-settled sense of themselves as independent learners; they readily show grace and courtesy to their fellow students and teachers; and there is a clear understanding of the ground rules which they seem to follow well even away from adult eyes. Teachers are able to verbalize the many ways in which children are encouraged to participate in their world citizenship. Independence and autonomy in work choices is well fostered and immediately evident in every room. Clearly this school has a strong and consistent commitment to preparing its students to be balanced, self-motivated and responsible citizens.

The school is seen to be successful in supporting student growth in almost all of the qualities listed by AMS as important outcomes in the Montessori learning experience. There is a lack of clarity, however, in the school's report on outcomes regarding the measurement, evaluation and reporting process for student achievement. This mirrors the noted absence of benchmarks and/or minimum requirements for matriculation between levels, and indicates a need for the school to revisit their evaluation of student outcomes. There is great value when a school formalizes what each competency "looks like" at each class level, determines a method or rubric for observing these competencies, and compiles its results in a way that is informative and can be communicated to others.

The Upper Elementary and The Middle School

Intended outcomes cited by both the Upper and Middle levels in the VMS self-study are that students model positive social behavior, care for their environment, understand ground rules and absolute limits, show ability to engage in work and complete a work cycle, exhibit joy in learning and appropriate independence, and demonstrate decision-making, problem-solving, and responsibility for their learning. These were observable. Possible outcomes for these levels not mentioned in VMS documentation include inclination toward excellence, passion for issues and/or subjects, willingness to be challenged, and ability to manage work outside of school. The documentation does not indicate any benchmarks used for determining when a child is ready, in literacy or numeracy, to move up; nor does it explicitly mention lifelong learning as an outcome or anything about young people establishing a personal best and challenging themselves to move beyond it. That type of standard does appear in the format of a Middle School academic percentage goal the students can then compare to their ongoing work. VMS publishes, in their *Parent Handbook*, an explicit "no homework policy" that is not consistent with Middle School practice; clarification could be beneficial. Although not mentioned in the documentation, students do take tests and both students and teachers maintain percentage records. Examples of records showing all forms of current learner documentation were made available.

Commendation:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the school for following the Montessori approach and their mission statement by creating an environment where children are inspired to realize their academic, personal and social potential.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the school for the presence of alumni in staff positions, at school functions, as parents with their own children attending VMS, and as documented supporters of the school is a vibrant testimonial to a key outcome: its graduates.

Recommendation:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that VMS evaluate their cross-level curriculum standards; assessment tools, including written progress reports, and protocols to assure thorough documentation of students' varied placements as they enter and exit levels, to build consistency within the school, and to provide guidance for a unified scope and sequence throughout the school. VMS would benefit from developing benchmarks at all levels and systems as a basis for considering and measuring student success. (10.13)

V. Evaluation by Holistic Analysis (analyzing effectiveness)

The school used an Energy Audit to analyze the strengths and limitations of the instructional and organizational effectiveness by reviewing the Educational Nature and Learner Outcomes. From this information, the Strategic Planning Committee of the Board developed a Strategic Plan. Although briefly stated, this process brought forward some elements that were critical to the resultant plan.

VI. The Strategic Plan

The Board of Trustees established a Strategic Planning Committee in May 2005. This standing committee of the Board is responsible for initiating, planning, coordinating and evaluating the school's continuous improvement efforts. The mission of the Strategic Planning Committee is "to develop and assess a continuing five year plan (2005-2010) that addresses educational, financial, campus and organizational goals. The committee will also define measures of success, linkage to operational plans, and provide recommendations to the Board of Trustees on an ongoing basis."

The Committee conducted a study of relevant Board planning documents, AMS Accreditation planning and self-study, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges report that lists Critical Areas for Follow-Up. The Board also included financial data from the Board Treasurer and input from the Executive Director and staff members in developing the initial Strategic Plan. The Board accepted and approved the working plan.

The Board has developed an action plan that includes both short term and long term goals. The short term plan is in process of completion in the next year. It involves board and committee members and teaching and administrative staff. The thirteen items scheduled for completion by December 2006, are preparation for the implementation of major goals that are being developed for the long-term strategic planning process. Included in the short term plans are:

- create and implement 3-5 year financial and fundraising plans
- create and implement educational and organizational plans
- develop a cost estimate for the Hillside development plan

The long term plan will be defined after the major board committees complete their analysis of needs and make recommendations to the Board. Examples of some topics that have come up to be considered include:

- Technology
- Succession plan and implementation
- Programs for Special Needs
- Space needs

The finalized Strategic Plan will be sent to the AMS office when it is completed. Progress, on items listed in the Plan, is to be reported in the Valley Montessori School Annual Accreditation Report, which is sent to the AMS office one year after accreditation.

Commendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the VMS Board of Directors as a future-planning board, dedicated to meeting the needs of the children of the school. The evolving 5 year plan is moving the school to a higher level of excellence.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the VMS administration and board for showing clear awareness of and commitment to the immediate and long-term financial stability of the school.
3. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the school's robust enrollment as testimony to the school's merits of VMS.

Recommendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that a 5-year timeline for completion of strategic goals be finalized along with the 5-year Financial Plan.
2. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that VMS continue to examine the importance of technology to its immediate and future development, including the continued focus of the board's committee on this crucial matter.
3. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the school more deeply and strategically address the presence and impact of an ever-growing population of special needs students upon the VMS community, specifically in terms of:
 - the procedures for and ramifications of meeting the needs of such students as identified by learning specialists
 - the needs of teachers relative to best practices for those students and for the other children in their communities
 - the approach to normalization for all students
 - the preparedness of such students for moving up to the next level
 - the impact upon testing
 - the way in which this student population is envisioned in the school's strategic plan
4. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that considerations be made to provide a larger, separate, consolidated library that is electronically bar-coded. Also, dedicated space for art is a much needed, especially for the elementary and middle-school students.

VII. Adherence to Standards

The Valley Montessori School has put forth much effort to provide the On-Site Visiting Team with documentation to demonstrate compliance with the AMS standards. Through verification of the documents, observations and interviews, some variance was found. The On-Site Visiting Team members agree that VMS is in full compliance with most AMS Standards.

The On-Site Visiting Team members agree that VMS is not in compliance with three AMS Standards (3.2, 3.7 and 5.2.1). One important standard, 10.1, states that "The school practices vertical grouping and assigns to each class (above the infant/toddler level) a balance of ages in a three-year range." It was observed that the sixth grade students were

not fully integrated into the Middle School. Only in Math was there a mixed age. The Executive Director was informed on the second evening and she and the team of teachers devised a new schedule and plan to be fully implemented by February 1, 2006. In addition to classes in Language Arts and History, there will be extended work time, group problem solving, and integrated class meetings.

The On-Site Visiting Team was particularly thorough and experienced. For these reasons, several areas were found where improvement could be made. Knowing that the Valley Montessori School is committed to school improvement, these standards were discussed and shared with the school. The On-Site Visiting Team members agree that 20 Standards are only partially met and that many of these components are included in our recommendations. (3.8, 4.4, 10.1, 10.5, 10.6, 10.13, 10.14.3, 11.1, 11.3, 12.7, 13.11P, 13.18P, 13.23P, 13.5E, 13.15E, 13.43E, 13.45E, 13.51E, 13.17S and 13.47S).

Commendations:

1. The AMS Accreditation Team commends VMS for its commitment to school improvement, evidenced by their extensive work to achieve accreditation with both the American Montessori Society and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. To its great credit, Valley Montessori School will be the first Montessori school in the state of California to be accredited by the American Montessori Society.

The American Montessori Society will work together with WASC to coordinate a joint accreditation visit when the Western Region schedules its team visit in 2007. It will be important for the school to keep in touch with Mimi Basso, the AMS Director of Accreditation and Consultation. This contact needs to be made as soon as VMS begins its preparation.

2. The AMS Accreditation Team commends the Executive Director and Middle School teachers for coming up with a plan and schedule to integrate the middle school students.

Recommendations:

Non-Compliant Standards

1. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the school compose and implement written policies regarding
 - a) a Five year plan for management and improvement of owned and buildings (3.2)
 - b) its natural and man-made site hazards (3.7)
 - c) the confidentiality of student records and parents right to review, comment, and release information (5.2.1)
2. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that VMS continue to integrate the sixth graders into the Middle School program with classes in the Humanities including 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. The school is to send a letter to the Accreditation Team Chair and the AMS office in February, when the intended plan is in place. (10.1)

Needs Improvement

3. The AMS Accreditation Team strongly recommends that VMS pay attention to three important safety issues:
 - a) review traffic safety considerations, both in movement patterns and site plan design

- b) develop non-negotiable ground rules and increase adult supervision during its use of the public park behind the school and on its primary playgrounds for safety and security reasons
 - c) evaluate the effectiveness of security measures at its main entrance and consider placing a receptionist in the front hall to assure that all visitors are greeted.
4. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the school look at and improve its
- a) criteria and procedures for Admissions, including the nondiscrimination statement as required by law (4.4)
 - b) classrooms' ground rules and absolute limits for behavior (10.5)
 - c) classrooms procedures and negotiable limits for behaviors (10.6)
5. The AMS Accreditation Team recommends that the administration and faculty examine and strengthen,
- a) the effectiveness and the logistics of all internal faculty and team meetings throughout all the levels so as not to precede or coincide with drop-off times, lunch breaks, playground duty or personal time.
 - b) a plan to enable early childhood faculty to more fully participate in statewide and national professional development experiences.
 - c) the elementary level teachers' commitment of time to peer observation (between classrooms and between levels), and to professional development opportunities outside of school.

The Visiting Team recommends to AMS that accreditation be granted to VMS.

American Montessori Society

Essential Accreditation Components Verification

To be completed by the Accreditation Team Chair(s) with full consent of the team members. This page must be included in the report generated by the Accreditation Team.

Name of the School: Valley Montessori School

Name of the Owner/Administrator: Mary Ellen Kordas

Initial Accreditation or Re-accreditation: Initial AMS Accreditation

YES NO

Required Standards #11.1, #12.0 (all of #12), and #13.0 (all of #13) of the *Standards For American Montessori Society Schools* have been verified by the visiting team.

A recommendation is included for any unmet standard.

The Montessori Educational Nature of the school is documented in the self-study and includes the 6 essential elements of an authentic AMS school.

Educational outcomes are documented in the self-study protocol and include Montessori outcomes.

A strategic plan has been developed.

The strategic plan includes action plans pertaining to the following components:

timelines for actions
 persons responsible for actions
 resources available for actions

Comments on any of the requirements detailed above:

The school is working on its Strategic Plan, which may be altered to include Recommendations made by the AMS Accreditation Team.
