



Unique public-private partnership is a win-win for district, community's youngest learners

by Shelley Seale

In the West Texas town of Marfa, something exciting is happening in the schools. Parents are lining up to get their 3- to 5-year-old children into Montessori school — and it's free! — thanks to an innovative public-private partnership.

It all began when Superintendent Andrew Peters was hired in August 2012. Marfa ISD had been experiencing a declining enrollment over the past decade and was operating at a deficit. A new board had been elected that May, and the members were ready to work with Peters to make some changes.

"During my first year, I reached out to anyone and everyone," Peters recalls.

One of those individuals was Katherine Shaunessey-Michael, a former Marfa ISD board member who had become the president of Marfa Montessori, a

private pre-kindergarten school that had been in existence for three years. She invited the superintendent to visit the school, which was thriving and accepting 20 to 24 students a year.

Peters and Shaunessey-Michael began to wonder if, and how, the two school systems might work together.

"I thought [the Montessori method] was really good for the children, and we wanted to be able to offer it to more students," Peters says. "I was losing my pre-K teacher, so I was looking for options. At the same time, I was trying to unite the community in Marfa so that there would just be one school, and we would all work together."

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Superintendent
Andrew Peters



Marfa Montessori Director and lead teacher Emily Steriti enjoys a little sunshine with students Jonea Acosta and Belen Soto-Torres.

By May 2013, the two had come up with a visionary idea: combine forces and integrate the Montessori school with Marfa ISD, creating a powerful program for pre-K students ages 3 to 5.

"By bringing the private Marfa Montessori into our fold, we were able to add state funds to the private foundation funds to put together a public Montessori PK3-K5 program that serves our entire community — without charging tuition," Peters explains.

The Marfa ISD Montessori program opened for enrollment for the 2013-2014 school year. The formerly private school moved into a renovated space at the public high school, and all the Montessori students became public school students.

"The community was skeptical, but the program astonished all," Peters says. "Locals stood in line to get this 'private' education for free. The ISD gained new students, which paid the bills and provided a quality, full-day education for the community's 3- to 5-year-olds."

Marfa Montessori, under Marfa ISD, offers a multi-age classroom in which 3- and 4-year-old students are mixed with kindergarteners. Special needs students and English language learners are also in the Montessori classroom. The younger students learn from the older ones, and the teachers use hands-on, multi-sensory teaching methods that respect and follow each child's development.

Three-year-old students must have turned 3 by Sept. 1, and 5-year-old kindergarten students must have experienced the Montessori method as a 4-year-old. (In the future, Marfa ISD does not expect to require kindergarten students to be in the Montessori classroom in the previous year.) Last year, 37 students were in the Montessori program. In 2014-2015, 50-plus students are in Montessori.

While the Montessori program is free for all children residing in Marfa ISD, children from outside the district can enroll at \$450 a month. In this area of West Texas, however, where the nearest neighboring town is more than 20 miles away, no one has taken advantage of that offer yet.

Marfa Montessori remains a separate 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. As such, it can still accept donations. It has an online shop where items, such as branded tote bags, can be purchased through tax-deductible donations.

Emily Steriti founded the Montessori program in Marfa and she continues to serve as the program director and lead teacher at Marfa ISD. She is supported by three assistant teachers.

"We just want every child in Marfa to be able to have that early childhood, enriched environment," Steriti says. "It was always my goal to open a public program in Marfa; however, it was the open-mindedness of a changing school board and superintendent, conflated with community support, that allowed for our actual merger."

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"Andy and I have worked as partners since early 2013 to create and grow an authentic Montessori within MISD," Steriti says. "For me, the most remarkable part of all this is how well he and I work together. I really could go on and on about my passion for Montessori."

Developed by Dr. Maria Montessori around 1900, the method focuses on three key points: independent learning, positive discipline and hands-on learning. Its multi-age classroom supports peer learning and creates a learning triangle among teacher, child and environment.

"The feedback that I'm getting [about the public-private merger] is increasingly more positive," Steriti adds. "I think people are realizing that it's a philosophy that loves and embraces children."

Marfa ISD first grade teacher Johanna Nevares is a firm believer in the value of Montessori education.

"As a receiving teacher of several Marfa Montessori students, I have noticed that the students are extremely well-equipped and well-prepared for learning. Each of the students I have taught or currently teach from Miss Emily's Montessori program possesses many of the same qualities: They are all extremely teachable, exceptional critical thinkers, polite and well-spoken, and academically self-motivated. I always get excited when I have one of Miss Emily's students on my classroom roster."

To handle an expected jump in enrollment, Peters says his immediate focus is to find a second lead teacher, and possibly even a third. Next, the district will explore expanding the Montessori method into other grade levels.

Peters offers these tips to other districts that want to form a similar public-private partnership:

Know the political environment. Political leadership must be in place, with a strong policy statement and the will to change the system.

Know the statutory environment. What are the state and federal rules for instruction and certification?

Be organized. You need to have a plan, develop an agreement (memorandum of understanding) and know each party's responsibilities.

Secure guaranteed revenue. There should be a fair plan for funding that considers potential savings and is understood clearly by all parties.

Gain stakeholder support. Who are the stakeholders (usually parents, teachers and board), and are there competing interests? This requires an open and frank discussion among all parties.

Pick your partners carefully. View this as a long-term relationship that requires verified experience and financial capability.

Steriti emphasizes that a solid vision is one of the most important factors in the success of such a partnership.

"The public school board trusted my vision, and for this rarity, I am quite fortunate," she says. "That vision — solid, holistic curriculum and strong leadership — would be my greatest advice to other districts."

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