

The
POST OAK
SCHOOL



ISAS Self-Study 2017

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Letter from the Head of School

Dear Walter, Marie, and the ISAS Visiting Team,

Welcome to Post Oak and thank you for taking precious time away from your own schools to help us through the accreditation process with ISAS. As a new ISAS Head, it has been such a pleasure being part of an organization that is so committed to school improvement and the support of quality education in the Southwest.

This self-study document has taken shape out of a process that spanned two school years and two heads of school. This created some logistical challenges but in the end enriched the process of self-examination, resulting in a rare perspective in answering the questions, “What are we doing and where does Post Oak want to go?” Post Oak began its process with each teacher and staff member reflecting on the nature of their individual work, including recognizing strengths and identifying areas for growth. Next, many parents and teachers completed surveys. Finally, working in small groups of community members, each area and level of the school has been closely examined, resulting in the reports that make up the body of this self-study.

We find ourselves presently in the midst of great changes around the school. And yet, there is a spirit of confidence and constructive engagement around the self-study work, even though it started as Post Oak was in the midst of a head of school search, and was completed during that leadership change.

Through its association with ISAS over the past twelve years, Post Oak has appreciated the support this organization offers to its member schools. By engaging in the self-study process at Post Oak and then joining accreditation teams at other schools, our staff at the school has benefited both personally and professionally. These accreditation experiences have inspired Post Oak to join with five other Montessori schools around the U.S. to create the MPRC (Montessori Peer Review Council) as a model for large Montessori school self-study and peer-study. In the spring of 2016, MPRC teams carried out the first peer-review visits.

As you will discover reading these pages, Post Oak is at an exciting time in its history, and the future holds great possibilities for growth. We welcome your input and guidance as we find our path forward.

Sincerely,

Maura Joyce
Head of School

I. Introduction

Summary Statistics (Exhibit F)

Profile and Summary Data—School Information

Date: **January 3, 2016**

School: **The Post Oak School**

Address: **4600 Bissonnet Street, Bellaire, TX 77401**

Telephone: **713-661-6688**

Website: **www.postoakschool.org**

Date of Founding: **1963**

Date of Incorporation: **January 9, 1964**

Date of initial ISAS accreditation: **2006**

Dates of last ISAS evaluation visit: **2006**

Grades Included (circle):

(PS K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12)PG

Enrollment Data (indicate number):

Boys: **233** Girls: **249** Boarding: **0** Day: **489**

Below Grade 1: **198** Grades 1–8: **215** Grades 9–12: **69** PG: **XX**

Faculty:

Full Time: **39** Part Time: **5**

School Head: **Maura C. Joyce**

Date of appointment: **7/1/16**

Board Chairman: **Melissa Coleman**

Date term expires: **7/1/17**

Substantive changes since the last ISAS evaluation visit (check only those that apply):

- Change in mission
- Change in bylaws
- The **addition** or deletion of grade levels. What grades? **9–12** Date of change: **2012–15**
- A noteworthy change in board composition or direction
- Current or recently completed capital campaign
- A significant change in the school's financial condition or opportunities
i.e. a major gift, significant **increase** or decrease **in endowment, debt** or bond issue, loss of revenue, etc.
- The **addition** or deletion of a major educational component (check those that apply)
 - Schedule
 - Academic courses: **International Baccalaureate**
 - Academic department(s)
 - Pedagogy
- Change in enrollment of 20 percent or more
- The **addition** or elimination **of a campus** or significant part thereof. Year of change: **2012**

Summary Assessment of the School

At 53 years, Post Oak is ready to look towards the next ten years. The ISAS accreditation visit and the work we have done on this self-study, provides an opportunity to look forward to the evolving vision of Post Oak. With strong enrollment, committed families, world-class faculty and staff, a solid financial position, and recent growth initiatives completed, Post Oak is positioned to consolidate its full spectrum Montessori program, create a new strategic plan, and continue to provide an outstanding Montessori environment in which students thrive and develop, ever more prepared for the world they will inherit.

Post Oak celebrates recent changes and milestones, including the graduation of its first High School class in 2016, the move of Middle School to the newly created adolescent center in the Museum District, and the completion of both the new High School building, and the complete renovation of the Bissonnet Campus to add several new spaces for classes, a music room and theater, offices, and a parenting center. Much of this was made possible by a five-year \$6.6 million capital campaign, the back-breaking work of which was happening simultaneously to the start-up phase of Post Oak's High School. The success of the campaign allowed us to refinance the original High School building property and secure an \$8.5 million dollar construction loan at an incredibly low interest rate. All of this puts the school in a stable position after a period of growth and development.

Post Oak has achieved and surpassed all of the priorities listed at the conclusion of the 2006 ISAS Self-Study. By setting new goals for the next ten years, we are building on our current successes, learning from past missteps, and reaching into the future to prepare our students with 21st century skills.

Our recently revised mission statement calls us to develop the whole child following the guidelines set by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). This commitment to AMI is at the heart of our work. AMI Montessori trained faculty and periodic review of AMI standards provides us with a solid base of common understanding. This dedication to AMI is echoed throughout the self-study. There continues to exist a healthy tension between the aspiration to follow our training and the reality of implementation. Another challenge we face is having AMI-trained teachers ready to step into the classroom when teacher vacancies occur. This challenge has been addressed through the school's support for AMI teacher training, as well as our mentor/intern program. As a newly accredited International Baccalaureate school for grades 11 and 12, Post Oak is discovering the compatibility of IB with Montessori theory and practice and continually working to integrate the two to ensure continuity of program from 14 months through 12th grade.

After John Long's 21-year tenure as head, Post Oak welcomed Maura Joyce at the beginning of the 2016–17 school year. During the search process, the community—students, parents,

staff, and Board—identified the importance of maintaining the Post Oak culture it values so much as a high priority. In this first year of the leadership change, students continue to thrive in the classroom environments and the community culture remains intact. Maura's focus this first year has been on building relationships in the community and being a “student” of Post Oak, that is, learning all there is to learn about what makes this school hum.

Looking ahead, we recognize that one of The Post Oak School's greatest strengths is its positive and healthy faculty culture and high level of parent satisfaction. The surveys conducted in the fall of 2015 verified that we are in a good place and that our work is appreciated and well worth doing. From this strong, confident position we prepare to embrace the changes ahead.

ISAS Parent Constituent Survey Results

In 2015, we asked all members of our parent community to participate in an online survey intended to measure the extent to which parent-school communication is effective and parent expectations are met. This survey was administered as part of our ongoing accreditation process with the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS). With our sincere thanks to everyone who participated, we are pleased to share the following results.

The majority of survey questions (60 of 90 questions) elicited favorable responses from at least 95% of participants and are therefore considered salient strengths of the school. The school received very high marks on topics ranging from its mission statement to its ability to communicate with parents, to the qualifications of its faculty. Selected commendations include:

- Our Mission:
 - ♦ 98% of parents who responded to the survey feel they have an understanding of the school's mission.
 - ♦ 96% of those parents believe the character of the school reflects the mission statement, and 97% believe the school's program is grounded in the mission.
- Our Community:
 - ♦ 99% believe that the school is a safe, secure place.
 - ♦ 99% of parents feel that the school is welcoming and inclusive for students.
 - ♦ 95% believe the school values and seeks a student body that is ethnically, religiously, and socio-economically diverse.
 - ♦ 97% feel that the school community is ethical in its programs and actions, and that the moral development of students is positively affected by the school's programs and actions.
 - ♦ 98% believe the school works well with the community at large and is well-respected.
 - ♦ 97% feel that the school holds itself to high standards.
- Communication:
 - ♦ 99% of parents believe that the means for individual communication between parents and the school are well-articulated and effective.
 - ♦ 97% feel that communication from the school to parents (collectively) is timely and informative.
 - ♦ 98% feel that communication from faculty and administrators is courteous and constructive.
 - ♦ 98% feel that school personnel are accessible and available to address student concerns, and 97% feel that they are accessible and available to address parent concerns.
- ♦ 99% feel that communication regarding opportunities for parent involvement in the school (parent association, booster club, etc.) is timely and comprehensive.
- Parent Community:
 - ♦ 96% of parents feel welcome and included.
 - ♦ 98% feel that the school shows appreciation for parent support.
 - ♦ 98% have a high degree of trust in the school.
 - ♦ 95% say that their expectations of the school are met.
 - ♦ 99% would recommend the school to a friend or colleague.
- Academics:
 - ♦ 99% agree that teachers are qualified, competent, professional, and every single participant (100%) feels that the teachers are dedicated to student success.
 - ♦ 98% feel the academic program achieves positive results for their children
 - ♦ 96% feel that the school stays abreast of current trends in education.
- Respondents were asked to provide three words that best describe the school. The most frequent responses are: "Nurturing," "Caring," "Community," "Supportive," "Diverse," and "Inclusive."

Despite the overwhelmingly positive responses to this survey, we are mindful that there are always areas for improvement. In their written responses to open-ended questions, many parents praised the progress the school has made with respect to extracurricular activities, athletics and the performing arts, and several expressed a desire that this progress continue. Parents also expressed interest in seeing additional educational programming on topics such as toileting in the Young Children's Community, sex education in Middle School and High School, and dealing with learning difficulties at all ages.

As we continue this process of self-study for ISAS re-accreditation, we are grateful to have your ongoing engagement and support.

ISAS Faculty Constituent Survey Results

In 2015, Post Oak surveyed all members of the faculty and staff in order to measure a number of factors relating to their experience of the school. This survey was administered as part of our ongoing accreditation process with the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS).

67% of school employees responded to the survey, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

Commendations

- All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the school's mission, and that the character of the school and the school program are well reflected in that mission statement.
- 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the school is welcoming and inclusive to both faculty and staff.
- 98.28% (all but one) of respondents felt that the culture of the school encourages faculty innovation, input, and collegiality. 98.28% also felt that the school community is ethical and that the moral development of the students is positively affected by the school's programs and actions.
- 92.85% felt positively about the school's communication of information and expectations with parents.
- 100% of respondents felt that teachers are dedicated to student success. 98.25% felt that teachers are qualified, competent, and professional. 96.5% said the faculty feels respected by parents.
- 98.25% of respondents felt the school was well-respected in the community. 96.43% felt their years at the school have been positive, and 98.25% would recommend the school to other educators.

Recommendations

While the response to almost all questions was more than 90% positive, we noted places where three or more respondents indicated that they disagreed with a statement.

- The most commented-on questions were about the Board of Trustees. Faculty and staff feel they don't know the board members and aren't sure of the work they do. Respondents also felt a lack of communication from the school website, and in regards to effectively communicating expectations to parents.
- 11.5% of respondents disagreed with the statement, "The school values and seeks a student body that is ethnically, religiously, and socio-economically diverse." However, when asked to provide 3 words they felt accurately described the school, diverse was one of the most frequently-used adjectives. It's difficult to know for certain which kind of diversity respondents felt was lacking in the school, however, statistically we are the least diverse socio-economically.
- Admissions: 7% of respondents did not feel they understood their role in internal and external marketing. 8.77% felt the administration office did not communicate effectively issues regarding enrollment and retention. 10% of respondents did not feel that the faculty plays an important role in the interview and acceptance process. This feeling is mirrored in comments throughout the survey reflecting some unease with the student acceptance process, and the communication with parents about school fit.
- Services: 7% felt that the school facilities were not adequate to support the program of the school. In addition to facilities, auxiliary programs such as food service and transportation were areas of concern. The largest concern was the lack of health services, which the school has already addressed by building a nurse's station and budgeting for a part-time school nurse position to be added in the 2017–2018 school year. 8.77% felt that the library does not meet student needs, although the question does not clarify if this refers to the facility or the collection.
- Salary/compensation: 16.36% felt that their compensation did not compare favorably with salary ranges in the school's market area.
- Administrative support of faculty/staff: 5.26% felt that there are not ample opportunities for faculty leadership training. 14.03% felt that faculty did not have adequate planning time. 12.28% disagreed that the Professional Growth Plan (PGP), Post Oak's faculty evaluation tool, has helped them with their professional development.

Academic Profile

The Post Oak School is an independent, coeducational day school providing graduates with an International Baccalaureate education in a Montessori environment.

OUR VISION

At The Post Oak School, we help shape young people who are “equipped in their whole beings for the adventure of life, accustomed to the free exercise of their own will and judgment, illuminated by imagination and enthusiasm.” This was how Maria Montessori described her vision, and it’s a vision we share. At Post Oak, we help students understand the world, because the world is infinitely interesting and learning is fun. We help them understand it so they’ll know how to make it a better place. We emphasize reading, math, and science because they open doors into the world. We emphasize independence, self-direction, and choice because they help young people identify which doors they want to walk through. We emphasize collaboration, cooperation and peace because, ultimately, we know that neither we nor our children walk alone.

The Post Oak School offers a comprehensive education from infancy through high school. In a non-sectarian setting, amid surroundings designed to support the principles that have made Montessori one of the most effective education systems in the world, our students develop the emotional, social, spiritual, physical, and intellectual skills to live the lives they were born to live.

OUR CAMPUS

The Museum District Campus extends the reach of the 53-year-old Post Oak School into the hub of Houston’s cultural and scientific community. It is situated to leverage partnerships with many of the area’s top companies and cultural institutions, which form the extended campus of The Post Oak School. Subject matter experts at each location are adjunct faculty, who work with High School teachers to create real-world experiences built on the school curriculum. These are not just field trips. For students, this idealized microcosm of adult society offers the best of human civilization.

CURRICULUM

Post Oak offers a challenging curriculum that helps students prepare themselves for college and beyond. The work is relevant, meaningful, and connects students’ interests to real-world activity. Students go deep and travel far to create tailored challenges that push them to explore. The school offers the IB Diploma Programme for students in the eleventh and twelfth grades. The IB curriculum fits well with the student-centered, critical thinking, and developmental approach already in place at The Post Oak School.

ADMINISTRATION

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Maura Joyce, MauraJoyce@postoakschool.org

HIGH SCHOOL DIRECTOR

James Moudry, JamesMoudry@postoakschool.org

IB COORDINATOR

James Quillin, JamesQuillin@postoakschool.org

COLLEGE COUNSELOR

Amanda Phelps-Smith,
AmandaSmith@postoakschool.org

CEEB Code: 440562

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS

- ♦ Educational Records Bureau (ERB)
- ♦ Houston Association of Independent Schools (HAIS)
- ♦ Independent School Management (ISM)
- ♦ Montessori Administrators Association (MAA)
- ♦ National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)
- ♦ National Business Officers Association (NBOA)
- ♦ North American Montessori Teachers Association (NAMTA)
- ♦ National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC)
- ♦ Texas Association of College Admission Counselors (TACAC)

ACCREDITATIONS

- ♦ Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS)
- ♦ International Baccalaureate School (IB)
- ♦ Texas Association of Non-Public Schools (TANS)
- ♦ Texas IB Schools (TIBS)

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Language & Literature	Language Acquisition	Individuals & Societies	Sciences	Mathematics	The Arts
ELA I	Spanish I/II/III	IHSS I/II	Natural Science I/II	Algebra I/II	Music I/II
ELA II	IB Spanish AI/SL	IB History SL/HL	IB Biology SL/HL	Geometry	IB Music SL/HL
IB Literature SL/HL	Chinese I/II	IB Economics SL/HL		IB Math Studies	Theater I/II
	IB Chinese AI	Philosophy		IB Mathematics SL/HL	IB Theater SL/HL
					Visual Arts I/II
					IB Visual Arts SL/HL

Core Requirements	Mini-Course Intensives	
Theory of Knowledge (TOK)	Critical Writing	Civic Engagement in Central America
Extended Essay (EE)	Psychology of the Mind and Brain	Creative Writing
Creativity, Action, Service (CAS)	Winter Orientation	Outdoor Experience
Physical Fitness I/II	Falmouth Field School	Paleontology Field Study
	Filmmaking	Psychology 101
	History Through Game Design	Electric Car Conversion
	Entrepreneurship and Design	

GRADING SCALE

Evaluation	Numeric	Percentage
Exemplary	4.5–5.0	90%–100%
Advanced	4.0–4.4	80%–89%
Proficient	3.5–3.9	70%–79%
Basic	2.5–3.4	50%–69%
Limited	1.5–2.4	30%–49%
Minimal	0.5–1.4	10%–29%
No Demonstrated Understanding	0.0–0.4	0%–9%

*Marks below 3.5 are not passing

ATHLETICS & STUDENT ACTIVITIES

The Post Oak School has many opportunities for participation in individual and team athletics as well as other activities. As a small school, much of what is possible will be determined by student interest from year to year. Examples include archery, basketball, chess, cooking, cross country, dance, debate, photography, swimming, volunteering, and yoga.

FINE ARTS

Course offerings include theater, music, media, and visual arts. Upper level studies (eleventh and twelfth grades) allow for a more specialized course of study, following student interest.

RELIGION

The Post Oak School is non-sectarian. Among our core values are respect for all people and international peace.

II. School Mission

Profile

Serving nearly 500 students on two campuses—the Early Childhood and Elementary students at the Bellaire campus on Bissonnet Street and the Middle School and High School students at the Museum District campus on Autrey Street, Post Oak now provides a full-spectrum Montessori program from 14 months through 12th grade. As the oldest Montessori school in the Southwest, at 53 years, Post Oak serves a diverse community of families from the city of Bellaire, and the greater Houston metropolitan area, with some students traveling to

History of the School

The Post Oak School was founded in 1963 as Houston's first Montessori school, serving children from 3 to 6 years of age. In the ensuing years, the following programs were added: Young Children's Community (1966), Lower Elementary (1969), Upper Elementary (1976), Middle School (1980), and High School (2012).

The school has changed both name and location several times. Originally The Little School House (1963), it became The Montessori School House (1979), Post Oak Montessori School (1980), The Post Oak System (1981) and finally The Post Oak School (1985). For nearly twenty years, the school occupied a house on Briar ridge drive. The school relocated to Harwin drive (1981) and then to Gordon Elementary School, an unused HISD building (1985), while the current facility was under construction. In that same year, the school moved across Bissonnet Street to its current location in a building that was specifically designed and built for its use.

Houston's Museum district was selected as the location for the High School campus, which opened in the fall of 2012 in a newly renovated open-concept environment. In 2016, a new High School building was completed on those grounds, and the Middle School relocated from the Bissonnet Campus to the existing building, creating an innovative center for adolescent education.

Carol Ferguson was the founding directress and led the school from its inception until 1985. John Long became the third full-time, permanent head of school in 1995 until he retired in June 2016. In July 2016, Maura Joyce became head of school.

THE MISSION

“The mission of The Post Oak School is to prepare an outstanding Montessori environment that fosters collaboration, cooperation and peace, and to provide experiences that promote curiosity, inquiry and engagement. Designed according to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual characteristics and needs of the learner, our methods guide and nurture each individual from infancy to adulthood. The school's

school from as far away as Cypress, Katy, and Sugarland. Post Oak has remained true to its Montessori roots throughout its history and remains committed to AMI teacher training for its faculty and AMI principles and practices in its implementation. With the expansion to High School, embraced the International Baccalaureate Diploma program for grades 11 and 12, as a complement to the Montessori ideals and structure.

approach is grounded in the principles of AMI Montessori education.”

This is the school's newly revised mission statement, drafted by a representative group of faculty and staff, reviewed by the full faculty, and adopted by the board of trustees. Does the mission statement really matter? Yes, so long as it is in active use and accurately portrays the school. At Post Oak the mission statement appears in every classroom and office at the school, and when important and difficult decisions are made, the mission is always “on the table.” We describe ourselves as “a mission-driven school.” The mission statement, complemented by the “Portrait of a Graduate” and the “Portrait of a Teacher,” most succinctly describe who we are and what our aspirations are as a school.

THREE SENTENCES; SIXTY-EIGHT WORDS: WHAT DO THEY MEAN? WHAT DO THEY SAY?

The mission of The Post Oak School is to prepare an outstanding Montessori environment that fosters collaboration, cooperation and peace, and to provide experiences that promote curiosity, inquiry, and engagement.

We prepare an environment and provide experiences.

Dr. Montessori said that the teacher's first responsibility is to prepare the environment for the children, an environment suited to their developmental stage, and characteristics as learners. It is an environment that includes specially prepared learning materials; an environment that is orderly and beautiful; an environment that inspires and invites learning; an environment that fosters collaboration, cooperation and peace.

Within this prepared environment, we invite the children to have real, hands-on experiences. As Dr. Montessori said, “education is not what the teacher gives; education is a natural process spontaneously carried out by the individual, and is acquired not by listening to words but by experiences in the environment,”—experiences that promote curiosity, inquiry and engagement; experiences that promote deep concentration

and a long attention span; experiences that promote intrinsic motivation and love of learning.

Designed according to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual characteristics and needs of the learner, our methods guide and nurture each individual from infancy to adulthood.

First, there's that word "learner." It's a little odd. But it speaks to our focus on learning rather than teaching; to our focus on the child first and foremost; and to our insistence that the student must be an active agent in her own education.

Our educational methods are grounded in developmental psychology, understanding that the young person's needs and characteristics evolve over the first twenty-four years of life as they grow from infancy to adulthood. We do more than teach students everything they need to know. We view children holistically, and attend to all four major domains of development: the physical, emotional, social and intellectual. Schools have traditionally focused on the intellectual domain—on what children should be required to know—to the exclusion of the other developmental domains; and in doing so, fail to explicitly develop many of the skills needed for success at work and in life. Yes, children need to know how to read and write and do arithmetic; but they also need to know how to collaborate on a project; how to be a leader—and a follower; how to speak out in a group, and to make a speech from a podium; how to manage frustration and disappointment; how to plan, and manage time and responsibilities. Post Oak does all the above.

The school's approach is grounded in the principles of AMI Montessori education.

Since its founding in 1963, The Post Oak School has looked to the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) for the training of its teachers and for pedagogical guidance. AMI represents commitment to Montessori's core principles. Montessori described her educational method as "scientific pedagogy." It is a method that began from a scientist's careful observation of children and evolved through trial and error over a period of decades. As an authentic Montessori school, Post Oak provides a qualitatively distinct option among the school choices in Houston. Post Oak is committed to the Montessori approach because it has proven effective over the years, and in Post Oak alums you can consistently observe the positive personal characteristics common to Montessori grads around the world. At the same time, Post Oak's commitment to scientific pedagogy means that we attend to the most current research in developmental psychology, behavioral psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience. This is why Post Oak is currently participating in a series of research projects focusing on student experience and the development of 21st century skills. This is why Post Oak belongs to school associations that invite us into self-study, and to continually ask, "How could we do that better?"

Post Oak's mission statement was last revised in 1993. This latest version is highly consistent with its predecessor, and

affirms the constancy of our educational vision and approach, while incorporating several improvements. Look for this revised mission statement to appear in classrooms, on the web site and in school publications.

John Long

III. School Community

Student Body

“The whole of mankind is one and only one, one race, one class and one society.” —Maria Montessori

The student body is currently comprised of 482 students aged 14 months to 18 years. Students are placed in multi-age level classrooms with age and gender balances and range in size from 8 to 29 students: 14 months–3 years (12 per class); 3–6 years (PK–K 29/class); 6–9 years (1st–3rd grade 22/class); 9–12 years (4th–6th grade 28/class); 12–14 years (7th–8th grade 43 in total); 14–18 years (9th–12th grade with class size from 8–26). We will enroll another 10 students in the youngest age group between January and early April to end the year with 492 students.

The student body is ethnically diverse with 49.7% non-white students. This is comprised of Asian American (20.7%), Multi-racial (13.7%), Hispanic (9.5%), African American (4.6%) and Middle Eastern (1.2%). Since 2008, the overall diversity rate increased from 38%. Our diverse community is seen as another positive attribute of the school. Post Oak is fairly balanced in terms of gender with 233 boys and 249 girls.

The purpose of the admission office of The Post Oak School is to recruit, enroll and retain mission appropriate families and students ages 14 months through high school. Throughout the six-month-long admission process, we endeavor to find families who have demonstrated a desire for, an understanding of, and commitment to a Montessori education. We actively seek families, no matter the age at enrollment, who are committed to a Montessori education through high school. The admission process varies little from level to level: school tour, application, and review of school records, interview/Admission Day visit, and admission decision. However, each component looks different at each level, has its own admission committee, and its own individualized way to evaluate an applicant. Important components of the admission process are our Prospective Parent Classes, as well as other parent education opportunities offered throughout the height of the admission season (September through February). These programs help parents to understand our school so they can make the most informed decision about their child’s school as soon as possible.

Financial aid awards are made only after a family has accepted an enrollment contract and submitted a deposit. In 2008, after the economic downturn, the board approved a large and necessary increase in need-based tuition assistance in order for Post Oak to remain committed to families who wanted to keep their children in school but who perhaps were unable to afford the tuition. Need-based tuition assistance is awarded to 17% of our student body and 48.7% of that aid was awarded to non-white students. For the 2016–17 school year Post Oak awarded \$1,154,651 (11.4% of our operating budget) to 82

students. We offer a merit scholarship for our High School applicants who have a special interest or talent. This award is granted each year provided the student remains in good academic standing.

The student selection process is a collaborative effort between the teachers, division directors, and the admission director. In the Young Children’s Community, students are selected and placed in classes based on an age and gender balance. There are no interviews, tests, or evaluations for these children. Current families have priority in the admission process and therefore, approximately 25 percent of outside applicants are enrolled in the YCC each year. In the Primary level, nearly 50 percent of accepted students are enrolled. There is a great demand for children for our Primary Home Environment and due to limited space, we are unable to offer an enrollment contract to every student.

Academic abilities are determined during the admission process and include teacher recommendations (if a child is currently enrolled in a school), prior year and current year report cards or transcripts, standardized test scores, and a parent questionnaire. Children from 3 years old through high school spend time in our environment; the youngest have around 45 minutes and for grades 1–12 a visit for an entire school day.

During the application process we request from parents any formal testing that demonstrates a need for accommodations. If the accommodations are ones we can meet, we will continue with the admission process. It is our goal to enroll students who can succeed in our school and who can benefit from the Montessori environment without disrupting the work of other students. Post Oak employs a school counselor and has a working relationship with a speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist and tutor, who use space at school to work with individual students. Many accommodations can be met, if the student can successfully navigate the Montessori classroom.

We continue to connect with families after enrollment with a New Parent Welcome Reception, orientation meetings by levels in the spring, and match current families with new families as hosts/mentors. Each summer we have a transition to elementary summer class for those entering 1st or 2nd grade. This gives those students coming from our own Primary classes, as well as those students coming from another school, a chance to see this new and exciting environment. Our children 14 months to six years are offered a walk-through the week before school starts.

We employ a staggered start to the school year for students of all ages. New students entering YCC meet their teacher at

their home for a Home Visit; this introduction in the student's most comfortable environment aids in a smooth transition to the classroom environment. These students start prior to returning students in those classes to help the new students acclimate to their new classroom and to have the undivided attention of the teacher. In contrast to the youngest children, the Primary and Elementary students return ahead of the new students so they can re-acclimate to the environment and re-connect with their teacher and the other returning students. Middle and High School students begin one week ahead of the rest of the student body.

The attrition rate for the 2015–2016 school year was 15% school-wide, while the 5-year average, 2012–2016, was 18%. We attribute the slightly higher 5-year average to the fact that in the first three years of the High School, the mediate retention rate from 8th to 9th grade was 21%. Attrition in the Elementary, specifically K–1 and 1–2, has been a concern for the past two years. The mitigation of attrition at this level has been prioritized.

Since we opened the High School program in 2012, we have between six and seven High School Admission Open Houses each year. These are the only formal open house we have, as the lower school (Young Children's Community through Middle School) continues to provide small adult-only tours with the admission director.

Our commitment to excellent, authentic Montessori education at all levels brings referrals from current families, parents' research through the Internet, and relocation agencies in Houston and nationwide. The High School has an advertising budget that includes print media (Medical Center magazine, regional magazines, posters and post cards), social media (Google ads) and radio ads (KUHF) to promote High School Open Houses. These efforts are successful and we do plan to continue advertising for the High School in this way. Additionally, we meet with K–8/K–12 Independent schools individually to educate those high school counselors or middle school principals about Post Oak High School.

We continue to offer the following Prospective Parent Classes to all prospective parents six different times during the admission season: Montessori 101; Partnership Agreement; Montessori at Home; Learning for Life. Parents of primary-aged children gain priority in the admission process if they participate in these courses. These classes are not required and if taken do not guarantee admission. Rather, we suggest that these classes are the best way for families to learn the most that they can in order to make a most informed decision about enrollment at The Post Oak School. Other parent education opportunities include: Coffees with the Elementary Director where specific issues related to Elementary are discussed; High School Open Houses; parenting classes offered by our Bissonnet Campus and Museum District Campus counselors; F.I.S.H. (Families Integrating School and Home). These are not part of the Prospective Parent Classes, but we do look at the attendance

to help us measure a family's level of commitment to Post Oak and Montessori education.

After first grade we have far fewer Elementary applicants each year. This is because transition years are Kindergarten/first grade, sixth grade, and ninth grade. Since we began offering the prospective parent classes and the opening of the High School, we have seen an increase in retention in the upper grades and therefore have few, if any, spots available in the Upper Elementary classes (4th–6th grades). Finally, we have seen an increase by nearly 100% of inquiries since 2013 to the Middle School.

Alumni Community

The Post Oak School works to maintain a connection with all alumni. This accomplishes two things: first, it creates an extended network of people that help each other both personally and professionally; second, it helps future fundraising efforts when alumni are in a position to support the school. Post Oak alumni are devoted to the school and keep relationships with faculty and staff.

Since 2009, the school has scheduled one annual alumni event—Alumni Night. At this evening event, current and prospective families are invited to hear from and ask questions of an alumni panel. Prior to 2009, there was also an alumni/staff basketball game in late fall for high school and college-aged alums to engage in some lighthearted and fun competition with faculty and staff.

Alumni record keeping begins in our SIS, Senior Systems and is maintained by the development director. For four years the school had an alumni coordinator position. That position was responsible for the acquisition and retention of alumni data, along with building relationships with those who left the school. In 2015 that position was eliminated due to budget cuts.

The school traditionally sends gift packages to college students during the fall of their freshman year. This includes Post Oak

School swag, treats, gift cards and a handwritten note congratulating students on their next big adventure.

As Post Oak introduced a new High School division back in 2012, starting with just a freshman class and adding a grade per year, the need for a more active and dynamic alumni program became clear, especially as the first group of seniors graduated in 2016.

In 2014, we hired a part-time college counselor, who has built relationships with our students as they trudged through the college admission process. The college counselor meets regularly with students as soon as they enter the school. She learns about them, their interests and helps guide them to colleges that might be a suitable match.

In November, 2015 we hired an associate admission director for Middle School and High School. In addition to the admission duties, (inquiry through matriculation), this staff member meets and works directly with the students even prior to the first day of school. She has also built relationships with all students, and as a former Montessori teacher, has a unique perspective on these students as human beings. This too, helps to build and maintain a rapport with the students. This person has taken the lead on alumni relations during the 2016–2017 school year.

Strengths

- Post Oak alumni are devoted to the school. This leaves a lot of room for potential support.
- The associate admission director has built excellent relationships with the students at the High School and therefore will continue to build on those relationships as they graduate.
- The development director has also built a rapport with the parents of our alumni. That too, helps to maintain the familial relationship well after a student has left the school.
- The head of school spends many hours at the Museum District Campus and has built her own relationships with parents and students alike.

Challenges

- Creating an alumni program that continues to honor those who “graduate” from the lower grades while building new momentum for our new high school graduates.

Plans and priorities

- Engage the associate admission director as the alumni liaison.
- Create a detailed program of activities throughout the year that would maintain relationships with alumni and help current students understand the benefit of staying connected to the school.
- Schedule time and devote resources toward the collection of data and record keeping on where our students attend college and what they are doing beyond college or perhaps graduate school.
- Begin “touch-points” much earlier both with parents and with students during the admission process.
- Work with students to create an alumni event that would attract both recent graduates/alumni as well as those from prior years.
- Consider creating an official Alumni Organization.
- Work with the development director and college counselor on planning activities that promote alumni support.

- Research best practices in Alumni social media as directed by the school rather than keeping track of unofficial alumni groups.

SUBMITTED BY:

Vivian Blum, Admission Director

Christina Kopanidis-Cantu, Development Director

Tamara Basham, Associate Admission Director for Middle
and High School

Parent Community

The Post Oak School's parent community is notable for its dedication, enthusiasm, and commitment to the life of the school. Parents are knowledgeable about the school's philosophy, supportive of its mission, and feel personally invested in the school's continued success. As a whole, the parent community is very involved in the daily life of the school, as well as in shaping and supporting its long-term goals. The parent population is richly diverse, which reflects the greater community in which the school resides.

When a child enrolls in The Post Oak School, that child's family is paired with a mentor family who can help ease the transition into the school community. These matches are made thoughtfully, and it is often the case that these relationships continue, with mentor families becoming new families' first Post Oak friends. New families are also welcomed to the school at the beginning of the year in a reception with faculty, staff, the parent association chairs, room parents, mentor families, and event chairs.

All families receive a calendar and the Family Handbook, which covers everything from carpool procedures to overnight trips. Parents use this handbook as a resource throughout their time at The Post Oak School. Once the school year begins, Post Oak publishes a monthly newsletter that includes not just announcements of upcoming important dates, but also in-depth articles about education, raising children, and school initiatives. This newsletter is sent home with children and also delivered online. Additionally, the school administration sends out an email each week with calendar updates and reminders. Individual teachers send out newsletters specific to their classrooms, and room parents email important reminders when appropriate. Each carpool line features a bulletin board to promote the week's big events, and social media posts spark excitement among parents and students.

When the school introduces a new program or makes a major announcement that will affect the life of the school (such as a new head of school search, construction projects, or new standardized testing protocols), parents are given the opportunity to attend community meetings on those topics. The school makes an effort to hold multiple meetings at different times of day, as well as provide childcare for evening meetings, to allow for attendance by working parents.

Finally, teachers conduct parent-teacher conferences twice a year, during which parents have the opportunity to discuss their child's progress and education with the teacher one-on-one. Teachers and division directors make themselves available for meetings with parents and respond to messages via email and phone calls. In the High School, students are assigned an advisor who remains with them throughout their four years. The advisor's role is to serve as an advocate for the student as well as the liaison between teachers and parents.

Volunteer opportunities abound. All parents are automatically members of the Post Oak Parent's Association (POPA). This group, which coordinates volunteer efforts on behalf of parents and helps to foster community spirit and involvement, meets once a month to help prepare classroom materials for teachers and also sponsors events throughout the year. Similarly, the Dads' Club is a community group tailored to providing special opportunities for fathers to get involved. Room parents on the main campus support teachers and also host informal social gatherings that range from camping trips to playground gatherings. Room parents at the High School level host a Fall Social off campus for parents and faculty to kick-off the school year. In addition, the school hosts an end-of-the-year barbecue at the High School for parents and faculty.

Each new school year begins with a "Volunteer Coffee," during which parents learn about and sign up for volunteer opportunities. To make use of the various talents of the parent community, there are many different ways for parents to volunteer, such as helping students check out books in the library or assisting the coaches of the Bearkats sports teams. The school also offers volunteer opportunities during the week and weekends, so that working parents can get involved. Every year, The Post Oak School puts on a number of events that are hosted and chaired by parent-volunteers. These events, which include an all-school welcome dinner, Field Day, Book Fair, and a biennial gala, all offer many opportunities for volunteers. At the classroom level, volunteers help to prepare monthly luncheons with elementary-age students, share their cultural traditions with students of all ages, call other parents on behalf of the annual fund, and chaperone field trips. There is never a lack of opportunity for parents to be involved.

Given the rich diversity of the parent community, the school must communicate well with working parents and stay-at-home parents, tech-savvy parents and not-so-tech-savvy parents, as well as connect with those parents who want to be heavily involved and those who do not. Moreover, given that its students range in age from 14 months to 18 years, the school recognizes that the type, frequency, and subject matter of information desired by the parent of a young child differs greatly from that desired by the parent of an elementary school student or teenager and tries to accommodate those different needs.

For example, the addition of the High School presents a new challenge. Specifically, since one of stated goals of the Post Oak High School is to foster student independence, students are expected to take responsibility for staying informed; on the other hand, the school has a vested interest in making sure that parents receive the information they need. There is the additional challenge of trying to create a unified school with two campuses each with different student age-ranges. The school is mindful of the need to balance these interests.

As shown in the survey offered to all parents as part of the self-study, overall, parents give the school high marks for communication. They agree that the means for individual communication between parents and the school are well-articulated and effective, and that communication from the school to parents is timely and informative. Furthermore, parents feel that communication from administrators, faculty, office staff, and other school personnel is courteous, positive, and constructive. Finally, parents overwhelmingly report having a high degree of trust in the school and feeling appreciated for their support.

PRESENTED BY:

Jennifer Chavis
Stacey Martin
Nicole Pedersen
Alison Wong
Christina Cantu

School Advancement

Post Oak's mission puts the student at the center of all we do. The Development Office works to raise funds and strengthen community to support and further our mission. We combine general fundraising efforts with volunteer coordination, community building, communications, database management, and alumni relations. Over the past 10 years Post Oak has had a development director, a communications coordinator, and for four years a development coordinator who managed events and the alumni program. The development coordinator's position was eliminated and, following the guidance of Independent School Management (ISM), it is being replaced by a development assistant with a heavy emphasis on database management. This office works regularly with parents, trustees, students, faculty, and the broader community.

The school has two major fundraisers: the Post Oak Annual Fund and our Biennial Gala. Strong support from the parent body has led to consecutively successful annual fund drives over the past 10 years with one dip during the public-phase-year of our capital campaign. With over 93% parent participation each year, we far exceed the national norms identified by NAIS which hover around 65%. Unlike many of our peer schools, there is no involvement by development in the admission process or directly after enrollment. Parents vocally appreciate the fact that Post Oak is not a heavy-handed solicitor for donations. This aligns with its mission focus, Montessori values, and egalitarian ethos. However, the lukewarm attention given to the donor cycle and major gift strategy affects the fundraising process for the whole school. A shift in this effort at the board level and from the development office is an opportunity for increased giving and for establishing a more advanced fundraising program to better support our mission.

The Biennial Gala has been a high point for the school community both in fundraising and in volunteer involvement. This is an opportunity for the community to raise significant funds and celebrate the school in a visible way, especially through the presentation of student-created artwork in the live auction. Maintaining an alternating year schedule keeps the event interesting and prevents volunteer and donor burnout.

In the fall of 2011, the school launched the Big Work Capital Campaign, the second such campaign in the school's 50+ year history. Sterling Associates was retained as a consultant for the campaign. Beginning as a \$6 million campaign that would cover the startup of the High School division and include significant renovations at the Bissonnet Campus, the campaign shifted gears in its third year to take advantage of the unexpected opportunity to purchase a piece of contiguous property on the Museum District Campus and build a new High School building. The goal was increased to \$8 million and a new case statement was created. Through the tireless efforts of the head of school and the campaign's family division chairman, currently over \$6.6 million has been raised by Post Oak families, friends, and foundations. The development office continues to work with trustees on raising the remaining

funds primarily through foundation grant requests. The Big Work campaign has highlighted the need for a board initiated major gifts program that will make future campaigns easier.

The board has been committed to full participation and generous support of each fundraiser, with their contributions totaling 28% of the Big Work campaign and 20% of the annual fund. Fourteen years ago, the board initiated an endowment campaign which has grown to \$2 million. The Board's Development Committee has also done important policy work for the school by writing a comprehensive gifts acceptance policy. For a number of years, the board has discussed implementing a major gifts program. An opportunity going forward is to engage all members of the board in active development work such as annual fund asks or follow up thank you calls. This would nurture a level of comfort in all board members with this type of work which would ultimately lead to a structured major gifts program. In addition, it would allow parents to get to know more of the board members and would positively support our fundraising efforts.

Board support in development's marketing efforts would also be beneficial. With the recent addition of board members who have a background in marketing, it is our hope to leverage their expertise and create a stronger overall marketing program for the whole school.

Student initiated fundraisers are coordinated through the development office. Students are moved to action typically in response to a natural disaster or call to help the less fortunate. The development director uses this as an educational moment to talk with the students about philanthropy and then work with them to coordinate their fundraising effort.

Using the Senior Systems database, development enters and receipts all gifts and maintains a giving history on all constituents. In most cases, contributions are acknowledged in the newsletter and in the annual report. Giving information along with biographical information and attributes are entered into the database to help develop the donor's profile and capture activity and interests in the school. Senior Systems has a specific tracking feature that would be helpful to use in conjunction with a major gifts program. Currently, donor tracking information is not fully captured in the database, which will no longer be an issue with the addition of the development assistant position. This person will also be responsible for generating reports from Senior Systems that will help with annual fund and major gift strategy.

Post Oak holds a number of events throughout the year that are managed by the development office for the purpose of building community and strengthening the relationships with our families. These events rely on the volunteer efforts of our parent body. The Development Office works as the liaison to the parent association and coordinates volunteers for school-wide projects and some classroom volunteering. Many

Post Oak parents have commented that one of the school's greatest characteristics is its parent community and the bonds that form between families. Care will need to be taken going forward to make sure this strong community bond continues to exist on both campuses.

The alumni program has been under the development office for many years and only recently transitioned to the admissions office. It is critical that this program receive more attention and planning as the High School grows and graduates an increasing number of students. There will need to be a dedicated alumni team member to create and maintain a structured alumni program.

The school's communications targets one main audience (current parents), several smaller audiences (employees, prospective parents, former parents, alumni, and more), and makes use of multiple forms of media. The majority of our efforts aim to inform our current parent body of the workings of the school, including events, volunteering and parent education opportunities, classroom information, and more. For this we create a monthly newsletter, *The Post*, with engaging stories from the head of school, photos of students engaged in activities, reports on events, a calendar, and smaller ads for important upcoming events. This newsletter is featured on our website, distributed in paper form to the oldest child in a family to give to his or her parents, and sent electronically to every parent. Parents also receive a weekly e-blast, Post Highlights, to keep them abreast of important weekly events and opportunities, as well as special emails relating to various programs, sports, health notices, etc. These are sent when necessary and timed to avoid inundating and overwhelming the recipient. Our website serves as a resource for parents to visit for information, including the school calendar, forms, publications (handbooks), and more. We also use social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter, for sharing photos, videos, and community-building information. Our annual report is mailed in the fall to give a

state of the school update and to acknowledge and thank all contributors from the previous year.

External communications also include the use of our website and social media. Our website is used as an educational tool for prospective parents, informing them about Montessori, IB, and our school, including programs, campus information, and admissions processes. Due to this fact, the site is rich with information; however, it may not be user-friendly for all audiences. Social media has received more attention in the last few years and continues in importance, with more planning and regular posting. The school has multiple Facebook accounts: a main account for all levels, one for the High School, and one for alumni.

To promote High School enrollment, we run a direct mail postcard and poster campaign in advance of each High School Admission Open House to reach prospective high school families. Radio ads purchased on the local public radio news station support those same Open House events.

The school sends out press releases to local papers for news such as the creation of the High School division, building construction, and student-interest stories. When a story is picked up, it is due to a unique angle (for example, High School students working on an electric car) and this is where we could spend more time creating press releases. We gather any press we receive about the school and update it on our website and share it on social media.

Post Oak's Development Office works to accomplish its yearly goals by working with board members and parent volunteers to help further the mission of the school. There is opportunity for new programs and procedures to be implemented in the Development Office and at the board level. With the addition of the development assistant position, streamlined and efficient processes will be added to the department.

Commendations:

- Development has connected well with parents to help strengthen the community bond and commitment to the school. That connection encourages parent volunteering in school activities.
- All school-wide events are managed appropriately.
- The annual fund is an efficiently run process which includes educating parents on the need for support.
- Communication generated by this department represents the school in a unified and professional manner. Great care is taken in all aspects of school communication both internal and external.
- All gift entry and receipting happens on a routine basis which helps with maintaining a current giving history of all donors.

Recommendations:

- A board-initiated major gifts program will advance our development efforts to a more mature level. Educate nominated trustees on the expectation of participating in the major gifts program.
- Change the priority of the board's development committee to cultivating donors and bringing major gift prospects to the school along with restructuring marketing efforts.
- Set up a process for board members to work on the annual fund by making asks or thank you calls. This will ease them into their involvement in a major gifts program.

- As the school has grown, the Development Office needs to keep in step with increased goals and expectations. A dedicated development planning retreat would be beneficial to review and reevaluate all events and programs.
- Early education of new families about the expectation of supporting the fundraising efforts would dismiss any surprise when they receive solicitations.
- Create a new alumni coordinator position to build a robust alumni program.
- Create a standard process for inputting all donor-tracking data into Senior Systems and for generating reports.
- Research, select, and implement a new website platform with a better user interface that will also be accessed easily by mobile device users.
- Streamline the receipting process to shorten the amount of time between receiving a gift and mailing the receipt.
- Work to maintain a strong community bond between the families on both campuses.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED BY:

Christina Kopanidis-Cantu, Development Director, parent
Elaine Schweizer, Communications Coordinator

School Climate

The Post Oak School is first and foremost a Montessori School. The mission of the school is “to prepare an outstanding Montessori environment that fosters collaboration, cooperation, and peace, and to provide experiences that promote curiosity, inquiry, and engagement. Designed according to the physical, emotional, social and intellectual characteristics and needs of the learner, our methods guide and nurture each individual from infancy to adulthood. The school is grounded in the principles of AMI Montessori education.” Maria Montessori’s philosophies provide not only the foundation of the educational blueprint of the school, but the core ethos of the community. The culture of The Post Oak School may easily be described as a reflection of that mission, and the climate may be described in terms that are rooted in Montessori philosophies. In examining the current school climate, we find a strong sense of satisfaction with the school and a strong sense of positive school identity among the staff, teachers, parents, and students. In our analysis, we discuss the current climate, seek to identify possible challenges to a positive school climate, and outline opportunities for improvement.

CLIMATE AS A REFLECTION OF THE MISSION

As the school has recently faced several important milestones in its history—the graduation of its first High School class, the completion of a major capital campaign and facility upgrade, and the retirement of its beloved head of school and recruitment of its new leader—the community has had the need and desire to assess its culture and to consider the strengths and challenges of the community. In evaluating the climate of the school, we must first reflect on whether our school and our community’s core values are in alignment with our mission. In surveys of our constituent groups, we have found that our community has a strong understanding of the mission of the school, and there is strong agreement that the character of the school reflects that mission statement. As we work intentionally to fulfill our mission and create our Montessori environment, our students, faculty, staff, and parents all contribute to a school climate that reflects the ideals of Maria Montessori. A culture of cooperation, collaboration, respect, empathy, and peace is the hallmark of a Montessori community, and our surveys of our community support the belief that our climate currently reflects these values.

STUDENT COMMUNITY

In the classroom, we see the manifestation of our culture and climate in the everyday behavior of the children. We see them regularly demonstrating grace and showing respect and courtesy to each other and to the adults. We see them operating with a high level of freedom and personal responsibility and working cooperatively or independently with a high level of engagement in their work. The students at all levels regularly hold community meetings to address and solve community concerns and establish class rules. The Montessori principles

create a framework for a safe, supportive environment where learning and self-reliance thrive. We find that Post Oak students exhibit a curiosity about their world, regularly work cooperatively, and exhibit engagement in their work. In fact, in a national study of student engagement, students in the Post Oak High School exhibit levels of engagement well above the national average for public and private school students. In studies of student experience conducted as part of our annual evaluation of the school’s stability, we see that when considering predictability and support, student satisfaction, and student enthusiasm, we are successfully creating a supportive climate with high satisfaction. Beyond the classroom, we see a high level of student participation in school-sponsored activities such as the Bearkats sports program and Montessori Model United Nations, and in school-sponsored events such as Field Day and Book Fair. That participation suggests a strong school spirit and sense of The Post Oak School identity among students. In addition, the school has experienced a recent increase in the retention rates in the Middle School and High School transition points, which also reflects a strong school identity and a willingness to maintain The Post Oak School identity until the college entry point.

PARENT COMMUNITY

Within the parent community, we see a climate characterized by robust support of the school and its mission. Strong attendance at school functions and high levels of participation in annual fundraising events tell us we have an engaged family population. In keeping with Montessori principles in the classroom, we see a strong and collegial community where parents treat each other with respect and are highly committed to the school. Our handbook outlines the expectations of the Parent-School relationship, and our research shows that the community is healthy and supportive of the school and its mission. Beyond the confines of school functions and activities, many in the community choose to interact socially and work together in the outside community, suggesting a strong Post Oak School identity within the parent population. The recent formation and success of a Dads’ Club of Post Oak fathers reflects a healthy parent community that collectively identifies with the school and supports it.

FACULTY AND STAFF

Within the faculty and staff community, the climate is characterized by a strong commitment to the school and to creating a dynamic Montessori environment. Our faculty and staff participate actively and frequently in professional training and development. The Post Oak School and its administration and faculty are considered leaders in the Montessori community and are frequently asked to lead training sessions for other organizations. We see our faculty and staff treating each other and other members of the community with the same respect and courtesy that is expected of the children. Surveys

confirm that the community is operating with a high degree of professional ethics and there is a high level of satisfaction with and among the faculty and staff of the school. Surveys of our faculty suggest that our teachers also find strong adherence to The Post Oak School mission, and see their culture as a “growth-oriented” one.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

According to Maria Montessori, the physical environment of the school is very important in creating an environment for fostering independence, cooperation, and intellectual curiosity. Our classrooms provide a beautiful environment for the children, and the children take responsibility for its care. Over the years, we have been very intentional in our classroom and school design, and in the maintenance of our physical space; the space must provide a space for collaboration as well as an opportunity for independent inquiry, and must be conducive to supporting the physical, social, and intellectual needs of the children. Our surveys indicate satisfaction with our physical space and suggest the physical environment contributes positively to the school climate. The renovations to the main campus, the completion of the new High School building and the transfer of the Middle School to the recently renovated High School building enhance that satisfaction and the school’s commitment to the values of cooperation and respect as facilitated by a thoughtful environment.

Strengths

- We are fortunate to have a strong school culture, deeply-rooted in our school’s mission.
- We are a Montessori school with a school culture that is as deliberate as the environment we create for our students and a climate that reflects positively on the tenets of Montessori.

Challenges, Plans, and Priorities

While The Post Oak School enjoys high satisfaction among its constituent communities and a strong cultural identity consistent with its Montessori mission, there are also opportunities for improvement, especially as we welcome a new head of school and settle into our role as a school that serves a wide range of ages, from infants to young adults. Among the school’s areas for potential growth and improvement:

- Our transition to a new head of school creates the opportunity to revitalize and enhance the school’s culture, while remaining faithful the school’s core values.
- Our relatively new two-campus school configuration and our new role in providing education from infancy to adulthood could present challenges to maintaining a unified school culture.
- The school’s marketing efforts should be updated to reflect the unity of our two campuses. A unified marketing effort

FAMILY-LIKE OR CLAN CULTURE

Beyond its identity as a Montessori school with a deep adherence to its mission, the school also may be characterized by what has been labeled a “family-like” or “clan” culture. As the school began the search for a new head of school, the Board of Trustees retained a search firm that conducted a survey of the community to identify its culture in hopes of finding a new leader that could work successfully in that culture. While our school has characteristics of several different cultures, the firm identified our dominant culture to be that of a “clan,” as described as follows: “A very pleasant place to work, where people share a lot of personal information, much like an extended family. The leaders or heads of the organization are seen as mentors and perhaps even parent figures. The organization is held together by loyalty or tradition. Commitment is high. The organization emphasizes the long-term benefit of human resources development and attaches great importance to cohesion and morale. Success is defined in terms of sensitivity to customers and concern for people. The organization places a premium on teamwork, participation, and consensus.” The report further describes the values of the organization as those of commitment, communication, and development. This external assessment of the school’s culture is consistent with its Montessori mission and reinforces our belief that the school has a positive climate with a strong sense of identity.

- We have a strong identity and with strong support among our student, teacher, staff and parent communities.

would include the use of a single color, logo and nomenclature for the school (i.e., using “The Post Oak School,” as opposed to “The Post Oak School” and “The Post Oak High School”).

- Creating more opportunities to bring the school together across classes, grades, campuses, and levels can help foster and reinforce a sense of school spirit, culture, and identity as enrollment grows.
- Parent participation and volunteerism in the school community is robust; however, the school remains committed to seeking out and increasing parent involvement that reflects the diversity of the parent population (e.g., parents of students from all academic levels, from infant to young adulthood, working parents, and parents from diverse backgrounds).
- A recent parent survey showed some desire among parents for the school culture to hew to a more entrepreneurial

model. That same survey indicated a desire among faculty to see even fewer elements of the “hierarchy” model. Awareness of any divergence between our perceived and our desired culture should be maintained during the coming years, especially in light of the major milestones the school has recently achieved (e.g., the addition of a High School, new facilities, and a transition to a new head of school).

Given the exciting changes in our community, we must remain deliberate in our effort to maintain our positive climate and must continue to monitor that climate and anticipate our challenges.

CONTRIBUTORS

Author and Committee Chair:

Katie Orr, Board of Trustee and Parent

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Christina Cantu, Director of Development and Parent

Simran Sood, Lower Elementary Teacher and Parent

Stacey Martin, Post Oak Parent Association Chairperson and Parent

Jordan Penchas, High School Student

Duaa Faquih, Middle School Student

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Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument, Post Oak School (October 30, 2015)

Diversity, Equity, and Justice

The 2014 Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey, published by Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, named Houston “the single most ethnically and culturally diverse large metropolitan region in the nation.” The Post Oak School community not only reflects that diversity, the school’s culture and curriculum celebrate that diversity and provide a bridge of learning and opportunity to connect the students to the richness of their city.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND JUSTICE AT THE CORE OF THE MONTESSORI CURRICULUM

The school’s Montessori philosophy embraces diversity of culture, diversity of learning, and the diversity of individual students, and provides a curriculum that seeks to illuminate those differences. From the moment one enters The Post Oak School and sees the flags representing the 45 home nations of our families prominently displayed, one can begin to understand the school’s deep commitment to diversity. Entering the classrooms, one begins to see the culturally-sensitive curriculum in practice. On any given day, one might see Primary students learning the world’s geography while working with the pin maps, or elementary students setting up a traditional Mexican *ofrenda* in celebration of *Día de los Muertos*, or a young Jewish student preparing a traditional Passover Seder to share with his fellow students. In Middle School, one might see a lively discussion among students after a field trip to houses of worship representing a diversity of religions, or during the reading of a carefully-selected novel representing a new perspective from a far-away culture. In High School, where the International Baccalaureate curriculum blends seamlessly with the Montessori philosophy in presenting a world perspective and a culturally sensitive approach to learning, one might witness a gathering of students preparing a presentation for their World Politics class, or hear students sharing presentations in Chinese or Spanish on cultural traditions in those countries. Strong curiosity, independent thinking, respectful action, and a commitment to peace and cooperation are the hallmarks of a Montessori education, as they are the precursors of cross-cultural understanding.

SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING EQUITY AND JUSTICE

At all levels, students are encouraged to get out into the world and participate in the diverse community, whether through community service, planned learning excursions, or internships. Faculty advisors in Middle and High School help support students in meeting the individual challenges they may face in the classroom, and regular community meetings help ensure justice in the community from the earliest ages through High School. The classrooms are designed to support opportunities for students to share what they know with each other and to interact with the community. Educational materials are chosen to reflect diverse views, and are carefully curated to

help students develop analytical and broad world-base thinking. Library resources are rich with culturally diverse materials and, at the higher levels, students are encouraged to take advantage of the depth of resources offered by the libraries of Rice University or the University of St Thomas.

Apart from celebrating cultural diversity, the Montessori philosophy also supports the differences in individual learning styles and needs, by allowing the choice of activities within a prepared environment beginning in the earliest ages. Students are allowed to develop at their own pace within the appropriate level of development, to work independently or collaboratively, to follow their passions and to be true to themselves, while being treated with kindness, respect, and acceptance. They can expect respect, kindness and acceptance—core values of the Montessori approach and The Post Oak School.

In addition, faculty is supported and encouraged to participate in professional development opportunities, both in-house and external, designed to better support the diversity in their classroom by furthering their knowledge and expertise about socio-economic, religious, ethnic, and gender issues. The school counselors are available to assist students, faculty, and staff with challenging issues, including those related to gender or diversity issues.

Beyond the student and teacher’s experience, opportunities abound for the entire community to improve its cross-cultural competencies. Parent education sessions, community cultural celebrations, and parent participation in presentations in the classrooms are plentiful and well-attended. As the community is ethnically and culturally diverse, every community gathering presents an opportunity for improving one’s cross-cultural competencies

THE MAKE-UP OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

A key source of diversity learning in the Post Oak community is the community itself. While 50% of the current student body is comprised of Caucasian students, the remaining 50% is comprised of Hispanic, Asian-American, African American, Middle Eastern, and multiracial students. Among Houston Area Independent Schools who track and report the racial and ethnic makeup of their populations, The Post Oak School ranks as one of the most racially-diverse. This high diversity ranking represents an increase in diversity within Post Oak over time; in 2005, only 28% of the school’s students were non-Caucasian, and in 2008, only 38% were. The Post Oak School also strives to maintain a gender balance, and currently enrolls 233 boys and 249 girls.

Financial aid plays a part in promoting not only socio-economic diversity within the community, but often ethnic diversity as well. Approximately 17% of Post Oak students receive some form of financial aid, and 45% of those receiving aid are of a diverse background. This percentage has increased

over time; in the 2005–2006 school year, only 10% of students received financial aid. Financial aid is also an important means of attracting faculty and staff, thus playing a role in promoting diversity of students and staff. In the future, a source of sustained or increased financial aid may be a vehicle for supporting diversity.

Currently, 64% of the teacher population is Caucasian, while the other 36% is Non-Caucasian (African American, Asian American, and Latino/Hispanic origin). Clearly, the diversity of the teacher population does not reflect the diversity of the student or city population; it also reflects the low rates of diversity in the teaching profession. However, given The Post Oak School's stature as the premier Montessori facility in the nation, the school is able to recruit faculty and staff from diverse locales. Assistants in the Primary and Elementary levels assist with teaching foreign languages and are often of Hispanic descent, increasing diversity in classroom leadership. Currently,

59% of the assistant population is of Latino/Hispanic origin, and only 41% is Caucasian. The administrative population is 75% Caucasian, and only 25% come from ethnically-diverse backgrounds. Overall, the percentage of Caucasians in the total staff population is approximately 58%, while approximately 42% is of non-Caucasian heritage.

The makeup of current Board of Trustees for the 2016–2017 school year included 65% Caucasian and 35% non-Caucasian, and a gender makeup of 53% men and 47% women. The Board make-up in 2005 included 75% Caucasians and 25% non-Caucasian, and 57% male and 43% female. The current Chair of the Board of Trustees is a woman and the Chair-Elect is of Hispanic descent. As part of the process for identifying potential new Board members, consideration and attention are given to finding candidates that bring important strategic

Strengths

- Sensitivity, understanding, and respect for diversity and individual differences are part of the core Montessori and IB curriculum.
- Enrollment of students from traditionally-underrepresented groups has increased to 50% in 2016 from 38% in 2008, 28% in 2005 and 21% in 2001.

Challenges

- Although enrollment of families from diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds has increased, it does not reflect the ethnic diversity of the city of Houston at large. Data suggest low enrollment of African American families (4.6%) at the school. In addition, socio-economic diversity remains low.

competencies, but also to bringing diversity of thought and perspective, including ethnic and gender diversity.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

In recent surveys of the school community as part of the ISAS self-evaluation process, parent and staff indicate that the attention given to addressing the needs of students, families, and faculty of diverse backgrounds has been effective. In the surveys, community members expressed their belief that the school is welcoming and inclusive of students and faculty, and that there is a sufficient range of activities allowing for opportunity for all students to participate. Further, the surveys indicate that the community agrees that the school values and seeks a student body that is ethically, religiously, and socio-economically diverse, and the school's policies are clear and applied equitably and effectively. Finally, the surveys indicate that the parents and staff feel welcome and included. The survey data reflects positively on the school's commitment to supporting diversity. However, voluntary, open-ended comments on the surveys for ISAS, as well as on culture surveys as part of the head search process, reflect concern that the school is not socio-economically diverse, and that much of its diversity comes from the families of staff members.

Also noted in the surveys are concerns that the school may not be meeting the needs of students with learning challenges. Further, feedback from faculty suggest a desire for more support and more training on how to meet the needs of students with special learning challenges while still meeting learning expectations. There is currently no single staff member designated as the coordinator or expert on learning challenges or accommodations. At this time, each division, and often each classroom, handles paperwork, support, and accommodations as it deems appropriate, and there is no coordinated approach to supporting a student as he/she transitions to another level.

- Post Oak is one of the most diverse private schools in Houston.
- Board diversity has increased over time and maintains continued focus on improving diversity in its ranks.
- Survey data suggest strong agreement within the community that the school supports diversity and is a welcoming environment.
- Diversity of the administration and faculty, and to a lesser extent the Board, still remains behind that of the student population and the city at large.
- While the Montessori curriculum was designed for students with learning challenges, and the curriculum provides a means for supporting a wide variety of learning

styles, feedback suggests that the school could improve its approach to meeting the needs of these students and the teachers supporting them. There is no appointed expert or point-person on staff at the school to accomplish this

task. Each division, and often each classroom, is handling paperwork, support and accommodations, as they deem appropriate.

Plans and Priorities

- Continue to monitor enrollment statistics, and develop policies for recruitment of a diverse student body and a diverse faculty, staff and administrative leaders.
- Continue to monitor and survey the community to understand how the school community is performing on important measures and perceptions of diversity and respond accordingly.
- Monitor the impact of tuition rates and financial aid on recruitment and retention of diverse populations, especially economically diverse communities. Develop plan for increasing financial aid as appropriate, and consider the use of endowment funds for this purpose.
- Plan and implement diversity training for Board, faculty and staff.
- Examine the school's response to students with learning challenges, and make recommendations for policies, professional development, and possible additional staff.

PREPARED BY:

Katie Orr, Board Member and Parent

WITH ASSISTANCE FROM:

Vivian Blum, Admissions Director
Jami Sweeney, Middle School Director
Lori Scovill, High School Counselor
Maya Pinto, Upper Elementary Teacher
Lindsay Mistretta, Lower Elementary Teacher

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Houston Association of Independent Schools Heads Group,
“2016–2017 Directory”
The Post Oak School Parent Handbook (2016–2017)
Post Oak School Search Survey for Constituents (2015)
Post Oak School Constituent Survey (2015)

Local Community

As a school with two campuses five miles (15 minutes) apart, Post Oak operates in a series of external communities:

THE CAMPUS IT SHARES WITH EPISCOPAL HIGH SCHOOL

Since 1985 Post Oak has occupied 3.44 acres of a 40-acre campus it shares with Episcopal High School (EHS). At this point, the relationship between the schools is multi-faceted and generally cooperative; however, EHS' campus development continues to erode the long-term facility-sharing benefits Post Oak has enjoyed. For example, when EHS converted its front lawn to a sports field, it ceased granting Post Oak permission to use the field for its annual carnival. In addition, EHS no longer allows outside entities' use of its theater, a change which affected our annual *Cinco de Mayo* performance. At particular risk now is Post Oak's daily utilization of the EHS driveway during arrivals and dismissals.

Since 1985, EHS has been one of a dozen high schools chosen by Post Oak students completing Middle School. During the period from 2003–2012, 48% of Post Oak eighth grade students matriculated at EHS; 10% went to SJS, the second most popular destination. Since opening Post Oak High School in the Museum District, that rate has dropped to 24% and our High School has surpassed EHS as the first choice high school for Post Oak eighth graders. Given the four-year trajectory in this data, we expect to see this impact amplified over the next several years, as ever-smaller numbers of Post Oak eighth grade students enroll at EHS. Since the numbers are small (an average of five students per year), the impact on EHS will be more symbolic than material.

OUR TWO IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORHOODS

The Bellaire campus is located at the intersection of Loop 610, Highway 59, and the West Park Tollway—a key highway juncture in Houston. While access and proximity to these highways is an asset, it is also a vulnerability. For example, the school's emergency plan outlines responses to a potential chemical spill on the highway or on the railroad line one-quarter mile to the east. The most recent incident of this type occurred in 2011 on the feeder road for Loop 610, within one mile of the school.

The immediate neighborhood includes EHS, and directly across Bissonnet Street, the now vacant Mandarin Chinese Immersion Magnet School. HISD's plans for the campus are not known at this time. To the south of the Mandarin School is Feld Park, a Bellaire community park. Post Oak Middle and High school utilizes the field for flag football and soccer games.

The neighborhood includes a number of small businesses as well as larger office buildings. The Neihaus Education Center

is a nearby resource that Post Oak teachers have utilized for training in reading, spelling, and learning differences.

There is also a small housing development across Avenue B whose residents are keenly aware of the school because of traffic congestion associated with daily arrivals and dismissals. Three years ago the side streets were posted "parking by permit only" at the request of the residents, a restriction that has further constrained visitor parking at the school.

The Museum District campus is located at Montrose and Hwy 59 at the gateway to the Museum District. That location was chosen for the High School so that the museums and cultural institutions would be immediate resources to students and faculty. The Middle School relocated to that campus in August 2016.

Although a vocal minority of residents were initially suspicious of the high school, our current relations with the Museum Area Municipal Association (MAMA) neighborhood association are open and constructive.

THE CITY OF BELLAIRE

The main campus is located in Bellaire, a semi-autonomous city of 15,000 surrounded by the city of Houston. The school is served by Bellaire Police and Fire Departments and Bellaire city government has local authority in matters relating to building code, health inspection, traffic regulation and safety. A plurality of Post Oak families live in Bellaire.

THE HOUSTON METROPOLITAN REGION

Post Oak's circle of families is limited in very practical ways by the sheer size of the Houston metropolitan region as well as its well-known traffic congestion. Though families come from as far as Katy, Sugarland, Pearland, Clear Lake, Kingwood and Humble, most live within five miles of the school.

Houston provides enormous opportunities as a learning laboratory for Elementary, Middle School, and High School students who visit museums, parks, businesses, houses of worship and centers of government. Furthermore, middle school students have worked with at least a dozen social service agencies in community service outings on a weekly basis. In addition to all of the above named activities, individual high school students are paired with experts in the Museum District for long-term mentorships.

THE LOCAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Of the 83 members of the Houston Association of Independent Schools (HAIS), 30 are located within five miles of the Bellaire campus; 17 are within five miles of the Museum District campus. The school is located in a highly competitive educational environment.

Administrative staff, including the head, CFO, development director, admission director, IT specialist, and division directors are active in the various sub-groups of HAIS.

THE STATE OF TEXAS

The state of Texas defers accreditation of private schools to various associations such as ISAS under the aegis of the Texas Private School Accreditation Commission (TEPSAC).

In addition, the school is licensed by the AMI Teachers of Texas (AMITOT) under the authority of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS) which regulates early childhood programs as well as day care. The school's Young Children's Community (YCC) programs fall under TDFPS and AMITOT jurisdiction.

THE SOUTHWEST REGION OF THE UNITED STATES

The school references the southwest region primarily through its association with ISAS.

THE LOCAL MONTESSORI COMMUNITY

There are 110 schools in the Houston metropolitan area that identify themselves as Montessori schools. Four of those schools are Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) schools. Since there is a well-established American Montessori

Society (AMS) training center in Houston, AMS has a larger presence than AMI. AMS accredits thirty schools in the Houston area. There are three Montessori programs in the public sector (which are feeder schools for Post Oak High School) and two Montessori charter schools.

THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MONTESSORI COMMUNITY

The school has been affiliated with the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) since its founding in 1963 and is one of the most prominent Montessori schools in the world. All of the classroom teachers are AMI trained and the school operates the Houston Montessori Institute teacher training center under the authority of AMI. However, the school withdrew from the AMI school recognition program in 2013, and is working with the Montessori Peer Review Council to establish an alternative to that program.

OUR PRESENCE ON THE INTERNET

We acknowledge the internet as a virtual community. Most prospective parents search the internet and access the web site to learn about the school. We rarely have prospective parents request print information to learn about the school. The web site was redesigned since the last self-study and is ready to be redesigned again. The school has an active social media presence (separate postings for all-school and High School on both Facebook and Twitter), though we feel we could do more.

Strengths

- Location. The school's locations in Bellaire and the Museum District confer access to clientele, community resources and transportation.
- The proximity to Episcopal High School and the constructive relations between the two schools.
- Post Oak's reputation internationally, nationally and locally.

Challenges

- Space. Two compact urban campuses will always feel constrained. At the High School, there is an immediate need for a gymnasium which will require acquisition of nearby property—and raising the necessary funds.
- Parking. The Bellaire parking lot is too small to accommodate all faculty/staff cars. When there are special events at the school, visitors park along Avenue B and in the adjacent neighborhood.
- Until a Museum District gymnasium is constructed, the plan is to transport Middle School students back to the Bissonnet Campus for physical fitness classes and after-school sports. This is not ideal.
- Split campus creates the challenge to maintain a sense of oneness among faculty, students, and parents; and creates possible chauvinism regarding allocation of resources.

Plans and Priorities

- Complete the construction of the new High School building, relocate the Middle School to the museum district campus, and complete the renovation project on the Bissonnet Campus.
- Create a property acquisition plan for the Museum District Campus, and research options for athletic facility use in the interim.
- Manage the logistics of living with a dual-campus school.

- Build the redesigned web site and review and revise the content to better showcase the local, national, and international recognition of Post Oak.

SUBMITTED BY:

John Long, Former Head of School
Robin Lunsford, Former CFO

IV. Academic and Student Programs

Overview

As the Post Oak mission statement describes, all academic and student programs are firmly grounded in the principles of Montessori as prescribed by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). The school is a prepared environment where students learn how to learn, where subject areas are integrated, and where the development of the person is never separated from the learning activity or academics. The 2–3 year mixed-age groupings create diverse communities where students get the opportunity to work collaboratively and engage fully in the learning process with their peers and their adult mentors. The universality of the Montessori principles make implementation relevant today, as it was in Dr. Montessori's life time. The needs of the students drive the work of the classroom at every level, and their input becomes a learning tool for the teachers.

The YCC and Primary levels are the foundation of our upper programs. Students create their personalities while learning how to work independently and concentrate, while using their hands to learn the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic, and cultural subjects. The Montessori curriculum continues through the Elementary program where attention is also paid to creating a dynamic learning experience. The development of new lessons and activities is constant and the work of the teacher is to inspire deep research into subjects of student interest.

At the Middle School and High School level, the curriculum is dynamic and there is ongoing attention to the development of courses, learning activities, syllabi, and rubrics. At the Post Oak High School, the integration of the International Baccalaureate program allows us to continue the Montessori philosophy, while offering a world class curriculum.

Ever-focused on the development and growth of the students academically, socially, and emotionally, the learning environments at Post Oak reflect the whole mission of the school, but it is within the community of staff and students where you see the crux of the mission in action: an environment that fosters collaboration, cooperation and peace. Post Oak students see beyond themselves and embrace the bigger picture. They understand their need to contribute to society and the responsibility of being a member of the human race.

These reports reflect the work at each level, as discussed through the Montessori lens. In conjunction with the Montessori Peer Review Council (MPRC) the faculty and staff discussed the following areas: *Learning Environment*, *Learning Relationships*, *Learning Activity*, *What the Montessori Teacher Is*, and *What the Montessori Teacher Does*. Although these headings have mostly disappeared from the reports, these areas are represented throughout the program levels.

Young Children's Community

Observations

The children in the Young Children's Communities (YCC) at The Post Oak School range in age from 14 months to 3 years old. There are two half-day programs and one full-day program. All communities are staffed by Montessori trained guides and experienced classroom assistants. We are committed to working in partnership with families to support each area of development for every child—physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.

Our practice is guided by AMI Montessori pedagogy, holding respect for the child at the forefront of all we do. We thoughtfully and carefully prepare our environments, both indoors and outdoors, to meet the needs of the children in our community. We strive to maintain beautiful, ordered and clean classrooms and outdoor spaces. Every aspect of the environment is designed with the children's needs and capabilities in mind. The materials support the child's path toward independence and allow him or her to participate in the daily life of the community, through activities of caring for oneself and caring for the environment. The classroom is a dynamic setting and changes as the needs of the children evolve. The language materials and manipulative activities are rotated regularly and activities for self-expression (music and art) are always available.

Children in the Young Children's Communities are at an age where they are learning to do more and more for themselves. We support their quest towards independence by allowing them to do all they are capable of. Our environments are laid out to support this desire for autonomy, with child-sized furniture and activities specifically designed for independent practice.

The children of the YCC are becoming increasingly aware of others and are learning to live together in community. Equally important to the physical environment (the classroom and the materials), is the psychological and social environment we provide for the children. The adults in each community must be the very best models of language, movement and social relationships. The multi-age community also allows the children to learn a great deal from one another. The young child who first enters the community benefits from having peer role models in the classroom, while the oldest children have the opportunity to experience being a leader and a helper.

Exposure to the Spanish language is a part of each Young Children's Community. Each class has one Spanish-speaking adult, who converses with the children exclusively in Spanish. Every interaction with this adult is a "Spanish lesson" in which the young child effortlessly absorbs this additional language.

Through our observations of each child and of the group, we gain knowledge that assists us in our task of connecting the children to the materials. The prepared environment calls to

the child and we link the child to the environment through presentations of the materials and activities. We allow for self-directed activity and exploration. We support and guide children when needed in social interactions, mediating peaceful conflict resolution. The children are given freedom in the environment, within limits. Clear and consistent boundaries are set in a respectful and loving way.

Every community keeps daily records on paper and digitally (through MRX record keeping). Observations from all members of the community are heard and valued. The adults in the community take a team approach in supporting each child by recording and sharing observations and making plans for each child. We are also flexible as we follow the development of each child and are able to respond in the moment to new interests and spontaneous activity.

Parent-School relationships at the YCC level are strong. We strive to maintain open and honest communication with each family and work in partnership with them to support their child. Post Oak provides a variety of experiences that connect the families to the YCC environment and staff. Home visits are conducted for new children to the community and a "walk through" of the classroom is available for parents and children at the beginning of each school year. For children moving into our communities mid-year, a class visit before their first day of school takes the place of the walk through. We follow a gradual orientation schedule for new children, allowing them to slowly adjust to the new routines of our communities. Host families and room parents reach out to new parents to welcome them to the community and all parents are invited to a classroom orientation at the beginning of the school year.

For parents guided observations of the classrooms are available and observations are allowed and encouraged at any time, from outside our classroom, through an observation window. Our arrivals and dismissals protocol allows us to see the parents or caregivers every day. Each teacher connects to their families through regular class updates and newsletters, including secure web share sites such as Shutterfly. Parents have the opportunities to participate in their child's environment by helping with art projects, gardening and giving presentations. In the spring all new parents are invited to a YCC orientation.

Post Oak provides resources and support for teachers, parents and children, including a campus-based language specialist, a school counselor, and parenting classes, including Parenting the Love and Logic Way®, parent-infant classes, and Redirecting Children's Behavior.

Commendations

- We support the transition from YCC to Primary at the time when the child shows signs of readiness for the next environment, working closely with the Primary teacher, parents and administration to provide a seamless and gradual transition from one community to another.
- The physical safety and security of the children in our care is a top priority. Both the indoor and outdoor environments are safe for the children to explore, under adult supervision, safety concerns, such as playground equipment are addressed immediately, and emergency drills are practiced regularly.
- Professional growth is encouraged and supported. The school sponsors qualified individuals for Montessori Training and funds are available for professional development for all staff at the school.
- All adults maintain dignity and respect for each child and for each other. We are able to see the strengths of each individual and the gifts they bring to our communities.
- There is a strong parent-school connection.
- The YCC has procedures and support systems in place for the children who exhibit behaviors outside the range of normal. Through regular communications with parents we collaborate to formulate a plan to provide optimum support. A language specialist and school counselor are available to provide support to students, teachers and parents.

Recommendations

- In order to improve our own practice and learn from our colleagues and other YCC guides, increase opportunities for observation in other classrooms, both at Post Oak and at other schools, to include identification of areas of growth and an expectation of sharing insights with our YCC colleagues.
- Hire and retain substitutes who are qualified to work with YCC-aged children to ensure that the children of the YCC feel at ease when a teacher or assistant must be absent.
- Provide additional training opportunities for classroom assistants (prior to entering the classroom) such as a foundations course in Montessori Theory and application, so that the assistant will have a greater understanding of the child at this age, and have practical tools to support the children.
- Find ways to offer support to the half-day YCC communities during the transition times of the day, particularly the transition from snack to outdoor time.
- Continue to be proactive in hiring, sponsoring, and mentoring future YCC teachers in order to mitigate the national shortage of qualified teachers at this level.

SUBMITTED BY:

Deidre Brooks, Young Children's Community Teacher, Post Oak parent

Sue Guerrero, Young Children's Community Teacher

Emily Hansen, Young Children's Community Teacher, Post Oak parent

Mirani Smith, Early Childhood Director

Primary

The Primary department at The Post Oak School is committed to following AMI Montessori principles. All lead teachers and three assistants are AMI diploma holders in the six Primary classrooms. One assistant is currently in training at the Houston Montessori Institute. Each class is comprised of one lead teacher and one assistant with 26 to 29 children from ages 2.6 to 6.6 years. Additionally, we have one Primary Home Environment community. This class serves as an environment for children who stay on campus for early morning care, mid-day, and afternoon extended care.

Each learning environment is equipped with a full complement of Montessori materials, as well as plant life, animals, handmade materials, and artwork carefully chosen by each Primary teacher. Outdoor environments serve as an extension of each classroom. Additionally, shared workspace is in each of the two foyers named “the West Pod” and “the East Pod.” There is also a connected space between the two pods called “The Butterfly Garden” where children come for short periods of time to sit, explore, and research. Child-sized tables, chairs, shelves and materials extend the classroom in both the pods and outdoor environments. This extension allows the child greater freedom of choice for workspace and movement. The tangible prepared environment offers “keys to the world” for the young child and provides purposeful activities designed to meet the developmental needs of the primary child.

The department offers a second language, with native Spanish-speaking adults throughout the team inviting children to naturally communicate in Spanish and join in daily small group Spanish lessons.

Both adults in the learning environment take on an active observer’s role. The assistant offers guidance according to each child’s needs, and the lead teacher presents new materials or concepts daily, following the rhythm of each child’s developmental path.

By encouraging exploration, independence, personalized education, and freedom within limits, the child is called to work within the learning environment to “unfold” his potential at his own pace. The pace of the young child is respected with the understanding that the particular learning path of each child cannot be hurried. The rhythm of work is dictated by the child’s freedom to choose throughout the three-hour cycle in the morning and extended day afternoon period. With a learning environment that allows such independence and freedom, the young child acquires the ability to problem solve and develop a better understanding of self, while balancing time within a consistent and predictable place. Each activity in the learning environment has a purpose. The materials are tailored to match the intrinsic rhythm of each child’s developmental path.

In addition to being a mentor, coach and guide, the Primary teacher is also the dynamic link between the prepared

environment and the child. The teacher and assistants observe, guide and nurture each child in accordance with Montessori principles. The adults are trained to be attuned to each child’s unique developmental pace. Specific lessons are delivered based on the child’s maturity and readiness. The teacher pays particular attention to each child’s “sensitive periods” for new lessons, producing a personalized learning experience.

The teacher is conscientious in protecting the work of the young child, diverting interruptions and allowing for deep concentration or “flow” during the three hour work period. The Primary teacher’s astute observation skills allow for knowing a child’s mastery of a skill, need for refinement, or interest in something new. In addition, the teacher actively asks questions to encourage wonder, curiosity, and exploration. Through knowing each child and consistent observation of his interests, the teacher can continue to offer opportunities of challenge with extensions or variations of work.

The adults in the Primary environments nurture the social and emotional development of each child. At the Primary level, during times of discussion or conflict resolution, acknowledgement of a child’s feelings through verbal reflection and dialogue is sometimes necessary. The adult acts as a positive and clear communicator to affirm the child’s successes with optimism. The adults present purposeful “grace and courtesy” lessons and children are given the opportunity to practice these lessons with one another.

The work of the Montessori teacher during the child’s journey through the environment is to plan and present materials unique to each child’s interests, cognitive needs, and pace. The Montessori curriculum spans four main areas, Practical Life, Sensorial, Language and Math, with attention on cultural enrichment and exposure.

The Practical Life curriculum is designed to utilize the child’s attraction to purposeful activity and desire to be a contributing member of his community at home and school. The purpose of these activities support the development of coordination, movement, independence, concentration, order and the development of the will of the young child.

The Sensorial curriculum is designed to use the child’s strong attraction to sensorial experiences. The purpose of the sensorial activities is to strengthen and refine the child’s sensorial perceptions, providing language for each of the perceptions experienced. This area provides the foundation for acquiring abstract principles, especially in math, at a later age and aids in the development of the hand as an indirect preparation for writing.

The purpose of the language curriculum is to provide an environment rich in language and to foster the natural development of reading and writing. The “explosion” into literacy

occurs naturally in Primary if the children are presented with the appropriate tools and experiences.

The math curriculum presents concepts through sequential concrete materials leading to the internalization of abstract concepts. The child is given opportunities to “discover” basic mathematical concepts utilizing the child’s natural inclination to order and relating to real life situations.

Individualized lesson plans based on teacher and assistant observation document the child’s daily work. Each teacher documents and records each child’s progress, development and mastery. The teacher then transfers to the web-based MRX recordkeeping system. This becomes the basis for parent/teacher conferences, and keeps permanent records for the school.

During a child’s time in Primary, a transition usually occurs from the half-day program into the extended-day program. This change takes place between 4 and 5 years of age. To be ready for extended day, a child should be able to communicate social/emotional needs, exercise self-control, and identify feelings with minimum outbursts. The classroom teacher considers each child’s social, emotional and cognitive development to stay for the full school day. Typically a child will be invited to visit the extended-day class for lunch before making a permanent change, at the discretion of the teacher.

A strong sense of community knits each classroom together. Cultural offerings are celebrated in each classroom, connecting the child to the surrounding community. The multi-age

nature of each environment promotes confidence and a sense of self. Children may seek help from each other. As children continue their three-year cycle, each year offers them a new role in this community. A child may enter the class as a mentee and depart a mentor. At the end of the first plane, the child has built the foundation to be a unique individual and has the power to develop and extend his intellect as an independent, social being in the second plane.

There is an intentional Parent–Teacher partnership that cultivates trusting and open communication with parents. This begins with a welcome gathering/orientation for parents of new children entering primary in the fall of the school year for children entering primary in the spring. All children have a ‘Walk Through’ before their first day. Parents and children are invited to see the classroom, meet the teachers and become familiar with the primary community. Teachers communicate regularly with each family via newsletters, email, website, and telephone conversations. There is a commitment to Parent Education in order to offer opportunities for parents to gain a deeper understanding of their child’s social and emotional development and to nurture and support their child with functional independence. Primary teachers host an annual parent education evening, F.I.S.H. (Families Integrating School and Home) meetings are held either monthly or quarterly, parent/teacher conferences are held twice a year and faculty participate in transition meetings with parents of children entering primary from YCC and when a child transitions from primary to elementary.

Commendations

- Beautiful, well-maintained environments that are developmentally appropriate and provide an optimal space for growth and learning.
- Strong mentorship culture, supportive and collaborative department, and a strong internship program to cultivate future teachers.
- Environments are equipped with more abstract and less concrete transitional materials used both in the primary and

elementary communities so that children ready for additional challenges can continue developing their intellect and ability to reason through their use.

- Commitment to accommodate more children in the Primary Home Environment and the needs of working parents. The east pod serves as an extension of the PHE, and one YCC classroom serves as an additional space for the youngest group of children in PHE to have lunch and take a nap.

Recommendations

- Commit to inter-departmental peer observations of other classrooms to help identify the areas in which there should be continuity from class to class, from those that are a matter of the autonomy of the teacher.
- Consider the establishment of a three-year apprenticeship with a matched mentor teacher and intern, to better position the intern for the role of a lead teacher. This more formal process could include goal setting, assessment, evaluation and feedback of the intern’s progress in the areas of classroom management, children’s development, understanding of didactic materials, and parent communication.

- Design and implement a more comprehensive process for the accommodation and documentation of the needs of exceptional children.
 - ♦ Identify strategies for identifying and recording behaviors of concern.
 - ♦ Document the learning accommodations necessary for the child to succeed within the structure and nature of the Montessori environment.
 - ♦ Investigate the use of a nationally normed developmental measurement, such as the Brigance Developmental Assessment Scale to serve as a base for this model.

- ♦ Work with the division director and specialists to develop a common language in communicating challenges and accommodations with the child's parents.
- ♦ Expand list of outside resources for assessment, consultation and services.
- Review and adjust the transition process from Primary to Lower Elementary to include more time visiting lower elementary classes and the opportunity to observe, socialize, play, and work with students who are in their same developmental plane.
- Explore how to coordinate and present the children's cultural celebrations authentically, as an extension of the geography work, and take advantage of the rich cultural diversity of Post Oak offers additional opportunities to present cultural celebrations in a natural manner. This could include: collecting cultural background information, including celebrations and presentations; creating a calendar of significant/appropriate dates of cultural holidays and celebrations of the class and coordinate presenters from a pool of parent volunteers.

SUBMITTED BY:

Cynthia Blessman, Primary Teacher
 Danielle Dalsey, Primary Teacher
 Elizabeth Dickson, Primary Teacher
 Rebecca Duran, Primary Substitute/Intern, Post Oak parent
 Orly Kluk, Primary Teacher, Post Oak parent
 Monica Moreno, Primary Assistant /Intern
 Julie Parraguirre, Primary Teacher
 Mirani Smith, Early Childhood Director
 Tamara Townsend, Primary Teacher, Post Oak parent
 Miriam Winton, Auxiliary Programs Director

Lower Elementary

Learning Environment

In all of the Lower Elementary classrooms we strive to maintain a prepared Montessori environment. Everything within is tailored to support the tendencies and psychological characteristics of children between the ages of six and nine (1st, 2nd and 3rd grades). In Lower Elementary most of the students' work (practice and repetition) happens while using didactic materials designed by Maria Montessori. Once a material is presented by the teacher, students may choose the material during work time to practice its intended use and discover the concept it is designed to reveal. In most cases, more than one material in the class can be used to gain an understanding of a single concept. We also provide lessons and materials that promote work within mixed age groups. The classroom materials are organized by content and follow a logical sequence. The teacher and assistant work with the students to maintain the classroom materials so that they are always clean, complete and ready for use.

As a department we actively promote freedom with responsibility in our communities. The children are free to choose their work, with whom they will work, and for how long they will work on a given lesson. The children are also free from things that would hinder their progress. They are free from the teachers imposing their own schedule and interrupting their work during periods of deep concentration. They are free from rewards and punishments in favor of personal satisfaction and natural consequences. The children have freedom to make decisions because they are capable of choosing for themselves; however they are expected to be responsible with these freedoms.

The children are expected to act in ways that have been modeled and demonstrated for them by the teachers and other students. Responsibility is shown by taking care of the environment, treating others fairly and kindly, and using time effectively. If responsibility is lacking then it is the teacher's job to evaluate how much freedom should be given and to inform the child how she can earn freedoms back.

As guides, our goal is to help each child with her self-construction. We use our lessons, the Montessori materials and the students' desire for social interaction to ignite interest and inspire learning—learning that takes place on their own terms through their own methods and decisions.

LEARNING ACTIVITY/RELATIONSHIPS

In a Montessori classroom, the source of motivation and energy comes from the students. The Lower Elementary classrooms are filled with the students' purposeful movement, their purposeful communication, and most significantly, their choices for activity. By choosing follow up work from lessons, students

practice initiative. Lesson presentation format is what makes choice and initiative possible in a Montessori classroom.

Flexible groupings are used by the teacher for lessons and by students for their follow up work. Although lessons are most commonly presented to groups of 4–8 students, teachers may elect to present a lesson to one student or groups ranging in size up to the entire class. Students receive a wide variety of lessons from every area of the curriculum. Students are selected for lessons based on readiness and interest. Teachers also combine students for lessons who have the potential to support and energize one another. Once a lesson is presented students are expected to engage in practice—follow up work from the lesson which can take a variety of forms. Some students elect to practice alone while others may choose a partner or gather several classmates together for a project. When children engage in group work, it provides an organic way to develop patience, compassion, focus, and teamwork. Calling children who are ready for a particular lesson, rather than by grade level, is yet another way we can truly follow the child and meet her at the point of need.

The children are often encouraged to go to other members of the community if they need help. Each child excels at something and can be a valuable resource to everyone else. While working with peers everyone gets a chance to teach and to learn. If a child is struggling with a particular concept we might pair them with a child who has mastered it or is close to mastering it. The relationship between the two children is strengthened along with their understanding of the concept. To foster these relationships, we as guides model how to actively listen to another person and then respond in a way that is peaceful, cooperative, and in the best interest of the entire community. Talking about issues and teaching the children different conflict resolution strategies enables them to deal with everyday problems in a positive way.

THE MONTESSORI TEACHER

All Lower Elementary teachers have the Association Montessori Internationale diploma for elementary. During this intensive training, teachers experience the lessons that Maria Montessori created for students age 6–12 and create “albums” that serve as both curriculum guide and lesson plan. In addition to preparing the environment, the teacher takes on the roles of presenter, observer, model and resource for the students. We generally keep lessons short and precise, and frequently provide examples of follow-up work, but the decision about how to practice is largely up to the children. Once lessons are presented, teachers observe students at work. Observation enables the teacher to keep accurate records regarding each student's development, provide needed feedback and plan for

upcoming presentations. Careful observation is what empowers the Montessori teacher to “follow the child.”

Because students often mimic the behavior of adults, we are intentional about modeling the grace and courtesy we expect from the children. This includes how we move in the room, the volume and tone of our voices, how we approach conflicts, and our attitudes toward others. We strive for a collegial atmosphere where everyone, regardless of age, grade, or position, is treated with respect and kindness.

The Montessori teacher takes time between lesson presentations to serve as a resource for students. This can take a variety of forms. Sometimes we field academic questions that arise during students’ follow up work. Other times we are there to give a lesson on a topic of burning interest or give a refresher lesson when a child is confused. In the event that we don’t have an answer we act as a guide to where the answer might be found. Because, our role as a resource is not confined to academic work, we are also available to help when conflicts arise or there is a question involving the social aspects of the class. Many classroom decisions are made at the class meeting

Commendations

- We cultivate strong relationships with families through regular classroom newsletters, two conferences per year, numerous parent education events, and by offering a variety of volunteer opportunities.
- All lead teachers have elementary diplomas from Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) training centers, and two out of the four assistants are assistant-interns (trained or in training).
- There is a strong bond between the Lower Elementary teachers through formal and informal meetings where we exchange ideas, share challenges, celebrate successes, and lend support.

Recommendations

- Create a process for identifying and supporting students with special needs. This process should include but not be limited to, the following team members: teacher, parents, school psychologist and division director. This process should result in more timely and effective identification, communication and remediation after someone initiates a student concern.
- Provide training for Elementary teachers so they are better equipped to work with students in the areas of social thinking, emotional regulation, remedial language arts and remedial mathematics. The aim here is to increase the variety of options available for students with special needs and potentially reduce the number of outside referrals for tutoring.

that takes place several times during the week. Although the teacher is present in the meetings, they are often led by the most experienced students in the class. Behavioral expectations, procedures, routines, traditions, conflict resolution and special happenings are all discussed at the meetings. Group meetings are also times for appreciation and sharing of special projects or talents.

We know that most Post Oak parents were not Montessori students themselves so the Lower Elementary teachers make a special effort to communicate well and often. In addition to the two, scheduled conferences per year teachers send monthly newsletters and encourage parents to take advantage of the many parent education opportunities offered by the school.

Parents are invited to observe in the classroom and discuss any observations or questions they may have in a meeting with the teacher, afterward.

We want the parents to not only feel like their child is in a supportive classroom community but in a larger school community that will advocate and care for them.

- Our environments are equipped with beautiful and well maintained Montessori materials that are used by students on a daily basis.
- In addition to class field trips, third grade students have one day trip and one overnight trip each school year. These trips support cohesion prior to their move to Upper Elementary.
- Lead teachers and assistants engage in ongoing professional development.
- There is a high level of horizontal consistency across the Lower Elementary classrooms in the areas of classroom management, parent communication, homework expectations, record keeping and progress reporting.
- Further develop and refine the process of Elementary admissions that was initiated in fall 2016. Our desired outcome is to admit students who quickly benefit from the Montessori program and partner with parents whose expectations align with the school’s mission. We believe we can increase the rate of “good fit” admissions by collecting better information about prospective parents and students and by providing prospective parents the opportunity to gather better information about our program.
- Expand collaboration among the Elementary classrooms. This process will include but not be limited to observing colleagues’ classrooms at work (within and outside of the elementary department), collaborating on departmental projects and encouraging student observation and collaboration within and beyond the elementary department. Our

aim here is to build a culture of collaboration that will lead to an organic sharing of ideas and critical evaluation of our work resulting in more effective, creative instruction and more collaborative, creative work by the students.

- Create and maintain gardens for the Elementary classrooms using the green space at the front of the school. We believe that there is great value to be gained by connecting students to the land regularly and in meaningful ways. These include:
 - ♦ a better understanding of seasons, weather patterns and their impact on living things,
 - ♦ positive peer relationships based on shared, meaningful work,
 - ♦ concrete knowledge of botany, ecology and interdependencies,
 - ♦ an appreciation for the food we need to live and those who provide it,
 - ♦ a sense of contributing to something larger than oneself—altruism.

LOWER ELEMENTARY COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Simran Sood, Lower Elementary teacher & Post Oak parent

Beth Olitzki, Lower Elementary teacher

Anita Taj Mahmood, Lower Elementary teacher

Lindsay Mistretta, Lower Elementary teacher

Jeff Schneider, Elementary Director

Upper Elementary

Essential Characteristics of the Classroom

1. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

A Student-Centered Environment

All three Upper Elementary classrooms exhibit clear characteristics of being positive, diverse, and dynamic learning micro-social environments. The students feel ownership of their classroom and are responsible for collectively establishing and maintaining order in their environment. They work at their choice of activity in freedom of movement and conversation with one another. They assist each other when necessary, participate in peer teaching opportunities or alternatively choose to work in solitude with concentration.

A Responsive, Prepared, Adaptive Environment

The classroom is richly equipped with Montessori materials relevant to the developmental and academic needs of the students. All necessary supplies and resources are also provided for their benefit. A set of 9 tablets (Chromebooks) complete the technology component of the classroom. The purpose of these tablets is threefold: to facilitate the students' keyboarding skills, to provide online resources for research and information and for desktop publishing of their documents. Students use the Chromebooks in the classroom regularly for all three purposes.

To provide for independence in activities of daily living, each classroom is also equipped with microwave ovens, refrigerators, cleaning implements and supplies etc. as needed.

Individual Competence

Students are also given tools for self-organization: the collaborative formation of classroom rules, individual planning of activities through prioritization and consistent support in time-management skills. The students are thus enabled to form and maintain independent and strong work habits with a sense of accountability and responsibility towards their learning.

2. LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS:

Mixed Age Groupings

Upper Elementary consists of the mixed age grouping of students between the ages of 9 and 12 years—equivalent to Grades 4 to 6. Their learning follows a three step process:

- Information through a key lesson.
- Consolidation of that information through follow up work or independent research.
- Application of that knowledge acquired through publication of their work, sharing with a classmate or a formal presentation to the group.

This process provides many opportunities for peer mentoring.

Social Development within Community

To encourage and develop their social and interpersonal skills, students receive encouraging lessons in grace and courtesy, good classroom citizenship, and they conduct regular class meetings as a community, to resolve any issues they may identify in an amicable manner.

Cooperation and Collaboration:

In the absence of competition, students are often found contributing their talents towards collaborative group projects affectionately termed "Big Work." Their cooperation and support of each other's efforts results in the formation of a supportive community encouraging the positive development of individual students.

3. LEARNING ACTIVITY:

Lessons are planned and given mostly to small groups, and sometimes to individuals or to the whole group as needed. Instruction is not limited to but includes the following disciplines: language arts; mathematics; geometry; earth science and geography; botany, zoology and human biology; cultural history including the study of the history of life on earth; art history; music theory and music notation. Large tables and counters in each classroom provide open spaces for collaborative projects or art projects as needed. Careful record keeping is maintained by the teachers as regards the curriculum presented and the level of practice and mastery achieved by individual students.

Lessons are given in an integrated manner as key lessons which open areas of further exploration and individual study by the students. These lessons are linked under the framework of a series of Great Lessons which, told as stories, help to provide the overview the students need in order to form the big picture in their work. In addition, Spanish is taught in the classroom by teaching assistants or a Spanish specialist in two, half hour lessons per student per week. Following a weekly schedule, art and music are each offered once a week by specialists in a 45 minute session. Physical fitness is conducted by our coaches in two, 45 minute sessions per week. The students leave the classroom for art, music and physical fitness.

As a cohesive department, the Upper Elementary students together take a four day and three night trip to a nature reserve to experience various educational outdoor activities in the fall term. The three classes participate in an annual Spelling Bee. The students in the Upper Elementary also participate in an alternating annual Science or History Fair in the spring term to allow for opportunities to focus their interests in related topics of their choosing. They prepare a project with

experiments, models or demonstrations which helps to hone their presentation skills as they share their work with younger members of the community, their peers and the parent community.

Hands-on Experiences and Spontaneous Activity

In Upper Elementary, lessons begin with the use of concrete materials and then, lessons are offered to engage their reasoning minds, logical thinking and burgeoning imagination. Exploration, discovery and resultant spontaneous activity is built into the mode of instruction. Students propose their own projects (collaborative as well as parallel and individual follow up projects) to demonstrate what they have learned and further their learning. The students in all three classrooms are encouraged and facilitated to expand and further develop the “Going Out” program. In this opportunity small groups of students are able to go to resources in the community which can further provide them with firsthand experiences, information and enrichment in the areas of study they have chosen to research; or in the maintenance of their classroom and in the execution of a class event or celebration. These expeditions are planned and carried out collaboratively in a large manner, by the students involved.

Active, Self-Directed Learning

Often the activity they choose to do is more challenging than the teacher would envision, and they delight in executing it, deriving satisfaction from their efforts. Learning is self-acquired and therefore incarnated into the intellect; students are empowered to seek ever increasing levels of competence in their work and the whole community benefits from the collaborative efforts of the students. Not being hampered with pre-determined periods of work, students feel that they are able to enhance their concentration and give full attention to their activity without being interrupted by time constraints.

Freedom with Responsibility

Students are aware that the freedom to choose their activity is not a random desire to do whatever they would like to do; instead it is a purposeful activity to enhance their learning. Built into their choice is also a responsibility to protect and improve the work of their community.

4. WHAT THE MONTESSORI TEACHER IS:

“The teacher, when she begins to work in our schools, must have a kind of faith that the child will reveal himself through work. She must free herself from all preconceived ideas concerning the levels at which the children may be. The many different types of children...must not worry her...The teacher must believe that this child before her will show his true nature when he finds a piece of work that attracts him. So what must she look out for? That one child or another will begin to concentrate.” —Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*

Guide, Mentor and Coach

The teacher often directs the students towards their own success by continuously introducing them to planned lessons

and their materials, while encouraging and engaging their interests. Individual coaching is part of the process as needed, but there is also an awareness of the importance and value of the student’s journey towards independence. “Purposeful work, freely chosen” is the mandate for each child.

Observer

In this environment, the teacher is a trained observer and bases her/his approach to each individual child by responding to their needs as exhibited or perceived. The curriculum is delivered as described, but each child’s learning needs are considered when individual lessons or conferences are conducted to support the students’ strengths and challenges as they proceed along their individual developmental continuum. This process gives rise to many instances of success for each child. Often the planned lessons are abandoned in favor of following a genuine interest to further exploration in an area by the students who want to go deeper in their study.

Resource/Consultant

In the process of delivering an integrated curriculum in a manner that encourages autonomous learning, the teacher becomes a reliable source of information for the student. The teacher is also a consultant who is able to assist the student in the collection of further information as needed. The teacher is seen actively engaging children in the learning process and enhancing critical thinking skills by offering open ended questions when the student is examining a subject of study.

Model

The adults in the room consistently model the behavior they expect from the students. They create an informal atmosphere of trust and sharing. They follow the ground rules, speak and conduct themselves with grace and courtesy, apply logical, fair and predictable responses to all students, introduce and encourage problem solving techniques, and most of all, are consistently approachable without the student feeling trepidation or hesitancy.

WHAT THE MONTESSORI TEACHER DOES:

Prepares the Environment

Not only is the teacher responsible for setting up the classroom with the needed materials and supplies, but, based on the needs of the students the environment has to be maintained in meticulous order with attractive and fresh materials. If needed, materials must be replenished and replaced, so that the students find their environment is tidy, easily accessed and evolving with their needs.

Respectfully Engages the Learner

Three important conditions determine the teacher’s strategy for engaging the work of the student:

1. Knowledge of the developmental and educational milestones the students need to achieve.
2. Faith in the student’s inner desire to learn.

3. Confidence in the transformation which takes place when the whole person is addressed, not just the academic, but the physical, social, emotional and moral aspects of the personality as well.

Builds Parent Partnerships

Building a complete picture of the student in course of development, evaluating the student's progress and communicating this to the parents establishes a dialogue between the classroom, school and home so that everyone concerned works for the benefit of the student's learning. It is an exercise in trust and cooperation. In the Upper Elementary, quite often, the students are also involved in the dialogue so that they are able

to take responsible decisions towards the modification of their work habits and behavior as they mature.

Learns from the Experience and Skills of Peers in the Faculty Community

Teachers at The Post Oak School have the opportunity to observe each other at work at least twice a year and learn from similarities and differences in the community culture thriving in each other's classrooms. Frequent and informative discussions in faculty department meetings keep the conversations supportive to challenges they may be experiencing. A variety of solutions suggested by colleagues will usually help to inspire and nurture the whole faculty community.

Commendations

- The classrooms are prepared, beautiful and well-maintained Montessori environments that support 21st century learning outcomes.
- Students are self-directed, independent learners.
- Students think and work creatively, exhibit critical thinking and problem solving, and collaborate effectively and respectfully with a diverse population.
- The infrastructure of the program provides time for important group collaboration and allows students to 'dive deep' and follow their passions.
- Teachers are integrating technology with Chromebooks without compromising the integrity of the authentic Montessori environment.
- Enrollment in upper elementary is strong. This can be attributed in part to the consistency, longevity and experience of our three Upper Elementary teachers, each of whom has both the AMI Primary diploma as well as the AMI Elementary diploma.
- All three classes have access to highly proficient Spanish teachers who conduct lessons during the regular work periods.

Recommendations

- Create a process for identifying and supporting students with special needs. This process should include but not be limited to, the following team members: teacher, parents, school psychologist and division director. This process should result in more timely and effective identification, communication and remediation after someone initiates a student concern.
- Provide training for Elementary teachers so they are better equipped to work with students in the areas of social thinking, emotional regulation, remedial language arts and remedial mathematics. The aim here is to increase the variety of options available for students with special needs and potentially reduce the number of outside referrals for tutoring.
- Explore going out practices at other similar Montessori schools and develop a program that best supports student learning, independence and responsibility that includes:
 - ♦ In-class process for students
 - ♦ List of available volunteer chaperones not limited to the parent body
 - ♦ Develop a strategy for modeling the process from start to finish.
- Identify strategies to maximize delivery of curriculum while creating more time for "big work" i.e., student collaborative projects to promote teamwork, organization, creativity, identifying and solving problems, self-management, time management and effective communication.
- In order to increase continuity in student learning from Lower Elementary through Middle School, engage in the process of vertical alignment by:
 - ♦ creating time for more intra-level communication with teachers in Lower Elementary and Middle School for the purpose of aligning core curricular objectives.
 - ♦ observing Lower Elementary classrooms and at the Middle School.
 - ♦ revising and enhancing the elementary curriculum standards document, paying special attention to the continuum chart for each content area.
- Create a formal process for teacher presentation of professional development resources and learning strategies at the Upper Elementary level in order to better inspire student work and create a motivated learning environment.
- Investigate and implement an age-appropriate comprehensive reproductive education plan for the Upper Elementary students.

SUBMITTED BY:

Maya Pinto, Upper Elementary teacher

Debbie Nickerson, Upper Elementary teacher

Errol Pinto, Upper Elementary teacher

Jeff Schneider, Elementary Director

Middle School

The Post Oak Middle School, established in 1978, is a two-year program serving seventh and eighth-grade students. The program is an urban-based school blending a core curriculum with community service, occupations, farm and city experience, and a variety of week-long trips as the culmination of thematic units.

The day begins with advisory meetings in which students discuss their plan of work for the day with peers and their advisor. Students then transition into work time which includes lessons in math, language arts, science, occupations, community service, humanities, and Spanish. Some of this student work occurs beyond the classroom in the greater neighborhood and city of Houston. When students are not in lessons, they use the morning time for open work. The focus of the afternoon is shared between an in-depth study of the humanities, physical fitness, art, music, and seminar book groups.

The physical environment reflects Montessori recommendations, with open well-lit areas conducive to cooperative learning and activities. Furnishings in the classroom are modular, encouraging both group and individual work. Shared jobs in the classroom provide opportunities for the students to care for the classroom and develop a sense of ownership and pride for the physical space. A manager program promotes engagement of all of the students in meaningful roles in the classroom. The managers work with a team of students and adults to identify goals and to outline a process for ongoing maintenance of the task.

The curriculum, like the environment, is unique. A comprehensive educational syllabus provides a framework for all work within the Middle School, fostering an interdisciplinary approach to learning. This framework is important in weekly planning meetings to be able to plan an intentional, interdisciplinary delivery of content across instructors. The humanities cycle focuses on the development of human civilization and transitions in human society that examine changing governments and cultural practices leading up to modern day. This weaving of content disciplines culminates here in the various humanities sections. The studies of humanities at the Post Oak Middle School aims to bring to light the ways social, scientific and political structures evolve and continuing evolving, and to highlight the many agents of change throughout history and across academic themes.

The math program begins by explaining the importance and development of mathematical concepts across time and illumination of the numerous mathematical ties to our everyday world. Students then move through strands of arithmetic, measurement, geometry, statistics, algebra and coding. Choice is built into the math curriculum by aiding students in choosing one or more of the strands until mastery is realized.

The language arts program focuses on building skills in vocabulary, creative writing, and analysis, the use of MLA format,

persuasive writing, grammar and essay writing to mention a sampling. Students are led through activities that teach skills that highlight the important aspects of these areas and are then given follow on work that encourages the application of this information. Small group and interest-driven groups are common with numerous writing projects being printed in local papers and school publications as well as presented at bookstores and local theaters.

The Fine Arts program at Post Oak, consisting of Visual Art and Music instruction, places an emphasis on nurturing the student's personal expression, and fostering a sense of belonging in the community—from the classroom out into the world. A commitment from the specialists provides the school with cross-curricular resources. On the main campus, daily Open Studio time affords children and teachers extra time for collaboration and the refinement of projects. At the Middle School, students have specialists available in the classroom for 3 hours one morning of the week and studio time for 90 minutes on a separate day. The Fine Arts work at the Middle School level prepares students to choose a discipline for their two-semester introduction at the High School level, which culminates with the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma options in Drama, Music or Visual Arts during their final 2 years.

Throughout the study of humanities, students are engaged in high-level critical thinking skills that help them construct their worldview. Each unit involves research and presentation efforts, typically in an area of interest they have identified, within the parameters of the course unit. Each unit also involves extensive reading in a variety of genres, with time devoted each week to Socratic-style discussions. Culminating activities are a common strategy for crystallization of this information into the adolescent mind. Examples of these activities include trips to Arizona and Washington, DC; preparation and presentation of a mock trial; and preparation and a culminating competition for entrepreneurship.

Community service receives a significant effort with each student serving approximately 90 minutes of community service a week outside of the walls of the school. Commitments are for a semester length minimum and can continue for the entire year. An emphasis is placed on opportunities that provide direct social contact with a goal for students to be able to comprehend that all of society is interconnected and that their contribution is making a difference. Examples include: working at a local church to feed individuals and families who were experiencing homelessness, providing constructed play opportunities with students in a one-on-one setting at a local early childhood center, providing training with a group of retirees to improve web literacy at a local neighborhood center, and providing movement classes to a group of young children to improve motor skills. Each of these opportunities offers students direct contact with individuals who in some way are

in need of social interaction and assistance, a concept that adolescents can rally behind.

Occupations is a component of the curriculum that requires physical activity, particularly activity that generates income for the students and stimulates an understanding of entrepreneurship. Examples include baking and jam-making, organic gardening, and photography with products being sold at school-sponsored athletic events. This work focuses on tangible product development, marketing, and entrepreneurship

Commendations

- The Post Oak Middle School provides an opportunity for extensive daily interaction with a low student-to-teacher ratio.
- The academic challenges are both rigorous and thorough with an emphasis on mastery learning.
- Students can extend their work by resubmitting assignments after receiving feedback.
- The urban school day schedule enables teachers to provide high-quality, curriculum-driven instruction while affording the students ample time to pursue personal areas of inquiry.
- Thematic based approach demands that students engage in cooperative work in achieving research and presentation objectives.
- Students enthusiastically serve a variety of community service sites on a weekly basis.
- Students experience one week of intensive land-based learning per year including key life skill experiences ranging from food production to meal planning and preparation.
- Students conduct one week of intensive Houston city-based learning per year based on their preferred theme to become better-informed citizens.
- Academic units culminate in week-long trips resulting in the tangible understanding of the topics discussed including

Recommendations

- Explore effective strategies to accommodate a broad range of learners in order to respond to their academic, developmental and social needs.
- Maintain a balance between written work and work that is more technology-oriented in order to provide ample opportunity for handwritten work, teaching strategies for organization, and developing executive function skills like, time management, teamwork, creativity, ethics, resilience, and curiosity.
- Create new options for midday community service at the Museum District campus.

and builds skills that require planning, implementation, and follow-through.

The programming is challenging and individualized taking into account the sensitivity of this plane of development and beckoning the students to work which prompts deep questioning and subsequent problem-solving. This learning is reinforced by natural gratification resulting in tremendous strides in maturity, responsibility, and critical thinking being demonstrated daily by students.

- Texas Odyssey for a study of state history, Washington, DC for studies of peace, and law and government, and Arizona for a study of early civilizations.
- Humanities studies are reading-driven and assessed through student-directed seminar discussions.
- Students participate in daily advisory sessions addressing a variety of developmentally appropriate topics including time management, work completion, and other life skills.
- Two 45-minute student-led parent conferences during the year provide a review of student goals and overall academic and social performance.
- Each student has connectivity to the internet to aid in research, organization, and planning.
- Students use the Google for Education Suite, including Google Docs and Google Calendar, to complete their work both individually and cooperatively in real time.
- Students have access to all of their assigned work and feedback through an online learner management system.
- Students are assessed in reading, language, math and science using a growth-based system called Measures of Academic Progress (MAP).
- Student's executive functioning skills are measured using the Missions Skills Assessment (MSA).

- Optimize the time in the schedule to provide for opportunities for occupations, community service, and humanities outings.
- Creatively explore ways that a kitchen facility for middle school activities such as luncheons, occupations, and micro-economy can be secured to bring to fruition the numerous ideas the students have around culinary arts.
- Secure an athletic center nearer the Museum District Campus to maximize student time and opportunity with athletics and physical fitness.
- Implement a sexual education program at the middle school level.

- Expand and refine the occupations program and maker space and explore creating a shop space at the Museum District campus.

REPORT PREPARED BY:

Zach Belis, MS Teacher

Rachel Chetrit, MS Teacher

Diana Lopez, MS Teacher and Post Oak parent

Monica Lundeen, MS Teacher and Post Oak parent

Patricia Onofre, MS Teacher

Jessica Samano, MS Teacher and Post Oak parent

Jami Sweeney, MS Director & Post Oak parent

Fine Arts

The Post Oak School affirms the value of the Arts in Education, offering all students engagement in meaningful and appropriate experiences in the Performing and Visual Arts, for all stages of their education. The Fine Arts at Post Oak place an emphasis on nurturing the child's personal expression, fostering a sense of belonging in the community from Post Oak and out into the world. A commitment from the specialists provides the campus with cross-curricular resources. On the Bissonnet Campus, daily open studio time affords children and teachers extra time for collaboration and the refinement of projects. The Fine Arts commitment culminates with International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma options in Drama, Music or Visual Arts during the final two years of High School, preceded by a two semester introduction to their chosen discipline. This section of the self-study will focus on Fine Arts at the Bissonnet Campus where we serve students ages 14 months through 6th grade.

DRAMA

The Post Oak School presents opportunities for the child in Drama. This involvement strengthens their ability to speak in front of groups without fear while also strengthening their proprioceptive ability. Of attendant value is the ability of Drama to strengthen their qualities of empathy and tolerance by exercising their ability to see events through the eyes of another person. This is a developing work at The Post Oak School and should see each child with experience in it.

The Young Children's and Primary Communities will gain from work in the guise of play such as: Pantomime; Creative Movement with and without an accompanying beat; Participative Storytelling. This work naturally follows the nature of the children and the many Montessori manipulatives in the classrooms.

In the Elementary division, at least one dramatic/musical production is performed each year, by each classroom, in addition to smaller dramatic exercises. This gives children a chance to participate meaningfully in the entire process of dramatic production, affording them insights on presenting a viewer with a satisfying experience. This participation solidifies prior lessons in teamwork, movement, music and empathy. The productions vary and may include: a student written class play; the demonstration of historical facts to students within the community; a fully staged play or musical. Each production provides students with experiential lessons in body awareness, teamwork, elocution, stage movement, stage etiquette and historical performance practices. Lower Elementary Students will work more from prepared scripts while Upper Elementary students will take advantage of their work periods to write and rehearse scripts to which they perform for their peers or for others.

Drama class is also offered as an option in the After School Enrichment Program.

MUSIC

The Performing Arts (Music and Drama incorporating movement work) at Post Oak places an emphasis on supporting each child's evolving skills of communication and self-expression. A major goal is to foster a deeper sense of belonging to the community as a nurturing environment, with an emphasis on respectful, constructive criticism. The approach incorporates Drama, Movement and Music, with a view to Dalcroze Eurhythmics, Kodaly, Orff Schulwerk principles and the movement work of Phyllis S. Weikart. The music specialist provides the campus with cross and co-curricular resources as well as performance options. On the Bissonnet Campus, daily open studio time affords children and teachers time for collaboration and the refinement of projects.

For children 14 months to 2.5 (Young Children's Community) and 2.5 to 6 years old (Primary), Music lessons are provided by the classroom teacher. Music is presented in the form of a series of lessons for children including:

- Singing simple songs and simple rhythm exercises;
- Naming and recognizing instruments;
- Care for instruments (instruments are kept in a specially designated space in the classroom) and the use of simple musical vocabulary.

In the Primary Community, there is the addition of classroom Bells which the children are free to visit throughout the day to practice a variety of skills.

In the Lower Elementary classroom, all of the above activities are available, with the addition of:

- Weekly, 45-minute Music lesson for each classroom in the Music Room;
- Yearly Classroom Music/Drama project with the music specialist directing or assisting;
- A study of significant Historical and Contemporary Music, Musicians and styles;
- Hands-on orientations to percussion, string and wind instruments;
- Orff Schulwerk music exercises including singing, movement work, instrument playing and music theory and

In the Lower Elementary classroom, instead of bells, there is the addition of Tone Bars which the children are free to visit throughout the day. Students use the tone bars to practice critical listening skills, more complex rhythmic exercises and beginning music notation.

In the Upper Elementary classroom, all of the above activities are available, with the addition of an acoustic piano in each classroom and a weekly, 55 minute Music lesson for each

classroom in the Music Room. An always available option is small group projects with the music specialist.

Optional After School Enrichment Program (ASEP) music activities include: small group lessons in voice or a variety of instruments; string band (ukulele and guitar); performing ensemble.

VISUAL ARTS

Art classes at The Post Oak School guide the child in mastering existing skills and developing new ones, inspiring creativity and self-expression in a dedicated environment. Special projects encourage students to actively explore their inner voice, problem-solve and develop a constructively critical approach in analyzing their own work and that of others.

Art at the Young Children's Community (YCC) level takes place in the classroom, directed by the classroom teacher. In YCC, the children explore shapes and colors through sensory experiences. This work helps the child build coordination of eye, hand, heart and mind.

Art at the Primary level takes place in the classroom, directed by the classroom teacher. In Primary, students work in art through sensory experiences and pictorial, visual imagery. They manipulate materials that help the coordination of eyes, hand and mind. The process of handling paint, pencils for drawing and coloring, clay for sculpting are more of a practical life activity with lots of time for the spontaneous creative process of creating meaningful and imaginative art.

Commendations

- Specialists are passionate, professional practitioners in their areas of expertise. In addition to teaching, they serve as a resource to the whole campus.
- Active and ongoing mentorship between students is an important part of learning in Post Oak art, music and drama classes and is constantly encouraged.
- The campus is fortunate to have a beautiful, organized, well-stocked art room
- Open Studio time gives students time to create and explore visual art, music and drama outside of class with the expertise and support of a specialist.
- Art, music and drama classes are offered every semester as After School Enrichment Program classes.

Recommendations

- Update and align the curriculum for the Visual and Performing Arts for children from 14 months to 6th grade for the purpose of insuring that all practitioners are

During the six years at the Elementary level, in addition to art work in the classroom, students have one 45 minute art class per week with the art specialist. The Elementary art curriculum is divided into 3 portions:

1. Artistic awareness and sensitivity: Students explore natural and man-made objects and environments. The students come to understand elements of design: line, shape, color, form, texture, space and value. They also learn the Principles of design such as balance, pattern, movement, rhythm, emphasis, unity and contrast.
2. Creative expression through art materials and tools: Students are working on the expression of ideas and feelings in a variety of media including but not limited to drawing, painting, sculpting, printmaking, modeling, constructing, paper cutting and folding. Students develop an understanding of the properties of a wide variety of media and practice to increase mastery.
3. Art appreciation: Students view slides and videos and discuss contemporary and historical works of art. They analyze and evaluate the works of art developing an aesthetic sense and discrimination. They learn and appreciate art from different times, cultures and movements.

The art studio is also available part of the day for students who want to work on their projects related to their class work or explore their creative self-expression. The art specialist is available as a consultant to provide assistance, guidance and inspiration to the students.

Classes in ceramics are offered in the After School Enrichment Program.

- The campus benefits from the quality, beauty and variety of artworks produced and displayed by the students throughout the school year.
- New in 2016, there is a spacious, dedicated space for Music and Performing Arts classes.
- There are school owned musical instruments in classrooms and the Music Room, including an array of Orff Schulwerk instruments, to ensure an equity of experiences available to Post Oak students.
- There is a culture of music and drama performance throughout the elementary department. Each class prepares and performs at least one production each school year.

informed and all students have experiences that meet our expectations.

- Conduct an assessment of the digital technology needs in the visual arts based on the school's mission and curricular goals, in order to enhance students' capacity for self-expression and communication.
- Establish and maintain a system for the education and support of Post Oak faculty to ensure that the performing arts are actively supported as a part of daily life at The Post Oak School.
- Provide fine arts specialists opportunities to learn more about the theory and practice of Montessori education so they are better prepared to conduct their classes in a manner that creates consistency in expectations and practice for students.
- Create and implement a plan for family involvement in the Performing Arts.
- Create more outlets for student skills by cultivating performance opportunities in the greater community, including off-campus.
- Connect students with visual art experiences beyond the classroom so that students experience how art is used for connection and communication.

Physical Fitness

The Post Oak Physical Fitness (PF) program supports the school's mission of developing the whole person. PF is valued at all levels of The Post Oak School and is structured as class time for students between the ages of 4 and 16 years. The PF program aims to guide students at all skill levels to develop the competence that leads to confidence which becomes the foundation for lifelong enjoyable physical activity.

Our goal is to help develop and improve locomotor skills, manipulative skills, specific sports skills and individual fitness levels. In keeping with the cooperative spirit of the Montessori classroom, every PF class provides opportunities for students to learn and practice social skills. Students offer and receive support, constructively work through conflict and experience the value of winning and losing with grace. Students learn that good sportsmanship mirrors and supports the positive community values they practice in the classroom, in their families and beyond.

Commendations

- PF class time is offered to Post Oak students from age 4 through age 16.
- PF classes support the school's mission by offering activities designed according to the physical, emotional, social and intellectual characteristics and needs of the students.
- Fitness improvement is made enjoyable through fun games and a variety of exercise activities.
- Consistent with all other classes at Post Oak, PF classes are conducted with multi-age groups and operate in the spirit of encouragement and personal best.
- Bearkats sports teams are open to all students who want to play. If students are in good academic standing, come to

Recommendations

- For the short term, make facility arrangements for Museum District Campus students to attend PF classes and Bearkats practices within a walk or short drive from campus. This will reduce bus time for students and reduce programmatic complexity thereby maximizing time for student engagement.
- For the long term, build a regulation high school gymnasium and weight room complete with separate dressing rooms with showers for Museum District Campus students. Dedicated athletic space will allow for the full development of PF classes and sports programming and maximize scheduling efficiency.
- Recruit and hire PF teachers and coaches as PF and Bearkats programming expands so that students in Middle School

BEARKATS ATHLETICS

An athletics program is offered to 4th through 12th grade students interested in specific sports which currently include cross country, track and field, flag football, volleyball, basketball and soccer. Bearkats practice is held once weekly for 4th through 6th grade students and three times per week for 7th through 12th grade students. Post Oak is a member of the TCSAAL-PSL league which schedules 8 to 10 games per sport. For some sports teams, additional games are scheduled with schools similar to Post Oak which are outside of the league. All practices and games take place after school hours.

Bearkats teams in all sports and at all levels are non-try out. Students in good academic standing who regularly attend practice with good effort will play in every game. Bearkats learn that hard work, self-improvement for the good of the team and honoring the game with good sportsmanship are more important than winning.

practice and put in the effort they will have the opportunity to play.

- On all Bearkats teams, students are taught to honor the sport and develop good sportsmanship by respecting teammates, the other team and the referee.
- Bearkats are taught to win gracefully and lose gracefully. Winning is usually more fun, and we like to win; but the young athlete learns about life by experiencing both outcomes. In any event, winning is a lower priority than any of the preceding values.
- The friendships, teamwork and school spirit forged on Bearkats teams carries over into the classroom.

and High School have instruction and opportunities that lay the foundation for a lifetime of fitness and good health.

- Resurface the gym floor at the Bissonnet Campus. This will provide students increased safety and a playable basketball and volleyball surface for practices and games and also for PF classes
- Begin registration for athletics the spring before the new school year starts. This will enable school faculty, parents and students to better prepare for athletics schedules in the coming school year.
- Refresh the PF curriculum documents from Primary through High School giving special attention to vertical alignment. The aim here is to use the resulting documents along with information from ongoing professional development to inform lesson planning so that students receive

high quality, developmentally appropriate physical fitness instruction throughout their time at Post Oak.

- Prepare the green space at the Museum District Campus for use as an athletic playing field so that it is safe and appropriate for movement activities.
- Update communication materials for the Bearkats sports program and work toward full implementation of the Team Snap mobile app so that players and parents share Post Oak's expectations for the sports program and are fully informed of practice and game schedules.
- Conduct an athletic programs cost forecast and make yearly adjustments to the Bearkats participation fee so that facilities, transportation, faculty and equipment are in place to provide mission appropriate programming for students.

World Languages

At Post Oak Spanish is offered at all levels, starting from the Young Children's Community through Middle School and it forms an integral part of the daily classroom life. At the High School level, students choose between Spanish or Chinese for their second language studies.

SPANISH

Young Children's Community

Students in the Young Children's Community are exposed to the Spanish language from their first day in class. Spanish is present in all environments on a daily basis and incorporated in a natural way, resembling living together with two languages.

Children hear the classroom assistant, who is a native Spanish speaker, use the language through all daily activities: in the exploration of the environment, in activities involving care of the person and of the environment, and in conversation and directions. The assistant interacts with the student in Spanish regarding the work that she/he is doing and invites the student to engage in his/her work, providing help as needed and encouraging the child to ask for it using words such as *ayúdame*. This bilingual immersion at such an early age is a huge asset to the children.

Primary

Spanish is presented through daily interaction and exposure, as well as in direct lessons. The assistant of the class models the language while in constant interaction with the children. She is always mindful of the language, pace, and inflection she uses to facilitate understanding.

The Montessori environment offers direct experience with practical life activities, such as preparing food, cleaning the environment, or greeting a friend. These experiences provide an ideal setting to learn language. Direct lessons in Spanish are presented in similar ways to English language lessons presented according to the Montessori Method. These lessons may include precise vocabulary that is developmentally appropriate for language acquisition such as names of materials, qualitative words, names of food, objects in the environment, and others.

Most of our Primary students are considered beginning learners. Those arriving from YCC, have a foundation for Spanish. As a result of constant exposure, Primary students arrive at what Montessori describes as the "second period" of understanding, with some children at, or at the brink of the "third period." Many are able to respond to commands, count between 50 and 100, exchange greetings and basic expressions, name things or tell their age. Some students are able to teach one another Spanish vocabulary. This not only validates their learning but also builds their confidence to speak the

language. Most valued for us is that each child has an awareness of the language and displays interest.

Elementary

The Elementary Spanish program was created and is implemented with the same essential characteristics and high standards of a Montessori environment. The Spanish instructor inspires interest and curiosity for learning the language through exposure to the culture, real world experiences, and daily interactions.

Students receive lessons twice a week in groups based on their ability and build on concepts by working independently. Vocabulary, basic conversation, language structures, punctuation and cultural topics are presented in the lessons. Currently, two Upper and one Lower Elementary classes have a Spanish-speaking assistant who is the instructor of the language. A specialist works with the other four classes that do not have a Spanish-speaking assistant. All classrooms have similar resources for independent practice, which consist of Montessori materials as well as other developed by the department.

Cultural activities are an integral part of the language learning experience. As an example is the Spanish Market in which one class organizes and prepares the shops, learning vocabulary and expressions related to them. Elementary through High School students are invited to participate by speaking Spanish with the student vendors and purchasing authentic and handmade products. All money collected is donated to a charity. In outings to a Mexican *restaurante* or *mercado*, students are exposed to foods and items from diverse countries of Latin America and at the *panadería* they learn how *pan dulce* is made. During all these trips, children practice Spanish while inquiring about the prices, ordering the food and asking questions. The celebration of *El Día de los Muertos* is a school wide tradition. Children have enjoyed learning the history and significance of this holiday. They participate in many ways; attending a workshop to learn about the building of the communal/personal *ofrenda*, making oral presentations or performing skits for other classes.

Elementary Spanish teachers aim to provide daily interaction in Spanish and are working to increase the use of the language daily in addition to raising the expectations that the students speak to us in Spanish. Incorporation of much more communicative practice to develop all students' effective communication skills is one of our goals. In addition, we believe it is important for all children to receive the presentations that have been planned by the Spanish teachers, and that these lessons should be protected from interruptions and cancellations. Assuring consistency delivering the lessons has been a

struggle at times due to different circumstances, which are out of our control.

Middle School

In Middle School, students have the freedom to work independently, explore their interests, and do work appropriate to their ages and needs. Students learn Spanish from daily interactions, real world experiences, by exposure to the culture, and through formal presentations. An integrated approach often leads Spanish to other areas of study.

There are three levels of Spanish based on students' ability and experience with the language: Basic, Intermediate, and Heritage. Within those levels, lessons are given two times a week to small groups of students and may also be given individually. Most students come to Middle School knowing a great deal of vocabulary and basic expressions and are able to produce simple sentences. In addition to ensuring they have a good foundation, the main objective is to help students develop effective communication skills and to advance them from the Novice-High level (as described by ACTFL) to a higher level of proficiency. Consequently, students engage in communicative practice, reading, learning new vocabulary, practicing grammar structures, and writing. Cultural studies are always liked to language lessons.

Middle School students are at different points in their learning of the language but are encouraged to practice with each other regardless of their level. Much of the Spanish work involves working with a partner or in a small group while performing a task in the language. Students usually work in cooperation in a respectful, supportive and productive manner.

Many materials for independent practice are available for them and are designed according to their levels and needs.

Commendations

- The Spanish program is integrated from early childhood through adolescence
- All language teachers are native speakers. A great number of them hold AMI diplomas in Infant, Primary, Elementary or Adolescent training.
- The school is committed to offer Spanish in all the environments. When a native speaker is not available, arrangements are made to provide instruction by a specialist
- Integration of technology as a teaching and learning tool in the Middle and High school environments enhances student learning
- Spanish culture is integrated regularly in many forms throughout the school year
- The curriculum serves as a guide and the Montessori environment allows for individualization and implementation according to the students' needs.
- The 5 C's for foreign language education (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) are present in Post Oak's language teaching.
- School and language teachers are committed to professional development, constantly seeking meaningful opportunities for professional learning

Recommendations

- Continue to have Spanish-speaking assistants in most elementary classrooms in order to provide continued practice with native speakers beyond the 30 min. lessons twice a week.
- Update resources in the library and replace Spanish database and online encyclopedia

Many online tools are also available for the practice of all skills, such as Rosetta Stone. Students use all these tools and materials consistently.

Language and culture experience is enriched by many field trips, cultural activities, individual projects that culminate in presentations, as well as visits by guest speakers. Since the middle school started this year at a new location, we are actively working to connect students to the nearby community, providing meaningful opportunities for them to experience the language and use it while taking advantage of all that the museum district has to offer. In addition, Middle School and High School Spanish teachers collaborate to facilitate activities involving both groups in order to provide a dynamic language experience.

DEEPER REFLECTIONS

The acquisition of a second language is a great skill for life. Post Oak has worked over many years to integrate Spanish into each child's learning experience, aiming to do it in agreement with the heart of Montessori theory and practice at all developmental levels as it addresses the education of the whole child. In addition to the numerous cognitive, social, and cultural benefits, most importantly, is the self-construction of global citizens who can contribute to world peace.

Language teachers are committed to seek opportunities to increase immersion and use of the language for all students. This year we are working actively in order to support staff's desire for peer observation and ongoing collaboration of language teachers, across levels and languages. Another task we will be undertaking this year is the completion of a comprehensive language approach and materials for the unique needs of Spanish Heritage learners.

- Explore ways to incorporate Chinese into lower programs such as in ASEP classes
- Continue to work to strengthen the High School Chinese program and explore the possibility of incorporating formal Chinese instruction beginning at the Middle School level
- Complete revision of performance standards for all levels and use them to assess student progress.
- Explore possibilities for Spanish Immersion/International travel for Middle School
- Allocate time to fulfill High School language teachers' desire for professional development in foreign language instruction

SUBMITTED BY:

Irma Alarcon, Elementary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Alma Armendariz, Primary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Ninfa Bridges, Elementary Spanish specialist
 Sandra De Leon, Elementary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Lilia Garza, Primary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Ana Giralt, Young Children's Community assistant and Spanish teacher
 Kathy Guani Nava, Primary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Lupe Lopez, Elementary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Monica Moreno, Primary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Andrea Novak, High School Spanish specialist
 Diana Onofre, Young Children's Community assistant and Spanish teacher
 Patricia Onofre, Spanish Program coordinator, Middle School Spanish teacher, and Self-study Committee Chair
 Elizabeth Silveira, Young Children's Community assistant and Spanish teacher
 Nina Strane, Primary assistant and Spanish teacher
 Shoulong Zhou, High School Chinese specialist

High School

The High School division, in its fifth year (2016–17) is a vibrant and active environment. Positive faculty and student relationships dominate the social ecosystem with a high alignment of shared purpose. The mix of students from a diversity of backgrounds (42% from the Post Oak Middle School; 60% prior Montessori experience), gives credit to the plan of work and to the community as welcoming.

Student voices play a central role in the development of the High School program. Since the inception four years ago with just 15 students (now 70), the faculty have striven to create systems and structures that keep student voices alive and support individual students in developing their voices. The highly egalitarian nature of classes and meetings provides ample opportunity to work toward this goal.

Faculty have built the program from the ground up over the past five years. The three founding full-time faculty members are still on staff and have welcomed five new full-time peers. Additional part-time faculty and staff round out the program to a total of fifteen. The growth in the number of faculty and staff has allowed greater variation and opportunity for students in curricular areas and in co-curricular and extra-curricular areas. There is now a strong club and sports culture, several service initiatives, a growing practicum (internship) program, and many travel opportunities. The dedicated efforts of the faculty provide this growth and real-world connection for students.

The student internships represent the quintessential experience at The Post Oak School. These experiences link students and their interests directly to adult roles in which they can experience efficacy and personal valorization. Students in an internship (for any duration) make the individual, personal connection to the world beyond school and to adults who are modeling a variety of roles in the world. About one-third of the students participate in an internship. It is a growing area.

The classes are built on broad framework documents that draw the connection between each discipline's area of knowledge and the developmental tasks of the period of adolescence. The history and scope of each discipline is laid out by way of the

1. English and Literature

The learning environment for English Language Arts (ELA) and the Upper Level Literature course is both the brick and mortar building of the High School and the Houston Museum District (HMD) itself. The extensions from the classroom to the HMD allow for choice, freedom, and responsibility for students within both curricula. Classes are held in a classroom of the open-plan school building, which has modular tables and chairs, floor to ceiling windows, clear glass overhead doors, and a large white board. This allows students to learn in a space flooded with natural light and to use the classroom in a number of ways, from having seminar discussions to working

in small groups or individually on student-initiated projects. It also allows for large group, small group, and individual lessons as needed. There is no specific place for the teacher to lecture, making the space more about students learning collaboratively with each other than the teacher lecturing. When applicable, students access experts and content at institutions in the HMD, such as the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Natural Science, the Contemporary Arts Museum, and libraries at Rice University and St. Thomas University, among others.

lens of adolescent development resulting in framework documents that capture the relationship between each area of study and how teenage students can best encounter it. The upper level program includes the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (grades 11 and 12). The classes have integrated the IB program to the core with the goal of creating a seamless experience for students. All 11th and 12th graders are enrolled in the IB program.

As the High School program advances through its startup years, clarity, repetition, and rituals materialize. This progression provides increased stability and predictability benefiting all community members. The ongoing focus of the faculty and older students will continue to support this positive direction.

DEPARTMENT REFLECTIONS

1. English and Literature
2. Language in Acquisition
 - a. Chinese
 - b. Spanish
3. History and Social Sciences
4. Natural Sciences
5. Mathematics
6. Arts
 - a. Design Technology
 - b. Music
 - c. Theater
 - d. Visual Art
7. Senior Essay
8. Metacognition
9. Physical Fitness

Both ELA and Upper Level Literature have mixed-age groupings of two years—grades nine and ten and grades eleven and twelve—allowing younger and older students to interact with each other during classes. This engenders a collaborative learning atmosphere, where younger students learn from older ones, and older students have the opportunity to guide younger students, while at the same time reinforcing and revisiting concepts. In both ELA and Upper Level Literature, students initiate projects or make choices within teacher-initiated projects in response to texts studied and often work in mixed-age groups of three or four. This requires students to organize, delegate, and collaborate in order to successfully complete their projects and assignments, which aids them in developing their social selves while learning.

Learning activities vary somewhat between ELA and Literature; ELA is the course for grades nine and ten, while Literature is for grades eleven and twelve. There are, however, many similarities in the courses, such as opportunity for choice, extensions into the HMD, and self-directed activity.

ELA is a more exploratory course than the Upper Level Literature, and allows students to develop their own projects in response to the texts studied in the course. The course has four major components: reading teacher-selected texts together, having student-centered seminars about the texts, developing student-initiated projects in response to the texts, and presenting the projects in class. Each student chooses her own book at the end of the school year and develops her own project in response to it. There are also multiple opportunities for low-stakes writing, such as weekly blog posts and informal, in-class writing assignments. Additionally, materialized abstractions, borrowed from Upper Elementary, allow those who have not yet mastered grammar and syntax or who are English Language Learners to continue to use concrete materials as they work toward mastery. Students work at their own pace to master English language skills, such as reading, speaking, listening, writing, and presenting, while still adhering to project deadlines, allowing them to learn to manage the scope of a project within a given time-frame.

The Literature course more narrowly focuses on literary analysis and essay-writing, in preparation for university studies. Students continue to read teacher-selected texts and engage in student-centered seminars about the texts, and complete internally and externally moderated assessments. Students sit for four hours of examination for Literature at the end of their senior year. For this, they are given as much choice as is possible; for instance, about which poems they choose to analyze within a collection and how they choose to interpret some of the internally moderated assessments. Students continue to have opportunities to collaborate on both analysis and creative projects and to present their work.

At the High School level, the teacher is part of the prepared environment. The teacher guides the students and acts as a resource, but also prepares the conditions making it possible to mostly “flip” the classroom experience, so that students are

actively working instead of passively receiving information from the teacher. Outside of key lessons, usually lasting no more than 15 minutes, students get little, whole-class instruction, and instead spend class time in seminar discussion, collaborating on projects, writing, or having experiences in the HMD. This allows the opportunity to observe students as they work and to individualize the curriculum to meet the needs of each student. The teacher also gives detailed feedback on multiple drafts of compositions and use assessments of these to plan small-group and individual lessons. More advanced students, for whom these lessons are not needed, are given the opportunity to push themselves to delve deeper into the texts and develop more sophisticated compositions, both creative and analytical.

As a part of the prepared environment, The teacher develops curricula far in advance, coming to class prepared to take on any number of roles: resource, guide, coach, or observer. Part of this preparation includes organizing an attractive shelf for materialized abstractions and develop rich fiction, biography/autobiography, poetry, and drama sections in our small library for those who would like to read more. The broader environment is the HMD, and the teacher is a dynamic link between the institutions and the students, which means that part of the preparation of the environment includes establishing and maintaining relationships with key persons in these institutions. Parents are kept abreast of their son’s/daughter’s progress by attending bi-yearly conferences and receiving bi-yearly written reports. Beyond this, the teacher encourages parents to initiate contact at any time if they believe that there is a problem with their child’s performance in a class or if they just want to talk about their child’s progress.

During the startup years at the High School, a primary task has been developing the curriculum and observing what works and does not work. Each year, based on observations and feedback from students, the curriculum has been tweaked. For instance, in Literature, the structure of the course allows students in grades eleven and twelve to remain together. So far, both courses have improved dramatically each year.

Commendations

- ELA has especially progressed with the integration of more varied, low-stakes writing into the course and due to the nature of the student-initiated projects in response to the texts. These projects give students opportunities to have authentic responses to texts as opposed to them all being assigned to do the same project. These projects are open-ended, with the only parameters being that each must have a written component and a presentation component.
- Students explore both creative writing and analytical writing, often in the form of a thesis-driven essay.
- Students have developed projects as unique and wide-ranging as themselves and their interests, including a stop-motion short film with a screenplay, a student-designed and sewn garment with an artist’s statement, analytical essays on a variety of topics relating to the texts with presentations of

findings, original poetry with performance art, fan fiction with a reading, and original photography exploring themes from the text, to name a few.

- This is the beginning of the third year of Literature, and so far the amount of student collaboration has been a positive

2A. Chinese Language in Acquisition

Students in the Chinese program are grouped based on their language abilities. In the 2016–2017 school year, three groups are provided. The lowest level group has five students, the intermediate group has three students, and the Upper Level course group has four students. Most of the teaching and learning are conducted in a small conference room with a glass door, a round table, chairs, a whiteboard and a smart TV. Students also have opportunities to visit local institutions and the Chinese community in order for deep understanding of the language and the culture.

An online curriculum, *Discovering Chinese Pro*, is used to facilitate students' learning. Students have access to it on iPad, Mac and PC. This curriculum provides students various learning materials and allows them to learn anywhere, anytime.

All of the three groups are mixed-age and mixed-grade. Students' learning progress vary within each group. A healthy competitive and collaborative learning atmosphere is encouraged and can be observed in the Chinese program.

In a typical one-hour class, about 20 minutes are used by the teacher to present key vocabulary, structures and characters, followed by intensive interaction and practice. Sometimes, "culture talk", where students and the teachers together talk about an interesting cultural phenomenon, uses about 10 minutes of class time.

At Post Oak High School, Chinese language is taught through multiple approaches. Structural approach is one of the most commonly-used. Comparison approach is also used very often in teaching, through which students deepen their understanding on both target language and native language by comparing structures for the same idea. In addition, translation is a traditional, but effective way to practice a language. Adequate input and output is the key for mastering a foreign language; thus, various assignments, such as character writing, conversation, essay writing, real-life scenario description, etc., are provided on a daily base.

In addition, cultural activities are also provided to all Chinese students, including field trips to Chinatown, traditional Chinese festival celebrations, volunteering in local Chinese community, etc.

aspect of the course as well as arranging the course so that grades eleven and twelve can still work together.

Recommendations

- Remain observant and responsive to students in the Upper Level Literature course in order to better support the consolidation of their experiences in the ELA course prior to university experience.
- Continue to assess the program needs with respect to staffing to support future development.

The Montessori teacher, is a facilitator of learning, not the center of learning. The teacher needs to 1) teach students effective learning methods and help them to be successful self-orientated learners 2) prepare proper learning materials and learning environment 3) offer help when students need 4) assess students' learning and provide necessary assistance based on the assessment, and 5) to meet students personalized learning needs.

To prepare learning materials is one of the most important work. The learning materials include lesson learning guides, character writing worksheets, homework sheets, various visual stimulus for interaction practice, and assessments.

The teacher uses multiple ways to help students' understanding on key words and structures. After a key language point is given, there is usually a practice conversation with each student. Then, the teacher becomes an observer and allows students to interact by themselves.

In addition, cultural activities are great supplements for routine learning, and provide students with an immersed cultural environment. My role in these activities is to get all students engaged; and students are the keys to make things happen. For instance, to celebrate Chinese New Year, students are in different groups with different tasks, such as decoration, presentation, field trip, and picking a Chinese movie. My role is to give suggestions and guidance, and track their process.

In the past years, there has been growth of Chinese program. In general, students are happy with their learning experience in Chinese program. It's also great to see that our first two graduates from Chinese program passed the Senior Chinese exam (externally moderated by IB). The exam results, as well as what is observed in current students, show that students' conversational ability is much stronger than reading and writing. The difficulty of recognizing and writing Chinese is one of the reasons; lack of proper practice would be another.

Commendations

- Students' learning in the Chinese program takes advantage of small size classes, great staff support, Montessori approach, caring teachers, student-led community, and campus location.

- The morale of students in Chinese program is high. Most of them welcome challenges, and are motivated to work hard.
- A healthy competitive atmosphere among students has been a good tradition in the program.
- A collaborative environment can be seen in the classroom learning, outside of classroom, and in other projects.
- The high school community's diversity and supportive culture benefit students' foreign language learning.

Recommendations

- Consider the extension of Chinese program to Middle School so that, when students come to the High School

2B. Spanish Language in Acquisition

Spanish classes are taught in small groups according to the skills and previous knowledge of the student. There are lower level classes, 9th and 10th grades, and upper level classes, 11th and 12th. In both levels there are Basic, Intermediate and Advanced classes.

In a group activity the teacher gives a key lesson and students construct the rest of the lesson with examples, sentences and/or uses of the concepts presented. Sometimes the group is divided in subgroups to learn different concepts according to their level or interest. When the material presented is complex, such as Hispanic literature or video materials from Hispanic speaker sources, presentations are with the whole group, to make sure students' understanding is accurate.

Students often choose their homework assignments according to the expectations of the course regarding the acquisition of the language with proficiency. Cultural topics are chosen according to student interests, opportunities that become available, and that can make a practical connection to their lives.

Students have a lot of independent work time where they can access electronic tools, such as Rosetta Stone, work in their workbook, read different type of material and sources, or they can work with other students. Students know how to make substitutions in homework assignments and learning opportunities. They propose many of them.

In the Montessori environment it is very important the cooperation between students, this is the reason students are mixed between grades. Most of the times students support one another in their learning process, they show respect between each other, and to the cultural differences that they can see while studying the Hispanic culture.

Students learn vocabulary by using flashcards made by them or previous students, and by using quizlet. At least six quizzes from the Realidades textbook are required per semester. Grammar is learned by using those concepts by speaking and writing sentences after receiving a key lesson. Conversation is promoted in every single class between small groups of

Chinese program, they already have a basic understanding of the language and the culture.

- Research ways to offer students more opportunities to have better connection with authentic language environment and culture, such as J/A-term travel to China, summer internship in China, China-US friendship families, China-US sister-ship schools, and other ideas.
- Provide the teacher with more professional training.

students or with the whole class. Reading is an important element that is fostered beginning with the basic level using special books for beginners. The rest of the classes use material from Spanish Native Speakers sources, such as magazines, books, newspaper or websites.

Traditional Mexican festivals are celebrated in the community to better understand their meaning. Students study the activities and prepare themselves to sing, dance, speak and/or act. Students choose traditional Mexican dishes for that specific celebration, cook it at home and bring it to school to share. Sometimes cooking is done in the school.

Living in Houston makes it easy to go out and have Hispanic experiences. Students go to different Hispanic restaurants, to Day of the Dead expositions/celebrations, to lectures about socio-political issues in Hispanic countries, to Hispanic art/expositions/concerts. Some of these activities are group activities, others are optional.

The teacher understands the different needs of each student, sometimes modifies assignments according to each student. The teacher also pushes the student out of his/her comfort zone, understanding that the student needs to try, in order to accomplish specific goals. Often the result is that the student feels proud. The teacher plays a role of a big motivator in the performance of every single assignment. The teacher explains the purpose of every single task, and models the right performance of each task.

The teacher prepares the material and resources needed for each class. Some of these activities are: facilitate the making of flash cards that highlight the main principles. Share with the students good practices of using quizlet and Rosetta Stone. Make meaningful handouts with pictures and specific grammar contents. Design Haiku pages with material related to a cultural topic such as pictures, articles, videos and/or music.

The teacher reports progress to parents twice a year via written report and twice a year at conferences. If needed, the teacher keeps a parent informed about any ongoing concerns between the standard reporting times.

The Spanish program has developed a lot over the last four years. It continues developing according to the needs and interests of the students and after seeing the success and failure in some practices. Currently the Spanish program builds on the Middle School program, with the purpose of giving continuity in methodology and contents. There have been some challenges in building the Upper Level Spanish program as a transition from the 9/10 courses. After getting results of the first graduating class' senior exams (externally moderated by IB), and reflecting about the process of the students, the following changes have been made this year in all classes: work with more intention in getting vocabulary, and teach more grammar, isolated grammar classes and grammar in the context. The cultural factor as main purpose of instruction has been very successful. The students really like it and the teacher enjoys sharing. Learning cultural activities is an easy way to provide a more immersive experience that is supported by written class material that is posted on the class website.

Commendations

- Having the Montessori Method for Spanish is a plus because it is a method that works well for language acquisition. It is a hands-on, thematically organized program that

allows students to learn Spanish through art, music, literature, culture, games, visual aids, sign language, and beyond.

- Using the target language as a medium of instruction as well as the object of instruction.
- Access to cultural topics as resources of interest for the students.
- Visit local Hispanic organizations as connectors with real life experience.

Recommendations

- Continue to assess the program's needs with respect to staffing to support future development.
- Have the teacher receive more training with Montessori teachers who teach a foreign language.
- Meet regularly with the middle school teacher: Patricia Onofre, to learn from her experience and improve personal practice.
- Visit other Montessori schools and observe how they implement Spanish learning.

3. *History and Social Sciences*

The History and Social Sciences sequence includes one Lower Level (9/10) course, Integrated History and Social Sciences (IHSS), and two Upper Level (11/12) courses, Global Politics in Historical Context (GPHC) and Economics (Econ). A student-centered learning environment is achieved by making seminar, not lecture, the default lesson plan. Frequent opportunities to work in small groups engages the students' social tendencies. Students have the opportunity to engage in both large and small-scale research projects of their own choosing. Students develop an understanding of the relationship between freedom and responsibility through opportunities to choose the subjects of their inquiry, specifically in the research paper and Challenge Project in IHSS and the Engagement Activity and Case Studies in GPHC and Econ. The geographical placement of the high school campus in the Houston Museum District provides an expanded learning environment that is ideally adapted to the developmental needs of teenagers. Local exhibits and events can provide key experiences to introduce students in an immediate and frictionless way to new areas of knowledge and fields of enquiry. Activities such as contributing to a seminar-discussion, pursuing research on a question of one's own formulation, and developing working relationships with professionals in an internship setting all help teenagers to develop a sense of their own individual competence and worth. Key experiences are particularly relevant at the Lower Level. At the Upper Level, as students are seeking points of entry to deeper knowledge, institutions can provide internships through which they can develop knowledge in the context of needful work. As students transition from the Lower to Upper Level, expectations change to match the student need for increased independence and challenge. At the Upper

Level, students are expected to apply advanced research skills, to delve more deeply into research, to analyze problems in a more sophisticated way, to synthesize evidence with greater facility, and to exercise greater independence in their pursuit of knowledge.

Course design contributes to the development of productive learning relationships among students. All three courses include students of different ages: ninth and tenth graders in IHSS and eleventh and twelfth graders in GPHC and Econ. These mixed age groupings make it possible for older, more experienced students to provide counsel and feedback to younger, newer students, while the newer students bring a sense of excitement and fresh ideas and perspectives to the class. Opportunities for developing these relationships are provided by the context of seminar and by frequent activities involving group work. These activities also give students the chance to practice and develop skills of cooperation and collaboration. Furthermore, students also develop critical learning relationships outside of the school walls through activities such as political polling in the Houston Museum District and the Oral History Project, which requires students to meet and get to know important citizens of Houston. Students would also benefit from opportunities to share their learning experiences back with the full community. Such presentations of work have on occasion occurred but a more regular institution of whole school events involving HSS work would be desirable.

Much of the student activity involves students working on self-chosen and self-directed projects. With the seminar as the central focus, students come with purpose for a class meeting. While the seminar has as its goal to delve into an

assigned reading, students are actively engaged in the process and can shape the seminar experience through their questions and comments. Students have opportunities to be completely self-directed in any given unit of study through choices they make in the research areas they pursue. In the Geography unit for IHSS, for example, the class shares a common book, but individual students make choices about areas of interest for further research. At the Upper Level, self-directed research becomes even more individualized, specific, and in-depth. Through our relationship with partner organizations within the Museum District, such as the Houston Museum of Natural Science, students are able to experience first-hand the resources for research available in our community. The student experience is complemented by pushing even further, by developing relationships with experts through work (such as the IHSS Challenge Project and GPHC Engagement Activity) which requires that they interact with local experts. An ongoing challenge for us in this area is to continue to expand the number of partnership institutions and to schedule immersive experiences with our classes. This is a particular challenge at the Upper Level, where the tendency is to stay in the classroom where material can be covered with a minimum of wasted time on transportation and the like. There is also a tension at the higher level in making a match between the specific material in the Upper Level curriculum and the particular specialties of our partner institutions. In the past year, the switch to single three hour blocks in humanities courses and the transition from History to Global Politics is helping us to ameliorate these challenges.

Montessori teachers are focused on maximizing student engagement. The teacher supports and encourages students to explore areas of deep curiosity. By maintaining a small library of excellent and fascinating books, students can begin their quest for information on a variety of topics. Students can also access the research resources of the Rice University Fondren Library and the University of St. Thomas Doherty Library and also enjoy borrowing privileges at the Doherty library. In order to add additional value and real-world understanding, students may reach out to area experts on an individual basis, as regularly occurs as part of the IHSS Challenge Project and GPHC Engagement Activity, and experts may be brought in for various parts of our curriculum, such as occurs when faculty from the University of Houston come in to teach about oral history in IHSS. Our key lessons, some of which take on the form of lecture, are developed to introduce new areas of inquiry. These lectures are infrequent, but rich and helpful in communicating important principles of study. Teachers take care in selecting readings that engage the learner, and by creating meaningful assignments that apply directly to what students are studying.

Montessori teachers observe students as they work in seminar, group, and individual projects. Teachers are able to act as mentors to help develop important research and communication skills. Teachers model respect for all human beings when students study historical figures and peoples in their

historical contexts with their own particular thought-worlds. Teachers also model respect and appreciation for diversity as students discuss contemporary topics such as race, gender, or inequality by striving to accurately represent the perspectives and arguments of people who are not present. At all levels, teachers adopt a side-by-side relationship with students and serve as models of the professional social science researcher. This role becomes even more pronounced at the Upper Level, where students are dealing with a greater variety of research topics in greater depth where the teacher is less able to serve as a direct source of information but more able to serve as models of social science work habits, techniques, and ethics.

Commendations

- Student centered learning environment, which cultivates students' awareness of the relationship between freedom and responsibility
- Experiences with meaningful assignments and with both large and small scale research projects
- Utilization of the expanded learning environment, including deep research resources, such as university libraries and local experts
- Key experiences to promote new areas of student interest, paired with opportunities for deeper exploration and engagement with areas of student interest
- Opportunities for productive student learning relationships with peers, adults, and local experts
- Opportunities for self-chosen and self-directed study which may be extended beyond the scope of individual class projects
- Modeling of respect for humanity and a deep appreciation of diversity, which helps the development of the students' sense of their own competence and worth

Recommendations

- Provide more opportunities for students to share the results of their research with the school community.
- Expand the number of partnership institutions and successfully counsel more students into social science-related internships and extracurricular activities with those institutions.
- Schedule more immersive experiences with HSS classes.
- Make more and better connections between curricular content and potential immersive experiences.
- Continue to strive to identify and incorporate key lessons better able to capture the interest of students in this developmental phase.

4. *Natural Sciences*

The High School science lab is made for student learning. Science today is about the intersection of fields, and about critical thinking and analysis. The environment is the lab in the building, the building itself, the grounds, and the many museums and parks in the area. In this environment, students engage in both individual and small group work. They are taught how to think up questions, explore those questions and how to do experiments and analyze data. As their skills develop, they are expected to come up with their own questions and ways to explore those questions in labs. It is project-based, and student-centered aiming at competence in these areas while scaffolding when necessary to support students where they are intellectually and at their skill level.

Students grades 9 and 10 participate in Integrated Natural Science and in grades 11 and 12 in Upper Level Biology and Physics. The structure allows for interactions within and across classes, having the more experienced students guiding the younger. Students often work in project groups that rotate, so they are collaborating with various types of people and learning skills of how to relate to and work with people different from themselves.

Much of the work in 9–10 is hands-on project-based work in the lab, and students are allowed to follow up on their own if they desire to do self-directed activities. Assessment is often by oral presentations or written lab reports, or by written test. In 11-12, labs rather than projects play a larger role in both Physics and Biology than in the 9-10 section; these labs serve as a foundation for each student's Internal Assessment. The Internal Assessment is a lab that is entirely student-driven; it is comprised of a central question, an experimental design, laboratory work, and analysis. The Internal Assessment is central to both Upper Level science courses: Biology and Physics.

The Montessori teacher is part of the prepared environment as a guide and resource, working to create the environment to allow “flipping the classroom” as much as possible. Class time is then spent in hands-on work, labs, projects, etc. Revision happens from regular observations—by asking “what’s working, what’s not” and “what does success look like.” Modeling positive behavior is just part of the basics. Key lessons prepare students for their individual or group labs or project-based learning.

In preparing the environment, in a lab, where there is much equipment available, one puts out only what is necessary. Preparation happens long ahead of time at its best, that then allows the students to explore as much as possible on their own. Finally, keeping parents in the loop about work and assessments is balanced with keeping the student at the center of the conversation. Students are asked to manage their assessments and assignments on our learning management system. This is an important part of their self-management and agency in their success.

The work as guide and mentor is to support students in gaining access to adult work through our internship process. The school is fortunate to have a strong relationship with the museums in the area, especially the Houston Museum of Natural Science, where many students have internships and take learning trips with experts in their field. The work as faculty is to not just maintain but expand those relationships and make sure that the relationships are mutually beneficial.

Paramount to all course lessons and outcomes is for students to develop a deep appreciation, authentic passion, and lifelong pursuit of exploration and dedication to the dynamic field of science. The foundation for this journey begins with the origin of the Universe. Interlinking the fundamental sources of life: heat, energy, water, and food—which serve as the foundation of the 9-10 science curriculum—students gain tremendous exposure to areas that form the main core of all scientific disciplines. Students respond well to individual and group guided activities that serve to deepen one's own curiosities.

Co-teaching the 9–10 level allows instructors to efficiently facilitate and guide students' learning in areas that are more germane to both instructors' interests and expertise. While not specifically limited to biology and/or physics in the 9–10 curriculum, instructors are able to place emphasis on areas that are instrumental and significant to the aforementioned disciplines of biology and physics. By doing so, students are able to gain exposure to these areas, which aid in developing more specific interests that may be more suitable to a specific discipline. However, students are not limited to choosing a single course of study regarding science, and in turn, juniors do have the option to study both Biology and Physics simultaneously.

Simulations, active learning, and laboratory experiments are ways the students say they learn best. There is an ever-increasingly large collection to use. The equipment is integral to learning because so many of the activities and experiments are hands-on and project-based. Students are shown to retain information better when several sensory systems are involved in learning the material, and when they have done something themselves, preferably by choosing their own projects and methods of study. While this is not always viable, there is as much choice as possible, and this has improved every year. The goal is to be able to step away more and more as students develop their skills. Organization has improved, as has understanding what works for each level and what does not.

Commendations

- Exceptional opportunities for students to explore interdisciplinary academic and professional disciplines concerning science, medicine, technology, and engineering
- Purposeful and practical material and assignments such as simulations, labs and projects driving self-inquiry and exploration

- Internship partnerships and opportunities with the surrounding museums, universities, and nearby medical district
- A dynamic environment where learning transcends the classroom setting and extends itself beyond campus
- Faculty passion to pique students' interests and cultivate an appreciation of and further pursuit of a science themed course of study
- Integration of technology, particularly Vernier hardware and software into many areas of the science curriculum that allows more complex experimentation.

Recommendations

- Investigate further opportunities for students to explore the several energy and resource efficient design aspects of the school's campus

5. Mathematics

Mathematics classes in the lower grades (9–10) are student-centered. In the 2015–16 school year the math classes have moved to an integrated mathematics curriculum that provides opportunities for all students to self-pace, be met at their level and to continually review concepts previously taught, algorithms, and skills. It also provides the requisite structure that allows students to self-assess as to where they need key lessons and further assistance in developing their mathematical knowledge. The Mathematics in the younger grades is co-taught providing students with more opportunities to interact with faculty and to pursue interests as they arise. Mathematics classes in the upper grades (11–12) are more traditional in nature, largely due to the sheer breadth of the three curricula that are offered. During this time students are much less self-paced and tend to be more economical with the time and effort that they dedicate to exploration of this field of study. The majority of students in the upper level appear happy with this difference in structure.

The younger grades' mathematics classes are of a mixed age grouping, and there are some instances of Upper Level mathematics classes that are of mixed ability groupings. In all classes, students are encouraged to explore mathematical concepts individually and collaboratively through projects, presentations, explorations and seminars.

The Mathematics Department has an extensive resource library, including many of the materialized abstractions that Montessori advocates to assist mathematical learning. The preparedness and structure of the younger grades' Integrated Mathematics curriculum provides opportunities for students to choose individual and collaborative mathematical explorations as they desire. These explorations are often motivated by interests in other fields. Time in class is completely dedicated to students being able to pursue their interests and choose the work appropriate to their understanding. The Upper Level curriculum requires students to undertake individual

- Develop partnerships with organizations and companies focusing on the city's larger economic sectors— energy, manufacturing, aerospace, healthcare, and biomedical—to provide students with potential internships and resources that will assist in directing students' paths and interests
- Deepen the development and connection of the 9–10 science curriculum, which fortifies the underlying outcomes in the upper level disciplines of biology and physics
- Create a system (similar to the one being used by the math area) in which students work their way through a set of activities and experiments to explore and solidify understanding, and are able to think about expansion to their own questions in that field of study.
- Improve curriculum coordination with the Middle School science faculty to improve sequencing of topics and to create joint projects.

mathematical projects in areas of interest. Although the Upper Level curriculum is less spontaneous than that of the younger grades, the classroom remains centered on hands-on experiences and active learning; there are elements of spontaneity, self-directed learning, and freedom interspersed throughout the two-year curriculum.

The teachers in the Mathematics classroom are part of the prepared environment. They are experts in the field of mathematics and education and are therefore a crucial resource for students. Faculty give key lessons, offer assistance when it is needed, observe, reflect, and respond to the students appropriately, as well as modeling behavior for hard work, focus, and curiosity. The goal is to model asking questions as a direct path to understanding and that students should not feel embarrassed to ask them.

To plan for 9/10 classes, students use a Google Form that allows them to request key lessons in advance of the class time. This is preferable to impromptu lessons, because it allows faculty to prepare fully for a lesson by divvying up who will teach each lesson and to have all materials ready for the lesson. Also, teachers are able to let the whole class know when certain lessons will be, which allows students to attend the lessons if they need it, even if they did not request it. Some impromptu lessons are offered based on observations of students' mistakes or misconceptions. It is crucial for faculty to be not only available, but highly observant of students' work to be able to make any plans for lessons in class or in the future. Although students are encouraged to work with peers and seek help from them regularly, there must always be communication with the teachers about their work. Faculty are not just a resource that help students solve individual problems (they can get that in a variety of ways), but are a knowledgeable resource that help students learn to ask questions that guide them through work. Faculty also determine when a deeper lesson is required.

In the Upper Level, each teacher prepares the lesson, activity, or seminar for the day in advance. Many of these activities are student-centered and not merely lectures followed by assigned problems. Just as in the Lower Level classes, faculty observe student work to help catch misconceptions and provide key lessons that direct the students towards a deeper understanding.

We have created a very orderly, attractive, and easy to use mathematics space. All Mathematics materials are available within a few steps of any location in the classroom on a shelf. The materials include all materialized abstractions appropriate for any lesson, matching cards and other learning materials, as well as Daily Review materials, textbooks, nonfiction and fiction mathematics books, and tools (compasses, rulers, protractors, etc.) Materials are used frequently in lessons, especially in younger grades' classes, and more abstract lessons are given when students are ready to receive lessons of a higher mathematical difficulty that are demonstrated more symbolically that with a material.

Communicating with parents concerning their students' progress in mathematics is crucial, as many parents have not interacted with a mathematics environment like ours. Parents must be informed about what is expected of the students concerning homework, organization, assessments, and preparedness for class. When a student may benefit from support beyond that of the classroom teacher and parent, the teacher must inform the student, parent, and tutor as to how to be most helpful and supportive of the work that the student is doing in school.

Commendations

- Students have generally responded well to the “freedom within boundaries” that is offered by the program and the

6A. Arts—Design Technology

Design Technology is a semester-long course in the 9th and 10th grade Arts rotation and Post Oak. The classes generally meet in the Tinker Lab, nicknamed “La Tinkería”, which is on-site in the high school building. This is the first school year that this has been a formal course offering. Throughout the course students learn how to use a variety of hand and power tools (from drills to table saws and more), design software (Adobe Illustrator, TinkerCAD), and other machines, including a laser cutter and 3D printer. The whole of the course is project-based, and students get a combination of group lessons and instruction, along with one-on-one or small group lessons in order to complete design projects of their choosing. The class is generally split into units that include woodworking, 2D design and laser cutting, and 3D modelling and 3D printing. The focus of each project during the units is to design and build one item that is functional and serves a person in someone's life, and another item which serves a more purely artistic purpose. This helps students to apply creative thinking to make things that are not only aesthetically pleasing and

opportunities for them to progress at their own pace (albeit with a clearly communicated minimum required pace).

- Student feedback has been generally positive as to the learning environment provided.
- Co-teaching of the course has worked very well, with teachers able to model how to seek out and solve mathematical problems. Students are having to adjust to the individual responsibility that is part of the program, and to prioritize requests for key lessons when they encounter new concepts or require a review of old.

Recommendations

- Develop greater alignment between the student experiences in the Lower Level and Upper Level courses.
- Prioritize developing varied learning activities to stimulate and encourage mathematical exploration.
- Extend the Integrated Math program through all four years of a student's time at Post Oak to create mixed-age and mixed-ability classes focused on learning activity being spontaneous, active, self-directed, and hands-on.
- Analyze and streamline the process for requesting Key Lessons to eliminate any unnecessary duplication of lessons and to increase planning time.
- Develop concrete metrics for students to more accurately self-assess when deciding the best Upper Level course.
- Expand the role of conversation and seminar to further stimulate, engage, and encourage deeper mathematical exploration.

pretty to look at, but also solve problems through useful and practical applications in our daily lives.

This course contains both 9th and 10th grade students by design. In the first year, there has generally been a larger 10th grade group so that all of the students could have the course before choosing their Upper Level Arts course in the following year. Students have a variety of individual and group projects including creating, sharing, critiquing, and tweaking designs; as well as building, assembling, and finishing all of the pieces that they create. Although the units in the class are structured, the projects are very open-ended and offer a lot of freedom for students to not only find and work with something that they find interesting, but also to work on projects of varying difficulty levels.

Students receive group key lessons at the beginning of each unit, including proper tool use and tool safety, intro to Adobe Illustrator, vectorization/rasterization with the laser cutter, and 3D modelling in TinkerCAD. Individual key lessons are

given as the need arises during students' self-selected projects. These are lessons that are more "just in time" vs. "just in case". Due to the large amount of knowledge to truly be a master at any of the tools or programs that are used, having lessons given as they come up is much more suitable to adolescent learning and is a great promoter of sustained student engagement.

The teacher in this classroom serves the role of "lesson-giver" at the beginning of the units, but then transitions into a more managerial role when students begin working on their projects. As in most Montessori adolescent contexts, the teacher is a material in the environment that students use as a resource for lessons, feedback, critiques, project direction, etc. Once lessons are given to acquaint students with materials, tools, and equipment, the teacher's side of the dialogue is centered mostly around asking questions to help the student direct their thinking and arrive a refined product that is fully their own.

In the first two semesters that the Design Technology has been offered at Post Oak there have been 12 or 13 students in each class. In the future, this number will go down due to the

6B. Arts—Music

At The Post Oak School, the importance of the arts and making connections to their other studies as well as their own daily lives, is impressed upon the students. They are given freedom to explore their own questions about current culture, expression, and the human condition, while at the same time learning about the history, theory, skill, and application of the arts throughout the world.

The 9/10 music class is typically a mix of freshman and sophomore students. They work both in groups and individually on projects pertaining to historical and theoretical topics. Students are asked to relate and interact with each other during in-class discussions, regarding various musical topics, such as current culture, music analysis and evaluation. As students explore the creation of music (guitar, percussion, piano, voice or composition), they learn how to listen to each other, follow each other, and interact while creating music as an ensemble.

In music 1 class, learning activities include: listening to music, exposing students to all different genres of music through world history as well as learning how and what to listen for. Students also explore music history and its connections to world events and current culture through individual research, group projects, and presentations. This class also includes music theory (reading music, understanding rhythm, recognizing intervals and scales) through hands-on application—analysis of musical works and learning a beginning instrument. The class is driven by in class discussions that are used to help

group of 9th and 10th graders being split up over 4 courses in a more balanced way.

Commendations

- There is a lot of excitement surrounding the class and clubs that have spun out of the tools and equipment in the lab. There is a lot of "tinkering" going on during open work times and after school.
- Students come in with varying degrees of ability, yet our environment encourages students to learn from each other. This works well for this course, and helps make the teacher not end up being the sole expert in the room.
- This class centers around the idea of "tinkering", which involves making productive mistakes and reframing your process to the end up with the best product after the refining process. This is a good practice for adolescents to engage in as it helps them develop skills that they will employ the rest of their lives and understand that making mistakes can be productive.

Recommendations

- Assess to determine the optimal class size, project group size, and individual project structure.
- Explore ways to increase the effectiveness of the direct instruction given to students regarding doing research.

students think about current culture, historical application, and their own musical interests.

Upper Level students in grades 11 and 12 meet together in the same class time. These students may be at different points in the coursework based on their choice for their creation component, either performance or composition. However, students are encouraged to share what they are working on and learning—for discussion, to generate ideas and questions, to inspire, and to make the connections between all the areas of music (theory, history, performance, composition, technology, analysis).

In Upper Level music class, learning activities includes music theory and music history (musical characteristics by era, instrumentation, important composers, and important historical events that influenced music history). Students also study jazz and world music through different cultures and their musical sounds and characteristics, as well as the evolution and influence of jazz, jazz characteristics, and composition. Students analyze two prescribed works for their theoretical analysis, historical significance, and to compare music from different eras and cultures. There is a musical links project that links two distinct cultures by illustrating compositional similarities in specific pieces of music). Students have a choice of a deeper focus on either performance or composition.

The teacher for this class is passionate about the subject, takes joy in learning and is excited to able to convey those joys and

passions to their students. The music faculty are able to teach through demonstrating concepts, but allowing ample room for the student to discover, reflect, question, and grow.

The teacher shares with the students the knowledge and skill of a subject. He or she encourages student discovery and is always ready to step in to guide while allowing for a student's own creation, critical thinking, and exploration of interests.

Post Oak High School has demonstrated a positive attitude and emphasis on the arts. This is creating a culture where students learn the importance and impact of these subjects on our world and are expected to explore their strengths and contributions to each subject. More than one music student has discovered a love of singing or an aptitude for piano by having to take a music class.

Post Oak High School currently has available a keyboard, a ukulele, and several guitars. These instruments reside in the school, in the common space. All students are encouraged to play and explore music as time permits outside of class. An a cappella group and a "string band" have been added this year as extracurricular activities. There is an average of ten students attending A Cappella weekly. The focus of this club is to apply music reading knowledge, learn good vocal technique, feel comfortable with harmony, learn how to be an active participant in an ensemble setting, and work toward the goal of performance. There is an average of six students attending string band weekly. The focus of this club is to create music,

6C. Arts—Theater

Theater classes at Post Oak immerse the student in a theatrical environment designed to introduce the student to a variety of elements (acting, directing, creating, designing, and spectating). From there, the student is given the freedom to pursue the elements that s/he feels the most interest in. As the student expresses interest, the teacher responds and adapts as necessary. (If s/he shows a strong attraction to musical theater for example, the instructor may bring in a dvd of a musical for the student to explore, or encourage the student to write an original song.) The theater instructor is equipped with a wide variety of theatrical knowledge, and is able to teach in a fluid manner, not only focusing on the students' interests, but encouraging work that will be on individual student's levels of competence, setting the bar high, but not unattainable. This bar of course is different for every student.

At Post Oak, the 9/10 theater students sometimes collaborate with Upper Level students. In Theater, age difference is rarely an issue. The structure of theater allows for older, more experienced students to direct and offer valuable spectator feedback to their younger peers. Theater students work together over a four-year process, from 9/10 theater to their senior year. Strong ensembles are formed as a result, with groups learning to "play together" more acutely as their time together grows. This is essential for theater, which is by nature a collaborative

learn about chord structures, and learn how to be an active participant in an ensemble setting.

This year, the school has hosted two coffeehouse events, giving students the opportunity to perform for friends and family in a casual, safe setting. Students are invited to perform solo or in groups, with their instrument of choice, or to present poetry. Our first two events were a success, with positive feedback from students and faculty. The intention is to hold more of these events in the spring semester.

Commendations

- Sound proof space—This year, in the new building, it is easier to play music and create music without disrupting other working students.
- Improved technology in classroom—This year, there have not been as many issues airplaying and loading music, youtube and presentations.
- Further IB training for the teacher

Recommendations

- Require Upper Level music students to play an instrument—the Upper Level music course is heavy on musical analysis, interpretation, and applied theoretical skills. The acquired skills and application that come from studying an instrument are extremely beneficial to the Upper Level music student trying to achieve the level of analysis and interpretation that the Upper Level final listening paper requires.

art. From the first day of 9/10 theater, students participate in activities that foster collaboration. By the time they are working on their collaborative senior project, they have deepened their relationships, artistically as well as socially, which impacts the theatrical work in very successful ways.

Students are given theory, scripts, and introductions to design, acting, and directing. They are expected to create theater work with a large amount of independent study. Students perform, direct, design, and occasionally write and create their own theatrical productions, especially as they prepare for devised work projects in the Upper Level program. There is a lot of improvisation in class, and most of the work is up and on the feet. The drama teacher circulates, but gives the students space to make their own choices, so the work presented in front of the audience is owned by the student, not parroted by a teacher. Our classes are in a theater space, which gives the students incentive and self-motivation to work at their best. Students are also frequently reminded by the teacher that the work is studio work, and students are often "sketching". Failure and "try, try again" are celebrated and the student is reminded that this "try, fail, try again" is part of the theater rehearsal process for professionals as well.

The Post Oak Theater teacher is, as Main Street Theater's mission says, "a professional artist serving as a mentor" in our "performing arts playground." The teacher does a minimum of lecturing, but is rather a guide, mentor and coach. The teacher respects the student as a fellow artist in a collaborative process. The teacher observes keenly and gives honest feedback while still maintaining an attitude of support, not harsh criticism. The classroom resembles a rehearsal room, and while the teachers are trained theater professionals, modeling skill and proper theater behavior and work ethic, they still give the students space to generate their own work, stepping in to give help or advice only when needed. The teacher also serves as a resource to the student, drawing from her/his theatrical experiences. The teacher walks the fine line between challenging the student to do their best, while supporting them in a way that motivates them to continue the work.

The teacher establishes a successful learning environment by preparing material and activities relevant to the students' learning prior to class. While these activities fall within an established curriculum, they are tailored to suit the specific needs and strengths of the students in the classroom, and focus on active, participatory learning. These activities largely

6D. Arts—Visual Art

For 9th and 10th grades, students are given prompts such as a material, medium or theme within which to work. Beginning with this prompt, they then create their desired work. The teacher works with students individually on their projects. Adjustments are made regarding how much time is allotted for projects and any additional supplements that may go along with the work being created. Supplements include being introduced to various artists' works, viewing videos and trips to see related works in person.

Students in the 11th and 12th grades work on the Upper Level curriculum. This includes the creation of an art exhibition of their design. Students keep a detailed sketchbook along the way and write an in depth comparative study about artworks of their choosing. The teacher assists students by exposing them to various types of art and providing exercises for them to hone in on their own chosen directions.

Students in the 9th and 10th grades work in the same environment at the same time following the same course schedule. Students in the 11th and 12th grades work in the same environment at the same time. The 11th graders are in the initial stages of creating an exhibition. They have the benefit of witnessing the 12th graders in the latter stages of creating an exhibition. Both groups have a monthly critique together.

Art at the High School level takes place at the Glassell Junior School. This is an art school belonging to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH). It is within a ten minute walk of the High School. Students have access to various museums in the Museum District and specialized equipment including a printing press and ceramic studio. Seeing artworks in person and

originate within the field of applied theater. The teacher then observes the students, and asks what they have discovered through engaging in these activities, facilitating a student led discussion about the curriculum. The teacher also integrates the students' artistic choices, encouraging them to put thought into each element of a theatrical piece. Parents are informed of their child's progress through frequent updates and comments on Haiku, and are encouraged to contact the teacher with any queries.

Commendations

- Professional theater faculty bring a heightened level of reality to the students' work
- Direct access to professional theater facilities connect students with the adult theater world

Recommendations

- Explore options for deepening the theater experience for all students, e.g., putting on a high school play
- Deepen the connection between the theater work and other faculty and classes within the high school to improve the student experience

working in an art studio provide a direct learning experience for students.

Students receive individual time with the teacher during each class period. Students also have group critiques of works in progress. Additionally, the teacher provides individual notes on experiments and completed works.

The teacher sets up the studio each day before walking to the high school campus to meet the students. The teacher provides students with the supplies necessary for their individual projects.

All grade levels are exposed to Non-Western art via readings, videos such as Art21 and trips to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Menil Collection, the Asia Society and various other art institutions.

Throughout the semester, students keep a sketchbook of ideas, notes, drawings and experiments. Students participate in regular critiques of their works. Critiques take place for both in progress and finished works.

Commendations

- Exposure to non-western art provides a larger perspective on the world, culture and art.
- Sketchbooks help students to develop their own art practice and actively seek ideas and connections.

- Critiques empower students through learning to verbalize their thoughts about art, assisting each other and deciding what adjustments need to be made to their own work.
- Develop more flexibility for Upper Level students to have an increased diversity of activities in their courses

Recommendations

- Increase the opportunities for students to see art in person around Houston

7. Senior Essay (Extended Essay)

The Extended Essay (EE) is a 3,500–4,000 word, research based, argumentative essay that is a requirement for graduation from The Post Oak School. The EE coordinator is responsible for overseeing process and being a resource both for faculty members who supervise students' work and for the students themselves. The coordinator sets deadlines for completion of parts of the EE in order to break this large project into smaller, more manageable chunks. She also helps students decide which subject and topic area they would like to research.

The faculty supervisors work with students to narrow the topic, develop a research question, facilitate research, and check in at intervals, including giving feedback on one full, rough draft. Though the supervisor is involved in the process of carrying out the EE work, the essay is an independent project for the students, intended to build upon their own interests and to be a summative piece of writing for their high school experience.

Students have access to research material at St. Thomas University's Doherty Library, where they have lending privileges,

and also at Rice University's Fondren Library. Students have the freedom to visit these libraries during their Open Work Time during the school day or other times outside of school hours.

Commendations

- All students passed the EE during the first two years of implementing the IB program.
- Deadlines are reasonable and help students to complete a large project in smaller chunks.
- Students have access to excellent university libraries for research purposes.
- Faculty supervisors are engaged, supportive, and helpful, while allowing each student to work independently.

Recommendations

- Offer more training of supervisors.
- Encourage students to meet deadlines in a more timely manner to aid in success with the project.

8. Metacognition

Students at the high school level participate in four years of coursework focused on the development of metacognitive skill development and exploration of personal philosophy. The coursework begins with the 9/10 two-year Philosophy course and culminates with the two-year Theory of Knowledge course for grades 11/12.

The Philosophy course is highly focused on student oral participation in in-class dialogues on topics such as epistemology, ethics, civics, freedom, justice, and rights. Through this course, students cultivate in-class skills around argument, ideation, example/counterexample, and building a conversation. Students in this course have occasional written work.

The Upper Level Theory of Knowledge course builds on the lower level course by adding in much more written work and presentation-style assessments. This course focuses on ways of knowing and areas of knowledge. It explores the relationships between the knower and knowledge. For students, there is ample opportunity to analyze their own acquired knowledge in the context of their coming adulthood and their personal preparation for adult roles in society. The work in this course appropriately pushes students toward deep reflection.

The faculty for these courses works to model rigorous thinking, analysis, and synthesis. The environment for the courses is one of safe, open ideation and argument that requires the faculty to set and maintain clear expectations for the community of thinkers. Teachers give feedback on in-class participation, seminar work, and written work with the aim of helping students deepen their analysis and explication work.

Commendations

- The faculty for these courses is deeply committed to the cultivation of a culture of reflective, analytical thought as a way of life that extends beyond academic study.
- The courses are well-sequenced so that the in-class dialogue experiences in the Philosophy course (acquisition) lay a strong groundwork for the more concrete written work (consolidation) in the Upper Level Theory of Knowledge course.

Recommendations

- Explore ways to deepen the connections between the classes
- Explore possibilities for more public demonstrations of the work of the courses, possibly with middle school or elementary students.

9. *Physical Fitness*

Physical Fitness (PF) is a class offered to the Lower Level (9th and 10th grades) twice a week for an hour each time. When a week is a four day week, because a holiday or special activity in the school, PF meets once.

Physical Fitness is a class lead by full-time faculty member who also teach other subjects at the school or sometimes by invited experts. The objective is to teach by modeling that regular exercise is a part of a healthy way of living.

Each semester is divided in two sessions of PF, each of those is seven weeks long. In each session there are four options and students choose what do they want to practice. The options are suggested by the teachers and by students' interest. Units include: soccer, basketball, volleyball, flag football, zumba, pilates, yoga, strength training, walk/running, tennis, squash, body combat, touch rugby, bocce, and ultimate frisbee. PF is practiced at the school or around the school in special facilities, local parks, tennis courts in the neighborhood, or a gym nearby.

High School Division in General

Commendations

1. The Learning Environment

1. Positive connection with reality through local, Houston Museum District organizational relationships and pathways for students out from school
2. Openness and beauty of physical space that facilitates interpersonal connections and collaborations across interests and groups

2. The Learning Relationships

1. Collegiality in the community of students and faculty supports positive regard
2. Community is unified around principles of support and inclusion
3. Connections with experts and opportunities beyond the school support student interests

3. The Learning Activity

1. There are opportunities for student-initiated work within classes that is project-based and focused on real-world activity
2. Student internships and student-initiated courses during interims support specific interests
3. Faculty planning and transparency allow for a more effective experience for all students

4. What the Montessori Teacher Is

Post Oak has competitive team sports (the Bearkats) and this is open to all high school grades. Practices meet before or after school. Sports teams include soccer, flag football, track, basketball, cross-country, and volleyball.

Commendations

- Show the students, by modeling, a healthy way of living.
- Create community by interacting in a different setting.
- Follow student's interest by allowing them make suggestions and choose their discipline.
- Promote leadership by allowing students to lead the class when they request it. It is an environment where no one is an expert and everybody can share their experience..

Recommendations

- Create more partnerships with sports facilities to have better places to practice the current disciplines and be able to add more options.
- Invite experts in the discipline more often to give the students wider experience.

1. Faculty act as positive and optimistic models for the student culture

2. A high level of responsiveness and support by faculty support student agency

3. Careful observations by faculty help to improve student experience, attitude, and agency

5. What the Montessori Teacher Does

1. High awareness of student activity and offering of commensurate support

2. Demonstrates consistent authentic engagement through passionate engagement

3. Deep understanding of the emerging adult personality in students

4. Supports the nature of a startup program

Recommendations

1. The Learning Environment

1. Create more opportunities for silence and solitude to facilitate concentration

2. Clarify roles in the community so students feel empowered and understand the process of organizational development

3. Solidify mores and norms in the new building and in support of positive culture

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|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Collaborate with middle school faculty to optimize use of campus and build community 5. Explore options for athletic facilities for student use in the Museum District. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ben Preston James Quillin Emily Sloan Sarah Watson Shoulong Zhou Charles Ziegler | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High School Faculty High School Faculty High School Faculty High School Faculty High School Faculty High School Faculty |
|---|---|--|
2. The Learning Relationships
 1. Analyze various structures of age groupings (two-, three-, and four-year groups)
 2. Provide better support for student agency by improving balance in relationships with parents
 3. Assess annually the opportunities for, and threats to, the program as it moves from small-scale startup work to the steady-state functioning of a larger program
 3. The Learning Activity
 1. Analyze opportunities to generalize student spontaneous activity into the broad environment
 2. Provide more opportunities for students to engage in large, connected work
 3. Continue opportunities for student independence and freedom within appropriate limits
 4. What the Montessori Teacher Is
 1. Continue to refine schedule to be more responsive to the optimal work of students
 2. Investigate ways to increase time for teacher collaboration
 3. Refine nomenclature and language to make a more streamlined experience for students
 5. What the Montessori Teacher Does
 1. Improve parent connections and parent involvement to support student agency
 2. Allocate time for formal observations and peer faculty collaboration and support
 3. Develop ways for teachers to better connect students to applied work, e.g., internships

COMPILED BY:

James Moudry	High School Director
Contributors:	
Dana Bowman	High School Faculty
Jonathan Gonzalez	High School Faculty
Jeremy Grisbee	High School Faculty
Kim Harrison	High School Faculty
Matt Jacobs	High School Faculty
Jamie Lee	High School Faculty
Andrea Novak	High School Faculty
Janet Ott	High School Faculty

Instructional Technology

Technology is knitted in almost every part of our lives; it affects the way we shop, socialize, connect, play, and most important the way we learn.

At The Post Oak School the use of technology is one way of enhancing its mission to teach the skills, knowledge and behaviors students will need as successful and responsible members in the community and as lifelong explorers.

Technology tools are purposeful and integrated in such a manner as to simply be another part of the daily environment just like books and pencils.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY AND PRIMARY STUDENTS (14 MONTHS–6 YEARS) AND TEACHERS

Because of the abstract nature of computers, it is not an appropriate tool for student use at these two levels.

Teachers use digital technology tools for communicating with the parents, record keeping, lesson planning, material making, and music. Teachers communicate with parents via email and class websites for photo sharing and class news. Material making that can be saved in a departmental file allows other teachers to have access to it. Some classrooms have iPods that are used for taking pictures and playing music.

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS (6 YEARS–12 YEARS) AND TEACHERS

Elementary students have access to a variety of web-based tools, all of which are accessible through a G Suite account which is provided to each student by the school. Each Lower Elementary classroom (grades 1, 2 and 3) has four Chromebooks and Upper Elementary classrooms have ten. Compared with desktop computers, the Chromebooks increase student access to technology, and provide more flexibility in and out of the classroom without making computers central to the classroom environment. Both lower and upper elementary students use the Chromebooks for accessing recently enhanced library resources including Destiny, Proquest and Britannica Online. These resources are also accessible from home with a student's username and password.

In addition to using online resources for research, upper elementary students (grades 4, 5 and 6) use the web-based program Typing Pal to improve keyboarding skills. Each student has an individual account that can be accessed from school and home. Upper elementary students also use several programs in the suite of Google tools including Docs, Sheets, and Slides for collaborating and presenting work. Students Documents are saved in each student's Google Drive, and can be accessed from home.

The Chromebooks are also used to implement several assessment instruments including Star Reader in both lower and upper elementary, the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) in grades 3–8, the Post Oak Student Culture Survey in grades 4–12, and the Mission Skills Assessment in grades 6–12.

Elementary teachers are each assigned a laptop which they use for email communication, preparing class newsletters, and managing student records using Montessori Records Xpress.

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS (12 YEARS–14 YEARS) AND TEACHERS

Students utilize technology at Post Oak Middle School for organization, communication, education and research. Equipped with Nexus tablets, laptops, and Chromebook, the Middle School environment provides a 2 to 1 ratio of devices to students. Most students grab a device as soon as they enter school and bring them from lesson to lesson. They use many pieces of software, mostly cloud based such as G Suite. Students use Google calendar (available on all their devices) to view lesson times and keep updated on Middle School events. School assigned Google email is used to communicate with teachers in regards to lesson times, classwork, and Middle School events. Databases such as Encyclopedia Britannica and Proquest provide resources for research. Students receive information regarding assignments, submit completed work and view grades on Haiku Learning (PowerSchool), a digital learning platform. Electronic devices often supplement lessons and are consistently available in the Middle School environment.

Teachers at Middle School utilize technology for communication, assessment, organization and administrative purposes. Each teacher uses a laptop and a Nexus tablet. The teaching environment has five projectors available for presentations and providing lecture material. Email is the primary mode of communication between teachers and Google Mail, or Outlook is the email interface used by teachers. Google Apps provide a way to share information and edit documents between staff members. Teachers use Haiku Learning as a platform to present information, distribute information related to assignments and store assessments of student performance. Google Calendars is used to invite students to lessons and to plan the time the students spend in the Middle School community. Technology plays a vital role in assessing student performance. The Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), a normative, growth-focused assessment conducted twice annually is computer-based. Most assignments require submission online with review and annotations provided electronically. MyBackPack is another platform that is used to send emails to parents. Our website is used to set up conferences with parents. The teaching environment at Middle School fully integrates technology for both students and teachers.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS (15 YEARS–18 YEARS) AND TEACHERS

Information technology has two broad areas of utility in the Montessori High School. First, it comprises an integral feature of the prepared environment and student experience which represents the primary stimulus to learning for the Montessori student. A number of technologies have enhanced the variety of means for students to demonstrate learning, creativity, and self-expression. These include iPads provided through our one-to-one program, a variety of apps such as iMovie and GarageBand, projectors with AirPlay capability, and digital and video cameras. These opportunities for self-expression have occurred both in everyday classroom activities and in dedicated courses such as the Filmmaking J-Term. Other technologies have made it possible for students to develop technical skills and engage in professional-level endeavors. These include conducting polling using iPad software, designing and testing products with a laser cutter, and producing archival architectural drawings using AutoCad. Our division continues to assume a forward-looking and positive attitude to technology and its capacity for capturing student interest, and we continue to acquire new devices such as our 3D printer and drone. Nevertheless, we have also identified areas where technology has interfered with productive student engagement, taking steps to encourage handwritten note-taking and limit the prevalence of cell phone usage during the school day. One challenge we note is the need to improve vertical coordination of technology use and policies with Middle School.

Second, information technology plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between the various constituent groups that make up the High School community, including students, faculty, and parents. In this regard, High School has enjoyed organizational and productivity benefits from a number of software programs, especially Haiku for coordinating and sharing course syllabi and assignments and faculty feedback on student work and calculating and sharing standards-based assessments of student work, and Google Drive for collaborating, sharing, and polling both faculty-to-faculty and faculty-to-student. These systems have become integral to the development of predictable and efficient procedures at High School. One ongoing challenge involves how to make Haiku transparent and available for parents while maintaining student ownership of the learning process. This task has become more complicated due to current changes in ownership of those companies. We also feel that there is room for the right technology to bring greater efficiency and automation to a cluster of school functions, including attendance and student tracking, aspects of scheduling internships and transportation, forms and paperwork, and plagiarism intervention.

TECHNOLOGY USE BY SPECIALISTS

Just as electronic technology use has expanded in the classrooms, specialists at Post Oak are also taking advantage of hardware and software to enhance teaching and learning. We have recently purchased new library management software

that allows students to more easily access all of the school's databases both in school and at home. Spanish, art and music teachers use digital tools appropriate for each level to enhance learning. Specialists communicate regularly with teachers in order to maintain consistency with technology use, and to connect learning in these areas with classroom work and student interests.

ADMINISTRATION AND STAFF

Administration and staff use technology to support the work of the classrooms and school. In the last five years we have been rolling our services to the cloud giving the ability to work anytime and anywhere.

Communication with our parent/student community, internal communication with employees and external communication with the wider educational world is a top priority at The Post Oak School.

We use Senior Systems as the primary student information system, SIS, since 2004. All student demographic information, billing, admission process, etc. is stored in Senior Systems. We use a parent portal, My BackPack (MBP), to receive and provide parents information, e.g. update contact information, progress reports, enrollment/re-enrollment, registration to programs, billing, etc. We also use MBP for broadcasting day-to-day announcements to all our constituents, students, parents, employees and trustees as well as social media, Facebook, Twitter, etc. We use Blackboard Connect for emergency communication via email and phone calls. Our website plays an important role in connecting with our prospective and current families as well as the wider Montessori community.

All these technology tools are used in service to the school.

Opportunities for Growth

Our work extends to finding that unified database that supports every area of the school, admission, development, finance, class pages, electronic grade book and electronic card catalog, nurse's office, etc.

Our ongoing efforts with 'branding' are important to have consistent unified communication from each student, teacher, and administration/staff.

New to G Suite, we continue to see how it can benefit collaboration and sharing among the team and wider community. This is the first year administration and staff has started using G Suite; it has been present in the classroom since 2012.

PARENTS (ALL LEVELS)

The uses of technology tools have improved parent communications over the last 10 years. The website (redesigned in 2008) continues to improve and develop and houses many resources for our current and prospective parents and the wider Montessori community. As an added improvement, MyBackPack

is an online information bank for parents. They are able to go through the admission, re-enrollment process, update contact information, billing, parent/student directory, register for after school programs, etc. Parent education events are mostly recorded and available through the school's YouTube channel. The school has provided parents with educational events on the use of the technology in many forms, hosting renowned speakers, writing the Tech.Byte article in the school newsletter, and scheduled technology topics during the Elementary,

Middle School, and High School directors' coffee events. A school monthly newsletter is distributed via email/hard copy and available on the school's website. A weekly highlight of events goes out and is available through the message center of MyBackPack and the school's website calendar. Parents have access to email or voicemail of teachers, staff and administration. The school uses Survey Monkey to conduct online surveys of our parents and staff.

Commendations

- Use of technology to enhance learning, creativity, and self-expression
- Use of technology to help students develop technical skills and engage in professional-level endeavors
- Forward-looking and positive attitude to technology
- Use of technology to improve organization and productivity within the high school community
- Use of technology to develop predictable and efficient procedures
- The introduction of Chromebooks into Lower Elementary has taken place smoothly
- The computers are in the background and do not work against the Montessori work of the students or teacher
- The implementation of online standardized testing was successful
- G Suite accounts create consistency across all Elementary classrooms and into Middle and High School

Recommendations

- Improve communications with parents about student progress while maintaining student ownership of the learning process
- Find the right technologies to streamline and/or automate certain school functions
- Continue to pursue steps to prevent technology from interfering with productive student engagement
- Improve vertical coordination of technology use and policies through Elementary to High School
- Explore the possibility of students using "e-readers" in addition to conventional books in elementary
- Look into adopting standards for technology use in elementary and create goals that are in line with the school's mission
- Develop a system for evaluating educational resources/apps for student use
- Balancing students' use of books with use of the electronic resources
- Managing cyber-safety with a combination of firewalls and student/teacher education

Plans and Priorities

- Review, revise and recast the technology plan with input from all its constituents, students, faculty/staff, and parents.
- Create a strategy for managing both people and technology in two physically distant campuses and three buildings.
- Continue to maintain a healthy balance of leveraging the use of technology to create a dynamic learning experience, and prioritizing those elements of the environment that promote human connection and experience key to the mission of Post Oak.
- Research and consider implementing a curriculum compatible with Montessori that provides instruction for basic computer skills, online research strategies and digital citizenship.
- Research and consider aligning our technology standards for students, teachers and administration with the standards of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

SUBMITTED BY

YCC/Primary: Lauren Bergeron, Orly Kluk, Mirani Smith
 Elementary: Anita Taj Mahmood, Jessica Samano, Jeff Schneider

Middle School: Zach Belis, Jami Sweeney

High School: James Quillin, James Moudry

Staff/Administration: Elvyn Mendez, Kelly Vaughn, Mirna Andrade-Salgado

Library

The Post Oak School library, on the Bissonnet Campus, has been designed to serve the needs of children (Primary through 6th grade), staff, faculty and parents throughout the school. Based upon the philosophy that the school community needs a cohesive center for information resources and literacy, the library seeks to be a place of inspiration for everyone.

The library is open daily during school hours. It is prepared with the intention of facilitating the location of books, discovering new reading materials, reading, studying and collaborating.

The library is divided into sections for ease of use. These include:

- Three levels of fiction (primary books, picture books and chapter books)
- Non-fiction
- Biographies
- Reference
- Award winners
- Foreign language books

The library's non-fiction is cataloged according to the Dewey Decimal system, to two decimal points. Call numbers for both fiction and non-fiction can be found on the spine of each book. In keeping with Montessori principles, children are encouraged to look up the location of their books on the OPAC (Online Publically Accessible Catalog) and locate the materials on the shelves with limited supervision from library staff. The collection is developed to complement the Montessori curricula at the primary and elementary levels and to support students in developing a love of reading. Both fiction and non-fiction materials are chosen with the needs, both academic and social, of the teachers and students in mind.

The ambiance of the library is carefully maintained so that it inspires the students' curiosity and desire to investigate books. The atmosphere is bright and appealing. The shelves are at a convenient height for children and are kept no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ full so as not to be visually overwhelming for browsers. Thematic book displays rotate continuously. New, movable, child friendly seating has been acquired and additional shelving and a nook space adjacent to the main library area has been created as part of recent building renovations.

Commendations

- Library is aesthetically pleasing and user friendly.
- Library supports the pedagogical aims of the school and the development of the students.
- The library provides a number of opportunities for parent participation.
- The collection intentionally reflects a broad range of diversity.

Books are chosen in accordance with The Post Oak School's book selection policy. Recent, extensive weeding of outdated and damaged materials has allowed more room for new materials both for pleasure reading and to support the curriculum. The Post Oak School as a whole is committed to ensuring that these materials accurately reflect the culturally diverse world in which the students are citizens.

Laptops and chrome books are available for students to use for catalog and research use. Students are given lessons on materials location and research skills and are encouraged to practice their skills with decreasing supervision as they gain understanding and responsibility.

The school has purchased school-wide access to both Encyclopedia Britannica Online and ProQuest databases. These, along with free research resources like the Library of Congress, are used extensively by students. Upper Elementary and Middle School students are given in depth group presentations on research skills and Lower Elementary students receive one-on-one lessons. Library policy dictates that students use these resources, along with books, to find information before turning to the wider internet.

This year, new library management software, Follett Destiny, has been purchased. Destiny allows students to search the physical collection and electronic databases at the same time, and provides them with curated internet search results. It also supports loaning of ebooks, something the Middle and High School have long advocated for. It is integrated with an excellent collection analysis tool, allowing library staff to more easily track what parts of the collection most need updated so that spending can be targeted.

Library materials for the Middle School and High School are housed separately on the Museum District Campus. The librarian collaborates with the faculty on collection, maintenance and information resources.

The librarian holds a Master's degree in Information Resources and Library Science, which is a great advantage as she is able to understand the current and long-term needs of a vibrant, 21st century school library. This enables the library to expand on and complement the work of the classroom in a variety of ways.

Parents volunteer in the day to day functioning of the library as well as organizing and executing the annual book fair.

- Students are taught hands-on research skills and have a variety of high quality resources for research.
- The librarian works with the technology department to Continue to update library technology to meet the changing needs of students and faculty.

Recommendations

- Age and condition of collection should continue to be upgraded. Size of library and space available for new materials is limited, so weeding must be continuous.
- Work to build a student culture that values print resources while continuing to expand and evaluate digital resources.
- Work closely with students on research methods and help them value print resources.
- Continue the inventory and cataloging of classroom collections to build a more cohesive school-wide collection.
- Work with teachers on integrating the library collection into classroom instruction to support events like Science Fair and History Fair, as well as on purchasing materials targeted to recurring projects and lessons.
- Establish book discussion groups at both campuses.
- Balance more traditional educational needs with the Post Oak vision to be a leader in technological application to the Montessori method.

Plans and Priorities

- Find creative ways to best utilize the library and librarian to bridge the two campuses.
- Explore ways to give students a greater sense of responsibility and ownership over the library and its materials.
- Work towards empowering library volunteers as ambassadors for the library within the greater parent community.
- Continuously weed out and upgrade the collection.
- Work with teachers to further establish and codify training materials and methods for students to learn and apply research skills.
- Increase staff training on new library software.

SUBMITTED BY:

Cory Eckert, Librarian
 Lindsay Mistretta, Elementary Teacher
 Miriam Winton, Auxiliary Programs Director

Academic Assessment

The forms of assessment used at The Post Oak School have been carefully selected for their alignment with our Montessori foundation, our mission to facilitate the development of the whole person, and our aims for how assessment data will inform our practice in support of positive student outcomes. Unlike conventional grading which serves the purposes of selection (rank ordering students) and socialization (offering rewards and punishments), assessment at Post Oak serves to support the mastery of academic objectives and the development of positive habits of mind and social/emotional maturity.

At the core of effective assessment in a Montessori environment is careful observation and regular, thorough record keeping. One of many stereotypes of Montessori education is that Montessori students are never tested—pulled up by the roots to see how the plant is growing. Montessori students through elementary actually engage in testing on a daily basis. Because the design of Montessori materials allows the students to check for error, students are tested by themselves, their peers and their teachers regularly. This feedback serves as the most useful assessment data these students receive. But assessment and self-checking doesn't end with the use of the Montessori materials. Post Oak students receive feedback from teachers and peers on every observable and verifiable learning objective that is core to the curriculum. This feedback includes but is not limited to edits and revisions of written work, a number score in the form of a ratio showing the number correct out of the total number of problems on a math quiz, a score generated by a rubric for a group project, or a student-assigned score from a skills-based metric in middle school or high school.

Parents often ask how teachers keep track of so many data points given the vast curriculum in a multi-age class. Parents also want to know how progress will be communicated. Both questions address one of the most challenging aspects of being a Montessori parent—getting concrete, specific information about student progress. At Post Oak, we believe it's not good enough to simply say "Just trust the process. In six years she will be right where she needs to be..." Post Oak parents at all levels receive detailed information about curriculum and teaching methods. Working in partnership with parents is critical to student success so we provide many opportunities for parents to be informed about process and outcomes.

Teachers of students through 6th grade use Montessori Records Xpress (MRX), a web-based record keeping system that is used for capturing information in the areas of academics, work habits and social skills. MRX is also used to generate reports which are provided to parents at each of the two, yearly

conferences. For middle and high school students, observational notes and conference notes are kept by teachers on a Google Drive. These notes are accessible by pertinent members of the students' team at any time. Portfolio notes are kept at all levels and housed in their respective databases. Written documents and other permanent products are scanned or photographed and uploaded into individual student folders and shared with parents. Middle and High School student records exist on Haiku, a learner management system that houses assignments and resources and tracks student performance using ActiveGrade, a standards-based grading system and grade book. Students access assignments, hand in work, and get feedback based on rubrics and skills based metrics. Through mastery learning, they have the option to improve work by editing and correction. Parents have access to these assignments and scores in the middle school, and part of the work at this age level is to create positive dialogue surrounding assessment and this tool. In high school students are in charge of their accounts and parents and students negotiate how to share this information.

Another source for formative assessment data for students in grades 3 to 8 takes the form of a twice per year inventory of skills in reading, language, math and science called the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), an adaptive, computer-based standardized test administered by Northwest Evaluation Association. This growth-sensitive metric permits students, teachers and parents to monitor their students' academic growth over time and compare scores to a nationally normed group of students.

At Post Oak, we believe that students' potential for academic achievement is highest when good habits of mind are in place and perceptions about learning are positive. This is why we look to alternative forms of assessment for this data. In addition to the Student Culture Profile, a school satisfaction survey administered to 4th through 12th grade students each school year, students in grades 6–8 measure 21st century skills using the Mission Skills Assessment (MSA), an annual measurement of teamwork, creativity, ethics, resilience, curiosity, and time management differentiating our students with students in 90 other cohort schools. High School students participate each year in the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), a survey designed to investigate the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of high school students about their work. Data from all of these assessments provide a broader and deeper view of student perceptions and experiences which directly and indirectly impact learning outcomes.

Commendations

- Intentionality in academic assessment through recordkeeping and documentation of all levels in the school provides

qualitative feedback to parents; aids current Montessori research

- The school engages in a student-centered approach to assessment with all facets of the assessment process focused back on the well-being and growth of the individual student.
- The school values professional development resulting in highly trained adults working in all areas of programming.
- The school employs individuals who value a culture of feedback and improvement using professional growth plans to pinpoint areas of interest and committing resources to ensure staff can further knowledge.
- The school fosters an environment of supportive feedback to students who subsequently thrive on improvement and refinement.

Recommendations

- Find creative ways to assess non-traditional programming like community service and occupations work in the middle and high school to improve delivery and justify allocation of resources to these programs.
- Explore options for student-maintained electronic portfolios beginning in Lower Elementary.
- Structure the documentation of learning challenges and strategies used to support students with special needs.

Academic Support

Post Oak takes a team approach to working with students and families when there is an indication that a student may have a special need, or a student has already been diagnosed with a special need. Although Montessori classrooms are known for accommodating children with a wide range of needs, the

Montessori classroom is not a therapeutic environment unless trained professionals are present. Post Oak does not employ educational or behavioral specialists, but instead, relies on outside practitioners for specialized services.

Support within the classroom

Students at Post Oak who possess a high level of responsibility are able to work with freedom and autonomy in the classroom. Students who are still developing self-management, self-regulation, organization and concentration receive support from the teacher in the form of fewer, developmentally appropriate choices. This balance of freedom and responsibility in the Montessori classroom makes it possible for children with a wide range of needs to operate successfully. But there is a limit to the amount of support the teacher can provide both in terms of management and academic modifications. Although

instruction is highly individualized, the instructional format does not allow for ongoing individual instruction. For students to be successful over time, they must be able to initiate a work choice, work independently with concentration, respond to redirection from peers and adults, and operate in an environment full of purposeful movement and communication. It is normal for some students to take more time to develop the ability to work with independence, but occasionally questions arise when a student continues to struggle in a specific area. In this case, the teacher will reach out for support.

Support beyond the classroom

Post Oak contracts two, part-time school counselors, one at the Bissonnet campus and one at the Museum District campus, and provides a permanent space for speech and language therapist, who is compensated by parents and not employed by the school. The speech therapist provides observation and informal assessment at the request of the teachers. The school relies on outside diagnosticians, therapists and tutors for diagnostics, guidance and services. Currently a local tutor and an occupational therapist provide services at the school with a few Post Oak students. Teachers are usually the first point of contact, but do not operate alone when there is a question regarding the need for outside support. Any request for outside diagnostics or support comes from the division director on behalf of the school, with the classroom teacher remaining central to the process. Occasionally, parents inform the school that they have elected to take their child for academic tutoring or diagnostic testing.

including cognitive, social/emotional, and physical. When a teacher or parent suspect that the child's performance in some area is well outside of the typical range for most children of similar age, more careful observation and record keeping is the first action taken. The teacher then consults with in-house resources including fellow teachers, a division director, a school counselor, and/or the speech/language therapist. These members serve as the in-house team for formulating an action plan and communicating progress with parents.

Post Oak has a flowchart outlining the process for communicating concerns, strategizing forms of support within the school, and seeking support outside school if necessary. This process can be used for a wide range of suspected issues

The action plan is monitored and progress is communicated to all concerned. If there is a need for more information or support, the division director or parents may initiate a request for outside diagnostics or tutoring. Parents are asked to fully disclose results from diagnostic testing. In a follow up meeting, which often includes the diagnostician, classroom accommodations are discussed and a plan is formulated. In some cases, it becomes clear that the necessary accommodations cannot be provided by the school. When this happens, the group discusses whether the student would be more successful in a different educational setting.

Commendations

- Classrooms at Post Oak provide an optimal environment for examining child development.
- The teachers are well-trained observers and students are free to move, communicate and initiate choices.
- In a Montessori setting, strengths and areas of relative weakness become apparent at an early age, allowing for earlier identification and remediation.
- The school has relationships with counselors, tutors and therapists for referral and has space for services to be conducted on sight.

Recommendations

- We must use formal and informal assessment to insure that we are meeting our own expectation for our students' academic progress.
- We must develop more effective ways to communicate student progress which reflects passage along a continuum.
- A more comprehensive list of tutors is needed so that we are able to make recommendations rather than leaving parents to select a tutor who may not be the best option for a specific need.
- Address fear among some parents that Montessori schools place less emphasis on academic achievement, therefore they must get a tutor in math or reading in order for their child to "keep up."
- Provide professional development for teachers to help in the identification of behaviors and learning differences and create a common language for communication of student progress for colleagues, parents, and specialists.

CONTRIBUTING MEMBERS:

Jeff Schneider, Phylis Tomlinson, Lori Scovill, Beth Dawson, Mirani Smith, Jami Sweeney, and James Moudry

Counseling Services

Post Oak provides personal, academic, family and college counseling services. Post Oak currently employs two part-time counselors, one at the Bissonnet Campus and one at the High School, and one part-time college counselor.

PERSONAL, ACADEMIC, AND/OR FAMILY COUNSELING SERVICES

In a Montessori environment, our focus is on educating the whole child, including each child's emotional, social and physical well-being. The counselor's role is to support staff and students' social and emotional development across all ages. The counselors at Post Oak are a resource to assist when social-emotional challenges prevent students from meeting their academic goals. When issues are beyond the scope of helping students learn and achieve their academic milestones, the counselors provide referrals to outside professionals as requested.

Counselors collaborate with staff, faculty, and students as we strive as a team to provide a positive and emotionally safe academic environment. To build this community, counselors participate and provide support in parent/teacher, director/teacher, division and faculty meetings when requested. Counselors take a proactive role in providing social and emotional education and support to students. Counselors also work to increase teacher and parent awareness of typical developmental challenges faced by students and to offer ways to help students meet those challenges. Counselors participate in regular professional development workshops, seminars and conferences to remain aware of any issues within the larger Houston academic community, to develop a network of resources, and to learn about best practices for supporting students dealing with those issues.

Counseling Services at The Post Oak School constantly evolve as the needs of the community change. We strive to remain responsive to those changing needs. With a 156:1 student to counselor ratio, we believe that our counseling services are adequate and effective.

STUDENT ORIENTATION

Counselors participate in new parent coffees, parent dinners, open houses, and community meetings which all increase visibility and awareness. Counselors introduce themselves and their role to all students at the beginning of each academic year.

STUDENT ADVISING, PROCEDURES FOR DISCIPLINE, AND REPORTING TO PARENTS

At the Middle and High School divisions, all students are assigned a faculty advisor who serves as the point person for all academic and discipline related concerns and parent

communication. Advisors and parents have an open line of communication throughout the academic year. Advisors hold weekly check-in meetings to stay abreast of all facets of the advisee's education. In the lower school, the lead teacher initiates conferences regarding academic, social or classroom issues.

Counseling services are available to all members of the Post Oak community. Counselors are available to help division heads, advisors, teachers, and parents understand the motivation behind student behaviors and to help students learn to make the most effective choices.

COLLEGE COUNSELING SERVICES

A college counselor was hired by the school during the 2014–2015 Academic Year to assist the students, families and teachers with the college matriculation process. The Post Oak High School Office of College Counseling bases its work on the Montessori philosophy and the individuality of each student. Our mission is to support the natural development from adolescent into adulthood, and to foster independent thinking and high personal expectation, providing a high-touch, self-motivated platform. Our hope is to not only prepare students for college, but for life, as they utilize a multifaceted approach to self-discovery. We respect and embrace the unique gifts, talents and interests of each student and our desire is to find the best fit college or university that will result in the perfect match and a joyful transition for the student. Every student meets with the college counselor each semester. In every phase of the college admission process, we provide guidance, while at the same time, setting a tone for students that it is their responsibility to remain in the driver's seat of the college counseling journey.

The Post Oak School adopted the Naviance Family Connection platform, allowing all family members and staff members to utilize their own account. Naviance is the number one program for college planning in the industry. Whether it's matching colleges to student's career interests, or comparing admissions rates at a student's top college choices, our college planning tools allow students and families to make informed decisions. Students can also compare colleges and universities, explore scholarship opportunities, and track the status of supporting application documents (transcripts and letters of recommendation). Plus, all of these tools are managed from one location, reducing paperwork and improving communications between students, parents, and Post Oak.

All students engage in one-on-one College Connection meetings each semester with the college counselor. Parents are always invited and encouraged to attend the meetings. During these meetings, students begin creating resumes and conducting initial, broad college searches. Students also have the ability to access Summer Enrichment Opportunities with the counselor via their Naviance account and additional program information via the College Connection shared

space (bulletin board) at the school. During the junior year, the broad college search is narrowed down to a list of 6–9 colleges composed of reach, target, and safety colleges for each student. Students also ask for letters of recommendation from two teachers during the spring semester of their junior year; all resumes must be finished by the spring semester, as the teachers view each student's resume via their shared Naviance portal. All students in grades 9–11 take the PSAT/NMSQT in October in order to better prepare for the SAT. All students have access to individualized test preparation via Naviance's PrepMe portal.

Commendations

- Post Oak offers parenting support through classes and parent education events at every level, and through the use of its part-time counselors.
- “Lunch with the Counselors” was piloted at the High School. At these lunches, the students and the counselors discussed and practiced skills designed to help students develop successful relationships and connections as they work towards independence.
- Students, teachers, administration and parents have access to all three counselors as a resource for emotional/behavioral help or college admission guidance.
- The Class of 2016 had a very successful year regarding their college acceptances, matriculation and scholarship offers. Among the thirteen students, they were accepted to 51 colleges, received \$2,198,180 in scholarship offers, and were all accepted and committed to attend one of their “reach” universities.

Recommendations

- Explore ways to systematize and more fully incorporate the learning and practicing of essential social and emotional skills into our ongoing learning opportunities.
- Continue to find ways to ensure that healthy social and emotional skills and relationship building receive adequate focus and how more effectively use the counseling services to assist the ongoing development of a school culture dedicated to collaboration, cooperation, and peace.

CONTRIBUTING MEMBERS:

Phyllis Tomlinson
Amanda Phelps-Smith
Lori Scovill

During the senior year, students are celebrated during the weekly Community Meeting regarding College Acceptance. As each student gains acceptance to each institution, they hang their college pennant(s) on the college acceptance wall in the community area. The Post Oak college counselor is responsible for securing 75–100 college admission representatives to visit the High School each year. The counselor is responsible for being the face of the school while building relationships with the higher ed community.

Extracurricular Activities

Post Oak offers After School Enrichment Programs (ASEP) to students in grades 1 through 8, by means of two 15-week semesters in the spring and fall. We encourage staff and other professionals to offer classes beyond the regular school day for the ASEP program. Some of the ASEP classes that have been offered include chess, art, yoga, Spanish, French, sewing, Engineering for Kids, Montessori Model United Nations, running club, ukulele, theater and knitting. Classes are offered before or after regular school hours and most classes are available to all students in grades 1 through 6.

Middle School students (grades 7 and 8) are offered two ASEP classes, Our Whole Lives (OWL) sex education program and MMUN, which are both also open to 9th graders.

Student clubs are offered at the Middle School and High School levels. The clubs are led by faculty members. At both levels, the clubs are proposed and initiated by students at the beginning of the school year. Student clubs in Middle School that happen during lunch are “Cool Down Club”—a green initiative group, and Novel Writing Club. At the High School level, clubs include Art Car Club, SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance), Psychology Club, Blue Grass/String Band Club, D&D/Tabletop Gaming, Filmmaking, Investment Club, Service Club, Creative Writing Club, and MMUN/Debate Club. Middle School and High School work together in the yearbook club.

All activities offered before or after school reflect our Montessori philosophy and serve to enrich our students in a safe and comfortable environment.

Strengths

- ASEP classes allow for mixed age groupings, in alignment with the Montessori philosophy of our school.
- Professional teachers offer a variety of courses offered with high quality curricula.
- ASEP classes and after school clubs are responsive to student interests.
- Appointment of an auxiliary programs director to manage and coordinate all aspects of ASEP including communication, registration, scheduling of classes, recruitment of teachers and/or programs, and utilization of space.

Challenges

- To expand the ASEP program offerings with the limited space available.
- To seek out and retain qualified professionals to lead courses and manage the students according to our school philosophy.
- To provide consistent orientation for ASEP teachers and parents with the dismissal procedures.
- Coordination and communications about the High School clubs.
- Maintaining enough faculty advisors for the student clubs.

Plans and Priorities

- Be creative with utilizing the space we have available to expand the ASEP program.
- Maintain the interest and excitement of the classes by providing a program that continues to be fun, educational and safe for the students.
- Investigate the need for an assign a coordinator at the Middle School and High School level to oversee the clubs.
- Explore ASEP classes for the adolescents (7–12th)
- Survey teachers to find areas of interest and encourage them to lead classes.
- Move up the timeline for Fall ASEP registrations and have them go out in the summer and close before the beginning of the school year.

SUBMITTED BY:

Kim Harrison, English Language Arts and IB Literature Teacher, IB Extended Essay Coordinator, Post Oak High School NHS Chapter Advisor

Miriam Winton, Auxiliary Programs Director

Debbie Henderson, Office Manager, former Post Oak parent
Monica Lundeen, Middle School Teacher, Yearbook Advisor, Post Oak parent

Kat Tevino, Physical Fitness Specialist, Bearkats Coach

Mark Tucker, Athletic Director, Bearkats Coach, Physical Fitness Specialist, former Post Oak parent

Community Service Around The Post Oak School

Community service is not an add-on at The Post Oak School. Rather, it is explicitly stated as an important part of The Post Oak School's mission. At all five levels we strive to prepare an environment that "fosters collaboration, cooperation and peace." Engaging in any activity that is a service to others, whether that person is in your own class, at another level in the school, or out in the greater community, promotes these three principles. In addition, we see community service as part of our human responsibility to each other.

At each level of Post Oak, community service is shaped according to the child's social development and sensitivities. To gather a broad view of how community service is deeply embedded in our work, we will examine each principle with examples noted from various ages within the school.

What does collaboration look like? In YCC a child may offer a drying towel after a friend washes his hands. The young child has a desire to be part of a group. The adults in the YCC environment model showing empathy and offering support as needed. In Primary the child practices "Grace and Courtesy" lessons as she is becoming more aware of others and how to consciously serve others. When a table needs to be moved, Primary students may work together spontaneously to reposition it.

Elementary classes have collaborated over the past eight years on a Food Drive for Braes Inter-Faith Ministries (BIM). This effort follows the idea to "Think Globally, Act Locally." The food pantry is located just a few miles from Post Oak. All seven classes work together to collect, box, and deliver their donations. The pantry's director and staff are annually overwhelmed by the generosity of the students and their families.

Middle School's advisory groups work together collaboratively both on-campus and off-site as a community service team. In groups they plan, problem-solve, and execute as issues arise regarding their service activities. This work offers students opportunities for flexible thinking, extending oneself, and helping others in valuable ways.

At the high school individual teachers have integrated service projects within their curriculum areas into lessons or units. During the unit on economics, freshman and sophomore students have volunteered with an organization that works

to bring fresh food to local food deserts. Similarly, biology students have volunteered with the Galveston Bay Foundation to study and replant cordgrass. Other classes have extended this model of service into units of study.

Cooperation is the second principle which drives our work in community service. Throughout the levels adults model how to work together cooperatively. Opportunities for cooperation lead to conversations such as those that follow natural disasters, for example. Students in Elementary and older levels are strongly motivated to "make a difference" in our world. Service projects such as bake sales or the Upper Elementary Spanish market work to raise funds for charitable giving. These events are also opportunities for student leadership. All junior and seniors, as part of the IB Curriculum, complete 150 Creativity, Activity and Service hours. This particular unit of study is developed by the students and tailored to their individual interests and supported by the faculty and outside resources. Additional on-campus organizations such as National Honor Society and Pay It Forward, our student-run community service organization, participate frequently in service-oriented activities.

Peace and well-being are the natural outcomes of work done in the service of others. In their journals middle school students often express their surprise at how the community service work they are doing has actually changed them. For example, students who worked at a soup kitchen feeding homeless adults were able to write about their concerns when they started this work and by the end of the semester they realized how much their friendly behavior was appreciated by the hungry adults.

In summary, the work of our students to serve in every environment, around the school and beyond into our urban community is based on the three principles of collaboration, cooperation and peace. We are striving to develop the acts of kindness that mark individuals who can see a need and respond accordingly. From the YCC child who helps to set the table to the Middle School student who realizes that his reading buddy is slowly improving every week, our mission is met when our students succeed in their community service engagement.

Strengths

- Community service is rooted in our school's mission "to foster collaboration, cooperation and peace."
- We offer opportunities and encouragement for community service activities which are appropriate to the social development of the students.
- Practicing "Grace and Courtesy" lessons in YCC and Primary serves as a foundation for caring for self, for others, and for the environment.
- We follow the students' empathetic responses to current events so they can "make a difference" in our world.
- Community service offers many leadership opportunities for students within our school and also interacting with service organizations, churches, and nonprofit organizations.

Challenges

- Transportation for students in Upper Elementary, Middle and High School for community service can be challenging. Some classes use parent drivers who need to be on the school's "Approved Driver" list.
- In order to drive the school activity busses teachers must be willing to take a short course on bus driving.
- Many service organizations have a minimum age limit of 16 years old especially to work with animals.

Plans & Priorities

- Encourage a shift to service learning with older students. This will offer students a direct way to take on leadership in projects to benefit our community.
- Document the contacts and connections that Post Oak classes have with Houston service organizations as a guide and tool for future projects.
- Coordinate the bus use for community service outings between Middle School and High School on the new Museum District Campus.

REPORT PREPARED BY:

Emily Hansen, YCC teacher & Post Oak parent

Tamara Townsend, Primary teacher & Post Oak parent

Beth Olitzki, Lower Elementary teacher

Keri Rebuffini, Lower Elementary assistant & Post Oak parent

Kathy Long, Middle School teacher & Community Service Coordinator

Jamie Lee, High School teacher & Post Oak parent

Extended Day Programs

Extended Day programs at The Post Oak School foster a sense of community amongst children who are present for a lengthened school day. Children at the Bissonnet Campus (Young Children's Community, Primary and Elementary) may arrive at 7:00 a.m. and remain up until 6:00 p.m. Students at the Museum District Campus (Middle and High School) may arrive at 7:30 a.m. and remain on campus until 5:00 p.m. In addition to the daily Before and After Care programs, students enrolled with expanded year contracts on both campuses may utilize the extended day environments for full-day care on Conference Days and specific In-Service Days throughout the academic year.

The aim of the extended day programs is to offer children who arrive early and/or depart late a unique and enriching experience. The children are welcomed into safe, caring and relaxed environments equipped with materials, work, and activities that are gauged to a child's particular developmental level, needs and interests.

Half-day children at the Primary level aged 2 ½ to 4 ½ who do not go home at noontime are welcomed into the Primary Home Environment classrooms. They have lunch in a communal setting. The majority of the children take a nap, which varies in length from a half hour to an hour and a half. Some of the older children who are beginning to outgrow their nap eat lunch together in the adjacent community pod area and then work quietly in that area afterwards. The pod area is equipped with a variety of work activities for them to choose from including puzzles, arts and crafts, books, yoga, and small manipulatives. Some of the children are dismissed at 3:15, while the remaining group of young children is joined by the 4 ½ to 6 year olds who have spent the full day in their Primary

classrooms. The programs provide a dynamic link between the child's academic experience in their classroom and their home life. The materials in these environments are carefully chosen in accordance with Montessori practice and philosophy. Children have freedom of movement in their respective mixed age environments. Children may choose a work or activity that interests them. In each environment it is common to see an older child guide a younger child with a new game or activity.

While homework support is made available by the adults in the Elementary and Middle School environments, the Extended Day programs are designed to offer the children a respite from the academic routine of the classroom. Board games, art materials and construction materials, puzzles and books are available to the students. The adults will also lead the children in occasional arts and crafts, cooking and gardening activities.

Children are afforded ample time for active play in the gym and outdoor environments. Healthful eating habits are emphasized as a nutritious snack is available on a daily basis in Primary Home Environment. Children in Elementary and Middle School After Care bring their own daily snack, chosen in accordance with the school's nutrition guidelines found in the Post Oak Family Handbook. Primary children in the Before Care program are served breakfast on a daily basis.

The programs also utilize the outdoor environment on a daily basis, weather permitting. The Elementary After Care environment features games and materials that are age appropriate, stimulate creativity and foster team work. The Middle School After Care program is housed on the Museum District Campus where students may engage in academic work or socialize in a familiar, developmentally appropriate setting.

Strengths

- The programs encourage "free play" amongst mixed age groups in an effort to cultivate social development. Children learn to problem solve, mediate, communicate effectively and play respectfully with children of various ages.
- The programs promote a healthy and energetic lifestyle.
- Though Montessori materials are not present in the Primary Home Environment and Elementary Aftercare environments, the classrooms are organized with Montessori principles in mind.
- There is a shared sense of respect by both teachers and students. Children understand that respect must be shown towards all members of the community and all materials

Challenges

- Middle School students have physical fitness class on the Bissonnet Campus Monday–Wednesday and some attend aftercare there until 6, others return on the shuttle to the

in the community and they are held accountable. Adults model grace and courtesy and ensure children are kept safe and ensure that their key needs are met.

- Children feel welcome in an environment that is organized, aesthetically pleasing and is fashioned with the comforts of home in mind.
- After Care program guides are dynamic and adapt the program to changing schedules. Because classes in Post Oak's After School Enrichment Program (ASEP) are held concurrently with the Extended Day Program on the Bissonnet Campus, students have the opportunity to engage with different groups of children on a daily basis.

Museum District Campus to be picked up at 5:00 p.m. On Thursday and Friday students have aftercare at the Museum District Campus and some take a shuttle to the Bissonnet

Campus at 5 p.m. to be picked up at 5:30. Having some students commute to and from the Bissonnet campus during the week for aftercare becomes logistically challenging.

- Dismissal procedures can be complicated as communication takes place via walkie-talkie and there are three separate dismissal locations corresponding to each level on the Bissonnet Campus. The pick-up and dismissal of siblings requires particular coordination and management.
- The sizeable number of children in the programs can pose its own challenges in terms of management and organization. For elementary students, the Common Room space is ideally suitable for approximately 40 children. When attendance exceeds that amount, the gym and the outdoor playground environment are utilized, and/or a third adult is

present. In Primary Home Environment, the adjacent pod space, the butterfly garden, the adjacent garden space and the outdoor playground space are utilized to manage high numbers of children in attendance.

- High attendance for all-day care on Conference and In-Service days requires additional staffing and scheduling and organized management of useable space.
- The Full-Day Young Children's Community, Primary Home Environment and Elementary After Care environments continue to operate during Spring Break and over the summer months. Staffing, budgeting and adding variety to ensure that the programs are unique from the routines of the regular academic year can be challenging.

Plans and Priorities

- Discuss, design and implement a dynamic after school program for the Middle School that will meet the needs of the students and their families now that it has moved to the Museum District Campus.
- Fully implement and define the role and responsibilities of the newly created auxiliary programs director position in management of the Before Care, After Care, After School Enrichment, and Summer School programs.
- Maintain direct and open communication between the admissions director and the auxiliary programs director regarding enrollment numbers.
- Manage growth while maintaining the quality of the programs, providing for safety of the children and making the best use of space, especially for napping.
- Provide materials and activities gauged to the interests of the emerging adolescent to meet the needs of sixth year students who sometimes experience "Elementary After-Care fatigue" as they approach the Middle School years.
- Plan and implement activities that foster community building and intermingling between levels in the After Care programs.
- Explore additional ways to utilize specialists and community resources for variety and enrichment on in-service and conference days.

REPORT SUBMITTED BY

Miriam Winton, Auxiliary Programs Director

Jenna Pel, Elementary Aftercare Teacher and Houston Montessori Institute Assistant

Dinah Chetrit, Primary Home Environment Lead Teacher

Emily Hansen, Full Day Young Children's Community Teacher and Post Oak parent

Diana Lopez, Middle School After Care Coordinator and Middle School Occupations Coordinator

Irma Alarcon, Before Care Teacher and Upper Elementary Assistant Teacher

Naomi Prevot, Elementary After Care Assistant and Primary Home Environment Assistant

Jessica Samano, Middle School Service Specialist/Community Outreach Coordinator, Post Oak parent

Health Services

Policies and procedures for student health and safety are communicated in the Family Handbook and Employee Handbook. All requirements for child care licensing through the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services are reviewed and met on a yearly basis. Classroom teachers, assistants, and full-time substitute teachers as well as most administrative staff members stay current with CPR and first aid certifications. These trainings also include the use of Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs) and Epipens. There are two AEDs at the Bissonnet Campus and two at the Museum District Campus—one at the Middle School and one at the High School. The Bissonnet Campus has a sick bay staffed by a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) who maintains school medical records and manages the dispensing of medications. Health records and medications are managed by administrative staff members at the Museum District Campus. Each classroom has a first aid kit which is stocked as needed.

Emergency response procedures are described in the Employee Handbook and are reviewed annually. For minor student injuries, teachers and classroom assistants handle basic first aid. Following an injury, the attending adult will complete an accident report which is signed by an administrator and kept on file. Each classroom having a student with a life threatening allergy will limit food options as needed. Communicable disease procedures are outlined in the Employee Handbook and the Family Handbook. Parents are notified when lice and other communicable diseases are present in the classroom. Vision and hearing screening takes place each school year.

Each school year, parents are expected to fill out paperwork indicating specific health conditions and needs for their child(ren). This information is compiled by the CNA and distributed to the division directors and classroom teachers. Procedures are in place for the storage and use of epipens, inhalers and other emergency medications.

Moving forward, Post Oak needs to review and revise the current system for collecting and communicating student medical information. The latest renovations to the Bissonnet Campus included a nurses station and the budget for the 2017–18 school year includes a salary for a part time nurse. This is the next step in being able to manage student health services.

Summer Program

The goal of the summer program at The Post Oak School is to serve currently enrolled students of working parents and those families desiring year-round care for their children (14 months–12 years). Post Oak continues to provide quality learning environments that follow the practices of Montessori philosophy throughout the summer months. Before-school and after-school care is available throughout the summer at all levels.

At the Young Children's Community (YCC) level and the Primary level, the summer program resembles the regular school year program. The classrooms are fully equipped with Montessori materials and led by AMI trained adults (usually Post Oak staff). Each child is supported on their unique developmental path, as the summer teachers collaborate and communicate with their colleagues to provide consistency and continuity for the children in their care throughout the summer months. Additional water activities, baking activities and outdoor garden activities enhance the summer program.

Strengths

- The format of the summer program allows for consistency and continuity at all levels. Classes are led by Montessori trained teachers, usually from Post Oak. Teachers communicate, collaborate and plan effectively to meet the specific needs of the students enrolled for the summer. Parents feel confident that their children are in a familiar, caring and nurturing environment.
- The summer program, at each level, mixes children from various classes and the groups of children and teachers can vary from week to week. This allows teachers, students (and parents) the opportunity to develop new and lasting personal relationships.
- Interest in summer enrollment at the YCC and Primary levels consistently remains very high.

Challenges

- One of the greatest challenges with the summer program is staffing at all levels.
- Interest and enrollment at the Elementary summer camp level sometimes wanes.
- During summers with construction or renovations on campus, housing the summer program can be difficult.
- Currently there are no summer school programs offered at the Middle School or High School level.

Plans and Priorities

- Explore more options for staffing. This may include surveying Middle and High School faculty for areas of expertise and recruiting them to share their talents with younger elementary students in the summer program, re-evaluating summer compensation and/or looking outside Post Oak to the larger Montessori community for adults to lead classes.
- Renew interest and increase enrollment at the Elementary level.
- Move up the timeline for planning and for staff commitment to summer school programming.
- Move up the timeline for summer school registration to make planning more efficient.
- Explore summer program options for Middle School and High School students.

When possible, a Spanish Immersion class is offered at the Primary level, with both the teacher and assistant speaking Spanish.

The summer program includes a Transition class designed specifically to assist children moving from Primary into Lower Elementary in the fall. The Transition class is designed to help prepare and support students in making a successful transition by providing developmentally appropriate activities in an authentic Montessori Elementary prepared environment. An AMI elementary-trained teacher leads the class.

At the Elementary level, the summer program deviates from the regular school year model. It is intended to provide enrichment activities consistent with the interests and developmental needs of the elementary-aged child (7–12 years). It follows more of a summer camp style with multiple activities offered weekly. Trained Post Oak teachers and assistants usually lead the classes and sometimes instructors from outside Post Oak are brought in for specific classes.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Chairperson: Miriam Winton, Auxiliary Programs Director
Danielle Dalsey, Primary Teacher
Julie Parraguirre, Primary Teacher, former Post Oak parent
Lindsay Mistretta, Elementary Teacher

V. Personnel and Administration

Overview

In accordance with the AMI standards, we have one trained AMI teacher in each classroom. These AMI teachers form the core of our faculty. Joining them are classroom assistants and specialists, most of whom also have Montessori training, as well as specific training fitting their job descriptions.

There are twenty-one members of the administrative staff at The Post Oak School. The head of school and division directors also have AMI training and multiple years of classroom experience. The faculty and administrative staff, a total of 92 employees, are very stable and turnover is low. Several members in each department have worked at The Post Oak School for more than ten years. Decision making at the administrative level varies based on the impact of the decision, and decisions are made based on the best expected outcome for the students and school community as a whole. Administrative staff has a weekly meeting to discuss areas of importance for each department. There is a high level of importance placed on collaboration and teamwork.

During the August in-service period, new employees receive an orientation to the school. There is a strong emphasis on professional development and continuing education at The Post Oak School. All lead teachers and full-time specialists have budgeted funds to pursue educational goals or attend refresher courses each year. Assistants often choose training at local organizations, such as museums or computer training centers. Administrative staff members have funds to attend seminars and classes. We require all employees to complete annual abuse prevention training through Praesidium, and also have onsite First Aid and CPR training.

The basic premise of our faculty evaluation tool, the PGP (Professional Growth Plan) is rooted in continuing professional development. Teachers are expected to work with their division director to identify “big” goals, which are intended to help them stretch themselves and to view themselves as active learners. Each spring, the division directors meet with their teachers to discuss progress in the completion of the year’s goals. Then the teacher identifies two areas to work on for the

coming year. During the school year, the director encourages and supports each teacher in accomplishing his or her goals.

Teachers also take on other responsibilities that contribute to the life of the school, as well as their own professional development. At the upper school level, we have implemented a teacher mentor program. When new teachers join the staff, a mentor teacher is assigned to them. These mentors receive a yearly stipend for their work. Post Oak has monthly faculty meetings attended by faculty, interns, and administration. The agenda of the meetings consists of various topics relevant to the work of the school. Several faculty and staff are involved in national and local Montessori organizations such as AMI, NAMTA, AMS, and MAA.

Benchmarking of salaries for faculty and administrative staff is reviewed annually with the head of school and Finance Committee to ensure that we offer competitive compensation.

Realizing the challenge to attract qualified AMI teachers, Post Oak started an AMI teacher training center in Houston in 2013. The Houston Montessori Institute continues to enroll and educate future Montessori teachers and also offers an Assistants course.

The school continues with its sponsorship program and is currently sponsoring several teachers and assistants.

One of our tools for maintaining consistent standards for our personnel is the Employee Handbook. The handbook is revised and updated annually and it serves as the basis of a new employee’s orientation. Employees sign off that they have received and read the handbook each year, and the Business Office goes over any significant changes at our Welcome Back Lunch.

Personnel records are maintained by the controller and are kept in a locked storage area in the Business Office. Access to these files is limited to the head of school, CFO, and controller. There is a checklist system for a new hire to ensure all required paperwork is collected for the file.

Strengths

1. Teachers engage in Professional Growth Plan (PGP) on an annual basis to set professional development goals.
2. Professional development funds are available to all faculty and staff, and the school supports and encourages engagement in professional development by granting additional days away from work that go above and beyond allocated personal days. Most employees also have a specific budget dedicated to their professional development. Professional

development hours are offered through in-service events as well.

3. The retention of the administrative staff is strong. Each member of the administrative staff is highly qualified and has education and experience that directly support his or her responsibilities. The low turnover has helped to create a stable and high-functioning department. Administration works together collaboratively, meeting weekly to discuss schoolwide issues, as well as engaging in an annual retreat.

On a daily basis, teamwork and support are part of the administrative culture. The transition of the new head of school and CFO has been seamless as all staff have continued to work together for the benefit of the school and students.

4. Administration continues to use Senior Systems, which allows the registrar, Admission, Business, and Development Offices to access information from one central data base. This has greatly improved our ability to gather and produce consistent, accurate information. We also added a module called MyBackpack, which allows parents access to their student's records as well as their tuition account.
5. Each classroom has a full-time assistant teacher who supports the work of the lead teacher. All students receive Spanish instruction by the classroom assistant or a visiting specialist. Teachers and assistants meet annually, in the spring, to complete a two-part evaluation. This helps to determine if the working relationship is mutually acceptable and prompts a discussion about strengths, challenges, and goals for the following year.
6. Post Oak offers a competitive salary and benefits package which includes health, dental, and life insurance; short and long term disability coverage, 401k, and paid vacation and/or personal days.
7. We have improved communication challenges regarding faculty and staff parents and have established clear and consistent boundaries. There is an annual meeting with all faculty and staff parents at the beginning of the school year to go over expectations and policies.
8. The Business Office has implemented a new employee checklist for various departments, which includes required documentation and set-up for new hires. This ensures that we follow the same process for all new employees, and that all the required paperwork is received. All employees have an official transcript in their personnel file. The Business Office has also implemented a departing employee checklist for various departments, including the required steps for a terminating employee.
9. We have created a new position of auxiliary programs director beginning with the 2016–2017 school year. The auxiliary programs director oversees all auxiliary programs, including before and after-school programs, after-school enrichment programs, the parenting center, and summer school.

Challenges

1. Due to resource limitations, it has been a challenge for administrative offices to operate effectively in the event of long-term absence of one of the staff.
2. Finding and maintaining relationships with qualified and dependable substitute teachers is a continual challenge.
3. Improving the practice of documenting employee performance issues and ensuring that write-ups are filed in the personnel file.
4. Nationally, there is a shortage of Montessori trained teachers at the Toddler/YCC level. Recruitment of teachers is challenging, and Post Oak needs to be proactive going forward.

Plans and Priorities

1. Plan for the succession of division directors and AMI lead teachers.
2. Develop detailed process and procedure manuals for administrative offices, which can be used in the event of a long-term absence.
3. Document and train supervisors on the process for addressing employee performance issues. Distribute forms to be used for appropriate documentation of all issues.
4. Implement strategies to identify candidates for training and prioritize sponsorship and mentorship opportunities at Post Oak at the YCC level.

SUBMITTED BY:

Christine Peterson, Controller, Post Oak parent
Kelly Vaughn, CFO, Post Oak parent

VI. Governance

Monitoring the School's Alignment with its Mission

The Board of Trustees (Board) of The Post Oak School (School) is charged with the duty of monitoring the School's alignment with its mission. The mission of the School, as reflected in the School's mission statement, is derived from the principles of Maria Montessori as promulgated by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). The Board regularly monitors the School's fidelity to this mission and considers whether the mission needs to be refined or updated.

The School's mission statement is as follows:

"The mission of the school is to prepare an outstanding Montessori environment that fosters collaboration, cooperation, and peace, and to provide experiences that promote curiosity, inquiry, and engagement. Designed according to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual characteristics and needs of the learner, our methods guide and nurture each individual from infancy to adulthood. The school's approach is grounded in the principles of AMI Montessori education."

The School's mission statement was most recently revised in 2015 in preparation for launching the head of school (Head) search process. A committee of the School's administration and faculty proposed modest revisions, which were approved by the full administration and faculty and adopted by the Board. The mission statement is displayed in every classroom

Responsibilities

The Board is a strategic board. In order to clearly articulate its strategic focus and key responsibilities, in 2003 the Board adopted the following Board mission statement that underscores its strategic role:

"The Board of Trustees for The Post Oak School exists as a strategic body to further the mission of The Post Oak School and to ensure the success of The Post Oak School. To discharge its duties, the primary activity of the Board of Trustees is planning for the benefit of the current generation of students and those generations who will follow. The most important long-term goals of the Board of Trustees are to create stability and solvency of The Post Oak School, to adopt policies that provide a framework for excellence in the classroom for both student and faculty, and to provide opportunities that enable students, faculty, and staff to thrive academically, spiritually, and socially.

Committee Structure and Functions

The School's by-laws, last re-stated in 2004, require three standing committees: the Finance Committee, the Committee on Trustees, and the Head Support and Evaluation

and office at the School. The School's administration, faculty, and Board assess all decisions through the lens of the mission statement.

Historically, the School participated in the AMI-USA school recognition program, which assisted the Board in monitoring the School's alignment with its mission statement. However, in 2013 the School's administration, faculty, and Board endorsed the decision to withdraw from the AMI-USA school recognition program due to AMI-USA's approach to the program, which was not helpful in promoting whole-school improvement. The Board has monitored closely the potential impact of this decision, with a particular eye toward the risk of "mission drift" in the absence of external criteria and the assessment of the School's Montessori character.

The Board has been satisfied that the School has assumed leadership within a group of other large, well-established AMI Montessori schools to develop a new approach to assessing a school's Montessori character and to school improvement. This group, the Montessori Peer Review Council (MPRC), has articulated professional standards of practice for the individual teacher as well as for the Montessori school as a cohesive learning community, and is in the midst of a five-year project to test the implementation of this program.

The mission of the Board of Trustees is not to make day-to-day decisions. These decisions are to be made and implemented by the staff and faculty. To assist the staff and faculty, the Board of Trustees shall create policies that will give guidance to the staff and faculty of The Post Oak School."

Similar to the School's mission statement, the Board's mission statement was last reviewed by the Board in December 2015 in preparation for launching the Head search process.

For the past 24 years, the Board has worked closely with Independent School Management (ISM) and implements best practices recommended by this organization. Of these, one of the most important is that each year the Board devotes a two-day period to a strategic retreat in which the Board, working with a senior representative of ISM, creates, reviews, or revises its strategic 5-year plan and sets annual goals consistent with the mission and vision for the School.

Committee. Following the introduction of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in 2002, the Finance Committee was restructured to separate the Audit function, which is now managed by its

own committee, to provide more appropriate oversight and governance in compliance with the recommendations for application of the Act to non-profit organizations. Additionally, in conjunction with the establishment of the School's endowment fund and the mission statement for that fund, a separate Endowment Committee has been established to oversee the management of the fund. The Head Support and Evaluation Committee is the critical interface between Board governance and School operations. As a strategic board, the Board avoids interfering with the day-to-day operations of the School and with the Head's relationship with staff and faculty. That said, the Board has elected to adopt a limited appellate review function into the Head Support and Evaluation Committee to provide a review process of decisions made by the Head. The appellate procedures are included in the Family Handbook each year and, since their enactment, have been used only once. A copy of the Appellate Process is included in the Documentation of Adherence to Standards.

The strategic plan, and the work necessary to implement it, drives the structure and composition of the remaining Board committees. Following guidance on best practices from ISM, an Annual Board Retreat is traditionally held at the very end of the summer break or beginning of the academic year. The retreat provides an opportunity to review the School's existing strategic and financial plans and long term goals from which the Annual Board Agenda is established. The committee

Board/Head Relationship

When new trustees come to the Board, part of their orientation process must be to understand the special relationship the Board has with the Head. Many of the current trustees have a business background and the Board seeks to ensure trustees understand the appropriate dynamic regarding reporting and authority in a Board-Head of School relationship at an independent school:

- The Head is the sole employee of the School who reports to the Board
- The Head, with her management team, operates the School on a day-to-day basis, and has authority for personnel matters
- The Board provides public support for the administration of the School

The Board's role is to employ a Head to carry out the School's mission. It is the role of the Head Support & Evaluation Committee (and, as applicable, the Board) to set the Head's goals, to evaluate the Head in her implementation of the School's mission, and to provide support to the Head as required. Head evaluation is based upon an interactive process by which the Head constructs her annual goals for the School and her professional development. The Head attends the Annual Board Retreat and so has the benefit of both the long-term view of the School's strategy, as well as the in-depth knowledge of the operational aspects of the School to balance in developing

charges for the upcoming year are established via this process. In this way, the Board remains aligned with its mission and committed to the continuous use of strategic planning. A copy of the current strategic plan is attached.

In addition to the standing committees, the following committees are currently charged with the work of the Board for the 2016–17 school year: Development, Audit and Risk, ISAS Committee, Technology, and a transition Committee to provide a support resource for our new Head.

The current structure of the committees is shown in the Board organization chart in the Documentation and Adherence to Standards. A copy of the current year's committee charges is also attached. Annual committee charges drive the Board calendar as indicated in the Board calendar.

The Committee on Trustees provides an internal review process to ensure committee work is progressing according to plan. The chair of this committee works directly with the Board chair to ensure that committee chairs are identified and appointed, and then works with those committee chairs to ensure that the committees are staffed with trustee and non-trustee members to provide the appropriate skill sets. Mid-year, the Committee on Trustees will request a progress update from each committee chair, and report back to the Board chair.

these goals. The Head Support & Evaluation Committee meets with the Head to discuss and determine whether the goals should be modified or supplemented in any way. Through this process, the Board is assured that the Head's goals are consistent with those of the Board and the strategic plan. Midway through the academic year, the Head and the Head Support & Evaluation Committee meet to discuss how the Head is performing based upon the goals agreed to at the beginning of the school year. Feedback is provided and any necessary adjustments are made to the Head's goals for the remainder of the year.

The Head Support & Evaluation Committee also serves as a sounding board for the Head as the Head works through various issues during the year. The Head will generally consult with or alert the Head Support & Evaluation Committee when sensitive issues involving the School's faculty, families, or community arise, even though the details and specifics of such situations may not be shared with the entire Board. This collaboration between the Head and the committee further ensures that the Head is performing her job consistent with the expectations of the Board.

Recommendation as to the renewal of the Head's contract and compensation is based upon the Head's evaluation of whether she has worked constructively, efficiently, and proactively to achieve the agreed-upon goals. Compensation for the Head

is recommended to the Board by the Head Search & Evaluation Committee, which takes into account the complexity

Trustee Profile & Board Composition

The Board understands that the right skills and experiences are required in order for the Board to carry out its mission. One of the most important charges of the Committee on Trustees is to identify new trustees, recommend new trustees for appointment to the Board, and successfully recruit new trustees.

The Board believes that collectively it needs a broad range of core competencies and experiences of its members, which are assessed annually, in order to develop and implement its strategic plan and to support the needs of the Head and School. Currently these include:

- Non-profit management
- Legal & political
- School management
- Corporate management
- Accounting/finance
- Investment management
- Audit & financial control
- Risk management
- Communication/Marketing
- Fundraising/Development
- Leadership of Volunteers
- Child & Youth issues/Education
- Information technology
- Real estate development/Construction
- Building maintenance/Architecture

Using the profile of the existing trustees' skills, and focusing on the strategic plan, the Committee on Trustees identifies skills that could be added or strengthened and then engages in

New Trustees Orientation/Ongoing Board Training/Evaluation

Educating new trustees about their responsibilities begins even before they attend their Board orientation. A list of expectations, developed by ISM, is shared with newly appointed trustees, and includes the following requirements, by which trustees are expected to:

- Come to Board meetings well-prepared; stay for all of each meeting
- Respect for the confidentiality of Board meetings
- See the long-range impact of short-range decisions

of the role, the performance of the Head, as well as market comparisons.

a review of internal (current Post Oak families) and external individuals (including former families) who have the needed capability, sophistication, and potential interest in serving on the Board. A copy of the Post Oak Trustee Questionnaire and current profile of the 2015–2016 Board is provided.

In addition to the immediate needs of the Board, the Committee on Trustees pays attention to succession considerations to ensure there is capacity on the Board to provide candidates for the next Board chair, as well as committee chair roles.

The Board also believes that its composition should be representative of the Post Oak community and the community at large and the Board seeks to ensure appropriate ethnic and socio-economic representation on the Board. The Board also continues to work to increase the number of external individuals who serve as trustees, and has recently been successful in attracting trustees with educational leadership backgrounds to serve on the Board. The Committee on Trustees also works to identify and place non-trustees on committees so that the Board can more closely evaluate them as future potential trustees.

In addition to identifying the skills that would benefit the Board, the candidate trustees are interviewed to assess their willingness and ability to take on the role, including making time available and taking fiduciary responsibility. The candidate trustees are interviewed by the Head, the Committee on Trustees, and other trustees as appropriate prior to being brought forward for appointment.

As for many other aspects of the Board's behavior, the Board refers to best practices and principles published by ISM in surveying trustee skills and potential performance. The interview process is conducted with a view to establishing "goodness of fit" for Board service, and setting clear expectations in the candidate trustee's mind that should lead to a successful outcome during the candidate trustee's tenure on the Board.

- Ask for data, both hard (enrollment, attrition, finance) and soft (who is in favor, who is not; who benefits who loses) in decision-making
- Require evidence of success or failure, again, in "hard" and "soft" terms
- Confirm appropriate level of Board activity
- Visit the School frequently
- Know that the Head does not report to individual Board members, but only to the Board as a group

- Keep his/her child's needs, if at the School, in perspective, and carefully distinguish between what is best for that child and what is best, long term, for the School

The chair of the Committee on Trustees is responsible for and actively participates in the orientation and training of new trustees. The annual process elects new trustees in April or May for a term which starts with the School year in August. Following guidance on best practices from ISM, an Annual Board Retreat is traditionally held at the very end of the summer break or beginning of the academic year, and is usually the first board meeting for the incoming trustees. Ahead of the retreat, there is a new trustee orientation and training program that provides background to the Board's work, including an overview of the evolution of the School, the School's existing strategic and financial plans, long term goals, and Board expectations. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding the relationship between a trustee and the Head, and a trustee and the School's other constituents. The new trustees are provided with a copy of the by-laws, the most current audit, the current financial statement, the current strategic plan, and any other documents relevant to the work of the Board in the upcoming year.

Being trained and oriented by ISM, one of the country's leaders in independent school management, has been a significant benefit for our new trustees and is considered a success factor for the Board's overall effectiveness.

Fiduciary Responsibilities

The Boards' Finance Committee meets monthly and reviews monthly financial statements with a report to the Board. The committee also develops and recommends approval of the School's annual budget and reports to the Board on the School's actual financial performance versus budget on a quarterly basis. This committee also develops a strategic financial plan to support the 5-year strategic plan developed by the full Board. An annual audit is performed by an external audit firm, which is presented by the Audit and Risk Committee to the full Board.

Endowment Investment & Spending Policies

The School established an endowment in 2004. It is structured to receive money and property to be invested, reinvested, and disbursed on behalf of the School. When the endowment was established, the Board also established guidelines regarding investment policies, objectives, and guidelines to govern the investment of the endowment's assets. The endowment is administered by the Board, which has the fiduciary responsibility to preserve and augment the value of the endowment. As such, the Board established an Endowment Committee to develop an Investment Policy and otherwise monitor overall objectives and policies separate from the Finance Committee. Also, this committee is charged with evaluating asset performance and reporting quarterly to the Board on such matters.

Trustees continue their education in numerous ways. First, the annual Board retreat serves to re-educate the entire Board on the role of a strategic board. The School provides a subscription to *Ideas & Perspectives*, ISM's monthly publication directed to independent schools and their boards. Second, the ISM representative attending the Board retreat shares with the Board new "best practices" with regard to governance of independent schools. Third, each new Board chair attends a 3-day seminar at ISM's corporate headquarters and receives in-depth training on board governance and the responsibilities of the Chair. This information is then imparted back to the Board throughout the year. Fourth, the Board has several emeritus members who continue to work with the Board. These members, and their years of experience in the world and with the School, provide invaluable education and insights to current trustees.

The Board also believes that continuing education must be based upon an accurate assessment of how the Board is performing. Every year the Board completes a strategic board assessment that evaluates the work of the Board. Using the feedback from this assessment, areas are identified for further education and assistance. A copy of the strategic board assessment is provided in the Documentation and Adherence to Standards.

The School retains an external law firm to ensure compliance with local, state, and federal regulations. The Head reports to the Board on any issues of significance. Risk management includes an annual review of all insurance coverage by the School's business manager. The chair of the Audit and Risk Committee has begun participating in that review process. Safety audits are performed every three years and annual safety inspections are done with the local fire department.

The Board may rely upon investment advice from professional managers and may delegate investment decisions to these managers with discretionary investment authority as determined by the Board.

Although spending would have been permissible when the value of the endowment reached \$1 million, which it did several years ago, no withdrawals have been made, as the committee chose to change the policy by increasing the value of the endowment to \$3 million before spending any interest income. The Endowment Committee has been charged with reviewing the policies to ensure they are still in alignment with the prudent use of this long term asset.

School Compliance with local, state, and federal laws, and Regulations

The Board of Trustees, through its work with the School administration and through Financial and Audit committees, ensures that Post Oak complies with all relevant agencies at the local, state, and federal level. As a 501(c)3, Post Oak complies with federal laws and regulations pursuant to our non-profit status in regard to taxes, financial audit requirements, and accepting donations. As an employer, we comply with state and federal labor and employment laws and remain informed about changes through our Human Resource consultants.

Risk Management

The Audit and Risk committee oversees the creation and management of the School's risk-management control structure. The purpose of this structure is to develop and institute control measures, targets, and responsibilities. This structure is used by the Board to evaluate the School's performance and to identify successful and problem areas as well as areas of specific risks. Its purpose is to provide an adequate set of controls and indicators in order to detect where and when issues requiring remediation arise.

This control structure is founded on regular and consistent reporting by the School's Head, CFO, and administration. The measures of this structure are based on agreements among the Board, the Audit and Risk Committee, the Head, and the administrative directors on the development of control targets, metrics, and remediation plans. The control structure is reviewed annually by the Audit and Risk committee for improvements and continuing appropriateness.

Development

The Board fully recognizes its role in fundraising, and understands its responsibilities associated with evaluating and executing development activities to permit the strategic plan to be successfully delivered. The School's hard income consistently covers in excess 95% of the School's annual operating expenses so the School's annual fund, which regularly has higher than 90% school community participation, and the School's biennial gala are recurring development activities that have provided reliable sources of funds for small and medium-sized projects in the School's strategic plan. With respect to larger projects, the School looks to utilize the endowment and long-term donor driven development. The Board sees the value in a donor-centered approach to development that focuses on relationship management as a process by which the School would identify, cultivate, solicit, and recognize donors and prospects. This approach puts the responsibility for development on those who are most accountable for defining the School's vision. The responsibility for development at the School lies with a group consisting primarily of the Board chair, the Development Committee chair, the Head, and the

Post Oak is licensed by the Texas Department of Family and protective Services (TDFPS) which inspects the before and after-school programs for children from birth to six to ensure the standards required by Texas law are met. Under the umbrella of Post Oak, the Houston Montessori Institute complies with Texas Workforce Commission Careers and Colleges department, which certifies small career schools and colleges.

The Audit and Risk Committee also oversees the development of the School's risk management policies and responds to any need to evaluate, reduce, control or eliminate potential risks, or to transfer part of the risk through insurance. Risk assessments that look at the likelihood of potential occurrences and the severity of potential outcomes across a spectrum of exposure areas are updated periodically, and address risks related to areas such as facilities, security, financial, personnel, public relations, and enterprise risk.

In identifying and addressing risks, the committee uses a process of (1) risk identification; (2) development of prevention and mitigation protocols; (3) creation of communication concerning the plan, supporting protocols, and action plans; (4) informing about the plans; and (5) periodically reviewing the plan. The Audit and Risk Committee forms focus groups and other teams composed of the Audit and Risk Committee members, other trustees, school staff, and outside experts where deemed necessary for effective risk management.

Development Director. Additionally, the recent capital campaign was headed by a trustee and leveraged additional Board and non-Board resources including current and emeritus trustees, external consultants, and selected parents, in addition to School employees.

The development of a major gifts program and the cultivation of the long-term donor relationships is seen as an area that could benefit from further emphasis at the School. In the Board self-assessment, carried out annually by ISM as part of their stability marker approach and seen as an important school "health-check," the existence of a major gifts and long term donor cultivation program has been the only subjective item over the last ten years that consistently scores less than "highly favorable." The School has recently expanded to include the creation of a High School located in Houston's Museum District, and the Board believes the High School will bring a number of opportunities for longer-term relationships that will mature over time to a greater giving base. These include increased alumni connections that were a

more tenuous proposition when the School ended at Middle School, a parent population further along in its prime earning years, and an institution that, with its knowledge-seeking and self-reliance-based international baccalaureate educational program using museum district institutions as an extension of the classroom, may appeal to an entrepreneurial donor

Strategic Issues for the Board

The Board understands that it can only fulfill its mission of ensuring the long-term success of the School if it acts as a strategic board, and develops the appropriate strategic plan and strategic financial plan. The Board has a well-established process for periodically developing a multi-year strategic plan and the accompanying strategic financial plan, and then crafting an annual strategic agenda based on those plans.

In the ten-year period since its initial accreditation by ISAS, the School has successfully achieved a number of visionary items that position it for at least the next decade. The background for this work started with the need to develop a new 5-year plan that incorporated the findings of the ISAS accreditation report issued in 2006. The visiting committee recommended modifications to the School’s music, technology and Spanish programs; and potential changes to the library and security. In addition to these recommendations, there was recognition of the pressure on the existing classroom space due to increased retention of elementary students rising from the primary department. Plans to establish a parenting center and a Montessori teacher training program added to the pressures felt in the utilization of the physical campus space.

In 2009, the School engaged in a series of meetings, led by an independent external consultant, in which parents, faculty, and staff came together to share ideas of where the School was and where it should be headed. Out of that process, the Board formulated a constituency-based long-range plan that recommended that the School establish a high school, in addition to an already robust strategic agenda. This led to the initiation of a capital campaign and a subsequent period of campus expansion and renovation, an effort that is just now reaching its conclusion.

Board Strengths

- Board is a strategic board
- Board is affiliated with best-of-breed professional organizations: ISAS, ISM, AMI, IBO, NBOA, MPRC and NAIS
- Emeritus board members provide institutional memory
- Board and School environments are mission-consistent
- Strong trustee engagement and attendance at Board/committee meetings

base that has no existing ties to the School. Notwithstanding the success of the recent capital campaign, the time taken to reach the financial targets also highlighted the desire to have a deeper understanding of and relationship with the giving base ahead of an identified need, and a fund-raising capability that is ready to tap.

The first strategic plan resulting from the constituent-based planning effort ran from 2010–2014, and anticipated campus expansion and/or renovation in 2012 through 2014. The time required to locate a property to house the high school, to determine the appropriate location for the expanding middle school, coupled with an increased budget and slower than hoped progress on the capital campaign, led to a revised timeline for the plan to deliver the new campus solution. The construction and renovation projects were completed in 2016. Concurrent with the completion and renovation projects, there was a Head transition at the end of the 2015–2016 school year; and the strategic plan appropriately called and continues to call for a period of consolidation and transition following all of these changes.

Working with ISM each year, the Board reviews the strategic plan and the accompanying strategic financial plan. The discipline of this strategic planning, especially the development of the accompanying strategic financial plan, has been critical to the success of the School. The following represent some of the material strategic issues considered or to be considered by the Board for the period between 2014 and 2019:

- 2014–2015 Revise and finalize campus master plan; continue capital campaign
- 2015–2016 Conduct Head search; construct new High School building on the Museum District Campus; renovate Bissonnet building; relocate Middle School to Museum District Campus
- 2016–2017 Handover: consolidation & transition
- 2017–2018 Assessment: How are we doing?
- 2018–2019 Vision making: the next 10 years

- Strong track record of supporting transformational initiatives
- Board members engage in vigorous internal debates on important issues, but speak with one voice when engaging with members of the community
- Board is representative of diverse School community

Board Challenges

- Developing sustainable major gifts and long term donor cultivation programs
- Serving as effective ambassadors and representatives to the community
 - ♦ Effectively obtaining and using structured feedback from stakeholders
- ♦ Consistently communicating with stakeholders about the School's mission/programs/ideals, as well as the Board's own mission and efforts to strategically assist in those areas
- Ongoing succession planning for Board leadership/membership

Board Plans and Priorities for the Future

- Develop sustainable major gifts and long term donor cultivation programs
- Support the development and implementation of integrated School marketing plan
 - ♦ Support cultural consistency and marketing efforts across two-campus school
 - ♦ Support in positioning the School among other Houston schools
 - ♦ Support in increasing the awareness of prospective students as well as members of the broader Houston, Texas, United States, and international educational and business communities regarding the School's educational, developmental and programmatic model.
- Continue to focus on Diversity:
 - ♦ Attend to racial/ethnic/religious/gender diversity among students/faculty/board
 - ♦ Respond to the rapid changes in the culture around gender identity issues
 - ♦ Promote socioeconomic diversity in an era of growing wealth-divide
 - ♦ Embrace the impact that a commitment to diversity might make on future fundraising capacity
- Continue to explore/pursue transformational initiatives consistent with the School's programmatic sustainability/initiatives

Attachments (available in Visiting Team File on site)

- Strategic Financial Plan
- Board Committee Charges
- Board Calendar
- Trustee Skills Profile
- Strategic Plan
- Post Oak Trustee Questionnaire
- Current profile of the Board
- Board Organization Chart
- Appellate Process

VII. Finance and Facilities Management

A. Finance and Business Procedures

Business Management and Financial Affairs Overview

The Post Oak School was established in 1963 as a non-profit Montessori school. The school serves approximately 486 students, ages 14 months to 18 years (grade 12). In 2012, the School established a new High School division on a second campus in the Museum District of Houston. The school employs 21 administrative staff, 5 maintenance staff, 62 full-time faculty, specialists, and teaching assistants, as well as several part-time specialists and substitute teachers as needed.

The school's Business Office is staffed by a controller and accounts payable/receivable clerk and operates under the direct supervision of a chief financial officer. In addition, the Facilities and Technology departments are under the direct supervision of the chief financial officer. Senior Systems Software for Independent Schools is integrated and used for all of the Admissions, Business Office, and Development operations, as well as for database management. Internal controls include using employees and board members outside of the business office as signers on accounts, as well as a number of other controls established by using personnel such as the head of school and office manager to add another layer of oversight for important reviews.

The Post Oak School's fiscal management is overseen by the Board of Trustee's Finance and Benefits Committee. A separate Audit Committee was established in 2009 as part of the school's commitment to compliance with the Sarbanes Oxley legislation. An annual audit is performed by Blazek and Vetterling, an independent audit firm. All recent audits have been unqualified and the school has not received a management letter in over 9 years.

The financial stability of The Post Oak School continued to grow during the 2016–2017 school year as we enrolled our fifth class of ninth graders in the Post Oak High School. Our audited financial statements for the 2015–2016 school year resulted in an increase in net assets for all funds of \$498,663. The school has experienced significant growth since the 2006 self-study as we have added 70 students to our main population, in addition to the High School.

The annual budget for 2016–2017 is \$10,105,000. The annual budget is developed in January and revised in May of the following year and a third time in October if necessary. The Board's stated goal is to finance 95–100% of school operations, including recurring maintenance, with hard income (i.e., excluding contributions), and the budgets are built to achieve this goal.

The overall financial success of The Post Oak School has been driven by positive budget variances in the operating budget, which have produced significant cash reserves enabling the school to internally fund two renovation projects and start the high school. In 2011, the school launched a \$6 million capital campaign to help fund the new high school, as well as to renovate the Bissonnet building. After a significant property addition to the Museum campus at the end of 2014, the campaign was increased to \$8 million to include the addition of a new High School building.

During the summer of 2014, the school completed a master planning exercise for both campuses with assistance of Gensler Architects and Forney Partnership to facilitate the project. The architectural firm of Gensler was selected to continue work on the design phase and to complete the construction drawings for both the new High School building on the museum campus and the renovation of the Bissonnet Campus. As work progressed, a panel of construction firms was interviewed and Mission Construction was contracted to build both projects. In August 2015, the school secured the Museum District Campus building permit from the City of Houston and broke ground on August 18, 2015 for the new High School building. The building was completed in time for the start of the 2016–17 school year. The construction on Bissonnet Campus began in June 2016 and was completed in September 2016.

Tax-exempt bond financing in the amount of \$8.5 million was secured through BBVA Compass Bank at a very favorable interest rate. This has allowed us to refinance our current mortgage on the museum property at a lower rate and to supplement the capital campaign for the constructions costs on both campuses. A portion of this loan will be termed out at the end of the project.

During the 2004–2005 school year, the Board of Trustees established an endowment policy. The policy covers both a Board-designated endowment (i.e., funds set aside by the Board from operating surplus and fundraising) and a donor-restricted endowment. The policy called for 20% of general fundraising to be contributed to the Board-designated endowment each year, but has been reduced to 5% in light of the new high school and building initiatives. The long-range goal was originally to reach a benchmark of \$1 million dollars in total endowment before spending any income from the endowment; however, in 2013, this benchmark was raised to \$3 million dollars by the Endowment Committee, which was

formed as directed by the endowment policy when the investment reached \$1 million.

The investment policy of the Post Oak School Endowment directs a long-term investment approach. The current asset allocation target is 20% cash and fixed income, and 80% equities to maximize long-term returns. More than 80% of the portfolio is invested in low-cost institutional asset class mutual funds managed by Asset Management Advisors. The combined portfolio experienced a 1.9% investment loss for the year ended June 30, 2016; however, has experienced an 88.7% gain since inception. The market value of the endowment accounts totaled \$1,853,032 at June 30, 2016.

Strengths

1. The school operates with a strong cash position, allowing for ease of funding for operations.
2. The school has established a strict ACH monthly payment plan in addition to the full-pay option that has resulted in almost 100% collection of annual tuition revenue.
3. The school has an active finance and benefits committee, as well as an audit committee with diverse backgrounds.
4. The school's strong financial position allowed us to secure tax-exempt bond financing at very low interest rates for a 10-year term/25-year amortization.
5. The school has embraced the Independent School Management "Markers" for financial health and has consistently followed its five-year strategic budget.
6. The school has recently added the Senior Systems budgeting module and is working to integrate additional input on the budget from other administrators.

Challenges

1. The addition of the Post Oak High School has required using significantly more cash reserves to support its operations than originally projected.
2. The slower "ramp up" of the High School enrollment has created budget challenges that are not straightforward, as teaching and staffing requirements are not always commensurate with student enrollment levels.
3. The "down side" to the bond financing is that the school is committed to significant principal and interest annually that must be supported by operations for the next 25 years.
4. The Capital Campaign to support the High School and construction projects has stretched out longer than anticipated, and the payout of pledges may impact the School's ability to "pay down" the debt level before the construction loan is "termed out."
5. The school is seeing an increased demand for financial assistance and, in the absence of a large endowment, this demand is met through a reduction of revenues.

Plans and Priorities

1. Grow the High School enrollment to a "break even" level of at least 74 students.
2. Manage the school's budget to support the annual debt service.
3. Replenish the School's Cash Reserves and establish a formal PPRSM reserve.

Submitted by:

Kelly Vaughn, Chief Financial Officer
Christine Peterson, Controller

The school has developed a seven-year strategic budget (aka the "base case") from 2015–2016 through 2021–2022 that calls for 5% tuition increases every year for the next five years, in addition to completing a five-year initiative that began in 2014–2015 to bring tuition levels at the elementary and Middle School levels up to competitor-school levels. The long-term plan calls for the 5% tuition increase levels until the High School has reached a "break-even" enrollment level, which is currently budgeted to be 74 students. The school's goal is to maintain an operating cash reserve of no less than 15% of annual operating costs and a 5% maintenance reserve for long-term repair and maintenance. The school typically enjoys a much higher operating cash balance stemming from its largely up-front tuition payment policy.

B. Facilities

Overview

Maintaining an age-appropriate learning environment is a fundamental principal of Montessori pedagogy. We apply this principle to both campuses of the school and ask the children to extend their respect and care to every aspect of the buildings and surrounding spaces. In addition, all staff is attentive to the whole of the school beyond their specific learning and working environments. Through respectful communication, they keep the maintenance or building management staff informed of their observations, needs, and suggestions. They also look for and find ways to involve the students in the care of this total environment, and to support the work of the facilities staff. Montessori students value the learning environment on and off the school property. Learning extends beyond the facility, which also extends their concept of stewardship and responsibility to the greater community.

The Post Oak School comprises two urban campuses: one located on 3.44 acres in Bellaire, Texas, and the second located on 1.56 acres in the Museum District of Houston.

The Bellaire (“Bissonnet”) Campus is housed in a two-story 55,000 square foot stucco building originally built in 1986–87. In 2000, a renovation was completed which added a gym and two Upper Elementary classrooms. In 2007, the building underwent a partial roof replacement. Another renovation was completed in 2008, as a portion of the open courtyard was enclosed and renovated into what is now known as the Common Room and a Lower Elementary classroom was renovated to accommodate the growing student body. As enrollment retention continued, the space that housed the library was renovated into a new Upper Elementary classroom and the library was relocated to the atrium space. The building on the Bissonnet Campus currently houses 380 students, ages 14 months to 13 years, within the four developmental levels of the school (YCC, Primary, Lower Elementary, and Upper Elementary). Classrooms range in size from 816 square feet to 2,061 square feet. Each YCC classroom houses 12 students, and each Primary and Elementary class houses approximately 28 students. In addition to classrooms, there is an art room, a music room, an 8,000 square foot gymnasium, a multi-purpose room, three tutoring rooms, a teacher workroom, bathrooms, and an administrative wing that provides office space for 16 staff. Outside, there is $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of play space/sports field that was renovated in 2007. Garden space borders the building wherever possible in order to accommodate the outdoor work of the children in support of the Montessori pedagogy. An interior courtyard houses a 500 square foot butterfly garden that is used by the children. There is a paved parking lot that can accommodate 57 vehicles, and a covered car port for two 14-passenger buses.

The mechanical layout of the building includes an all-electrical air conditioning and heating system. The system provides

for fresh air ventilation throughout the buildings. Over the past 10 years, the school has steadily increased its investment in repairs and maintenance. In the past three years alone, six rooftop HVAC units have been replaced, and plumbing has been updated to remove deteriorating galvanized piping, which was replaced with CPVC and copper pipe. The main electrical breaker was replaced last year, and fire-suppression sprinklers were added to eight classrooms. The “School Dude” work order software was adopted five years ago to streamline the work order process and has significantly contributed to the smooth running of the facilities department. In 2015, the school commissioned a full facilities audit from Building Solutions, Inc. to aid in long-range planning to keep all of the building systems in excellent working order. All systems are in proper working order and have passed all regular and necessary inspections.

As the school has increased its enrollment, it has faced a lack of adequate meeting and other internal gathering spaces to support program needs. A number of plans have been considered over the last eight years, but for a variety of reasons, the school was not able to implement them. With the newly acquired property at the Museum District Campus (see below), a major renovation at Bissonnet was planned in conjunction with the decision to move the Middle School program from Bissonnet to the Museum District. With the additional square footage provided by this transition, we were able to create a dedicated music space, a parenting center, a nurse’s office and clinic, and renovate the administration hallway. Two new Upper Elementary classrooms and a new teacher workroom were created on the second floor, making space available on the first floor to relocate one of the Lower Elementary classrooms, create an additional reading area adjacent to the library, and create the new music room. This extensive renovation of the Bissonnet Campus began in June 2016 and was completed in September 2016.

The Museum District Campus was created in 2011 with the purchase of three separate properties on Autrey Street and Montrose Boulevard. Two of the lots were contiguous on Autrey Street, with the third located one lot away on the corner of Autrey and Montrose. In 2013, a parent was able to purchase the remaining lot and held it for us until the school was able to purchase it in 2014. All four properties were resurveyed in 2015 and consolidated into one larger property, now known as 1010 Autrey.

There are two buildings located at 1010 Autrey. The first is a 6,000 square foot midcentury modern building renovated in 2011 into an open-concept school building that includes open space, small classrooms and meeting areas, a tinker space as well as a full science lab. There is also a reception space, office, kitchen area, teacher workspace, and bathrooms. In

August 2016, the Middle School relocated to this building. All mechanical systems were replaced during this renovation, including four rooftop HVAC units, all new electrical systems, plumbing, and sprinkler systems. A new fire alarm system was installed and all inspections have been passed.

The second building is the newly-constructed High School. It is an 8,200 square foot building that has been designed in an open concept by Gensler Architects. To accommodate future growth, the building has been designed so that a second floor of 8,000 square feet could be added. Mission Construction broke ground on the high school building August 18, 2015, and it was completed in time for the 2016–2017 School year.

The school currently owns and maintains two 14-passenger activity busses purchased in 2007 and 2011, a 2-seat cargo van purchased in 2009, a 7-passenger minivan purchased in 2012, and an 8-passenger minivan purchased in 2014. A new 71-passenger IH activity bus was purchased in August 2016 to support student transfers between the campuses and for large group outings. All vehicles are on a regular maintenance program. The buses and minivans are used to transport the students on outings into the community, as well as to shuttle students between the two campuses. The cargo van is mainly used for school maintenance business. Transportation of students to and from school is accomplished by private vehicle and carpooling. A strict policy of arrival and departure times and traffic flow is supervised by off-duty law enforcement officers, security guards, and staff to ensure the smooth drop-off and pick-up of our students with safety first and foremost.

Strengths

1. The Post Oak School maintains a safe, quality play and learning environment that children, staff, and families can utilize with confidence.
2. Improvements driven by the strategic plan have supported school-wide initiatives, and the attention of the building committee and facilities staff continues to provide a healthy environment for the school's community.
3. Maintaining a prepared environment as part of the Montessori pedagogy supports the constant scrutiny and systematic approach to facilities' maintenance.

Challenges

1. The lack of sufficient parking continues to create problems for faculty and staff, as well as parents and guests of the school. Daytime events are especially challenging, and parents are often forced to park blocks away from the school. In recent years, the school has created "buddy" parking spaces and leased 18 parking spaces across the street from the school, but this continues to be a challenge for the school.
2. Our new Museum District Campus does not have a gym or outdoor recreational fields. The school is currently transporting students to the Bissonnet Campus for physical

With the increased focus on safety and security in schools, Post Oak has instituted a variety of new security measures. The school has unarmed security officers that are provided by an outside company (Peace of Mind Security) during school and special events, as well as off-duty police officers. These officers patrol the grounds and assist with carpool and traffic safety. During the 2014–2015 school years, Post Oak commissioned a full security audit from Wyatt Security to help analyze overall security of both campuses, as well as possible neighborhood threats. POM security provided safety training to staff and the High School students who are moving about the Museum District on a daily basis. We designed an internal and external lockdown protocol and established "safety zones" by installing additional doors and locks on interior bathrooms and closets. A public address system was installed and lockdown drills are held twice annually. All buildings have outside security cameras.

All aspects of facilities operations are directed by the facilities director who reports to the CFO. His staff consists of a maintenance manager and his assistant, as well as a facilities technician on each campus. Additional custodial services are provided by an outside company. The CFO and facilities director maintain the annual facilities budget and work closely to ensure that the facilities are properly maintained. In addition to the annual maintenance and repair budget, the school maintains a 5% reserve for PPRRSM.

4. The addition of the new High School building supports the expansion of that program and provides a new state-of-the-art facility for the High School students and staff.
5. Relocating the Middle School from the Bissonnet Campus to the Museum District Campus provides an enlarged and improved space to enhance that program.
6. The Bissonnet Campus renovation added programmatic space as well as facilitated replacement of a number of the mechanical systems, extending the life of the building and providing significant reduction in energy use.

- fitness and other sports activities. The students are spending an excessive amount of time commuting, and a long-term solution is being researched.
3. The school will continue to struggle with adequate meeting and gathering spaces even post construction. Ours is an urban campus and we have already maximized the "imperious" cover allowed by the City of Bellaire.
4. The shortage of adequate storage for classrooms, administrative and extracurricular activities continues to be a problem

for this urban campus. We have responded by reconfiguring current storage areas, such as the gym closet, and adding additional storage along the back gym wall. We continue

to rent offsite storage facilities for the Houston Montessori Institute, as well as for long-term record storage.

Plans and Priorities

1. Plan and execute strategies for integrating the facilities management of two campuses that are approximately six miles apart.
2. Integrate the long-term maintenance & repairs schedule that was part of the facilities audit completed by Building Solutions with the new “School Dude” module to ensure that the school stays on top of long-term maintenance of the three school buildings.
3. Locate and rent a facility or space close to the Museum District Campus for physical fitness and sports activities for the Middle and High School students, while strategically planning for a more permanent solution.

Submitted by:

Kelly Vaughn, CFO

Matt Thompson, Facilities Director

Manuel Mejia, Maintenance Director

Nazario Anastascio, Facilities technician

Michael Vaughn, Campus Planning Committee

VIII. Conclusion

The pages of this self-study report provide many examples of how the Post Oak community is fulfilling its mission. Analysis of our programs and the organization as a whole confirmed Post Oak's commitment to an environment of collaboration, cooperation, and peace. Observations, dialogue, and other solicited feedback recognized the engagement of students, the promotion of curiosity and inquiry, and the nurturing of each student's development—intellectually, socially, physically, and emotionally. Although not explicitly stated in the mission statement, this in-depth look at our whole operation reminded all involved that The Post Oak School is a happy place to be for students, staff, families, and other members of the community.

Whole School Recommendations

1. Develop and implement an integrated school marketing plan which supports the following objectives:
 - a. Reposition The Post Oak School as one entity, with two campuses.
 - b. Develop strategies that connect students, parents, and staff at both campuses, that supports cultural consistency throughout the Post Oak community.
 - c. Refocus marketing efforts to include all levels, infancy through adulthood, moving away from the separate marketing efforts for the High School.
 - d. Strengthen Post Oak's position among Houston schools, as well as broader Texas, national, and international education communities.
 - e. Develop a plan for an alumni program that expands to High School graduates.
2. Explore athletic facility possibilities at the Museum District Campus for both Physical Fitness classes and the athletics program for Middle School and High School.
 - a. Explore relationships with area schools, colleges and organizations in terms of rental possibilities.
 - b. Create a master plan for property acquisition at the Museum District Campus with an eye towards the athletic facilities.
3. Maintain a strategic financial position in order to fund programmatic and sustainable initiatives that further the growth of the school.
 - a. Develop a sustainable major gifts and long term donor cultivation program.
 - b. Maintain a balance of reserves and endowment that allows for flexibility for funding smaller-scope projects that do not require capital campaigns or additional debt.
4. Realize the potential of the Museum District Campus as a center for adolescent studies, with a focus on the maturation of the High School program, and the integration of the Middle School program.
 - a. Forge new partnerships with Houston Museum District organizations for community service, internships, and extended learning opportunities.
 - b. Explore the collaborative possibilities between High School and Middle School, in academic and social activity, including but not limited to:
 - i. World Languages
 - ii. Fine Arts
 - iii. Athletics and Physical Fitness
 - iv. Community Building
 - c. Explore the potential of offering workshops and professional development for other Montessori adolescent practitioners who are working in an urban setting.
5. Create a plan for a whole-school approach to serving students with learning differences.
 - a. Support teachers, through professional development, in obtaining more skills in the areas of observation, accommodation, and documentation of learning and behavioral challenges.
 - b. Create a process with common vocabulary and structures for communication with colleagues, parents, and, as appropriate, students, regarding challenges and strategies to support progress.
6. Create a plan to promote professional exchange and the sharing of best practices among the faculty and staff.
 - a. Increase time and opportunity for Post Oak teachers at all levels to observe and collaborate with their peers both

at Post Oak and at other independent or Montessori schools.

- b. Prioritize inter- and intra- level conversations at and across both campuses.

Next Steps

Post Oak has opportunities to capitalize the momentum of the self-study process by integrating the report into its school improvement processes. The Steering Committee recommends the following actions:

- Add ISAS recommendations progress review to the annual Board agenda
- Use ISAS findings in the next Strategic Planning process to begin summer 2017
- Include ISAS recommendations in department meetings in order to strategize implementation, assessment and review of plans and priorities.
- Use report findings in annual goal setting for both the head of school and Board of Trustees and include in staff retreat and planning meetings.

Lessons Learned

From the point of view of the Board of Trustees, the most significant lesson learned through this process was recognizing the lack of connection between the ISAS accreditation process and the work of the Board. Board members, some with five and six years' tenure had not seen the 2006 report, or the whole school recommendations from the 2006 accreditation visit. Engagement in the current self-study made it clear that the Board has a responsibility to monitor the progress the school makes in regards to ISAS recommendations and use the self-study to inform their strategic discussions going forward.

As stated in the introduction, this self-study spanned two years, and two heads of school. The outgoing head had great foresight to incorporate this work into the head search process year, when staff, students, and parents were engaged in thinking about the future of Post Oak. Re-booting the process after a summer of great change, with the incoming Head and two simultaneous construction projects had its bumps along the way. The opportunity to review and refresh documents that were thought to be mostly "done" in the prior year, led to

engaging in the discussions anew, and in some cases, resulted in complete rewrites. While this added significantly to the workload of faculty and staff in the short term, it resulted in a more comprehensive report in the long run.

Although a huge task, there were great benefits to the new head taking on the role of Self-Study Coordinator in year one. This provided a once-in-ten years opportunity to dive deeply into the workings of the school and ask questions about how everything worked.

With a school the size of Post Oak and the new logistics around the two campus model, new High School building, the Middle School's move to the new campus, and new renovations at Bissonnet, the biggest challenge was getting everyone to be able to see the "whole elephant." It may not read as smoothly as the coordinator would like, but the content paints an accurate picture of Post Oak. The future is bright for this excellent institution and the fabulous people who are part of its community.

Self-Study Steering Committee

2015: Errol Pinto (Coordinator), Debbie Henderson (Administration), Mirna Andrade-Salgado (Administration), Tamara Basham (YCC and Primary), Debbie Nickerson (Elementary), Kathy Long (Middle School), Jeremy Grisbee (High School), Alison Wong (Parent Body), Stacy Martin (Parent Body), Melissa Coleman (Board of Trustees)

2016: Maura Joyce (Coordinator), Kelly Vaughn (Administration), Mirani Smith (YCC and Primary), Jeff Schneider (Elementary), Jami Sweeney (Middle School), James Moudry

(High School), Alison Wong (Parent Body), Melissa Coleman (Board of Trustees)

Acknowledgement

Those of us who worked on the report express our gratitude to Elaine Schweizer for her work editing and formatting the report. She makes everything we do look good!

The
POST OAK
SCHOOL



BISSONNET CAMPUS: 4600 Bissonnet Street, Bellaire, Texas 77401
Phone 713-661-6688 • Fax 713-661-4959

MUSEUM DISTRICT CAMPUS: 1010 Autrey Street, Houston, Texas 77006
832-538-1988 • Fax 832-538-1926

www.postoakschool.org | www.facebook.com/thepostoakschool