



## VISITING TEAM REPORT

The Post Oak School  
4600 Bissonnet St, Bellaire TX. 77401

Date of Visit  
February 1-3, 2016

Prepared by: the MPRC Visiting Team  
Chaired by: Audrey Perrott, Head of School at Near North Montessori School, IL.

# Visiting Team Roster

## Visiting Team Chair:

**Audrey Perrott**

Head of School

Near North Montessori (IL)

[audrey@nnms.org](mailto:audrey@nnms.org)

The Whole School Perspective

MPRC Standards

## Visiting Team Members:

**Michelle Aspal**

All Day Montessori Teacher

Countryside Montessori (IL)

[michelea@countrysidemontessori.org](mailto:michelea@countrysidemontessori.org)

Primary

Extended Day Program

**Wendy Calise**

Head of School

Countryside Montessori (IL)

[wendy@countrysidemontessori.org](mailto:wendy@countrysidemontessori.org)

Primary

Extended Day Program

**Nicole Fedorehder**

Elementary Teacher

Montessori in Redlands (CA)

[nfedorow@gmail.com](mailto:nfedorow@gmail.com)

Lower Elementary

Upper Elementary

Academic Assessment

Academic Support

Extracurricular Activities

**Maura Joyce,**

Head of School

Montessori in Redlands (CA)

[mjoyce@mir.org](mailto:mjoyce@mir.org)

Observer

**Anne Matern**

Elementary Director

Near North Montessori (IL)

[amatern@nnms.org](mailto:amatern@nnms.org)

Lower Elementary

Upper Elementary

Academic Assessment

Academic Support

Extracurricular Activities

**Katy Myers**  
Principal  
Denver Montessori Jr/Sr High School (CO)  
[katy\\_myers@dpsk12.net](mailto:katy_myers@dpsk12.net)

High School  
Fine Arts

**Kris Schaefer**  
Junior High Coordinator  
Lake Country School (MN)  
[kschaefer@lakecountryschool.org](mailto:kschaefer@lakecountryschool.org)

Middle School  
Community Service

**Vinkle Thakkar**  
Toddler Teacher  
Near North Montessori (IL)  
[vthakkar@nms.org](mailto:vthakkar@nms.org)

YCC

**Paulette Zoe**  
Head of School  
Lake Country School, (MN)  
[pzoe@lakecountryschool.org](mailto:pzoe@lakecountryschool.org)

World Languages: Spanish & Mandarin  
Library  
Physical Fitness & Athletics  
Technology

## Introduction

The Montessori Peer Review Council (MPRC) was created in 2014 to support whole-school professional development; to promote and elevate the practice of authentic Montessori education; and to establish a collaborative, professional community among Montessori schools.

MPRC emerged from the collaborative work of seven Montessori schools\* with decades-long commitment to professional growth and reflective practice. In an effort to develop the collective needs of classroom teachers, school leadership, and whole-school community, our schools have long sought affiliation with and guidance from organizations including the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and its affiliates; the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and its regional associations; and other school consultants. Each of these organizations provides a lens through which to view our work. At the same time MPRC recognizes that more authentic and relevant support is needed for our schools.

Our experience with school accreditation programs is a case in point. Ideally such programs invite both self-study and external evaluation, look for congruence and best practices as defined by association standards. On one hand, the AMI/USA School Recognition Program focuses on the individual classroom teacher and his/her implementation of Montessori pedagogy. By design, this approach is atomistic and fails to respond to schools in a holistic way. On the other hand, the NAIS model employs a whole-school perspective but lacks a nuanced understanding of Montessori principles and practice. Our schools need a consultation approach that marries the best elements of each, as proposed by MPRC.

### **MPRC Mission:**

To elevate the practice of Montessori education and support the growth of a collaborative, professional community through self study and peer team visits

The Montessori Peer Review Council (MPRC) visited The Post Oak School January 31 - February 3, 2016. The visiting team felt honored to be part of the inaugural MPRC visiting team, charged with observing, collaborating with, and supporting the POS community of faculty and staff.

The visiting team was warmly welcomed to POS by faculty and staff on January 31st, before being taken on a tour of the Bissonnet and Museum District campuses. We spent the next three days observing the work of faculty and students in classrooms and the general life of the school.

There is no question why POS is one of the premier Montessori schools in the country. Serving students and families in Houston for over 50 years, Post Oak School offers a quality Montessori

experience for all students, in all programs. The faculty and staff are deeply committed to their work and the POS vision to help shape young people in accordance with Dr. Montessori's vision for all children to be *"equipped in their whole beings for the adventure of life, accustomed to the free exercises of their own judgement, illuminated by imagination and enthusiasm."*

Classroom environments are beautifully prepared by trained and dedicated teachers, interns and assistants. Much attention to detail is evident in the classrooms. Objects of interest and beauty are artfully displayed in the classroom to peek the children's curiosity. Montessori trained and experienced administrators provide support to teachers and serve as a conduit between teachers and parents, and provide a detailed and thorough parent education program. Grace and courtesy is visible throughout the school and permeates exchanges between staff, parents and students.

The following reports provide an account of the visiting team's observations, conversations and discussions with faculty and staff. We truly hope that the faculty and staff of the POS will find affirmation in the commendations in this report. Recommendations listed in this report are offered in the spirit of peer support and collaboration, and with the added benefit of building a network of professional communities among our Montessori schools.

**\*List of Montessori Peer Review Council Founding Schools:**

Countryside Montessori School (IL)  
Lake Country School (MN)  
Montessori Children's House (MI)  
Montessori School in Redlands (CA)  
Near North Montessori School (IL)  
Santa Barbara Montessori School (CA)  
The Post Oak School (TX)

# Young Children's Community

## General Overview

Each of the three communities is aesthetically pleasing, beautifully prepared and maintained. The classrooms are intentionally prepared, keeping the children's developmental needs paramount with attractive Montessori inspired materials. The child sized furniture, areas for care of self, outdoor garden, play areas and the classrooms are all designed considering the importance of independence. The art and music areas created opportunities for self expression and learning.

The head teachers in the environment have the pedagogical information and follow the Montessori philosophy in their practice. The communities have a rich language environment. All the adults conducted themselves in a poised demeanor, were calm and composed when assisting children. The children were being exposed to a second language Spanish, via conversations and songs. The adults engaged the children and supported them in the daily routines- arrival, care of self activities, encouraging the children to practice the steps involved in a work cycle. The adults redirected the young children with dignity and respect and gave positive redirections when necessary.

The young children entered into a specially designed space that is created to support their development. The children were familiar with the environment and routines. The children looked very comfortable and seemed engaged. Most children participated comfortably in the routines of the day. However during multiple transitions of the day the children exhibited a lot of dependence on the adults. It was a joy to observe the children at work, on the playground, enjoying the outdoor garden, meal times and nap.

The team had the opportunity to meet all the members of the Young Children's Community and enjoyed hearing their thoughts and brainstorming with them ideas to develop more collaboration within the community and peers- via observations, discussions and professional development for all staff. Together we discussed some current practices that support professional development. For personal growth and further enrichment the community expressed the need for more professional development opportunities to support and enhance parent education and understanding the role of the assistant to support all new as well as current assistants.

The team enjoyed the experience of observing the three vibrant Young Children's Communities.

## Commendations

The team commends the Post Oak School for:

1. the dedicated adults in the Young Children's Community for continuing to offer their guidance, patience and support to aid the children in their development.
2. creating environments that are beautifully organized, prepared and maintained to allow for an enriching and welcoming learning experience.

<b>Recommendations</b>
------------------------

The team recommends:

1. administration schedule time for the YCC teachers to observe each other to recognize the expertise within the community and to allow for collaboration and support among the teachers.
2. the teachers review and reflect on the amount of transitions happening during the day. Too many transitions take away from the children's engagement in work in the beautifully prepared environments.

## Primary:

### General Overview

It was a real pleasure to be able to use this newly created *Essential Characteristics of a Montessori Classroom* document in primary classrooms that clearly practice them. We were able to visit each of six primary classrooms several times throughout the day over the course of two days. Our goal was to observe with the backdrop of the self-study and the essential characteristics as a guide. It was clear that teachers were attending to academic, social and psychological aspects of the children's experiences. The classroom environments are fully equipped and organized logically according to respective areas of the primary classroom albums. As is the case in any school, different teachers have developed and honed different areas of strength. The strong community among the primary faculty and leadership creates a great foundation that could be used as a basis for encouraging deeper reflection and conversations about Montessori pedagogy and practice among the primary teachers.

Teachers and assistants appeared to work collaboratively, communicating throughout the day on an as needed basis. Students had a sense of ownership of the classroom and were quite comfortable. We were often approached by curious students who were interested in why we in their classrooms. Students made independent choices working in small groups and individually on a wide variety of materials.

We had the opportunity to meet with the Early Childhood Director, Mirani Smith, and all of the primary teachers and assistants/interns. There was a warm and open feeling of camaraderie between all. We discussed the challenges of finding time for observations and also for communication. One additional challenge that is somewhat inherent in the use of interns is creating ways to nurture and support the continued growth of trained interns.

### Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Primary Program:

1. for creating beautifully student centered classrooms. The balance of freedom and responsibility is in dynamic evaluation by the faculty on a constant basis.
2. on making independence a clear priority in the primary classes. The students were working on their own or in small groups. Teachers were not hovering over them, and

students were not repetitively seeking help and intervention from the teachers. They were able to initiate and complete extended works without prompts from adults.

3. faculty of the primary community who expressed a deep appreciation of a strong sense of community and belonging. Additionally they recognize a strong support network that seemed to be extended to them, both professionally and personally. Faculty and staff seem to love working at POS.

## **Recommendations**

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Primary Program:

1. make a formal commitment to observation of one another's classes in order to take advantage of the expertise within the walls of Post Oak. These observations will help the faculty distinguish the areas in which there should be continuity from class to class, from those that are a matter of the autonomy of the teacher.
2. provide interns the opportunity to practice the critical skill of class management, better positioning them for their future roles as lead teachers. The need for fellow primary teachers to observe one another will organically provide interns an opportunity to supervise the classroom while the lead teacher is observing in another room. This practice will help maintain an engaging experience for the intern and stimulate their growth and learning.
3. consider the use of elementary students to offer services in myriad ways to the primary students in the classrooms and the primary home environment.

# Elementary Program

## Overview

The Elementary is composed of seven beautiful indoor classrooms surrounded by an inviting outdoor campus. The artwork is intentionally chosen and placed to draw the appreciation of the students. The arrangement of shelves and furniture facilitated a student centered environment. The children can access any needed material without adult assistance. This includes resources within the school such as the library and the many inviting outdoor spaces. Children have access to a variety of materials and experiences.

All teachers are AMI trained and seem very pleased to be part of The Post Oak Community. Teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to Montessori principles and further professional learning and personal growth. The teachers demonstrate an open and engaging demeanor in both the language used during lessons and casual exchanges. The presence of the adult in the classroom is subtle and not intrusive to the students.

The children demonstrate a high degree of self regulation and there is evidence of a strong academic foundation in all Elementary classrooms. Many children are working individually and parallel work is visible throughout the classrooms. However, true collaborative work is not evident in the classrooms and teachers are reluctant to encourage students to work in this manner. Each classroom is a normalized environment and children are not unnecessarily interrupted by adults for either lessons or redirection. Children are well regulated and treat both teachers and peers respectfully.

Academic standards are clearly articulated and are available to both teachers, parents and students.

Teachers acknowledge that there is a school wide, step by step procedure to follow when a student needs additional learning support. However many of the teachers were challenged to explain the step by step procedures, and expressed a desire for more support to help individual students with learning difficulties.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Elementary Program:

1. for creating classroom environments that are very aesthetically pleasing. The materials and furniture are clean and well maintained.
2. for establishing respectful and positive communication practice reciprocated between student and teacher. The children are relaxed and comfortable with peers and their exchanges consistently demonstrated grace and courtesy.

3. teachers for setting clear and regular conferences with individual students to discuss goal setting and supporting student emotional development by having conversations regarding the social perspective of the child.

## Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends the Elementary Program:

1. foster opportunities for collaborative work among the students to facilitate deeper learning, and develop socialization skills. Collaboration can be “messy” but allows for greater [diversity of thought](#), creative problem solving and expanded communication skills. The Visiting Team encourages teachers to ask themselves each day, “Are children doing parallel work or collaborative work?”
2. expand the Going Out program as an avenue to encourage collaborative work.
3. develop a culture of observation among the Elementary faculty. Teachers could be paired for mandated observation, with a follow-up discussion and exchange.
4. Allocate time for professional peer to peer learning through sharing of lessons, resources and classroom strategies during level meetings. This may also inspire teachers to seek out more professional development in areas beyond Montessori Refresher Courses and include workshops and seminars on Learning Differences

# Middle School Visiting Team Report

## General Overview

The Post Oak Middle School is currently preparing to move from their current location in Bellaire, to a new building in the Museum district of Houston (where the existing High School campus is located). The current space is large and open, with tables set up for lessons as well as collaborative group work. The staff is excited about the new building (which is significantly larger) and the opportunities that go along with the space, including the location and the possibility for collaboration and connection with the high school.

The Middle School has an open morning schedule, with 4-6 lessons going on simultaneously, and small groups of students working independently. Morning lessons include science, math, language arts, Spanish and occupations, as well as community service outings. Humanities classes are held every afternoon, along with Physical Fitness 3 times a week, and visual arts and music once a week. Staff share a google calendar of lessons with students so they can track lessons for the day and plan for their daily schedule.

The Middle school curriculum is both broad and deep, with Humanities providing the framework for an interdisciplinary approach. Community service is also central to the middle school program. It provides real world work and opportunities for students to connect with people they wouldn't ordinarily connect with. Community service happens each day, where students work in different areas around the school itself, and other outings into the greater Houston community.

Although the Post Oak Middle school is an established program, within the last 2 years it has been significantly revamped, and therefore has elements of a start-up program. The move to the new campus also creates challenges and opportunities which the staff will have to navigate. The Middle school staff are ready for this challenge and have worked hard to create a vibrant adolescent community where students are engaged and learning.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Middle School for:

1. it's engaging, wonderful, energetic and creative staff. The staff all clearly want to be at Post Oak, they communicate well with each other, and they have a respectful, encouraging relationship with the adolescents. Most staff are quite new, less than 3 years in the program, and with this comes positive energy, adaptability and a wiliness to try new things.
2. the fluidity and openness of schedule. This allows for small group instruction and creativity in lesson planning as well as student-driven work. The curriculum is both rigorous and thorough and provides opportunities to develop research and organization

skills, critical thinking, public speaking, along with advancing skills in math, language arts and science.

3. creating a space which encourages collaborative work as well as individual work, and general flexibility. Tables are easy to move which creates a dynamic work and social environment.
4. it's commitment to community service which fosters real work and the valorization of the adolescent.

## **Recommendations**

The MPRC visiting team recommends the middle school:

1. maintain a balance between written work and computer work. Each student has access to Chromebooks and laptops, calendars are generated on google calendar and students can submit work into google dropboxes. Continue to actively look for opportunities where work can be done off the chrome book.
2. examine the role of occupations in the program. Establish standards within occupations, including scholastic preparation, written work and reflection. Explore the relationship between occupations and community service. Consider visiting other urban montessori schools where occupations are an integral part of their program.
3. implement sex education into the middle school program. Sex education is clearly developmentally appropriate at this age and weaving it into the rich existing curriculum would be an asset to the program.
4. create a mid-year and/or end of the year report that goes home to families which includes a narrative assessment for each student.
5. reflect on the balance of socialization and the need for grace and courtesy within the open work environment, especially if lessons are being given within that environment.

# High School

## General Overview

POHS is a Montessori / IB program, and included within its curriculum is preparation of seniors for the IB exams. The program offers to students an environment where students voices and opinions are valued, a rigorous IB curriculum, the opportunity for internships within the museum district, and the opportunity to individualize learning and demonstrate mastery through a wide variety of modalities.

Post Oak High School (POHS) is in its fourth year of existence. It started with 15 9th graders (who are now ready to graduate as seniors) and grew to its current enrollment of 50 9th through 12th grade students. Although the original desire to create a high school for Post Oak School came from parent demand and the Post Oak strategic plan, the pioneer class included two students from POS middle school. As the high school has matured, it now attracts a considerable number of Post Oak students. POHS has now outgrown its current building and is preparing to move into a custom designed building located directly next door to its current facility.

The Post Oak Middle School will be moving to the current high school building. Once the two schools are adjacent, Post Oak High School will provide a very visible and attractive option for the graduating Post Oak Middle School students. As that linkage is solidified, there will be opportunity to consider program modifications such as potentially moving 9th grade to the middle school (if that fits into the mission/vision of the two programs).

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the High School for:

1. A beautiful environment that shows tremendous respect for the students. It is clear that every aspect of the environment has been thoughtfully designed. Students respond to this thoughtfulness by showing respect for the environment. For example, the end of day clean up was a joy to observe. Students naturally took to their jobs with no reminders and then helped each other to insure the environment was completely restored.
2. the healthy culture reflected in the students. Students created very few distractions. They knew where they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to be doing. At times, students would fall away from work into social behavior, but then they would get right back to task at hand with little to no prompting. The environment felt extremely emotionally and physically safe.

3. the respectful adults; they speak to the students in low voices, are careful with their movement, and model adult, professional behavior.

## Recommendation

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the High School:

1. work now with the current environment to facilitate silence and solitude - especially with the oncoming IB exams. The new environment is being prepared for this. As the program has grown, the current environment no longer supports deep concentration and/or engagement; both are required to create a flow experience that leads to deep learning. Consider involving the students as they may come up with physical or behavioral solutions that they will then be invested in implementing.
2. collaborate to determine what tools, lessons, skill lessons, materials and second period suggestions need to be created / prepared / delivered in order for the students to feel confident with exploration within the HS environment. These ideas could then be added to the lesson planning documents.
3. explore ways to make the internship program be more visible and viable. The internship program at POHS is one of the most unique and valuable aspects of this program. Possible ideas include creating a wall that shows what each students is doing and where. The director noted that every staff member is required to pursue internship opportunities. How is that information gathered, celebrated and disseminated? It is great to hear that POHS is going to hire someone to be the centerpoint of the Internship program starting next year. What can be done now to raise the current profile of internships?
4. create explicit processes and collaboration time that includes all staff. This time and process needs to occur at least twice a month if not weekly to discuss important programmatic decisions such as schedule, community norms, and cultural practices. Process could include stated norms such that all decision making is rooted in the mission / vision and Montessori / IB model. Processes and resulting decisions can then be documented so that all staff, including new staff, are able to access the establishing culture of the school.

# Extended Day

## General Overview

The Extended Day, Before School and After School programs at Post Oak School offer children who need extended care a unique, relaxed and home-like experience. The individuals staffing these programs are working diligently to meet the needs of the children in their care. The notion of developing a community within each program seems critical to the staff involved. While the Extended Care programs are not set up as traditional Montessori environments, the staff is mindful when they choose and rotate materials for these spaces.

As the numbers grow, the staff should continue to reevaluate and assess whether or not the programs are continuing to meet the needs of the children. The “sizable amount” of children was a challenge that emerged frequently in conversation with the Extended Care staff. Establishing clear limits for enrollment numbers in these programs and sticking to them may prove to alleviate the unpredictability in numbers and therefore allow for a more consistent schedule. An alternative may also be to make the commitment to provide new resources for these programs in order to accommodate the high demand.

The daily challenge that the Home Environment faces is planning and executing group lessons considering attendance is inconsistent and unpredictable. Extended care is a universal challenge for schools across the nation and particularly for Montessori schools because they are not willing to settle for simply keeping the children safe. Post Oak clearly wants to make the most of these additional hours seeing them as an opportunity to add value to the Post Oak experience.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Extended Day Program:

1. for the children’s level of engagement in their chosen activities within these environments. Their minds are active and alert. There is an inviting energy to each of the environments. The mornings are particularly peaceful in the Home Environment which is nice for the children as many of them are still a little sleepy when they arrive.
2. fully utilizing the outdoor space as well as the gym at times when it’s needed most to alleviate overcrowding. The Extended Care staff has made the best use of the space they are provided and find creative activities to engage the children’s attention and energy.

## Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. use the Primary environment as a model for the Primary Home Environment, as best as possible, replacing large group activity with small groups according to age, interests, and needs of the children. Invite elementary children from the after school program into the Primary Home Environment to build community among the levels and provide mentors for the younger children.
2. staff should continue to work together and discuss the readiness of the children for the transition to extended day. Transition readiness is an area where congruence from class to class would benefit the children.

# World Languages - Spanish & Mandarin Report

## General Overview

The Spanish program is alive and well at POS! Through efforts to integrate the program for all students in developmentally appropriate ways, the use of Spanish language and sharing of Spanish culture from around the world stems from the enthusiasm, dedication, and expertise of its teaching and support staff. The scope and sequence of the program, created and coordinated by a longtime Spanish specialist in collaboration with language acquisition standards and program staff, helps to provide a dynamic and cohesive learning environment. Many of the teachers hold Montessori diplomas in support of integrating their work within a Montessori learning environment. From the youngest students who are immersed in Spanish through practical life, to formal lessons based on student interest and ability levels through high school, students have opportunities to take their world language experience as far as they'd like to go within and outside of school.

The ease with which students approach and express what they've learned is evident in the many ways that students connect over and learn from their shared formal and informal language experiences. With the help of games, activities, lessons, handmade and Montessori materials, students learn to understand and subsequently communicate with teachers who strive to speak only in the target language throughout the day. Bilingual signage and cultural artifacts also support the immersive nature of their experience and encourage students to expand their horizons beyond lesson work and into the world around them.

While unable to observe the Mandarin Chinese program because of class scheduling, it was interesting to learn that the program, which began in the high school, has been expanded to the middle school based on student interest and request. Lessons are currently offered by a Chinese language teacher in both programs with the hope of extending the experience in small ways to all students in the future.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Post Oak School for its:

1. Dedicated, integrated, and comprehensive approach to developing and offering a world language program that meets the needs of its students on all levels.
2. Incorporation of technology to expand the opportunities for learning and connection to cultural and real world experiences in support of its program goals.
3. Shared care, commitment, enthusiasm, and joyful learning experiences provided by its dynamic teaching staff.

Recommendations
-----------------

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. Explore ways to support staff's desire for peer observation and ongoing collaboration both inside and outside the POS community in continuing to develop a broad and deep world language experience for its students
2. Continue to develop opportunities and materials for students to independently connect to the world language experience outside of lessons and/or when the world language staff are not present or available to them.

# Community Service Report

## General Overview

As stated in the self study, the idea of service begins with the very young children when they are taught grace and courtesy. Through all of the levels of the school, this idea of service is a part of the Montessori classrooms. Post Oak fosters the idea that service is part of our human responsibility to each other.

Community service at Post Oak is most apparent in the middle school. It serves to valorize the adolescent, to provide meaningful work and to help students become more empathetic. Community service creates relationships between students and people in the community with whom they would not ordinarily work. The Middle School has been participating in community service in the outside community for the past 21 years. Over the last 2 years, and with the appointment of a director of community services, the middle school has worked to elevate the profile and consistency of the programs and to establish community service as an essential part of the program.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Post Oak School for its:

1. Commitment to Community Service, especially in the middle school program. Community service is clearly connected to the values and mission of the school, “to foster collaboration, cooperation and peace.”
2. Community service opportunities which provide meaningful work and valorization of students. Community service offers leadership opportunities both within the school and outside of the school as students interact with service organizations, churches and nonprofit organizations.

## Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. Create a more student centered approach- move from community service to service learning. On the middle school level, connect service learning to occupations in ways that are applicable.

2. Work on transportation issues surrounding community service. The move to the new campus provides additional challenges to get students to service projects, with minimal disruption in the daily schedule.
3. Find ways for the middle school to continue the midday community service at the new campus. Also ensure that the service that middle school students have done at the Bellaire campus be passed on to the upper elementary students, and that this culture of service continues.

## Fine Arts

### General Overview

Post Oak has a clear commitment to Fine Arts. For example, there are bells or tone bars in every primary and elementary classroom. The elementary music room is small, but will be moved to a larger room after the remodel. The elementary art room is well stocked with materials that allow for deep learning, and the art teacher has been able to collaborate and consult with teachers as they set up art areas within their classrooms. Theatre is encouraged for every classroom and supported by the music teacher. The middle school is putting together a musical production that is being supported by the music teacher. For elementary through middle school, music and art are offered for a minimum of 45 minutes per week.

In the high school, the art class and the theatre class are presented in professional environments off campus. High school has a defined rigorous scope and sequence as part of its IB curriculum. Every 9th / 10th grade student is required to take one semester of music, art and theatre and then has the opportunity to repeat whatever subject area they plan to move forward with once they start the IB curriculum in 11th grade.

### Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Post Oak School for the following:

1. A proven commitment to the Fine Arts by hiring professionals who are passionate about their subject area. Each level has prepared environments within the class and at external classrooms. The education provided is appropriate to grade level. Every classroom participates in at least one production per year.

### Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. Create desired outcomes for each level for music, art and drama. The Fine Arts team has expressed concern that they are not preparing students for the rigors of the high school IB curriculum. By creating and reflecting on these outcomes, the team may realize that they are accomplishing more than originally thought. The outcomes will then demonstrate where the Fine Arts program is excelling, and where the team can invest additional time and/or resources.
2. Provide opportunities for professional development to primary and elementary staff as a means to increase comfort level regarding the bells, the tone bars, rhythm and singing so that it is easy for staff to teach/guide a vibrant music curriculum within each

classroom.

3. Find a professional music environment for the high school to complement the professional theatre and art environments. The current space is not prepared for music instruction and therefore creates the impression that music is less valued (even though that is clearly not the case).

# Library

## General Overview

A new librarian with a Master's degree in Information Resources and Library Science has provided expanded opportunities for the library's role as it serves Primary through Upper Elementary levels within the POS community. Centrally located in a beautiful, open and easily accessed environment, efforts have been made to create a flow for the students' independent navigation of the space that mirrors their experience within the Montessori classrooms. Weeding out old and adding anew to the library's variety, services, and collections, "... the library seeks to be a place of inspiration for everyone.... [that meets] the current and long-term needs of a vibrant 21<sup>st</sup> century school library."

The library serves as an example within the school community to expand its integration of technology in useful and developmentally appropriate ways. With the increased availability of laptops and notebooks in lieu of desktops both in the library and throughout the school, the library provides a more flexible research-based experience with the increased availability and use of these electronic tools. In addition, POS has purchased school-wide access to online research tools (i.e. Encyclopedia Britannica, ProQuest databases) and the library provides in-depth presentations on research tools that allow the students to access reliable and accurate information to support their work and understanding of the world around them.

In addition, the library serves as an opportunity that supports its goals for cultural competency within its educational experience. Books and materials for the library are chosen according to the POS book selection policy that is, as stated in the self-study, "committed to ensuring that these materials reflect the culturally diverse world in which our students are citizens."

Working with parent volunteers, the library is also an opportunity for them to connect to the life of the school community in direct support of the students and staff. In addition, parents come to serve as ambassadors, sharing new initiatives offered by the library in support of the community's needs around information resources. Plans to move the parent collection to the upcoming Parent Resource Center hopes to create awareness that the library offers resources for everyone to access beyond student and staff needs.

## **Commendations**

The MPRC visiting team commends the Post Oak School for its:

1. Support of developing the library to serve its community's ongoing needs for access to authentic resources, research tools, and information exchange/management within a Montessori learning environment.
2. Creation of a beautiful, central, and welcoming library environment that supports students' need to explore and discover independently in an environment that promotes mixed-age and cross-level connections among members of its school community.
3. Expansion and maintenance of its library collections that seek to introduce a wider variety of resources available to meet its students' diverse learning styles, interests, and insatiable curiosity that drives their learning process.

## **Recommendations**

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. Explore ways to introduce and integrate the role of the librarian beyond the library and into the classrooms
2. Consider extending its indoor library space to include a prepared space outside such as is offered in other areas of the school that allows for the inspiration of being outdoors while reading or researching.
3. Continue with efforts to "position the library as the visible center for literacy in the Post Oak community."

# Extracurricular Activities

## General Overview

Post Oak's After School Enrichment program offers a variety of activities to its students throughout spring and fall. Staff and other professionals instruct these enrichment programs for students in first through sixth grades.

In Middle School, clubs are offered to students during lunch periods. The clubs are proposed and initiated through student proposal and upon approval are led by faculty members. Current clubs are "Cool Down Club- a green initiative group" and Novel Writing club. Students are encouraged follow their interests to create these clubs.

At the High School level, clubs meet after school. Students have created clubs that focus on many topics including; Art, Car Club, SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance), Psychology Club, Bluegrass, String Band Club, D&D/ Tabletop Gaming, Filmmaking, Investment club, Service Club, Creative Writing Club and MMUN/Debate Club. Both Middle School and High School students are part of the Yearbook Club.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the POS on the following:

1. Activities and clubs allow students to further explore their interests .
2. Elementary activities are composed of multiples age groups and are lead by passionate experts.

## Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends the POS:

1. Explore all options for activity space.
2. Survey teachers to find areas of interest and offer them opportunities to lead classes.
3. Help students coordinate and promote clubs at the Middle School and High School level.

# Physical Fitness & Athletics

## General Overview

The physical fitness program is available to all levels of the school on a consistent schedule and strives to support all aspects of student interest, physical development, and emotional needs. Classes are offered throughout the school day to co-ed mixed-age levels in both a beautiful and welcoming indoor environment and an adjacent outdoor play field conducive to personal skill-building and collaborative activities. Equipment and manipulatives are used to provide variety and creativity within each activity as well as to address different skill levels of class participants. Music plays a central part in establishing a fun and energizing atmosphere, a rhythm for movement and a measure for students to set and reach their goals.

The PF staff present and model many areas of physical fitness development in a calm, professional, and enthusiastic manner. It's clear from their interactions with students that they respect and support each student's own journey toward the stated goal of "competence that leads to confidence" and "lifelong physical activity." Activities are demonstrated and clearly broken down into small steps for success. Lessons include not only valuable information about sports and games, but references to how the body functions in support of a healthy and lifelong PF experience. Students were observed helping one another and were joyful and fully engaged in their work. At recess it was evident that students also use and enjoy the skills they have learned in PF classes, during free play.

School spirit for the "Barkats" athletic program is displayed and evident throughout the school in a variety of ways. At the beginning of the soccer unit begun after school, staff complimented the students on how well they had done in their participation throughout the year and encouraged them to try out the new offering and do their best. Recognizing that many POS students also participate in athletic programs outside of school, the staff shared during discussion that they work to accommodate student schedules in order to encourage their participation in Post Oak sports as well. In addition, they shared that because of the campus relocation for middle and high school students next year, they are rethinking how to offer the PF & A program that will embrace the opportunities and meet the challenges this change will bring.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Post Oak School for its:

1. Inclusive and whole child approach to developing physical fitness skills and lifelong enthusiasm for physical activity in its students.

2. Enthusiasm and creativity that staff model for students as they develop their program, present lessons, and demonstrate activities.
3. Prepared indoor and outdoor environments that support Montessori principles of beauty, simplicity, choice and independence.

## **Recommendations**

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. Consider staffing needs within growing schedule and program responsibilities as middle and high school programs develop and campuses change.
2. Explore potential for students to participate in more outdoor activities through the existing partnerships with adjacent schools and facilities at both campuses

# Technology

## General Overview

As indicated in the school's comprehensive and detailed Technology Self-Study report, "...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." In support of this goal, technological tools and programs are available to students and staff as they create, collaborate, and communicate throughout their day.

Following the characteristics of students within each developmental plane, opportunities for access to and learning about technology build upon student experience and increase in complexity and use from lower elementary through high school. The POS Educational Technology Rationale and Curriculum Objectives (submitted by the school technology committee and adopted by faculty in 2009) serves as a guideline for school-wide goals and states: "We seek to spark the imagination, then to enlist the reason, and finally to provide the tools to make sense of the universe. Modern technology can assist students in reaching that goal, but only when introduced gradually so that the student's own skills and sense of self are enhanced rather than replaced; students must be the masters of the technology, rather than its pawns." Evidence of these goals was observed within classrooms and across levels throughout the school.

Recognizing that students have access to varied uses of technology outside of school, one staff member described student use of technology in school as an opportunity to practice and expand "professionally" their use of technology within a school/work environment that enhances their understanding of its value beyond entertainment, as competency grows. For staff, the ability to work collaboratively with students through shared resources (i.e. Haiku, GAFE) augments their lesson/curriculum development and expands their horizons beyond the classroom in unique and creative ways.

Under the guidance of the Technology Director and technology staff, in-house as well as outside resources and expertise have been sought for developing best practices and providing parent education, for example, within the POS community. The role of student Tech Managers has been implemented to include student involvement in tech decisions and support. "Google moments" shared by staff have been incorporated into staff meetings to raise awareness and provide ongoing professional development. Beautiful marketing and publicity materials have been created through the use of technology and are displayed throughout the school, on the website, and through social media.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the Post Oak School for its:

1. Proactive vision for incorporating developmentally appropriate technological advances into its Montessori learning environment to responsibly and respectfully enhance the learning experience for students and staff.
2. Efforts to meet the ongoing understanding of its parent community to incorporate technology into its communications from staff and school while working to maintain a boundary around students' responsibility for their own process around information management.
3. The middle and high schools have a rich environment of technology.
4. Creation and implementation of a school-wide technological plan that is "...driven by consensus of the school's needs as well as best practices.... and supported by the technology committee in conjunction with the Board of Trustees."

## Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends that the Post Oak School:

1. Continue to explore uses of technology for inter- and intra-level communication within the school community and especially between the two campuses given the upcoming renovation and change.
2. Continue to provide consistency in tech platforms, programs, equipment and use, to help create a network of competence, confidence and support by and between staff members throughout the school.
3. Continue to recognize and support the need for hands-on work with Montessori and handmade materials at the Elementary level.
4. Continue to recognize and support the stated goal that "teachers... do the important work of human interaction that technologies can't do..." that is prevalent throughout the educational experience at POS.

# Academic Assessment

## General Overview

The school uses a variety of assessment tools within the community. Post Oak recently switched to MAP testing. They are planning to use two benchmark testing measures per year, testing students from 3rd to 8th grades. As a new measure of assessment, investigation of how to use the results has not yet been fully explored. All Elementary teachers use Montessori Records Express to record classroom lessons. The reports are shared with parents twice a year with parent/teacher conferences. Parents are invited in for classroom observations. At the YCC and primary levels, parents must observe the class through a two way mirror. Parents of elementary students sit in the classrooms to observe. A counselor is available to support the needs of teachers and parents. The counselor facilitates prosocial behaviors among students in the classrooms, directs parent education classes, and is available to talk with parents in person or by phone.

## Commendations

The MPRC visiting team commends the POS on the following:

1. Transition to MAP testing, which focuses more on individual growth with resources for teachers to better differentiate instruction.
2. Regular communication between parents and teachers in twice yearly conferences. Parents are able to observe Elementary classrooms.
3. Specifically designed curriculum maps to indicate the sequence of instruction. These documents are readily available to faculty and parents. The curriculum documents use language easily understandable to non-Montessorians.

## Recommendations

The MPRC visiting team recommends the POS:

1. Provide professional development around MAP testing and how to utilize the data for both strong and struggling students. Explore how test results can inform instruction.
2. Encourage parents to observe in classrooms to deepen their understanding of how Montessori principles are applied.

# Academic Support

## General Overview

Academic support provides a comprehensive and holistic approach to meeting the needs of individual students and families. Post Oak has a specifically designed protocol to follow when concerns regarding a child's academic or social development are observed. Faculty and parents work in partnership to determine what is needed to support the child within the environment. All diagnostic testing is done with outside providers recommended by the Level Director.

Parents are strongly recommended to share the results of any testing with appropriate school personnel. A speech and language therapist serves as a consultant available to contract with parents individually but with remediation taking place on campus. Parents are strongly encouraged to arrange any work with specialists be done before or after school hours to minimize classroom interruptions.

## Commendations

1. A clear standard for communicating issues to parents is followed. The Level Director is the point person to the Academic Support process, which promotes clarity of communication.
2. Experienced staff and faculty are well trained to observe the child in a variety of environments.
3. Familiarity with a wide variety of local specialists to recommend to parents.
4. On- staff counselor to assist with difficult conversations.

## Recommendations

1. Provide professional development around MAP testing and how to utilize the data for both strong and struggling students. Explore how test results can inform instruction.
2. Consider having some on site resources to make sure that academic assistance is accessible to all students.

3. Explore special needs training for staff to better provide effective early intervention for students with learning challenge

# The Whole School Perspective

## General Overview

The Post Oak School is a premier Montessori school with a history of educating students in Houston, TX. for more than fifty years. With a strong reputation for excellence in education, POS enjoys a retention rate above national norms and a robust wait list for available seats.

According to data from Independent Schools of the Southern States (ISAS), the Post Oak School draws a more diverse student body than 90% of peer schools. Need based financial aid is offered to 13% of the student body, representing 10% of the annual operating budget. This is consistent with NAIS best practices. Results from a recent parent satisfaction survey indicate that the parent community are exceptionally satisfied with their experience at Post Oak School.

The consistent and attractive signage posted throughout the school is evidence of the premium the School places on its brand and reputation. Messaging is professional, and the design is welcoming and attentive to the needs of visitors. School publications beautifully represent the Montessori work at the school, big and small and the many school accomplishments.

The visiting team felt very welcome at the school and applaud the The Post Oak School for its commitment to providing a beautifully prepared environment for all constituents and the MPRC.

## Commendations

The Post Oak School operates in an intentional manner around its mission statement. The work of all of the staff, the atmosphere of its environments, and the dedication of the parents show a great commitment to Montessori education in its most authentic form.

The Visiting Team members were particularly impressed with the following:

1. The prepared environments were pristine, carefully prepared, consistently orderly and provided for independence of movement and spontaneous activity.
2. The Montessori professionals hired to lead the classroom environments are equipped with training and are grounded in AMI Montessori principles.
3. Multiple formats of Parent education help parents understand the nature of the Montessori classroom and feel connected to the school.
4. A generous professional development budget allows faculty to attend conferences and workshops to further their learning and improve their practice.
5. Grace and courtesy is not only visible in the classes among the children, but permeates the exchanges between staff, creating a climate of collegiality and respect.

6. The Post Oak School holds its students to high expectations and they are accountable for student progress through multiple forms of assessment. Parent teacher conferences are held twice a year and conference reports are shared three times per year. Students needing support have access to a part time school counselor and part time speech therapist.

## Recommendations

The Visiting Team found that Post Oak had appropriately identified areas of need through the stated recommendations and questions in the self-study document. In a meeting with the Head of School and Division Directors, there was a general consensus that the following recommendations are worthy of prioritization.

### **Bridging the Two Campuses**

Staff at several levels expressed concern about how to maintain the “one school” feel for students, faculty, and parents, when there are two campuses and four levels. This includes logistics, like events, scheduling, and daily activity, and identity, like staff and parent connectedness, branding and logos.

The following strategies were discussed as potential ways to promote a more unified all-school feel:

- Create more intentional exchange between the adolescent staff (MS and HS) with the lower school staff (EL and EC).
- Continue student activities like the child development classes held with the HS students and inviting Elementary students to lunch at the HS when they are visiting the museum.
- Hold prospective parent classes and parent meetings at both campuses.
- Despite the focus on the challenges it will bring, focus on the opportunity moving the MS to the HS campus will bring for renewal, collaboration, and consolidation.

### **Inter- and Intra- Departmental Exchange**

Currently there are formal and informal interdepartmental exchanges at Post Oak, including YCC and Primary meeting together and as individual levels, Middle School teachers meet with the Upper Elementary teachers individually to discuss students ready for transition, LE and UE meet together to discuss vertical continuity of the curriculum and make sure it is aligned, Middle School and High School teams meet three times per year.

The Visiting Team recommends that Post Oak explore the following strategies:

- Design the schedule to create time for staff to come together both inside of divisions and across divisions.
- Facilitate observations between teachers at the same level.
- Facilitate observations between teachers across levels

- Create time in regularly scheduled meetings for sharing of albums, practices, discussions of social development, etc.

### **Communication**

The Post Oak School is in a great position, strong in its pedagogy and with healthy enrollment and finances. The student body is diverse and they enjoy strong retention. This is clear in reports and data recorded with H AIS, but is not necessarily communicated clearly to staff. Parents receive information from teachers at parent teacher conferences, with accompanying reports, and teachers work hard to express academic, social, and emotional progress.

The Visiting Team recommends the following:

- Review what information (data and benchmarks) can be provided to staff in order for them to get a real sense of the position of the school.
- Consider training for teachers in communicating progress to parents, answering direct questions about progress, and running a concise and professional parent-teacher conference.
- Investigate ways in which to use technology to communicate between campuses and connect students and faculty.

### **Student Support**

Montessori classrooms are well designed to support a variety of learning styles. The Post Oak classrooms are staffed with well-trained observers who can support children to build the skills needed to self-monitor and progress through the developmental continuum. Children with learning challenges can be identified early on, when intervention can be most effective.

The Visiting Team recommends that the POS:

- informs all head teachers of the *step by step* process for evaluating a student with learning differences.
- seek out additional resources to support teachers as they work in the classrooms with students who learn differently and require special learning accommodations.

## Conclusion:

The MPRC believes that what schools get from the peer review process is commensurate to the energy, honesty and sincerity they expend writing the self-study and working in collaboration with MPRC visiting team. The faculty and staff at the POS provided the visiting team with a self study that was a thoughtfully compiled and accurate description of the POS experience.

The visiting team's goals were to validate and affirm the quality of the Montessori program offered to students at the POS and to build relationships between schools for collegial exchange. In order to accomplish these goals, the visiting team observed classes and conducted meetings with teachers, assistants, interns, and administration in a dialogue rather than interview format.

Reports were written by the visiting team to respond to each section of the self-study. The information, commendations and recommendations are based on the self-study provided by the POS, classroom observations guided by the *MPRC Essential Characteristics*, and discussions between the visiting team and with the POS faculty and staff over the course of two days.

The success of a peer review council is based on the ability for all parties involved to build a trusting relationship and engage in conversation with an open mindset. The visiting team worked hard to build an open and trusting relationship with the faculty and staff at the POS. This was more difficult to achieve than we first anticipated due to the poor experience of many of the POS staff with prior Montessori Recognition visits. Once the faculty and staff understood how the peer review process is different from a Recognition visit, they were more open to sharing their experiences as teachers at POS, their strengths, and opportunities for development. We spoke philosophically about AMI Montessori and our commitment to providing a quality and relevant Montessori education in our schools. We hope these conversations continue as we build a network of MPRC members and participants.

The MPRC visiting team is grateful to the entire Post Oak School community for making us feel welcome. Thank you for your generous hospitality during our visit; we felt like we were part of your special community. We commend and thank the faculty for their work on the self-study and for their graciousness in having visiting team members share in their teaching experience. We are especially grateful to Errol Pinto, the self-study steering committee, Debbie Henderson and the office administrative staff, for their tireless attention to detail in the weeks leading up to our visit. We want to thank, Head of School John Long for his patience and guidance with the MPRC process and for being willing to be the first host school in our study.

We feel privileged to have been guests of The Post Oak School for these few days, and we look forward to hearing about the future accomplishments of POS and its students.