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Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools SUBMISSION COVER SHEET

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Organisation: Yarralumla Montessori School

Submission subject/issues: Maintaining a unique socio-environmental model of education in the ACT public education system

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YARRALUMLA MONTESSORI SCHOOL

SUBMISSION TO THE ACT GOVERNMENT

TOWARDS 2020

November 2006

Introduction

Modern international¹ and national research in psychology greatly supports the conclusion that a model of early childhood education that is grounded in close and insightful observations of children is best suited to fostering a child’s learning and development. A positive and supportive educational environment, rather than one developed for “adult convenience” is recognised as a good predictor of a child’s preparedness to learn and social success. Thus, an inclusive and supportive early childhood educational environment, tailored to the pace of the individual child can greatly improve cognitive and social outcomes later in life.

The Yarralumla Montessori School (YMS) was established in 1982 to provide just such an early childhood learning program. For the past 25 years the YMS community has implemented the Montessori philosophy of education to satisfy the community’s desire for a focus on early childhood development that is effective in preparing children for future education and roles in society.

The School is currently operated by the ACT Department of Education and Training as a small early childhood school, which offers a Montessori program for children aged 3-6 years. The YMS is the only public school in the Australian Capital Territory that offers the Montessori philosophy of education, which is based on the principles set forth by Dr. Maria Montessori and was founded through the establishment of the Association Montessori Internationale in 1929. The Montessori educational model has recently expanded, with a second public Montessori school opening in Victoria.

Unlike mainstream public schools, core to the philosophy of the Montessori schooling is flexibility in approach to teaching, which is holistically reflective of the individual child’s development. It is reflective of their level of ability, learning style and social maturity. Montessori classrooms provide a prepared environment where children are free to respond to their natural drive to work and learn. Through this, children are carefully supported in developing concentration, motivation, persistence and discipline.

The Montessori teacher is one of a guide and observer, whose ultimate goal is to intervene less and less as the child develops. The teacher builds and promotes a sense of calm, order and joy in the classroom, and encourages children in all their efforts. This fosters an environment of self-confidence and discipline, tailored to their needs. Knowing when to observe and when, and how much to intervene, is a skill that the Montessori teacher develops through a rigorous, specialised course of training, at established training centres around the world.

The approach embraced by Montessori schools is the embodiment of such principles, and offers an alternative to mainstream schools offered both in Australia and internationally. Whilst this is not necessarily unachievable within a traditional educational model of schooling, Montessori can offer a real, evidence-based alternative that achieves this aim.

¹ *Montessori: The science behind the genius*, Lillard, 2005, Oxford Press

YMS Submission – “Montessori: A unique socio-environmental model of education for children in the ACT”

The Montessori philosophy has worked for 94 years in thousands of Montessori schools around the world. Montessori has shared and enjoyed the support of some of the leading personalities of this century, including President Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Mahatma Gandhi, Helen Keller, Sigmund Freud, Buckminster Fuller, Bertram Russell, Jean Piaget, Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, Ann Frank, and David Elkind, just to name a few.

As with other government preschools and schools, the YMS is supported through voluntary Parent Association contributions for 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds. A core component of the Montessori philosophy is the establishment of an early childhood learning approach that encompasses 3-year-olds. Currently, funding for 3-year-olds relies entirely on parent contributions that enable the school to purchase “teacher services” from the Department. This represents a parent contribution to staffing fees of \$28,000 per year – a significant amount.

In recent years there has been significant growth in demand for places at the YMS. The School currently services 50 children, many of whom are not within the local school catchment area, and come from areas well beyond the current range of Yarralumla Primary School. Indeed, were a straightforward amalgamation to occur that resulted in a loss of the Montessori School model, the enrolment numbers from YMS **would not** supplement Yarralumla Primary School enrolments, given the current enrolments to YMS are specifically for the Montessori model.

At present, the waiting list for access to the YMS program is 30 places – which, considering the program has not previously been widely advertised means there is a far greater potential demand for this model in the ACT. This demand reflects national and international recognition of the uniquely valuable approach to early childhood development adopted in the ACT. An advertising campaign conducted in 2006 for 2007 enrolments has generated much wider interest.

Over the past 25 years, the YMS community has invested heavily in the YMS program, providing a purpose-built facility; appropriate learning materials; excellent teaching staff; and supporting the unique demands of enrolment beginning at age 3 and extending through to age 6.

Looking to the future, the YMS community is not adverse to obtaining efficiencies in the administration of ACT schools. Nor is the YMS community adverse to adapting to the changing demographics of the Canberra community generally. The YMS community is willing to continue to work towards maintaining and expanding an emphasis on early childhood learning. However, the YMS community respectfully submits that whatever form of administration or change is implemented as a result of the Towards 2020 review, the qualities and elements of the YMS program that make it so uniquely valuable to the community must be protected.

In the context of educational choice for residents of the Canberra region, it should not be forgotten that the YMS is a community initiated school developed expressly to provide the Montessori model as a choice for the community. It has been providing that choice to the Canberra region for 25 years. With current issues and our history in mind, the Yarralumla Montessori School Parent's Association takes this opportunity to put forward its submission to ensure a prosperous future of the Montessori early childhood program as very real and effective schooling option for the Canberra region.

Executive Summary

The Yarralumla Montessori School Parent’s Association (YMSPA) recognises that the School has not been specifically identified for merger or closure within the Towards 2020 document, released by the ACT Government. However, under the 2020 plan there has been discussion that preschools come under the auspice of their local primary school, in this case for YMS to merge with Yarralumla Primary School. While YMS is identified as a preschool, there is a current primary component (given the YMS program caters for kindergarten children).

The overall position of the YMSPA is that whilst this would be acceptable in terms of offering a more efficient and centralised administrative model, it is important to maintain the integrity and uniqueness of the Montessori School within this.

In particular, the YMSPA wishes to make the following points as part of its submission:

- The YMSPA recognises and appreciates that rationalisation of the ACT schooling system is required, in order to reflect and meet changing demographics among the Canberra population and infrastructure;
- The YMSPA asserts that through offering the Montessori schooling system within the public education system in the ACT, Canberra is a world-leader in facilitating access to an alternative and evidence-based model of education that can offer tangible and long-term benefits to those who attend;
- The YMSPA has identified potential for growth of the public Montessori school system within the ACT to meet increasing demands for places, and asserts that the cost-inputs associated with providing this system of education are far outweighed by the positive social and educational outcomes for those who attend;
- It has been identified there is a potential for amalgamation of the YMS with the local Yarralumla Primary School, and such as merger would be acceptable if:
 - it did not compromise the current location of the YMS, which is on purpose-modified premises and grounds that meet the unique needs of the Montessori educational model;
 - it did not compromise the unique Montessori educational model through broader amalgamation of function or curriculum;
 - given the above, such a merger enabled continued independence of the YMS teaching method and system, rather than a broader incorporation (and through this a loss) of the Montessori model;
- Following on from the above, while efficiencies of shared administration is acknowledged, there is a case to maintain an important level of minimum independence from the Yarralumla Primary School in the curriculum management of the Montessori arm of the school. Potential options for this are further described within this submission;

- A potential case exists for the further expansion of the YMS, to include an additional school that covers the north Canberra region of the ACT, and in the longer-term to incorporate Cycle 2 (Grades 1-3, 7-9 years of age) to provide continuation of the Montessori model of schooling to a greater number of children in the ACT.

Uniqueness of YMS

Montessori is a comprehensive educational approach from *birth to adulthood* based on the observation of children's needs in a variety of cultures all around the world.

Beginning her work almost a century ago, *Dr. Maria Montessori* developed this educational approach based on her understanding of children's natural learning tendencies as they unfold in "*prepared environments*" for multi-age groups (0-3, 3-6, 6-9, 9-12, and 12-14).

The Montessori environment contains specially designed, manipulative "*materials for development*" that invite children to engage in learning activities of their own individual choice. Under the guidance of a *trained* teacher, children in a Montessori classroom learn by making discoveries with the materials, cultivating concentration, motivation, self-discipline, and a love of learning.

Today, Montessori schools are found worldwide, serving children from birth through adolescence. In the United States, there are more than 4,000 private Montessori schools and more than 200 public schools with Montessori-styled programs. The *Association Montessori Internationale* (AMI), founded by Maria Montessori in 1929, maintains Montessori educational principles and disseminates Montessori education throughout the world.

In a Montessori classroom²:

- **the organisation of the room allows children easy access to a variety of learning experiences.** The room is specifically organised to appear attractive and orderly;
- **The Montessori method of helping a child is through a process of showing a child what to do in a positive manner.** Montessori classrooms are based upon respect for the individual. Interaction between teacher and child occurs in an atmosphere that is positive, constructive and co-operative. The dignity of the child is at all times respected and nurtured.
- **The Montessori Programme is systematic and carefully sequenced.** Every activity is carefully thought out to build upon previous preparation and to lead on to a more complex activity.
- **The Montessori classroom is designed to develop independence and responsibility.** The organisation of the classroom, the method of teaching and the practical life lessons are oriented towards helping the child become a self sufficient and disciplined individual.
- **The routine of the Montessori classroom is based on the principle of choice rather than on set times for prescribed activities.** Since everything in the Montessori environment is something planned to be worthwhile and educational, the child can be free to choose.
- **In Montessori Programmes children are viewed as positive beings whose primary work is the construction of an adult.** Rewards and punishments, therefore, can only get in the way. Development and learning themselves are adequate motivators. Likewise children do not need to be appealed to through fantasy, bright colours, or gimmicks, as these come between the child and real learning.

² Booklet – *Choosing Montessori for Your Child: More about the Montessori approach to education and the CMS*

Dr Montessori believed that the key to a peaceful future lay with the child, and that it was the nature of childhood experiences which determined an adult’s character and personality. Thus the real work of creating peace is through education where the role of education is in nurturing children to support the unfolding of their inner peace. Education must not be seen merely as teaching, the passing on of facts or the process of acquiring culture. Rather it must aid the development of the whole personality and will involve parents as well as educators. Education must foster the development of people who value themselves, who feel in control of their lives, for only then can they direct their energies to a wider community and work to build a better world. The fulfillment of this goal is the foundation for social harmony which constitutes a genuine state of peace.

The observable fact from implementing this philosophy is that the majority of children in elementary Montessori programs achieve high-level academic standards because they are highly motivated and have been exposed to an extremely broad and integrated curriculum. They may not have a weekly math test on which their grade is based, but they can prove to you that "the answer in division is what one unit gets." They won't have a multiple-choice quiz on Chapter 2 of their science or geography textbook. Rather, they can independently research topics using encyclopedia, atlases, reference books, maps, microscopes and magnifying glasses. "Real school" should engender a love of learning and an acceptance of personal responsibility for intellectual growth as well as social interaction. "Real school" attempts to shape long-term attitudes and concrete skills necessary not just to move up to the next grade, but to "move up to a successful and happy life."

"Montessori elementary gives children the opportunity to continue to progress at their own pace in an environment that nurtures a love of learning. Children take responsibility for their own learning and have daily opportunities to make decisions and choices in a child centered classroom. They are exposed to many complex concepts at an early age through the use of wonderful concrete learning materials. It is not unusual to see seven-year-olds in a Montessori classroom constructing atomic and molecular models. Nine-year-olds analyze the squares of trinomials, while ten-year-olds solve algebraic equations and twelve-year-olds compute the square root of large numbers. What parent who has watched her children thrive both intellectually and socially in the Children's House wouldn't want this to continue in the elementary years?"

***Judi Charlap, Elementary Montessori Guide
The New Gate School, Sarasota, Florida***

Traditional Classroom

Textbooks, pencil and paper, worksheets etc

Working and learning without emphasis on social development

Narrow, unit-driven curriculum

Individual subjects

Block time, period lessons

Single-graded classrooms

Students passive, quiet, in desks

Students fit mold of school

Students leave for special help

Product-focused report cards

Montessori Environment

Prepared *kinesthetic materials* with incorporated control of error, specially developed reference materials

Working and learning matched to the social development of the child

Unified, internationally developed curriculum

Integrated subjects and learning based on *developmental psychology*

Uninterrupted work cycles

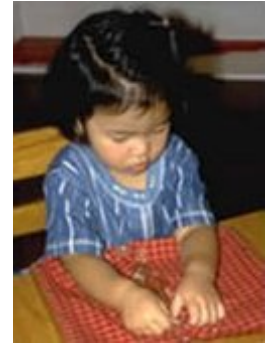
Multi-age classrooms

Students active, talking, with periods of spontaneous quiet, freedom to move

School meets needs of students

Special help comes to students

Process-focused assessment, skills checklists, mastery benchmarks



Source: North American Montessori Teachers Association

Montessori would say that knowledge is relative – ever changing and developing as people have changed and developed. Knowledge is a personal experience for each individual and it is based on their perception of reality and the means they have for symbolising reality.

Knowledge in and of itself is interesting and delightful when made available to a child when they are ready for it. There is no need to “sugar coat” in order to provide an incentive for learning – nor is there a need to create a forced learning situation that engenders resistance. This key philosophy is core to the principle of Montessori education – one that engenders empowerment and wonder amongst children, and through this a love of learning.

"All my children have had the advantage of having a Montessori education to start them off on their educational journey. All of them have benefited greatly (too much really to include in this), however I would like to share the difference a Montessori start has made for my eldest child (now in Year 7) who has Autism.

"In a Montessori classroom my child was able to have all his needs met without any changes to the environment, my child was able to enjoy learning in a way that suited him and his needs. He studies all areas of the curriculum and loved going to school. Within an educational philosophy initially developed for children with disabilities it is no wonder that he learnt most of what he knows in that environment and still talks about his time there.

"He learnt to be independent. He was not teased by other children, and was respected for the individual he is. In a Montessori classroom children are respected and learn to respect each other and the environment – this has been vital to his social development.

"Whilst he could be challenging, he was never overwhelming for the teachers in a Montessori environment – the environment was so stimulating that he was always engaged. The Montessori environment allowed for the teacher to work individually with him and in small groups to develop his social skills and to this day he can approach anyone, including strangers. He is still independent from his time at Montessori, and can go into a shop and order and pay for what he would like without any help. This is a direct result of his start in life in a Montessori classroom"

Parent of child who attended Yarralumla Montessori School

A key element to the Montessori educational model is the environment itself. In a Montessori classroom, the organisation of the room allows children easy access to a variety of learning experiences. The room is specifically organised to appear attractive and orderly. Materials are displayed on shelves at the child's height. The materials are carefully designed and thoughtfully researched to fit the developmental needs and characteristics of children. Each class contains materials experimentally determined to be appropriate for the developmental stages of children attending.

The external environment also reflects this – using the opportunities offered outdoors to further provide practical and hands-on exploration of the outside world. It promotes their understanding of the environment, positive attitudes towards the earth and the life it supports, and the confidence and skills to promote ecological sustainability. It focuses on how people are part of the living planet and on the interaction of the natural, built and social aspects of the environment, emphasizing all facets of this interaction-personal, local, national and global.

A frequent comment from people who observe a Montessori class is the calm and tranquility of the environment, and of the children who participate.

Issues

[Yarralumla Primary School survey: Yarralumla Montessori School](#)

In September 2006, a survey was undertaken to seek the views of parents/caregivers attending Yarralumla Primary School, Yarralumla Preschool and Yarralumla Montessori School on the potential impacts of a broader merger on these families. A return rate of 68% was achieved (n=25).

All respondents to the survey were from suburbs outside the Yarralumla school catchment area, with some traveling as far as Queanbeyan, Calwell and Evatt. Very few were from the same suburb, showing an equal spread of parents across Canberra accessing the program.

“If Montessori went to Year 6 in the government sector I would send my 3 children there.”

Survey respondent

The survey highlighted a number of interesting results:

- most respondents expressed concern with the proposed changes and the potential impact on the integrity of the YMS program – in particular around the proposed governance, and division of funding;
- comments from the survey clearly indicated that respondents would like to see the availability of a Montessori education model expanded to middle and upper primary, referred to as 2nd and 3rd cycle classrooms in a Montessori environment;
- over half of the respondents specifically identified that they would attend Yarralumla Primary School if it had a Montessori program.

A key conclusion drawn from the research was that given the specialised nature of the school and its value to the parents and caregivers across the Canberra region, that the school retain its enrolment area, independence, and that consideration be given to expanding the availability of Montessori education throughout primary school and the provision of Montessori to other areas of Canberra.

[Concerns re loss of YMS through merger with YPS](#)

The principal issue of concern that forms the basis of this submission is that the unique, evidence-based and effective model that is available through the Yarralumla Montessori School will be lost if a broader merger is undertaken with Yarralumla Primary School, without consideration for maintaining the uniqueness of the Montessori model described above. This could in particular occur through:

- Loss of the equipment and built environment which is unique to the YMS premises, which have been specifically designed to facilitate the self-directed and supported learning model that is core to the Montessori philosophy;

- Through potential administrative efficiencies (such as integration with the Yarralumla Primary School teaching model) a lack of ability for Montessori to maintain a separate, stand-alone curriculum that promotes the principles of Montessori schooling and promotes emotional and social development.

"My daughter has attended Yarralumla Montessori for the full three year program, and the benefits have been obvious. In particular, she displays such independence and confidence now in all her activities – having been nurtured in such an open and positive environment.

"She is always keen to find out more about the world around her. I strongly believe this will place her well later in life, and in her future education – being able to question, to want to learn and to drive her own quest for knowledge is such a gift, and one which we can continue to foster throughout the remainder of her school years and her life.

"The respect and integrity that she has gained from being part of the Montessori experience is something I know she will cherish for years – my only regret is we cannot let her continue with the Montessori educational model in the future, and I'm sure other parents would also send their children if it was available in the public system.

Parent of child who attends Yarralumla Montessori School

Given the benefits offered through Montessori, and the data which indicates significant demand for the program does exist in the ACT, YMS asserts that the Montessori model should continue to be available as an alternative for parents in the ACT.

[Maintain current YMS Governance and Enrolment Model](#)

YMS is currently managed through a Parent's Association, which comprises membership from the current parents of children who attend. The Parent's Association is currently responsible for all aspects of the administration and financial management of the school, including the payment of expenses, and contribution to staff through the ACT Department of Education:

It is important to note that the YMSPA agrees there *are* some potential benefits and efficiencies that could be achieved through a partial merger of the administrative functions of the school. Obviously, many functions which are currently carried out administratively by the Parent's Association would duplicate those carried out by Yarralumla Primary School.

It would be in the interests of both schools that were a merger to occur, some of these functions be centralised, thereby maximizing efficiencies and enabling investment in the core aspects of the schools in terms of ongoing curriculum development and materials.

YMS Submission – “Montessori: A unique socio-environmental model of education for children in the ACT”

It is the fundamental position of YMS that a merger that more broadly incorporated the curriculums and educational approaches adopted by Yarralumla Primary School would eventually compromise the continuing function of the Montessori method of education. Eventually we would like to recommend that if such a merger were to occur, a separate committee/administrative committee be formed to manage the Montessori School, as a discrete program within the broader YPS.

[Stengthening Public Education](#)

As one of the only public Montessori Schools available in Australia, continued support for the YMS provides for choice for parents in the ACT and surrounding region. One of the key principles for strengthening public education is the ability to offer a range of available schools that can meet differing needs of the local community.

For this reason, the opportunity exists for the ACT to remain a world-leader in providing an evidence-based educational model that is in demand, and strengthens public education in the local region.

[Cost Issues](#)

There is a high level of parent enthusiasm and involvement at the school. An Executive Committee of the Parents Association is elected by parents to take action on their behalf. Parents Association meetings are held each term. In addition to volunteering time to assist staff during class time (eg cutting fruit and in the library), taking school laundry home, cleaning the school and gardening, parents and caregivers make voluntary contributions (currently 73% for this year) and organise a number of fundraising events. This enables the purchase of the specialised equipment required for a Montessori classroom (for example, approximately \$2,500 was raised to purchase a set of maps specially designed for the Montessori environment).

Given this offset, the YMS remains more broadly cost-effective and efficient in offering the Montessori education model, and does not represent additional costs to the ACT Government education system to support its ongoing operations.

[Longer-term implications](#)

Part of the future vision for the rationalisation of the ACT system is further amalgamations and mergers of schools, to offer further efficiencies in terms of management and administrative function. We understand one of these future options is for YPS/YMS more broadly to come under the administrative management of Forrest.

The position of YMSPA remains that if such a merger was to occur, the integrity of the YMS model remains.

The Future of YMS

Working on the presumption that the YMS would merge with Yarralumla Primary School, we propose the following to ensure the continued integrity and maintenance of the Montessori model within the new structure:

Centralised Administrative Management

There are a number of areas that generate administrative duplication and cost for both the YMS and Yarralumla Primary School, that could and should be rationalised. Apart from the apparent areas such as electricity, phone and other on-costs, these could include the following:

- Staffing administration, such as teachers leave, and relief staff;
- Some administrative payments, such as bills, payments to ACT Government (eg 3 year old contributions), and maintenance costs;
- Central office and processing/receipt of forms and other requirements (such as health checks, procedural administration such as payment for advertising etc).

It is recognized that these would be further determined and explored in consultation with Yarralumla Primary School.

Independence of enrolment process

In order for the Montessori model to be maintained within a broader school structure, the ability for the school to manage its own enrolment process is vital. This would include ensuring equity of access and managing placements within the program.

Independence of curriculum setting

As described through this submission, central to the unique Montessori model is the approach to education that differs from the traditional educational model. For this reason, maintaining independence in the educational curriculum and approach adopted by the classroom teachers is important.

Independence of financial allocation

While there is a potential for fees collection to occur through the centralised administrative management model, it would be important for funds to be maintained separately between YMS and the Yarralumla Primary School. While some funds allocation should be held in a ‘shared pool’ (eg costs for bills, phone, heating, electricity etc), YMS makes payments to the ACT Government to contribute to staff costs for 3 year olds, as well as the purchase of specialised equipment that would be different to the needs for the Yarralumla Primary School arm.

Part of the discussion under a potential merger would be ensuring that at least this level of independence is maintained to enable these arrangements to continue.

School Governance

At present, both the YMS and Yarralumla Primary School’s have separate school governance structures. Currently, these attract no or minimal costs as they often rely on the voluntary time and contribution of staff and representatives, and are important in setting key priorities and directions for the schools. They are also vital in ensuring transparent and accountable use of available resources to support the school infrastructure.

Given the above points regarding maintaining independence of the enrolment, curriculum, and financial decision-making for the schools, it is proposed that broadly the independent governance structures for both schools (eg the YMSPA and the YPS School Board) remain.

It is appreciated that there will be some discussion on how the jointly-managed functions of the schools will be managed – and it is anticipated this would form part of the discussions between both schools were a merger to occur.

Closing Summary

In conclusion, the YMSPA believes that the vision of the ACT Government through its 2020 strategy has room to facilitate the ongoing provision of the Yarralumla Montessori School as a public educational model within the ACT. The Montessori model is unique, and offers an alternative model for which demand is growing now, and is projected to grow in the future.

With this increasing demand, there is the potential for expansion of the Montessori arm of schooling to other areas of the ACT, either as stand-alone programs or as an arm of schooling under broader amalgamation with other schools in the ACT. In any event, ensuring that the Montessori model is maintained as an independent school service is vital – and many options can be explored to maintain this independence in terms of administration and management, while maximising the administrative efficiencies – a core intent of the 2020 vision.