

Introduction to Swannanoa Valley Montessori School

Swannanoa Valley Montessori School was founded as a non-profit school in 2003 by parents who sought a creative active learning environment for their young children ages three- to six-years old. In the fall of 2004 we opened our lower elementary class of six- to nine-year olds. In 2007 we were excited to add an upper elementary program of nine- to twelve-year olds, and in 2008, we opened a toddler class for children ages 18 – 36 months. We are currently in the preliminary fundraising and building stages of creating a new elementary satellite location in Asheville, NC. Our goal is to continue to expand to meet the needs of the community. The school is an Associate Member School of the American Montessori Society (AMS).

SVMS focuses on the Montessori approach to child-centered learning by creating an environment where children feel secure, supported, and stimulated. We believe in the child: in each dream, in each mind and in each individual, through nurturing confidence, self-motivation and cooperation we promote community awareness and enthusiasm for life-long learning. We wish to help children become individuals who respect themselves, other beings and the world in which they live.

The mission of SVMS states, “We are building a sustainable and vital environment for children to actualize their full human potential and to bring about peace in the world.”

Maria Montessori and Our Philosophy and Values

A Montessori school is a learning center based on the whole child educational approach of Dr. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the first female physician to graduate from the University of Rome. She believed that children have a natural, spontaneous interest in learning. A Montessori program is directed toward helping each child reach full potential in all areas of life. Every Montessori classroom is a carefully prepared environment to promote the child’s development of social skills, emotional maturity, independence and physical coordination, in addition to intellectual growth.

An essential feature of the method involves the interaction of multiple ages within each classroom, over a three-year range. The resulting atmosphere allows for flexibility for each child to learn at his/her own pace in a home-like environment where younger children learn from their slightly older peers, and older children reinforce their own achievements by helping the younger ones.

At SVMS we believe that excellent education is built around nurturing and supporting the whole child. Starting in preschool our teachers help students learn personal responsibility through peaceful resolution of minor conflicts and encourage a positive outlook regarding self and others. The core values in each classroom are respect for oneself, for others and for the environment. The small size of our school allows close involvement among teachers, students and parents creating a powerful sense of community. Children feel valued for who they are, and parents are an important partner in the educational process.

As a Montessori school, we understand that children learn more by touching, seeing, smelling, tasting and exploring, than just by listening. Children learn by doing, not passively accepting pre-existing knowledge. Our developmentally appropriate approach has been designed to fit each individual child, instead of making the child fit the program.

Swannanoa Valley Montessori School admits students of any race, color, religion, and national or ethnic origin.

Children's House – Ages 18 – 36 months

The toddler community at SVMS offers a unique beginning of self-development in a warm atmosphere of respect, understanding, and support. Within a small group setting, our experienced teaching staff fulfills the social, physical, emotional, developmental and psychological needs of each child.

Our toddler program follows the Montessori philosophy that encourages vocabulary development, independence and self-confidence for each child. In this environment there is space for movement, individual work and room for group activities. The environment is designed to be safe and aesthetically pleasing. This freedom in a safe place is a key element of the toddler program. Through positive daily activities even the young child will gain an appreciation and respect for the environment and his or her peers.

Children's House – Ages 3-6

The Montessori classroom is a prepared environment that allows children to work towards their own development, be part of a community and explore the environment around them. Children between the ages of 3 and 6 learn from direct contact with the environment by means of all the senses and through movement. The child literally absorbs everything in the environment.

At this age children are refining motor coordination, social skills, concentration, and a sense of order, independence and reasoning. The teacher guides children in their whole development – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Over a period of time, the children develop into a “normalized community” working with high concentration and few interruptions.

The classroom is made up of six areas: Practical Life/Art, Sensorial, Math, Language, Science and Culture.

- **Practical Life** is the foundation of a Montessori Classroom and teaches the children to care for themselves and their environment. With activities such as pouring, sewing, apple cutting and polishing, the children gain concentration, coordination and self-confidence.
- The **Sensorial Area** helps children become aware of the surrounding world through refining their senses. This area also prepares the children for mathematics by teaching varying dimension and geometric shapes.
- **Mathematics** in a Montessori classroom is taught using concrete materials. Starting with the Number Rods the children learn the concept of base ten. At the ages of four and five, the Golden Beads are used to introduce mathematical equations.
- **Language** is part of all areas of the classroom. With a rich verbal environment the children develop vocabulary and self-expression. Through sandpaper letters and realistic objects the children learn letter sounds and gradually begin to spell and read phonetic words.
- **Science** allows the children to explore their environment. Through books, objects, photographs and coloring the children learn about the animal kingdom, sink/float, living/non-living and magnets.
- **Culture** is an important part of the classroom. There is a focus on the different continents, including flags, celebrations, ethnic foods and the people of different nations. Maria Montessori believed that the ultimate goal of Montessori education is world peace and, for this reason, culture and diversity are an essential part of the classroom.

Lower Elementary Years of Cosmic Education – Ages 6-9

Children between the ages of 6 and 9 develop a reasoning mind that asks why and how things happen in the world. The children's own questions then provide the basis for their explorations. "And what better answer," said Maria Montessori, "than to provide them with the universe itself. With their ability to think abstractly and the power of their imaginations to "see" what cannot be seen, the universe is the limit for their search.

The Montessori teacher guides and assists the students in this search. The stories of the Great Lessons and other presentations provide a framework in which the details of the various disciplines – mathematics, language arts, the sciences, social studies, history and geography – can be studied and the conceptual skills that children need to become literate members of society can be mastered. The Montessori curriculum, rather than being a collection of random facts, takes an interdisciplinary approach and emphasizes the inter-connectedness of life, as well as emphasizing the unique role and responsibility human beings have on our planet.

Working independently or in small groups, students teach themselves and teach each other, learning at their own pace as they pursue their projects and master the basic skills. Teachers set up additional learning opportunities and try to nurture and encourage each student's varied interests. The arts, music and physical education are integrated as much as possible with the other subjects. The mixed-age classes and cooperative learning approach also foster the social development of each child and the sense of community.

Upper Elementary Years of Cosmic Education– Ages 9-12

The curriculum provides opportunity for self-development and self-discovery. Students are encouraged to discover their own innate abilities, and to develop a strong sense of independence, self-confidence, and self-discipline.

The methods used in the Montessori curriculum literally help students learn how to learn. We encourage them to think for themselves, do research, analyze what they have found, and reach their own conclusions. In most areas of study, rather than simply using textbooks, we have students use reference materials, libraries, and the Internet to acquire information and to prepare materials for presentation to their classmates.

There is an emphasis on community involvement through a partnership with local colleges, community gardens and the arts.

A Partnership with Parents

Parents are an essential component in the SVMS approach to education. The partnership between parents and the teaching staff benefit the children, the school and the community. Parents literally helped build the school, from bookshelves to furniture to learning tools. Parents continue to donate time as classroom aids, field trip chaperones, for special workdays and fundraising events, on committees and much more. The strength a community can achieve by working together provides a role model for our children that will be remembered for years to come.