



WHY: THE QUESTION THAT UNDERLIES WHAT WE DO IN OUR CLASSROOMS

By Robyn Mernick

Parents and teachers are bombarded with questions from children, and one of the most common is, “Why...?” At WSMS we encourage our teachers to help children explore the “why” of the “why”—what initiates the asking of the question, what do they hope to find out.

But “why” is also a question we have explored with our teachers, to help them understand what inspires the procedures we use in the classroom.

As Simon Sinek, author of bestseller *Start with Why* and TED-talk star, articulates so clearly: most of us can describe what we do and how we do it, but not necessarily why—and that is the core requirement for success.

We believe that thinking deeply about our “why” as educators is in keeping with WSMS’s mission. To quote an excerpt from the mission statement, “We are leaders in teaching Montessori principles and incorporate the best practices of modern early childhood education in our classrooms.”

While teachers and administrators at WSMS use Montessori philosophy as a compass each day to guide our work with children, we remain open to new strategies and approaches that emerge in the larger field of early childhood education best practices. Our “why” is always driven by the directive:

how can we best serve children and their families?

Our answers are informed not by a singular source. As a school with a well-developed history, we are also attentive to reviewing long-standing policies and traditions in the classroom to ensure that the why’s that have substantiated these practices still resonate with continued meaning and impact in our community.

Classroom teams utilize the “why” in their communication and reflection together. With the guidance of Judy Jablon, WSMS Visiting Scholar, teachers have adopted the practice of providing feedback to teammates in a manner that not only acknowledges effective moments, but elaborates on why that moment was important in a larger context. WSMS school leaders also incorporate this approach in their communications with faculty. In a message to teachers in the first weeks of school, Mimi used this approach to share an observation of the busy set-up period.

I noticed positive energy throughout the two buildings. People were going out of their way to be helpful, and that contributed to a strong community feeling.

This is so important because positive energy is contagious, and it helps all of us show up as our best selves for children and families, as well as for each other.

Deciding on new school-wide procedures frequently involves a thoughtful conversation between administration and faculty, and an analysis of whether a change can be supported by a meaningful “why.”

In preparation for this school year, for example, it was suggested by one of our multi-age classroom teachers that we consider adopting a policy of having each child keep a pair of shoes for use within the building. Teachers who agreed were asked to share why they believed this to be important. A variety of why’s were shared: that the practice of changing shoes upon arrival and departure is a meaningful ritual that marks for children their entrance into a different space; that a pair of sneakers kept at school would ensure that all children are equipped for safe gross motor play; that the incorporation of this daily self-care task would further build children’s independence.

At West Side Montessori School, we regularly review and reflect upon everything we do, and integrating the “why” means we continually incorporate best practices into our community life.



CLIMBING WALL

One big surprise for returning students this year was the new climbing wall in the gym.

The traverse climbing wall was designed by Gus Dollinger of Central Rock Gym. The fun and challenge of a traverse wall is making it from one side to the other, rather than up to the top. Children are never more than a few feet off of the ground, climbing horizontally across one of three routes: beginning, intermediate and advanced. The routes will be reset regularly to ensure that the children continue to be challenged. The installation was tested by “forerunners” Quinn Skelton (Garden) and her brother Alden (‘18), whose mother, Tenille, oversaw the project.

As Tenille notes, climbing is a gross motor activity that boosts physical skills such as balance, coordination and agility. Climbing also requires planning (“Where am I going to put my hands and feet? How do I turn my body?”), and the routes are set up like a puzzle to be solved, boosting logic, memory, problem-solving and concentration. Climbing is an activity where children of all sizes are strong and confident on the wall, despite their “athletic” abilities.

Becky Lewin, parent of Amelia Resta-Flarer (3E), and the school’s occupational therapist, agrees. The wall challenges a child’s strength and coordination, but also has clear cognitive benefits from the constant need to determine next steps mid-activity. Professionally, Becky has seen the impact of climbing walls in therapeutic sensory gyms. And she knows that every child at WSMS, regardless of age, size or strength, will profit from this exciting opportunity.

