

DEIB IS AT THE CORE OF OUR MISSION, AND MARTHA HAAKMAT IS HELPING US ADVANCE OUR WORK



The WSMS mission has—since our founding—emphasized the importance of equity and diversity in our approach to education and in our community. In 2019 we substantiated that commitment by bringing in Martha Haakmat, the former Head of Brooklyn Heights Montessori School, who currently serves on the NYSAIS, Brearley and Early Steps Boards of Trustees. She is

the Executive Director of Haakmat Consulting, LLC, providing leadership coaching and support for DEI strategic planning for schools and other organizations.

Martha has an open, friendly, nonjudgmental approach, which encourages conversations and sharing. Her initial work at WSMS began in June of 2019 in a workshop with parents on how to answer children's questions about race and the protests for racial equity that spanned the globe that spring and summer. She provided tips and strategies to help parents handle their children's questions and concerns about the racial divisions in our country. She had parents role-play as a way to test and practice their responsiveness to questions.

She then created a series of workshops for faculty and staff, throughout school year 2019–20, that built upon their exploration of anti-bias in early childhood education, and investigate ways to create a sense of belonging for every child, with a focus on classroom culture and curriculum. She held individual meetings with teaching teams to support their particular needs, and to have a deeper conversation about their classes, ideas and questions. This work broadened in 2020–21 to training for the Board on applying an equity lens to their roles at the governance level.

What Martha loves about WSMS is our mission, and our willingness to learn together as adults in the service of our children.



Although Martha's cornerstone is DEIB, her expertise has a broad impact on interactions with children and adults, because the way to address equity is by being open and honest in our connections and communications.

As Martha cogently reminds us, children come into the classroom with open eyes. They observe, name what they see, try things, are open to a different approach if the first (or second or third ...) doesn't work. They collaborate to problem-solve, and learn from mistakes. They care.

In fact, children model for adults their openness to new ideas and to sharing ideas, and their ability to have open and honest conversation across differences. What adults sometimes forget is how important it is to unlearn/relearn/practice.

Martha's workshops are an opportunity for honest conversation, and ongoing learning for adults in a safe space. They build skills/knowledge, enhance their understanding of goals and objectives, and build a culture of practice.

Another example of Martha's approach is a faculty workshop she facilitated with partner Molly Davis and Rebecca DuVall, Librarian and Diversity Coordinator at Brooklyn Heights Montessori, on reading aloud with children. She focused on techniques to not just read but to share, to talk about what was read, and to encourage connection and critical thinking about the pictures and text. In this way, teachers can use literature to learn about how children make sense of their world. She role-modelled how to navigate questions and spark discussion. And she plans to hold a similar workshop this year with parents.

She will continue to partner with parents, centering on our goals and objectives and tracking progress toward them, while connecting the school's mission, and building a culture of working together.



Martha did two workshops with the Board last year, focused on working with our leadership to put into practice a strategic approach to equity in alignment with our mission and culture. In June 2021 the Board approved an amendment to the By-Laws, establishing the DEIB ad hoc committee as a standing Board committee, cementing our commitment. She is scheduled to hold two sessions with the Board in 2021-2022. And she will meet monthly this year with Admin on their roles, with the goal of infusing equity into our policies and procedures and systems, supporting what the faculty do in the classrooms.

Martha is genuinely impressed by the WSMS faculty: their deep engagement, readiness to share experiences, willingness to ask for support, and their rich, open and honest communications. As she has said, early childhood educators know how to move beyond DEIB as an intellectual exercise in order to make learning about equity a concrete experience for children.

Martha will expand her classroom coaching this year. Teachers will send her an agenda of their questions/ideas for discussion on curriculum, how to partner with parents, and their concerns. Martha will then foster dialogue, and provide resources and guidance.

As Mimi said so eloquently to the school community last year,

At WSMS, we have a long-standing commitment to creating an environment where every child and adult celebrates human diversity, recognizes injustice, and has the skill set to address it. We are working together to build an anti-bias community, a world in which all children are able to blossom, and each child's particular abilities and gifts are able to flourish.

Martha is helping us get there.

42 YEARS AT WSMS!



We had a lot to celebrate at the end of the 2020–21 academic year, but our happiness was tinged by the departure of WSMS teacher, Joan Shisler, after 42 amazing years.

Joan's time at WSMS began in September 1979, in 3E. She was hired as an Associate, working from 10:30 to 6:30, cementing her love of—and commitment to—working with children in what we now think of as LAP.

She quickly learned she was teaching parents as well as children (her student, Beatrice, would often say, "You were my daddy's teacher"), and she became adept in her collaborations and communications with families.

About 15 years ago, she took over the nature program from Naomi Stern, which brought her into every classroom to explore and celebrate the wonders of nature with the children. Joan is now "educating" her new puppy, Molly, and planning a trip to Belize.

Joan has lots of memories, including the AMS conference in Boston where she enjoyed the company of Dr. Gordon Mack, one of WSMS's first visiting scholars (and the father of Margot and Melissa). Another terrific memory was the 2010 trip to Ghana with six fellow teachers; they shared their teaching experience and were warmly welcomed into the lives and culture of the adults and children they met.

But, as Joan has said, "The greatest highlight has always been the interactions, the congeniality of all my fellow teachers, all the children and their parents I've had the privilege to meet, and the staff of WSMS. They have all so enriched my life."

When Joan announced her pending departure to her colleagues, she ended with a quote from Muhammad Ali: "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth."

Joan, you have enriched our lives, and we miss you!

