



As is the case with everything at our school, the impetus for the “greening” of West Side Montessori School was the desire to do what’s best for our kids. And the best is what our efforts have yielded: our newly renovated classrooms provide a state-of-the-art early childhood learning environment that is ideal for



# THE *Green* OF WEST SIDE



our young students. They also provide much more!

Several years ago, our Board concluded that the best way to support our exceptional faculty and secure our school’s future would be to create classrooms that were in keeping with the excellence of our teaching and our reputation as one of the finest early childhood schools in New York City. We are fortunate to have a beautiful building in which to conduct our work, but our interior space had not been seriously rethought or renovated in a comprehensive way for over 25 years. The Board resolved that our new learning spaces should not only be a model of the best instructional theory and practice, they should also be environmentally and ergonomically sound. WSMS has always taught its children to respect the earth and the environment (did

# Beginning THE MONTESSORI

by michael moran (parent '05, trustee)  
photography by ken missbrenner.



ing. At the start of our renovation project, therefore, WSMS enlisted the aid of Rebecca Rasmussen Architects (headed by Rebecca Rasmussen Grunwald, WSMS parent '06), who asked our faculty to identify what was needed to create that environment. Teachers said that

you know that Maria Montessori was an early environmentalist?), so it was only logical that any renovations should reflect these values. In late 2005, a goal to renovate all of our classrooms was established, and **The Campaign for West Side Montessori School**, a capital campaign to raise \$1.2 million dollars to accomplish it, was born. Thanks to the confidence and generosity of the donors to this campaign (see page 21), this dream has become a reality.

The value of the “prepared environment” (an orderly, serene, secure setting where children feel free to explore) is at the heart of Montessori’s educational approach and all that we do at WSMS. Our teachers put much time and care into carefully organizing our classrooms to engage each of our young students in investigation and learn-





more storage, display and workspace was essential. They also requested the use of construction materials that would ensure the highest standard of cleanliness.

One blue-sky idea was to have dishwashers in the classroom. A highlight of our school program is the fact that teachers and students sit down together to enjoy wonderful organic lunches cooked in our own kitchen. This communal meal provides a perfect opportunity for group conversation and interaction. Children help to set and clear the table using washable plates and utensils. Carrying those plates and utensils down to the kitchen for sanitizing was a burden for teachers, while the use of disposables ran against the WSMS ethos.

All faculty and staff input was taken into consideration, and the design and materials specifications were prepared, and planning began in January 2009. Construction commenced the day after school closed in June and was completed—on time and on budget!—before the start of school this September. The results are amazing! Here are just a few examples:

- Each classroom now has sufficient storage space to grant children instant access to materials, thereby facilitating their exploration and maintaining their focus. And the

cabinets are made of bamboo, a sustainable material.

- Classrooms and stairwells now have great swaths of easily accessible display space made of Forbo Cork. This washable and soil-resistant linoleum has a “self-healing” surface that accepts pins and tacks and always looks new. It is composed of natural ingredients without any toxins or harmful emissions. Best of all, it provides vast surfaces on which to display children’s work, thus building confidence and promoting sharing.
- IceStone countertops and Marmoleum floors are solid, easy-to-clean surfaces composed of environmentally friendly materials that help us maintain a healthy environment for children. IceStone is made of 100% recycled glass and concrete and is enhanced with non-toxic pigments. Marmoleum is natural and sustainable, made with natural ingredients minus harmful VOC’s or other toxic chemicals. It is installed with solvent-free adhesives.
- The new lighting chosen for our classrooms integrates daylight harvesting, occupancy sensing and dimming, provides non-glare illumination, and has been shown to promote concentration. It is super energy efficient and looks great, too.



• And as for that blue-sky idea? It was realized in the form of dish sanitizing machines (with the highest energy efficiency ratings) installed in each classroom. They are a marvel. Using interior heaters, these machines sanitize those lunch dishes in three minutes flat, after the children have gone for the day.

The list goes on: We were also able to equip classrooms with refrigerators to keep snacks and home lunches fresh; install all-new efficient plumbing fixtures and washer-dryers; and more. The best way to get the whole picture is to come and visit.

Kudos to our Head of School, Mimi Basso; our Associate Head of School for Finance and Operations, Melissa Mack; and my colleagues on the building committee, Jim Blaney and Renan Pierre, for overseeing this project. And again, our heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to the campaign. In doing our part to take care of our environment, we are also taking care of our children: in the short run, by providing classrooms that promote good health and optimize concentration and learning opportunities; and in the long run, by teaching them how to be caring and responsible global citizens. What greater mission for WSMS and its parent community to come together to undertake?

*Awe and amazement were some of the emotions I felt when I walked into the newly transformed classrooms of West Side Montessori School. I have been a member of the WSMS faculty and administrative staff for almost a decade now, and as I stood in the classroom doorway, I felt such a sense of pride in my school...and I wasn't alone. A former student of mine ran up to me and said, "Wow, I love it, I put my backpack in the basket."*

*One of the many things I value most about WSMS is our foresight. We are always looking for ways to grow and improve. The renovation and "greening" of our classrooms to 21st-century standards is a testament to our being a model urban early childhood program.*

Lorén DeNicola  
Associate Director of Admissions  
and Advancement