

CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES

BY MIMI BASSO, Head of School



For more than 53 years we have taken great pride in our “multi” diversity: economic, ethnic and cultural. We’ve lived it, but we have never *actively celebrated* diversity.

At a quick glance I can identify teachers from 15 countries speaking 18 languages. We have children born in France, Ethiopia, United Kingdom and Uganda, and parents from Belgium, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Pakistan, Russia, Italy, China, Australia, Brazil, The Netherlands, Israel, Japan, Argentina, France, UK, Hong Kong, Venezuela, Jamaica, Mexico, India, ... and many more. We represent a broad range of nationalities—especially if you look back a few generations. And we are affiliated—or not—across a spectrum of religions and cultures. Many of us share our heritages within our families and communities: from traditional

foods to music and arts, to clothing, to religious celebrations and cultural holidays, to the story of how our previous generations came to this country and where they settled.

But families new to WSMS are sometimes surprised when holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas or Hanukkah are ignored—or at least not obviously acknowledged on bulletin boards or in class communications. Sometimes WSMS is a child’s first exposure to people from a different ethnic or cultural background. Children are curious about their classmates and classmates’ families: why does someone not speak English; or dress differently; or even look different?

So I have begun thinking about how we might actively seek to celebrate this diversity.



"How best can we bring the range of differences that create the magnificent WSMS mosaic into the foreground of our life together?"

How can we learn more from one another about the world in which we all live? Montessori teachers respond to children’s statements and questions in a way that is balanced and non-judgmental. So a question from a child about a man wearing African garb or a woman in a sari will be answered in a way that encourages curiosity while emphasizing respect for individual differences.

But perhaps we need to take this a step further.

Celebrating a cultural holiday or experience at school, as well as at home, can confirm for children the relevance and importance of their special background.

We have never discouraged parents who want to share their heritage in the classroom—perhaps reading a favorite story, demonstrating a musical instrument, or bringing in a special ethnic treat—but we haven’t really sought them out. Our teachers often do this as a special lesson, but with nearly 200 families there is a lot of potential out there!

With the help of our exceptional faculty, I will be initiating some activities starting next fall that will help us discover the wealth of different customs and ways of celebrating life that are embedded in the brilliantly colored and intricately textured tapestry that is the WSMS community. I look forward to your thoughts.