WHERE WE BEGAN

An Early History of West Side Montessori School

Researched and written by George Adams and Kurt Brokaw, 1993; abridged and edited by Allison Kohrs, 2023

In March of 1963, Susanna and Boker Doyle hosted a dinner at their West 106th Street apartment to discuss ideas for a school. Their guests that evening were four couples—Gil and Sarah Burke, Larry and Olivia Huntington, Fritz and Marian Schwarz, and Joe and Bay Wasserman, all Upper West Side neighbors. Having been drawn there by the large, inexpensive apartments, they soon came to appreciate the area's vitality and diversity. But as their children reached school age, they also discovered that there were few good schools in the neighborhood, and found themselves facing the prospect of long commutes to East Side schools. According to Susanna, there was only one thing for them to do, and so, bound by a shared sense of purpose, this group became partners in founding a remarkable project: the West Side Montessori School.

The ten individuals had two common notions central to their conception of WSMS. First, they were committed to creating an alternative to the area's existing schools that would serve their educational objectives and also benefit the community. Their second central idea was providing their children, and all of the school's future enrollees, with a strong, innovative educational environment. They had read studies on early childhood education by psychologists like Bruno Bettelheim and John Dewey, and they were aware of the early work of Bank Street College in New York. Fortunately, they also knew of the work of Maria Montessori in Italy around the turn of the twentieth century.

Their alternatives—local public, parochial, and private schools—were unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. In their view, the local public schools were crowded and poorly administered; parochial schools run by the Catholic Archdiocese were too regulated and narrow in scope. A few private schools offered preschool programs in uptown Manhattan, but admission was very competitive, and few were co-educational. Then there were the early childhood programs closely associated with primary school programs, but many saw those as long-term commitments that were prohibitively expensive. The few programs that were geared specifically for preschool children were either inconveniently located or put too strong of an emphasis on play and socialization.

Founding a school to suit one's needs was thus an attractive option. For all involved in the founding, it was a chance to create a progressive, co-educational academic environment on the Upper West Side, where nothing like it had existed before.

A class from the 1960s

The Montessori influence had come from more than the founders' reading. In 1962, during a holiday visit to relatives, the Doyles toured a Montessori school in Hudson, Ohio, and came away impressed. They saw in practice what they had learned from the theory developed by Maria Montessori: learning should be a dynamic social process engaging the whole child, an approach that facilitates the child's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Upon Susanna's return to New York, she attended an open house at the just-organized Caedmon School and ran into Bay. Susanna told Bay of her interest in starting a Montessori program on the West Side and asked for her help. They decided to do more research and visited the Whitby School in Greenwich, Connecticut, the first Montessori school in the United States. After their visit, the two women were committed to Montessori as innovative, progressive, and readily adaptable to the diverse needs and lifestyles of families in their neighborhood.

Looking for a teacher, the Doyles were introduced to Tom Hopkins, whose wife, Elizabeth, was Montessori-trained. Susanna and Bay interviewed Elizabeth and quickly realized they had found the right person for the job. The next question was how closely to follow the Montessori model. The founders agreed that the school would be based on the Montessori approach but not bound by it. According to one early report, "the school does not take a doctrinaire attitude toward Montessori ideas; they are conceived, as are those of more recent writers, as a beginning, not as an end, as a guide to meeting needs of modern American children." The founders offered a four-point program describing the school's approach to education:

- Early education is especially important because the nature of intelligence is plastic and changeable, not fixed.
- Growth depends on individual, active learning, which will permit development consistent with each child's unique abilities.

- A classroom integrated by sex, age, race, social class, temperament, and religion contributes to the creation of an accommodating, nonjudgmental learning environment.
- The teacher's role is that of guide, catalyst, and observer, so each child can acquire concentration skills, independent knowledge, and self-respect independently.

The founders were mission-driven, and their awareness of the need for a close, responsive relationship between the school and the community was part of that. It was decided that the school would be administered cooperatively, with parents involved in many operational aspects, while management would be the board of directors' responsibility. Central to everyone's thinking was the idea that WSMS would be run as a "community house" welcoming all segments of the Upper West Side's population. Not only was cultural diversity a founding principle, but economic diversity was as well, and a scholarship policy was established, with a portion of the tuition designed to fund scholarships.

Seeking broader support, a public meeting was held in the spring of 1963 to present the school project to the community. By the end of the crowded session, sixty families had expressed interest in the ten available places. The school was on its way. The board of trustees comprised the founders (the Burkes, Doyles, Huntingtons, Schwarzes, and Wassermans) and the school's sole faculty member, Elizabeth Hopkins. The relationship of the board to the administration of the school was quite close as board members themselves were responsible for the daily operation of the school, from admissions, fundraising, financial aid, and public relations to curriculum, staffing, scheduling, and anything else. No one person was in charge, but by all accounts, Susanna Doyle was the de facto head of the school, and the first office was indeed a home kitchen.

By late summer, the school was affiliated with the American Montessori Society and licensed by New York City's Department of Health. But the school had no home once an arrangement to lease space from the Buddhist Temple on Riverside Drive fell through in late July of 1963. New space was quickly located in the Frederick Douglass Houses on Columbus Avenue at 104th Street. WSMS initially occupied one room on the ground floor with a play area in the back; at morning's end, the Montessori equipment was packed up, and the Children's Aid Society used the space in the afternoon. The school consisted of one session with fifteen students guided by Elizabeth Hopkins and her assistant, Mary Jo Lemmerman. Tuition was set at $500, and an additional bond of $100 was required of each family.

A year later, WSMS moved to the second floor of the Young Israel Temple on West 91st Street. By that time, the school had added an afternoon session necessitating lunch service. By the end of the school year, WSMS was once again on the move, this time north to the Parish House of St. Michael's Church on West 99th Street.

Looking for a more permanent situation, the board continued to examine alternative locations, including the Children's Mansion, the Walden School's building, and even a ten-story apartment building at 104th and Central Park West. The board was bold; they bought the apartment building in 1969, planning to use the first two floors for the school and eventually renting the other eight floors. But because the building was occupied, all the tenants on the first two floors had to be relocated before a certificate of occupancy could be issued. However, the tenants would not move and could be persuaded neither by cash payments nor by other apartments in the building. WSMS was picketed and besieged with news of needed repairs and additional costs. After many months, the building was sold at a loss of $118,000.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1970, Susanna Doyle became both the administrative executive and the educational director. The appointment was in keeping with a school managed in the spirit of a cooperative with a "family-style" approach among its founders. However, in the face of increasing complexity at WSMS, Board President Barry Huntington made it clear that more than volunteer coordination was necessary to handle day-to-day and operational issues and ensure that board policies were carried out: a dedicated professional administrator was needed.

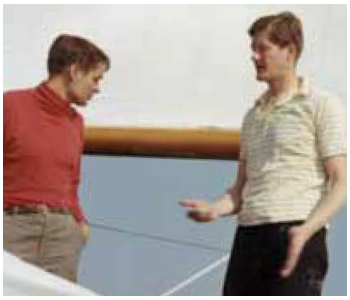
This was a major philosophical shift, reflecting WSMS' growth in 1972 to 215 students and twenty-five teachers. The school, despite a tenuous relationship, was still based at St. Michael's, now occupying two floors in the parish house with an additional two floors at Temple Ansche Chesed on West End Avenue at 100th Street. The school was divided into three nearly autonomous programs: a half-day program for children ages 3 to 5; an all-day program also for children in that same age range, which included a day care unit; and the Primary, an experimental open classroom for children ages 5 to 7. A year earlier, WSMS had become one of the first private institutions to receive public funding for its financial aid program through New York City's Agency for Child Development (ACD). In 1972, 25% of WSMS's families—about 60 students out of 225—were receiving financial assistance from a combination of public and private sources.

As parent and teacher groups within the school assumed increasing authority, sometimes without board approval, tensions developed. Susanna Doyle announced she was stepping down as director. When a search committee was formed to find a successor, the realities of a transition provoked a great deal of introspection. Suddenly the board was faced with new and difficult decisions: Should the school continue in a Montessori direction? Should it be strict Montessori or liberal? Was there a need for new thinking and fresh ideas from someone outside the school, or would they prefer to consider people already in the school? The majority of the board favored an outside person who would "exercise low-key leadership responsive to the opinions of parents, faculty and the community."

John Sherman was chosen to succeed Susanna in the spring of 1972 and lasted less than a year, citing in his resignation a lack of enthusiasm for the Montessori approach. The board

Bay and Joe Wasserman

Marian Lapsley (Schwarz) Cross



Fritz Schwarz and Larry Huntington

Sally Burke

Boker and Susanna Doyle

Olivia and Larry Huntington

tried again, hiring Teri Seidman as director in the spring of 1973. A ten-year veteran of City schools with a reputation for innovating “open classroom” programs, Seidman looked promising but she, too, moved on very quickly.

Frustrated. the Board brought in an outside consultant, Dr. Gene Hittleman, who succinctly summarized the school's director dilemma: “The school is in a state of transition from a family style school to a larger kind of institution... It needs to hire a first-rate educator, and carefully define the role of that administrator.”

In 1975 Penelope Pi-Sunyer, an “inside” person who had been Susanna Doyle's assistant as well as assistant to the director through the brief tenures of Sherman and Seidman, was elevated to acting director. Because of her long involvement as a parent, board member, and assistant to all three directors, her tenure was in part a continuation of the “family style” management of the first ten years of the school. Moreover, unlike Sherman and Seidman, she had strong, positive relations with the board, the administration, the faculty, and the parents. Her first months on the job saw a number of proposals for improving teacher–administration relations; after this short trial period Pi-Sunyer was appointed director, a post she held until 1979, when Marlene Barron succeeded. In 2008, Mimi Basso succeeded Marlene and remains head of school today.

During that period of director turmoil, and no doubt adding another dimension to the board's full agenda, the Calhoun School building at 309 West 92nd Street suddenly became available. After almost a decade of residence in a series of temporary, shared spaces, the board was presented with an ideal solution to WSMS’s most pressing problem. A building committee quickly produced a study showing how “309” could be used. The faculty was consulted and agreed that 309 could be a good solution to the school's needs. The West Side Educational Trust was formed to purchase 309 West 92nd Street for the School and in the fall of 1974, even with the position of director unsettled, some two hundred youngsters and two dozen teachers strode through the front doors. West Side finally had a home of its own that was not only affordable and well suited to its present needs, but one that also provided room for future expansion.

The founders and those who guided the early days of WSMS were bound by a sense of mission and purpose. Not being highly credentialed educators, more often than not, they did things as it occurred to them. They made up the first admissions forms without ever having seen any before—and got it right. As they were not professional educators, they knew little about certification, licensing, equipment, curriculum development, or assembling a staff. But between them, they certified, licensed, equipped, wrote curricula, and assembled and directed a staff. They held conferences, initiated innovative programs for parents and children, raised funds, bought buildings, produced studies, and applied for and received grants. Board meetings were famous for lasting well past midnight; sometimes they continued over entire weekends. Leadership agreed, and they disagreed. In the process they took an idea born at a dinner table and made it a reality so that in 1970, after less than eight years of existence, West Side Montessori School could describe itself as an “integrated, non-sectarian, ungraded, semi-public, community preschool on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.” And today we can say it continues to stand the test of time.

That’s how we began. And now you know why—for children all over the Upper West Side and beyond—WSMS is known as “Where to Begin.”