As you know, every ten years WSMS undergoes a major self-study to be re-accredited by NYSAIS (New York State Association of Independent Schools) and AMS (American Montessori Society). Over the last year, we used this as an opportunity to take a deep look into how WSMS operates, and the faculty, administration, Board and families in the community, both current and former, had a role in that effort. The purpose of this process, above all, is school improvement, and we all (students and their families, faculty and administration) benefit.

It was an honor and privilege to serve as co-chair of the steering committee for West Side Montessori School’s re-accreditation. I have been a member of the faculty of WSMS, as a teacher of both children and adults, since 2009. But the process of self-study reminded me of what makes this school such a unique and generous place, not only for children and their families, but also for faculty and administration. I’m very grateful to work in a community of people so deeply dedicated to their work.

Throughout the process of our self-study, WSMS faculty and administration took thoughtful account of what we do everyday: what works, and what we can do better. It was quite a coordinated team effort! Everyone’s input and efforts throughout this process were invaluable, and it is my hope that within the AMS report they will hear their voices, and the voices of the children and families with whom we partner.

Because we are a Montessori school, NYSAIS permits the educational program piece of the self-study to be prepared according to AMS guidelines. What follows is an excerpt from the report submitted to the American Montessori Society in July of 2016, detailing the work faculty and administration undertook, with the participation of both current and former families.

DEFINING WHO WE ARE: THE EDUCATIONAL NATURE OF THE SCHOOL

Many aspects of the self-study required the participation of the full faculty. Some of this work was conducted during evening faculty meetings, held monthly, where the teachers participated in deeply meaningful reflections on our program offerings.

At our first meeting, teachers examined the learner outcomes identified by the American Montessori Society, and brainstormed indicators that matched each of these outcomes. They recorded their ideas on Post-its, which were then placed on posters and later used for the development of our observation forms and surveys. At another meeting, teachers gathered at tables covered with paper tablecloths, each labeled with one of the essential qualities of a Montessori school. Over the course of a few hours, small groups considered: what are our strengths, and what could we do better? Teachers were offered the opportunity to share their thoughts as they related to the essential qualities of Montessori education: the Montessori Learning Environment, Students’ Learning Activity, Learning Relationships, Spirituality, What the Montessori Teacher Does, and What the Montessori Teacher Is.

Teachers’ responses served as the frame-
work for our Educational Nature of the School section. The faculty reflected appreciation of this element of the process in surveys completed at the conclusion of the self-study: "I think meeting in small groups to talk about strengths and weaknesses of our program is certainly a step towards becoming better at what we do." Echoed another faculty member, "All good programs must have opportunities for constructive criticism to be offered."

Faculty committees gathered on Friday afternoons in the library. With heads bowed over laptops or raised to participate in a brainstorming session, teachers created guidelines for our parent observation groups, located particular articles in Great Beginnings, formulated drafts of surveys, and, later, tallied results and identified meaningful anecdotal information to be included in the report.

Our Head Teacher Professional Development Seminars, held monthly, provided a space to refine the work of the self-study. This subset of experienced faculty examined the compiled lists from the faculty’s discussions of our strengths, areas for growth and plans for improvement. They addressed and reflected upon the standards set forth by the American Montessori Society.

DOING WHAT MONTESSORIANS DO BEST: OBSERVE!

The faculty then deeply immersed ourselves in study of the eight learner outcomes identified by AMS as integral to the best Montessori programs: independence, confidence and competence, autonomy, intrinsic motivation, social responsibility, academic preparation, spiritual awareness, and global citizenship. Are we successful in providing our students with opportunities to develop in these areas? How could this be ascertained? Through thoughtful observation and analysis conducted over the course of the year, teachers gathered photographic and anecdotal evidence for their classrooms, creating illustrative newsletters to be shared with the parent body. Additionally, end-of-year conferences and reports were structured according to the eight learner outcomes, providing us with useful data for every one of our 245 students.

Cross-classroom and cross-level observations by teachers further supported the collaborative approach to which we aspired at the outset of the self-study. Though we always intend to visit the classrooms of our colleagues within the school, too often this opportunity slips away as our school year becomes busy with other tasks and responsibilities. The self-study necessitated that we undertake this important work, and a collegial atmosphere was renewed among faculty. During the period allotted to the teacher observations, it was common to hear peers offering support and praise of one another, or seeking more information about one another’s strategies, approaches, presentations, and even songs. One teacher commented: “It was nice to see that there was evidence for all of the wonderful things that we feel about our school—that you can go into any classroom, and see evidence of it.” Another added: “I enjoy these moments and opportunities [to be observed] because parents get to really see what makes WSMS such a special place and why the children cherish it so much.”

The steering committee also organized a month-long observation period to be conducted in every classroom, at every level, by current and former parents as well as members of the Administration. Thirty-seven parents, including many sitting or former Board members, were invited to spend one hour in a classroom other than their child’s to seek evidence of a particular learner outcome; twenty-six agreed, and several parents volunteered to participate in more than one observation.

Feedback shared on the observation forms and verbally was enthusiastic; parents and administrators delighted in the opportunity to see classrooms at work in a unique way that had not previously been afforded. To quote Iva Mills, parent to two children at WSMS and 2015-16 PA co-president: “Participating in the classroom observations allowed me to observe authentic and spontaneous interactions between children working together with their peers and teachers. I also appreciated seeing how individual children autonomously engaged the works over long periods of time with nominal teacher guidance. I was quite struck by the care children consistently took to maintain the work(s) and the classroom environment.” This sentiment was echoed by Nigel-Ann La Qua Williamson, parent to two children at WSMS: “Besides the fact that it was exciting to observe the children in the classroom for a long period of time, observing a specific learner outcome was very interesting. It really helped how to gauge an observation well by looking for something specific. It was interesting to see what is being learned in the classroom, and also to be aware of the milestones teachers/WSMS is striving to attain. Although the children are all learning at a different pace, the learner outcome that I observed both times were very evident in the classrooms.”

Administrators expressed appreciation for the opportunity to view the work underway in our classrooms. One staff member commented, “I was delighted to spend some time observing. Despite the fact that I have been working in a Montessori school for almost two years, I’ve had little opportunity to see how the philosophy is implemented in the classroom. I was most impressed by the children’s self-sufficiency; whether it be getting their own snack or resolving an issue with a peer, they seemed confident and capable.” Another member of the administrative staff added, “What struck me most was the teachers’ patience with the children and their encouragement toward independent activities.”
CLASSROOM YEAR-END RESPONSES

Below are word clouds generated by parents’ responses to our year-end survey: the first by parents of children in our multi-age classrooms, and the second by parents of children in the Twos classrooms. They reflect the words used most frequently in response to the prompt: *Please choose five adjectives to describe your child’s classroom experience.*

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SURVEYING OUR CONSTITUENTS

As the end of the school year approached, the committee created a survey for teachers to assess the development of learner outcomes throughout the year, in both multi-age and Twos classrooms. This survey was completed for each child, and used as a framework to plan teacher-led conferences. We attained 100% participation by teachers on this survey.

At the start of each end-of-year conference, parents were reminded that the school was engaged in a process of self-study, and that conferences were organized with attention to the AMS eight learner outcomes. Many parents confirmed that they found it useful to hear their child’s experiences highlighted in this manner. In contrast to past formats for this important summation of the child’s year, this approach provided a more holistic picture of each child’s development, rather than simply sharing a list of mastered lessons.

At the conclusion of each end-of-year conference, teachers advised parents that they would be asked to submit a survey comparable to the one completed by the teachers. This allowed us to see whether teachers’ perceptions of learner outcomes matched the perception of parents. We attained 70% participation from parents of children in multi-age classrooms, and 80% participation from parents in the Twos program.

The committee also created a version of the learner outcome survey to be completed by representatives from ongoing schools who have welcomed West Side Montessori School alumni. Ten schools were polled; 5 responded. Heads of School and/or Admissions Directors were asked to comment on 16 indicators (two for each learner outcome), and to provide additional information as needed. They were also asked to describe a “typical” West Side Montessori School graduate with five adjectives. Below is a selection of their affirming replies:

- curious, cooperative, mature, kind, social
- collaborative, respectful, engaged, self-assured, community-minded
- curious, capable, independent, kind, generous

This self-study, which involved our faculty and administration, current and former parents, Board members, and even the children themselves, has clarified our understanding of our goals for children as a leading Montessori school and unified our approach to meeting these goals. The outcomes of the study informed our latest strategic plan, detailed further in this magazine, and provided a plan for school-wide goal setting. Every member of our faculty will have a hand in meeting these new goals. The hard work completed thus far has been in service of the children in our care, and, as we make meaningful changes in response to the self-study, of the children who will join us in the coming years.