

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN MONTESSORI SOCIETY

MontessoriLife

SUMMER 2018 VOL.30 NO.2



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THE PLANES OF DEVELOPMENT

The journey of Silver Oak High School
Page 36

Two sophomores
collaborating with
a freshman in their
mixed-age Digital
Media Arts class





SILVER OAK HIGH SCHOOL:
THE
BIRTH
AND
EVOLUTION
OF A MONTESSORI SECONDARY PROGRAM

By Marley Wertheimer, MEd

The life span of Silver Oak High School, a public charter Montessori Secondary program located in Hayward, California, can be likened to Montessori's planes of development, which span the years from birth to age 24. However, while a human has the luxury of passing through decades to reach maturity, an institution must have a dramatically abbreviated maturation process in order to survive. If a new school, especially a charter, is not running efficiently and at full enrollment within 4 to 5 years, renewing the charter or any affiliations/accreditations may be difficult, placing much pressure on the administration, stakeholders, and community at large.

Silver Oak High School opened its doors in 2013. Space was tight at first; in fact, several classrooms occupied a section of the campus previously used as boys' locker rooms. The founding staff was made up of 6 full-time faculty members, only 3 of whom had previous Montessori experience. Sixty ninth- and tenth-grade adolescents comprised the first student body; all were ready to blaze a trail to an alternative public high school that could be a model for future Montessori high schools.

Montessori educational practice pays special attention to the evolving needs of the individual within each plane of development. Maria Montessori herself said, "Successive levels of education must correspond to the

Starting a new school evokes many of the same emotions experienced by parents-to-be on the brink of welcoming an infant.

successive personalities of the child" (1976, p. 1). Similarly, Silver Oak's founders used strategic thought and careful planning to tailor the school to the evolving needs of the community. They created learning cycles and made critical decisions that would enhance each individual student's strengths, as well as support the metamorphoses of the school. Although the planes of development Silver Oak has experienced do not directly mirror the developmental planes described by Montessori, dividing the school's journey into four "planes" of development provides a structure to which Montessorians can relate. This article will discuss the school's triumphs as well as its growing pains as it passed from one stage to the next. It will also include testimonies from founding faculty members, parents, and students; they illustrate Silver Oak's colorful journey from then to now.

THE SCHOOL'S FIRST PLANE: BIRTH

Starting a new school evokes many of the same emotions experienced by parents-to-be on the brink of welcoming an infant: excitement, hope, and all-consuming anticipation.

The prospect of making Montessori education available tuition-free to the Hayward community was a driving factor in opening a school like Silver Oak. Founding parent Murielle Bichard explains, "The goal was to provide alternative learning that would benefit students from all backgrounds, not just the families who could afford a private education."

The "one-size-fits-all" approach of traditional education was not working for Bichard's son, and she noticed a number of other capable students experiencing similar struggles in conventional classrooms. Providing free Montessori education in her local community seemed a reasonable response to the lack of affordable, alternative options in Hayward. "I believe all students can learn, including the ones struggling and who are far behind in their knowledge acquisition, if you adapt the way of teaching to their interests," she says.

Founding faculty member and current academic dean Yanira Ledezma agrees. Ledezma is 100% "Made in Hayward," as the local saying goes, because she is a graduate of Hayward Unified School District schools and California State University, East Bay, located just up the street from Silver Oak's current campus. She brought to Silver Oak an extensive knowledge of college preparation, student counseling, and an invaluable willingness to share critical firsthand knowledge of Hayward's intimate community. She explains,

I knew that Hayward would greatly benefit from a Montessori program at the high school level, but the challenge was being able to demonstrate to families

that our school vision and mission is what their student needed. It can be difficult to trust the growth process and place your child in a school that is just starting and does not have roots or a reputation yet.

The start-up endeavor was also an intimidating one. As digital media arts teacher Dyane Goldman recalls, *I never anticipated some of the challenges I faced starting a school. It was truly a start-up in every sense of the word, which entailed not only creating an art program from the ground up, but also building a school, emulating a methodology, and establishing a community. And this seemingly impossible task was in the hands of just 6 employees.*

Fortunately, the school had experience to draw on: Its founders chose Elaine Blasi as head of school, in part due to her experience starting new schools. In turn, Blasi selected her staff carefully and purposefully. Despite the demands and unceasing attention required by a school in its infancy, Silver Oak has proudly retained a number of its founding faculty members. One is current dean of students Cesar Martinez, who began at Silver Oak as a math instructor and brought with him a strong Montessori background. He recalls the school's first days: "We were starting a new school culture with constant changes in rules and policies while figuring out what worked best as we got to know our community." The theme of "following the child" was put in practice from day one, and, to stay true to it, the school experienced relentless shifts in procedures and plans as faculty and administration worked to meet the needs of the diverse and expanding community. Some of the changes included restructuring the school's advisory system, transforming personal reflection routines for the student body, creating intersession scheduling, and increasing the frequency of parent education offerings and family conferences.

The constant changes in the school's first year, coupled with long hours, were exhausting for the founding faculty members. However, it was imperative that they keep the initial reasons and motivations for starting the school at the forefront of their minds. Blasi took it upon herself to regularly emphasize the importance of the school's Montessori vision, reiterating it at weekly or more-frequent meetings, and led on-the-spot trainings to familiarize the faculty with Montessori methods, such as the prepared environment within classrooms, consistency in the number of assignment and assessment choices available on the study guides, and daily community meetings.

Murielle Bichard, in addition to being a founding parent, is also treasurer of the school's board. She played a critical role in the successful launch of Silver Oak (and

has continued to be an integral part of the school community). She shares more of her incentives for founding the school:

Students do not all learn the same way and at the same pace, which is why I personally was so enthusiastic discovering Montessori education, as it is based on individualized learning.... In addition to academics, I [appreciate the emphasis on] personal growth, motivating students to develop lifelong skills, such as critical thinking, initiative and leadership, in order to succeed in life and to pursue their own passions.

The first advertising slogan used to promote Silver Oak was “A Different School... Right Here in Hayward!” Ebony Walker wholeheartedly agrees with that message. A member of the first class to complete a full 4-year high school cycle, she transferred to Silver Oak from a traditional public high school the second week of her freshman year (and the school’s first year). Now a university sophomore, Ebony has maintained watchful eyes on Silver Oak’s journey, keenly observing and critiquing both the growth spurts and growing pains. She shares some of her first impressions: “Silver Oak was very different from how I imagined a regular high school [would be]. It was calm, and the students were working together in groups. It felt more like a library than a school.”

THE SCHOOL’S SECOND PLANE: FINDING OUR FOOTING

Silver Oak’s second plane was a time for expansion of previous goals and objectives; new possibilities presented themselves as the school community gained knowledge. In 2014, Silver Oak moved from its original location (where it had shared a small portion of the former Sunset High School campus with two other schools) to a larger, more permanent campus, initiated an athletics program, and added an eleventh-grade curriculum; not-yet-credentialed staff members also began their Montessori Secondary training through Houston Montessori Center (HMC).

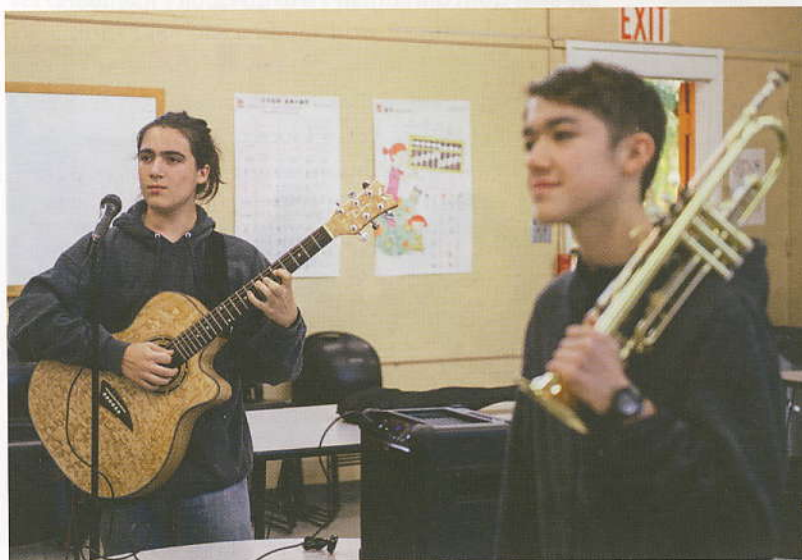
“You cannot open a Montessori school if you do not have Montessori teachers,” Blasi states firmly. She did, however, grasp how unrealistic it would be to expect to hire a full staff of teachers with Montessori credentials, let alone the Secondary I–II credential, especially as no West Coast branch of HMC existed. “So, you budget the money to put the teachers through a credentialing program that next summer.”

Another essential element that helped establish Silver Oak was that Blasi (who has a Secondary I–II credential) devoted 50% of her time to leading her own academic classroom as the freshman and sophomore English teacher. She explains:

I truly believe the key to success is for the founding head to teach half the day and administrate the other half-day, to actually have a core classroom.... In that way, I was a member of the teaching team as a teaching colleague.

The chance to collaborate with the head of school was a valuable opportunity for Silver Oak faculty members, many of whom were new to Montessori. To be able to view Blasi’s authentic Montessori classroom—with an

Sophomore (trumpet) and junior (custom guitar) musicians, jamming during Silver Oak’s after-school music program



experienced Montessori Secondary teacher modeling a student-centered learning environment, spiraling lessons, and facilitating Socratic seminars—gave teachers an additional building block of support.

Working at Silver Oak has had the unexpected side effect of converting several former “traditional” educators into Montessori teachers. Digital media arts teacher Goldman, for example, remembers getting her job offer: “The most interesting aspect of the interview process was that the head of school hired me because she said I was a natural Montessorian.” This intrigued Goldman, as she had never before been exposed to the Montessori Method. “I knew next to nothing about Montessori, and so I did some research and was astonished by how closely the methodology aligned with my own practice and personal philosophy.”

The delight in discovering Montessori education at the Secondary level is an ongoing theme for both the Silver Oak student body and their teachers, truly creating a community of like-minded, curious individuals.

THE SCHOOL’S THIRD PLANE: FORGING AN IDENTITY

In Silver Oak’s third plane, its true identity began to emerge. It was also a time for the school’s faculty and staff to develop their individuality by applying their foundational skills as well as undergoing personal

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Students use technology to supplement learning during a freshman/sophomore Multicultural Literature class.

reflection. Each faculty and staff member is dedicated to improving the experiences and learning outcomes of the students; having time to reflect on past semesters and collaborate with the growing professional learning community allows individuals to work together as a stronger team. As a result, they can better serve their students and community. Another notable area of growth during this stage of development was the expansion of the staff from fewer than 10 to 20 faculty members.



There are many opportunities for students at Silver Oak to guide their own education, both inside and outside the classroom. Because Silver Oak is so new, students are encouraged to establish any type of clubs they desire. For example, students have spearheaded the Pre-Med Club, the Student Committee, and the Anime Club. There are also a number of student-led unions, such as the Black Student Union, Muslim Student Union, and the Asian Student Association. These student groups organize school fundraisers, contribute traditional dishes and performances to annual cultural events, such as the December La Posada celebration and the spring Multicultural Festival, and lead community service projects, like cleanups of the Hayward Regional Shoreline.

Another arena of student education outside of classroom work is the school's senior internship program. It serves two purposes: First, it allows students the opportunity to give back to the local Bay Area community, and second, it provides seniors with career experiences in areas that fit their interests. Students apply the foundational principles and skills emphasized by Silver Oak while engaging with their local community. Senior Ramit Singh discusses his internship teaching a coding class to adults at a local public library: "I have learned what the responsibilities of holding a real job feel like. I've also gained confidence in communicating with adults and senior citizens, especially in how to share my knowledge with them." Other exciting internships have included researching at NASA in Mountain View, crafting handmade organic and free-trade chocolates in Berkeley, archiving historical artifacts at the Hayward Area Historical Society, and leading a social justice class at a middle school in the Oakland Hills.

Just as there is space for students to mature within the high school cycle, there are also opportunities for faculty members to pursue both personal interests and professional goals. The school's budget includes professional development stipends, allowing faculty members to pursue graduate degrees as well as add credentials and certifications. Faculty are also encouraged to innovate at school: For example, psychology and senior thesis teacher Jordan Boyd implemented an after-school music program that allows him to share his creativity and passion for art and performance with students. There is the flexibility for teachers or counselors to transition into administrative roles. For example, dean of students Cesar Martinez began as a mathematics teacher; he has been at Silver Oak for 5 years, a longer tenure than he served at any other school. Yanira Ledezma began in Silver Oak's first year as a part-time counselor and now works as academic

Dean of students Martinez, who is now Montessori-credentialed at the Upper Elementary and Secondary I–II levels, says that if he could revisit Silver Oak's early days, he would have taken a slightly different approach at times.

I would have spent more time working on the Montessori basics, like Grace and Courtesy. We were so eager to get started and focused on academics that we didn't spend enough time introducing the "Montessori way of life" to these students, many of whom had never entered a Montessori classroom before.

When asked to reflect on her time at Silver Oak, academic dean Ledezma muses that the student-centered approach to learning has been one of the most challenging Montessori principles to adjust to. "I have begun to accept that students will make mistakes and that we, the adults, should only guide them when they need our help." She goes on to explain a way in which Silver Oak is different from other area high schools:

The adolescent-centered environment has provided a perspective in learning and growth like no other. Allowing our students to teach us and work collaboratively through challenges has been the best part for me, especially when all I had experience with before was a "teacher-centered" environment of learning.

There are many opportunities for students at Silver Oak to guide their own education, both inside and outside the classroom.

dean and college counselor. I began as a social studies teacher and now fill the role of the school's instructional coach and development director.

"Silver Oak is truly a team!" boasts Blasi. Rightfully so: Everyone on staff has a voice in developing curriculum and developing budgetary policy, as well as writing the family handbook. Blasi goes on:

Our faculty takes ownership of our school. It is not a hierarchy; it is not a top-down institution. We pride ourselves on how we support one another in finding areas of professional growth here at Silver Oak, rather than losing [faculty] and having them seek those opportunities elsewhere.

THE SCHOOL'S FOURTH PLANE: MATURITY

The last plane of development is reserved for stability, productivity, and further sharpening of the specialist mind, with the intent of pursuing endeavors that positively impact the community and the world beyond. The important and engrossing work of the previous planes all contribute to the creation of a self-sufficient "adult," which is where Silver Oak finds itself today.

"It takes four years to normalize a new Montessori high school," explains Blasi, "because you must have your founding students, who began in ninth grade, go through the full 4-year Montessori cycle." In June 2016, the first ninth-grade class, which entered the Silver Oak High School Montessori program in its earliest, arguably darkest days, on the original Sunset campus, was promoted. The ceremony brought tears to the eyes of many and felt especially momentous for the founding faculty members.

Alumna Ebony Walker describes how her time at Silver Oak positively affected her: "Silver Oak prepared me a lot for college," she says, and explains that compared to her university classmates, she has advanced readiness for productive group work/collaboration and presentation skills. "[I learned how] to communicate with my peers and organize material, so an audience can understand it while I'm presenting." Ebony, who benefited from the foundational skills she gained at Silver Oak, is a true testament to the school's success. Many of Silver Oak's diverse graduates agree. They regularly return to campus to express their gratitude for the focused preparation they experienced, the inspirational mentors with whom they developed relationships, and the special sense of community for which they feel nostalgic.

Despite victories both large and small, Silver Oak continues to look to the future. In the words of Maria Montessori (1976, p. 92),

Considering that their study will never cease, why should they take so much trouble to obtain in the shortest

possible time the advantages that the degree affords them, when they are destined, if they wish to keep up with the ever-rising level of efficiency, to pursue the new things that are continuously being elaborated in the field of their profession?

With the goal of continuous improvement and increased efficiency in mind, Silver Oak faculty and staff are constantly working to grow in order to better serve the deserving student community. Regular conversations take place about how to spread the word about the wonderful opportunities available to Silver Oak students. The faculty and staff want to expand inter-session activities, add more STEAM electives, further develop the special education services provided, and, sooner rather than later, relocate to a larger campus to feed the growing demand for more classrooms, a theater, athletic facilities, and meeting spaces.

After 5 years in operation, Silver Oak has finally reached a place of established stability. Faculty, students, and families alike are noticing the unique culture that sets it apart from other educational options. "It is very clear that students here are thriving in this environment," Goldman says with a smile. "They feel it and they want to share it."



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Junior girls stay focused during precalculus.