



# **First State Montessori Academy**

2015-2016

Annual Report

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## **Charter School Program**

**Provide a Synopsis of the School's Mission and Educational Program, Including Key Components of the Education Model and Any Unique or Innovative Features of the School**

**Discuss Key Accomplishments of the Charter School Program over the 2015-16 School Year**

First State Montessori Academy (FSMA) is the culmination of the efforts of many determined people who have seen firsthand the power of a Montessori education. As Delaware's first Montessori charter school, FSMA is one of the most innovative educational programs, and at the same time, one of the most well researched approaches to teaching and learning. As one may see, it is the people and their creativity that run this school so efficiently, taking our charter into a reality beyond the original expectations. Each one of our families has a similarly vibrant story to tell about their coming to and dedication for First State Montessori Academy. The board and staff that run this school efficiently have taken our original charter into a reality beyond the original expectations. In a nutshell, we have dug our roots deep, and will continue to spread our branches wide.

FSMA opened its doors in 2014 but is rooted in over 100 years of research and reflection about strong educational models. Since the early 1900s, Maria Montessori ministered a child-led, teacher-guided pedagogy, espousing the connection of mind and body in joyful learning. At FSMA, we strive every day to carry forth the incredible work developed by this educational leader. As Delaware's first public Montessori charter, our school penned the charter in dedication to providing academic and social outcomes that will continue to benefit the student's future and development of a lifelong love of learning.

FSMA believes that our impact goes far beyond our students and the surrounding districts. As a school in downtown Wilmington, we are making a positive impact in two very strong ways on the city. First, we are making a direct impact on many children who live in the city limits as 25% of our children come from zip codes in Wilmington. The other children that we are bringing in from areas surrounding the city are allowing us to make a positive contribution to downtown Wilmington. We see our role in shining a spotlight on something positive happening in the city as an important way we are helping to rebuild the perception of our city. FSMA has hosted events in the street and invited our local community, plus, has created service learning projects for our students that directly impact the city. From donating over 1000 lbs. of food to the Food Bank during the Stuff the Bus campaign, to planting flower bulbs in Rodney Square, our children are learning more about their role as contributing members of the local community. FSMA also utilizes many local businesses for field trips and we are bringing families into the city to utilize these services as well. FSMA is making an extremely positive impact on our city and as we have grown, the impact is even greater.

Organizationally, we are functioning extremely well – meeting all legal requirements, attending to DOE deadlines, creating necessary procedures and policies, and our board has shown strong responsibility and commitment to the students and families who are a part of the FSMA Family. Financially, FSMA has a strong outlook which includes a clean audit of the 2015-2016 school year and money budgeted to cover all operational needs and potential surprises. Additionally, our budget includes money set aside to cover all potential liabilities for things like summer pay for teachers and facilities.

Our original charter application was approved for a Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade configuration. FSMA has now been given approval for a major modification to increase our enrollment and eventually move to a Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade configuration. This change also included adding an additional neighboring facility. The enrollment increase have begun in the current school year, FSMA has added over 100 new students and will add another 200+ over the upcoming years.

Staffing highlights are both the quantity and quality of personnel that choose to work at FSMA. In the 2015-2016 school year, we had 26 classroom teachers, with two in each classroom; four specialist teachers to offer a well-rounded elementary curricula; three full-time special education teachers; two lead administrators with a Principal's Certificate and Montessori education, respectively; two part-time office staff; and one full-time facilities manager. Every staff member was selected with great care and is a true asset to our school. From the previous school year, there were very few teachers who chose to leave FSMA and the returning staff started the year with a year of Montessori charter school experience under their belt. They were able to jump right in and get started and any new staff were quickly brought up to speed as we recognize that what we ask of our teachers is truly unique and must be cultivated carefully.

Throughout the year, many strategic events and activities occurred to build community, educate our families and impact student learning. Our PTO where everyone is a member, made strident efforts in fundraising, and raised money to send a cohort of teachers and administrators to the American Montessori Conference in Chicago. Teachers planned trips to visit local government facilities invited notable officials such as Congressman John Carney to speak with our students, walked students to

Wilmington's Grand Opera House for dance classes, built floats at Thanksgiving and filled them with donations, weekly trips to the Wilmington Library, and other in-school activities are just a few additional milestones of our students' passion and curiosity that make FSMA a unique and special place.

The positive reputation that has been created was due to very purposeful messaging about the amazing things that happen at FSMA every day. A weekly newsletter highlights classroom activities and almost daily Facebook posts (to our over 1000 friends), share moments from the classroom. Teachers have been trained in how to effectively communicate with current families who in turn spread the message about the power of FSMA. As we entered the application period for our third year, we had over 400 children on our waiting list. We are hopeful that the many powerful things that are happening at FSMA can be expanded to many other schools in Delaware and as we continue to build the number of people who know about our school, our reach naturally expands. There are many components that make FSMA a choice for families that could be implemented in other schools and we hope to be active contributors to the changing landscape of education in Delaware.

#### Key Components of our Educational Model:

##### **Implementation of an authentic Montessori Curriculum**

- All classrooms have at least one certified Montessori teacher
- Montessori materials and curriculum utilized in all classrooms
- Components of a Montessori Approach included multi-age classrooms, extended work periods, and personalized learning

### **Incorporation of Responsive Classroom Principles**

- All teachers, specialists and leadership staff were trained in Responsive Classroom
- All teachers received coaching and feedback throughout the year on their implementation of Responsive Classroom Approach from a national consultant
- Resources to support implementation were provided for all classrooms

### **Common Core State Standards**

- Common Core Guiding Team formed and participated in professional development provided by the Delaware Department of Education
- PLC's utilized as time for connecting Montessori to CCSS
- Standards based report previously created by teachers were reviewed and improved

### Innovative or Unique Features of the School:

**Strong alignment of Montessori curriculum with Common Core State Standards** - This required an intense amount of focus and perseverance to blend the two models, however it is possible because they are rooted in many similar beliefs about how children learn. FSMA is the only public school in Delaware devoted and committed to offering this type of education.

**Multi-age classrooms (K/1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>)** - At FSMA, we teach children at the academic level they are ready for. We know that each child learns at his/her own pace and will be ready for any given lesson in his/her own time, not on the teacher's schedule of lessons. In a mixed-

age class, children can always find peers who are working at their current level. Children normally stay in the same class for two years. With half of the class returning each year, the classroom culture tends to remain quite stable. Also, working in one class for two years allows students to develop a strong sense of community with their classmates and teachers.

**Volunteerism and Spirit of Giving as a core belief** - “Giving back” is a recurring theme of our work with the students. Our children have donated more than 300 pairs of shoes to Mexico, collected warm items for local shelters, and planted crocus bulbs in Rodney Square to beautify our city. Not only do our classrooms focus on this, our families give back in many ways to impact the operations of the school. Volunteers run our entire food service program, do all of our landscaping, operate a staff work room to prepare materials for teachers, and much more. These examples are not only huge cost savers to our school, but also incredible models for our students about the importance of giving back and volunteerism.

**Key Accomplishments:**

- Stronger alignment of CCSS and Montessori – after our first year, our teachers now had more experience and stronger implementation
- Growth of special area classroom programs. A highlight included adjusting the schedule so that all K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade students went in small groups to art and technology so they could receive a more intensive and personalized program

- Formation of a Middle School Committee dedicated to creating a unique program specifically designed to bring Montessori to our adolescence.
- After receiving a major modification to increase the number of students we could serve, we received more applications than spaces and were forced to go into a lottery at all grade levels.
- All DPAS requirements were completed by the administration and all staff met satisfactory requirements of teacher evaluation program.
- FSMA's governing board participated in board training and has a strong presence in all parts of the school. This year they even combined their board meetings with other main groups of the school so that all of the "branches" of the school could meet on the same night.
- FSMA formed relationships with all of its contractors (transportation, food service, cleaning, etc.) that positively impacted the quality of service and continues to build on this so they are a part of our community.
- FSMA utilized local resources for our students. This includes the Wilmington Public Library, The Queen Theatre, The Grand and Baby Grand, the DuPont Theatre, Rodney Square, St. Joseph's Church, Market Street Church, and more. These relationships have provided many cultural experiences and learning opportunities and activities for our students.

## Performance Reflection

### What are the successful academic practices at FSMA that other schools can replicate?

FSMA is a unique school and has worked diligently to ensure that our Montessori approach is only impacted positively by other statewide initiatives such as CCSS, state testing and more. With each requirement, FSMA carefully analyzes how to implement without sacrificing any of our Montessori roots and without impacting student experience. For example, FSMA took great care in determining a testing schedule that ensured no child tested for more than an hour a day, and that teachers did not add any stress around test results. We were careful to think of our students and create a low anxiety evoking testing environment. This is just one example of many of how FSMA is careful to implement state requirements with integrity but in a way that we believe matches the development needs of our students. A table showing FSMA's testing results and a brief analysis are below:

#### **Math - % of Students Proficient on SBAC**

	2014-2015	2015-2016
Grade 3	42	52
Grade 4	35	29
Grade 5	52	22
Grade 6	31	50

#### **ELA/Literacy - % of Students Proficient on SBAC**

	2014-2015	2015-2016
Grade 3	62	54
Grade 4	51	51
Grade 5	59	54
Grade 6	54	60

#### Successes:

- When looking at the same grade band over time (grade 3 in 2014-2015 becomes grade 4 in 2015-2016), 2 of the 3 ELA cohorts, went up.
- In ELA, all of our students in grades 3,4,5, and 6 were above the state average of 49.7%
- When our math scores are considered as a whole, our school average is 39.3% which is higher than the state average of 35.1%

#### Areas for growth:

- Grades 4 and 5 showed a significant dip in scores in math / inconsistent performance across grade levels in math specifically
- Continue alignment of CCSS and Montessori in a way that is transparent for students and allows them to use their background knowledge depending on the type of mathematical foundation they have from previous schooling.

FSMA believes that a social and academic curriculum go hand in hand. We believe that in order for children to be ready to learn, they must have their social and emotional needs met. Every classroom utilizes a plethora of practices to ensure that children are learning both social and emotional skills. Many of these practices can be utilized by any classroom teacher and have had very positive effects on the classroom community and culture of the school. Some of the social curriculum features include:

**Daily Morning Meeting** – each classroom begins the day with a whole group meeting where children are greeted, share about themselves, and participate in group activities rooted in academic skills. Each child is taught oral communication skills and practices them daily in this activity.

**Peace Tables** – Each classroom has a designated “Peace Table” where children are supported in mediation, reparation and problem-solving. By teaching children to quickly

resolve their differences, they are able to refocus on academic tasks more quickly. This lifelong skill is having positive effects on all of our children.

In addition, FSMA utilizes many strong academic practices that could positively impact any classroom. Some of these include:

**Individual Work Plans** – Each child is provided a work plan that includes each academic area and has lessons or tasks specifically chosen based on the competency level of the child. These work plans are a guide for independent work periods and allow each child to maximize the time spent on learning and lessons that are at the optimal level.

**Small group and individual lessons** – In every classroom, all ELA and Math lessons are taught in a small group or individual basis based on the level of the student. These lessons are rooted in the Montessori curriculum and teachers carefully scaffold skills so that children can master necessary skills and move forward.

**Reading Instruction based on The Daily Five** – All teachers did a book study of *The Daily Five* and have incorporated the components of this approach. One of the biggest impacts has been a more strategic approach to sustained silent reading/independent reading time.

**What are the successful organization practices at FSMA that other schools can replicate?**

FSMA met all of the operational requirements in the organizational section of our Performance Framework but has many plans to go above and beyond this. As an organization, we have focused on three areas that we feel make a direct impact and could be replicated by other schools.

1. Continue to meet all regulatory requirements and create streamlined processes for completion
2. Create a clear distribution of tasks and increase the training for related personnel in these areas
3. Continue clear communication with all stakeholders – students, staff, families, board members, community members

**FSMA has been committed to meeting all regulatory requirements and creating streamlined processes for completion.** FSMA is focused on creating and adhering to local, state and federal timelines. Relying on our notes from the 2014-2015 school year, we compiled an overlapping calendar that incorporates all of the due dates we must adhere to. Additionally, we will identify who is responsible for each task to prevent overlap. The Charter School Office was especially helpful with this as they created a Compliance Calendar that was also used to ensure we were meeting all deadlines.

**FSMA developed a clear distribution of tasks and increase the training for related personnel in these areas.** In our first year, we learned a lot about what certain tasks would require of us, would look like upon completion, and would require a specific staff member to focus on. We kept notes on certain responsibilities and quite often found ourselves saying, “When we do this next year...” Whether it be refining a component or reassign the task to a different person, there was a natural reflection that took place. We utilized these notes in our second year and continued to strengthen our operations.

One of the areas we focused on in the 2015-2016 school year was Response to Intervention. We recognized that this was a non-negotiable area that we had to make sure every criteria and formality were met and done correctly. Our Education Director, Liz Madden, oversaw the program and participated in many training sessions led by the state of Delaware. Developing a Response to

Intervention Program from scratch can be an arduous task but we feel as though we have done this successfully.

**FSMA built on the current communication structures with all stakeholders – students, staff, families, board members, and the community to ensure that everyone is educated and informed about what is happening in our school.** Our main goal is to make sure current families had the information they needed about the operations of the school. Last year, as we applied for a major modification, we realized a need to be extremely informative, transparent and strategic in our communication. We increased the amount of online communications, held “Coffee and Conversation” events to share information, shared our application electronically, and created a team to spearhead the creation of our middle school.

The FSMA Board is extremely active and involved. They are present at events, volunteered often, and helped spread the word about what was happening in the school. As we continue to share the great things that are happening at FSMA, the Board will be an integral part. We will expand our circle, share in new communities, and build opportunities for people to see what is happening at FSMA, and potentially apply some of the strategies to other classrooms or schools. An involved board is critical to the operations of a successful school.

### **What are the successful financial practices at FSMA that other schools can replicate?**

First State Montessori has managed its finances and achieved a Meets Standard in all rated categories in its first two years of operations. This has been accomplished through strong administrative leadership,

an involved Board Finance Committee, an experienced and knowledgeable Citizens' Budget Oversight Committee and the use of an outside financial consultant.

The Head of School is the leader for the development of the budget, purchasing and monitoring of the school's cash position and budget. There is transparency in reporting and the Board and CBOC have access to all financial information. Collaboration amongst all parties has been a key component in contributing to the financial stability of the school. Decisions are made thoughtfully and with inclusion of all parties.

In terms of reporting and audits, the monthly financial report includes a month by month cash flow analysis to monitor all facets of the financial transactions, budget and cash position of the school. In addition, the annual audited financial statements have been completed timely and without any findings or recommendations.

Some of the practices utilized by FSMA that have contributed to this strong financial picture include:

**We heavily researched anticipated costs** and created a budget that ended up being very close to our actual revenue and expenses. Because of this, we could prioritize and budget accurately. As a school, we have been extremely strategic in our spending. We have utilized the advice and feedback from our DOE representative and Innovative Schools consultant as well as reached out to other charter schools for information. We have built a collaborative relationship with these "thought partners," and are constantly seeking new information and training from those who have worked with charter schools.

**Our administration knows the budget inside and out.** Our Head of School understands everything from coding to processing and has taken the time to learn each step of the process for all budget related items. As a building leader, she is engaged and involved in budget development and monitoring. She

uses historical data to make budgeting decisions, is constantly seeking grants and forming relationships with funders, and is extremely conservative when it comes to spending on anything that does not impact the classroom or students.

**Developing a community that donates and volunteers services** that are not directly related to student learning so that all of our funding can go directly into classrooms has allowed us to budget creatively. For example, our entire food service distribution system is run by parent and grandparent volunteers, all printing and marketing needs were covered by a parent with access to the necessary printers, all of our landscaping needs have been donated by a parent, many office supplies have been given to us by local companies, and almost all of our paper was donated based on a relationship with our vendor. There are many more examples of the generosity of our community that have allowed us to focus on the classrooms, and it is important to note that these things did not just happen but instead, relationships were formed and a culture of giving has been created.

**Our Citizens Budget Oversight Committee/Finance Committee has made a tremendous impact on the financial status of the school.** Our chair has previously sat on other charter school CBOC's and the other members bring a background in finance and business. We also have staff members and parents who sit on this committee. They have learned the ins and outs of charter school finance, have participated in state training, have sought resources to address questions, have recreated our Financial Policies and Procedures Manual, and have been highly engaged in the budget process. This group has been an incredible asset to the school and continues to add to our strong financial performance.

