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## Elm City Montessori: A Public Montessori Option for New Haven

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### Abstract:

“Something that’s unique about us, and very much because of how we were founded, is that we’re really rooted in New Haven,” Eliza Halsey tells me in her office. She’s the Executive Director of ECMS (Elm City Montessori School) and a lifetime New Haven resident herself. In 2013, frustrated by the lack of high quality early education options in the city, Halsey and a group of parents decided to submit an application to form a local charter school. Their plan, a Montessori school serving a racially diverse group of children from age 3 through 8th grade, gained approval from both the local and state boards of education. In the fall of 2014, the school opened its doors, admitting a fraction of the 500 children who applied for seats. The parents and community members who came together to create ECMS had one goal in mind: to create a high-quality public early education option utilizing the Montessori method they had observed in Hartford. But creating a school is no easy process.

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Education Studies  
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At the corner of Quinnipiac Avenue and Ferry Street, steps from the Quinnipiac River, sits a nondescript red brick building. There's a makeshift parking lot just north of the building, and a small car repair shop across the street. It's only around two miles from the Yale University campus, but the neighborhood couldn't feel more different. There appear to be a number of industrial buildings, most of which are unidentifiable from the exterior. Small houses are spread out on the surrounding blocks and the streets are in desperate need of re-paving. A casual passerby might not even notice they were walking by Elm City Montessori School, perhaps the most innovative center for early teaching and learning in the city.

“Something that's unique about us, and very much because of how we were founded, is that we're really rooted in New Haven,” Eliza Halsey tells me in her office. She's the Executive Director of ECMS and a lifetime New Haven resident herself. In 2013, frustrated by the lack of high quality early education options in the city, Halsey and a group of parents decided to submit an application to form a local charter school.<sup>1</sup> Their plan, a Montessori school serving a racially diverse group of children from age 3 through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, gained approval from both the local and state boards of education. In the fall of 2014, the school opened its doors, admitting a fraction of the 500 children who applied for seats. There are currently four primary classrooms, which serve children ages 3 to 6, and one elementary classroom, which serves children ages 6 to 9.<sup>2</sup> The school is set to expand each year, eventually serving student up through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

The outside of the school building may leave some to the imagination, but when you step inside, everything changes. The walls are covered with notices and decorations. Miniature

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<sup>1</sup> Although charter schools have become increasingly popular over the last decade, for many the distinction between a charter school and a traditional public school or private school is unclear. Charter schools are public schools, funded with public dollars, but are independently operated. Some think of it as a type of public-private partnership. Depending on the school, they may receive private funding in addition to public funding. Some charter schools belong to larger networks of schools, others operate as stand-alone schools. The school or school network is led by a board, which operates as a small-scale board of education. Parents have the option to choose to send their children to

<sup>2</sup> “Enrollment,” Elm City Montessori School, accessed March 17, 2016, [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

exhibits on African-American history month sat in the lobby during the month of February. The front office doesn't have a door, so the school secretary openly faces the lobby. A small gate, not much higher than the average adult's knees, separates the lobby from a hallway of primary classrooms. Cubbies line the walls of the hallway, stuffed to the brim with winter coats, boots, and tiny backpacks. Each classroom door prominently displays the classroom mascot. Though the doors are closed, the voices and laughter of small children echo through the hallway.

Stepping into a classroom feels like stumbling into a miniature house, provoking an Alice in Wonderland sensation. Everything, from the chairs, to the tables, to the sink is small-child sized. Toys and books are in abundance, but so are small versions of common household items, like plates and baking pans. The Montessori model of education places a strong emphasis on fostering independence in children<sup>3</sup> — students choose which activities to do in the classroom, and activities can range from reading to practicing how to tie shoes to washing dishes. At any given time, students are spread around the classroom, in small groups or individually, deeply concentrated on the task in front of them. The lead teacher and aides walk around the room, observing the children and stopping to help or ask questions of the children. The scene at ECMS is very different from most classrooms in New Haven Public Schools, where order and discipline rule.

ECMS is the first public Montessori school inside the city's boundaries. The parents who opened the school were inspired by Annie Fisher Montessori Magnet School in Hartford, Connecticut, and decided to transport the model to New Haven. Unlike Annie Fisher, however, ECMS is a charter school. It is the only *local* charter in the state, meaning that it is partnered with both the local school district, New Haven Public Schools (NHPS), and the state of

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to Child Education in "The Children's Houses" with Additions and Revisions by the Author*, translated by Anne E. George, New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1912, 68.

Connecticut, whereas most charter schools are typically chartered exclusively through the state. The partnership with the school district means that the teachers are members of the New Haven Federation of Teachers (NHFT), the local teachers union. As if the school composition weren't complicated enough, ECMS is also the recipient of a federal magnet grant, meaning that 10 percent of its seats are set aside for children outside of the district. Those seats are managed by lottery through Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES), a regional educational service center. The other 90 percent of the seats are distributed to New Haven residents through a second lottery system.

In many ways, ECMS represents the confluence of several schools of thought on education. It is a charter school, yet its teachers are unionized and one of its founding board members, David Low, was formerly the vice president of the NHFT. This is uncommon; only 7 percent of American charter school teachers are unionized, half of them solely as the result of state requirements. In an article for *The American Prospect* on charter school unionization, journalist Rachel M. Cohen is blunt: "Most charter school funders hate unions and unions generally hate charters."<sup>4</sup> Across the country, charter schools and teachers unions have engaged in battles over everything from resources to pedagogy. ECMS is also a magnet school, an education strategy cities in Connecticut have embraced since the Connecticut Supreme Court ruling *Sheff v. O'Neill* ordered the desegregation of Hartford Public Schools.

While the labels "magnet," "charter," and "union" can all be accurately assigned to ECMS, Halsey and the rest of the board members view the school as a Montessori program, first and foremost. According to Halsey, the operations of ECMS are closer to a traditional public school than a charter school — its federal magnet grant is managed by NHPS, and the teachers

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<sup>4</sup> Rachel M. Cohen, "When Charters Go Union," *American Prospect*, June 19, 2015, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://prospect.org/article/when-charters-go-union>.

are unionized. The school's control over its curriculum is what makes the school appear closer to a charter school, (although its decision to use the Montessori education method is unique). This distinctive positioning between public and charter can lead to some confusion over governance, Halsey admits. While ECMS has its own board of trustees responsible for school governance, as any charter school does, NHPS controls the majority of the school resources, giving it some level of influence over the school.

The parents and community members who came together to create ECMS had one goal in mind: to create a high-quality public early education option utilizing the Montessori method they had observed in Hartford. But creating a school is no easy process. In many ways, it appears that the founders of ECMS adopted various other school models (charter, magnet, unionized) primarily in order to ease the process of getting their school up and running. Becoming a local charter school sped up the process of opening the school, and came along with teacher unionization, a feature board member David Low appreciated, being the union vice president at the time. Becoming a magnet school gave the school access to federal grant money, a necessity given that they didn't have outside financial resources like most charter schools that are part of larger networks do. These decisions were compromises — being a local charter forfeited some level of governance to the school district, and being a magnet forfeited control over enrollment. But so far, the compromises seem to have paid off.

“The vision for the school was to create a high quality Montessori program that helps each child reach their full potential, while remaining committed to being a racially and socially diverse school,” Halsey says. When Halsey and other parents first began meeting close to a decade ago, they had no idea that they would eventually found a school; all they wanted to do was find a way to provide high quality education for their children. They soon realized that the

problems of New Haven Public Schools were far more complex and widespread than they had imagined.

### **Organizing parents for early education**

Eliza Halsey grew up in New Haven, attended New Haven Public Schools, earned her bachelor's degree at Yale University, and worked in New Haven for most of her adult life. "I'm pretty rooted in New Haven as a place," she says matter-of-factly. Her interest in early childhood education came from a natural place: "Most people who become interested in early ed, like me, become interested when they have kids and need to learn about it." When Halsey began searching for preschool options for her children, she realized how difficult it was to find the basic information needed to locate quality programs.

Halsey learned that there were three main funding streams for early childhood education programs in New Haven: Head Start, School Readiness, and magnet schools. Each stream had its own set of processes through which they could be accessed. "Part of what I experienced as a young parent was not knowing any of this and finding it quite confusing," she says. Halsey was an Ivy League educated working professional. If she was having trouble with the system, she was sure other parents must have been in even worse positions. Halsey decided to start engaging other families to hear about their experiences with navigating New Haven preschool options. She started attending Board of Education meetings and visiting a wide variety of preschool programs. Halsey may not have identified as such at the time, but she was slowly becoming a parent organizer.

One of the first realizations to come out of Halsey's initial parent conversations and school visits was that there weren't very many high quality public early education options for New Haven residents. The highest quality programs were in the magnet schools, but in many

cases fewer than half of the seats went to New Haven residents. In an effort to integrate schools, magnet seats were available to suburban children as well. Unfortunately, this meant fewer seats were left for New Haven families, who arguably needed them more, as suburban families were more likely to have the means to pay for private education.

The parents decided to take on the issue of access to information first. Most parents were unclear about the differences between the various types of early childhood options. Even if parents figured out which schools they wanted to send their children to, there was no way for them to estimate their child's chance of acceptance, which was likely low due to how magnet seats were distributed. The parents decided to submit a request for information about school make-up and admissions through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Once their FOIA request went through, they created a website with all of the information so that other parents could access it as well. They connected with Mira Debs, a sociology PhD candidate at Yale, to create a webpage called School Haven in 2010, which was housed within a larger website called Kid Haven. Kid Haven aggregated useful information for New Haven families with children; School Haven provided specific information about preschool options.

The information the parents received through the FOIA request quickly illuminated why it felt like it was impossible for New Haven families to gain admission to magnet preschool programs — there just weren't very many seats available to them. The Connecticut Supreme Court ordered Hartford to adopt a desegregation plan for its public schools following its landmark 1996 decision in *Sheff v. O'Neill*. The desegregation plan involved the creation of a large number of magnet schools that would integrate students from Hartford and the surrounding suburbs, in an attempt to reduce persistent racial inequalities in education.<sup>5</sup> New Haven, fearing a

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<sup>5</sup> American Civil Liberties Union, "Sheff V. O'Neill," March 11, 2014, accessed April 13, 2016, <https://www.aclu.org/cases/sheff-v-oneill>.

similar legal battle, chose to adopt a voluntary desegregation plan soon after. Under the plan, magnet schools in New Haven must enroll 30 percent suburban students. The 30 percent quota is an aggregate figure — it accounts for students from preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. However, New Haven’s elementary and middle schools are not nearly as desirable to suburban families as the city’s preschools are. As a result, the district has maintained the 30 percent figure by weighting it toward the preschool seats. In reality, far more than 30 percent of New Haven magnet preschool seats go to suburban children. It is also unclear if the desegregation plan is actually serving its intended purpose, according to Debs. “Since the desegregation plan is voluntary, New Haven is not required to show that they’re reaching a cap of racial integration like Hartford schools have to,” she explains.

The parents were hardly shocked by the data. Anecdotally, they knew that a disproportionate number of magnet preschool slots went to suburban students. Halsey had picked up on this immediately when visiting preschool options for her children. “At one school I asked how many kids were from New Haven. In a class of 20 students, the teacher said seven. This raised questions of access for me,” Halsey says.

The number of parents involved quickly swelled from the original eight or nine up to 30. They became more of a formal organization, calling themselves the New Haven Parent Network, choosing new issues to focus on each year. The overarching mission of the group was simple: “walkable, high quality schools for all children in New Haven.” But they had to choose specific issues to work on, and as the parents’ children got older, their concerns changed. Some of the parents became involved with the Citywide Parent Leadership Group, an NHPS-run parents group. They ultimately decided, however, that if they wanted to have real autonomy over their work, they needed to be a parent-led group, as opposed to district-led. As parents with children

who were growing up quickly, they felt a sense of urgency that the district might not. An early campaign the parents ran was named “Recess for All” and it called on New Haven Public Schools to ensure every school had a robust recess program.

The parents’ relationship with NHPS wasn’t adversarial, but it would be wrong to claim they worked together perfectly. The parents worked in partnership with the district to the greatest extent possible, according to Halsey, but they also sought to put public pressure on the district to better serve New Haven residents. “I think the district, as much as we were kind of a pain...the fact that we would do work and not just complain...I think they could respect that and see that we were actually trying to help them,” recalls Halsey.

A subset of the parents became interested in the Montessori school model. Even the highest quality early childhood magnet programs in New Haven didn’t seem to use developmentally appropriate practices, in the parents’ view. Very young children were asked to do homework and use computers at school — the setting was more explicitly academic than some of the parents would have liked. Halsey had worked for an organization based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which is home to a robust public Montessori school system. She thought the Montessori model might offer more developmentally appropriate teaching and learning. The parents visited Hartford, where there were three public Montessori schools. After seeing the schools, in particular Annie Fisher, the parents became determined to bring the model to New Haven.

“We were all just excited about the possibility of Montessori being a school that could really attract a racially and economically diverse group of parents,” Debs remembers. “Also, the idea that Montessori was developmentally appropriate and inherently respectful to children of all backgrounds.” At this point, the group of parents transitioned from general advocacy work to a

concentrated effort to open a public Montessori school. Most of the parents knew they would never be able to send their children to the school, even if it did open. Still, they felt that New Haven was in desperate need of better early childhood programming, and they believed in the Montessori model.

### **The Montessori method**

In 1907, Maria Montessori opened a school for low-income children in Rome called *Case dei Bambini* (“Children’s House”, in English). Her method of teaching, which focused on multifaceted child development and fostering independence, became popular around the world. Two years later, she published a book detailing her teaching philosophy, which she had developed after years of scientific observation of young children. In English, the book was titled “The Montessori Method.”<sup>6</sup>

The largest barrier to high quality early childhood education in Italy, Montessori argued, was a restrictive philosophy of teaching. Teachers were “of the old school,”<sup>7</sup> concentrated on enabling students to regurgitate the ideas of respected philosophers and theorists. While she didn’t dismiss the importance of this information, Montessori stressed the importance of teachers being “real scientists.”<sup>8</sup> A real scientist did not simply learn how to use instruments and perform tests; instead, a scientist was, “the type of man who has felt experiment to be a means guiding him to search out the deep truth of life.”<sup>9</sup> Acting as scientists, teachers should worship nature, and seek to cultivate the natural parts of children. The “free, natural manifestations of the child,”<sup>10</sup> must be allowed and embraced in school.

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<sup>6</sup> “History of Montessori Education and the Movement,” American Montessori Society, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://amshq.org/Montessori-Education/History-of-Montessori-Education>.

<sup>7</sup> Montessori, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 29.

Montessori viewed current methods of schooling as working against the natural inclinations of children, and, thus, as unscientific. Desks and chairs were designed to restrict the movement of children. Teachers incentivized their pupils to learn with prizes in exchange for reciting facts, just as a jockey gave sugar to his horse. Restrictive laws forced teachers to conduct their classes in specific ways. Rather than embracing nature, Italian schools aimed to control, even reverse it.<sup>11</sup>

In Chapter IV of her book, Montessori detailed the pedagogical methods she used at the *Case dei Bambini*, methods grounded in observation and developmental study. The physical environment of the school was of ultimate importance. She stressed the necessity of an open-air playground and garden space — instead of simply using this space for breaks from instruction, children should freely come and go from the classroom to the outdoors. Inside of the classroom were small, child-sized chairs of different shapes and types. The classroom also contained a wash area, cupboards filled with toys and materials, and blackboards. All were small and at a height at which children could easily reach them. Children were free to wander around the classroom, which was specifically designed for them. Traditional schools emphasized immobility; Montessori's school emphasized that children learn to control their movements through freedom of experimentation.<sup>12</sup>

Montessori conceived of discipline in a very different way from other educators at the time: “A room in which all the children move about usefully, intelligently, and voluntarily, without committing any rough or rude act, would seem to me a classroom very well disciplined indeed.”<sup>13</sup> Teachers should help guide children toward independence. Not only should children have freedom over their movement, they should also be free to choose, with guidance, which

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 30-34.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 67

activity to do at any given time. Punishments and rewards, hallmarks of most classrooms, should be abandoned, as children should find the urges to learn and explore within themselves.<sup>14</sup> Every lesson given by a teacher should be conceived of as an experiment, and they should not be given to the entire class as a whole. Instead, a teacher should individually instruct each student in a simple and brief manner, before moving on to teach the next student while the first experimented with what he or she just learned: “And such is our duty toward the child: to give a ray of light and to go on our way.”<sup>15</sup>

The Montessori movement spread to the United States in the 1920s, but did not become popularized until the 1960s, when Nancy McCormick Rambusch started the American Montessori Society.<sup>16</sup> The organization lists hallmarks of the Montessori method, most of which can be traced directly back to Maria Montessori’s book. These hallmarks include “multiage groupings that foster peer learning, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and guided choice of work activity.”<sup>17</sup> Putting children of different ages in the same classroom allows younger children to learn from their older peers, and gives older children the opportunity to solidify their learning through teaching. The environment is designed specifically to foster “freedom within limits” and independence.<sup>18</sup> Teachers in Montessori schools must be credentialed through a Montessori teacher education program.

According to the American Montessori Society, there are more than 4,000 Montessori schools in the U.S. today. While most are private schools, around 400 Montessori programs are in public schools, including neighborhood, magnet, and charter schools. An added challenge for

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74-77.

<sup>16</sup> “History,” American Montessori Society.

<sup>17</sup> “Introduction to Montessori Method,” American Montessori Society, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://amshq.org/Montessori-Education/Introduction-to-Montessori>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

public Montessori teachers is the need to ensure that the curriculum adheres to state standards, as the students are required to take standardized tests.<sup>19</sup> Testing can be difficult for Montessori students because the timing of Montessori education does not always align with the timing of traditional public schools. As children are asked to follow their interests, they might not focus on a particular subject one year, making it difficult for them to perform well on a test in that subject area. Some public Montessori schools have made efforts, with varying levels of success, to get waivers from standardized tests because of this.

Critical to the Montessori method is that children start at age 3. Most children in the U.S. enter kindergarten at age 5, which is too advanced of an age to implement the Montessori method. However, many school districts do not provide nearly as much funding for 3- and 4-year-old students, presenting an additional complication for public Montessori schools. Many public Montessori schools are able secure funding through Head Start programs, which provide early education for low-income families, (Elm City Montessori funds its programming through Head Start). Other public Montessori schools are forced to seek alternative funding streams for their youngest students.

When Halsey decided to put together a proposal for a public Montessori school, she put together a team of parents and experts who were committed to the model. Many of these individuals eventually ended up on the Elm City Montessori board. One of these experts was Priscilla Coker Palmer, the president of the Association Montessori International/USA (AMI-USA). Palmer had trained as a Montessori teacher in London and worked as a Montessori teacher for several years before moving to New York to work in financial services. Palmer stayed involved with the Montessori community in the United States, teaching adult literacy part-

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<sup>19</sup> “Montessori Schools,” American Montessori Society, accessed March 18, 2016, <http://amshq.org/Montessori-Education/Introduction-to-Montessori/Montessori-Schools>.

time using Montessori methods and participating in foundation work that aimed to spread Montessori to developing countries. When her husband enrolled at Yale, she moved to New Haven and quickly met Halsey, who told her about her plans to open a public Montessori school. “I’d never been involved in public Montessori before, only private, so it was extraordinarily interesting to see the process of how a charter school gets put together,” Palmer remembers.

Halsey also recruited Erik Clemons, then the executive director of New Haven LEAP, a non-profit that provides after-school and summer programming for New Haven youth. All four of Clemons’ children had gone to Montessori schools, so Halsey sought his guidance. “I understood this idea of unbridled exploration and discovery while learning...I also understood the need for school choice in New Haven,” says Clemons. I spoke with Clemons in his office at ConnCAT, where he is founding CEO and President. ConnCAT provides market-relevant job training, after-school activities, and summer camp programming for New Haven residents. Clemons, like most of those involved with opening ECMS, is deeply committed to improving the quality of life in New Haven, particularly for disadvantaged populations. He felt his daughters had benefitted immensely from the Montessori daycare they attended in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and wanted more New Haven parents to have that option for their children in a public school setting.

### **Opening Elm City Montessori School**

All of the New Haven Parents Network organizing shifted over to opening the school starting in late 2012. With Halsey spearheading the project, there simply was not the capacity for parents to continue issue-based work on the side. One of the first people Halsey recruited to the school project was Joan Bosson-Heenan, a New Haven parent who conducts research on the genetics of dyslexia. “Eliza approached me and Kia Levey [who would go on to be president of

the ECMS board of trustees],” Bosson-Heenan recalls. “Both Kia and I were like, ‘Okay, we’re on board, but it’s never going to happen.’ But it did.”

As a first step, Halsey’s team started a petition asking NHPS to open a public Montessori school. Pulling on existing parent networks from previous organizing campaigns, they were able to collect more than 300 signatures. Halsey took this petition to the New Haven Board of Education and asked the board members to consider visiting some of the public Montessori schools in Hartford. All but one board member complied with Halsey’s request, and they returned from Hartford intrigued by the idea of public Montessori.

The state of Connecticut had recently put out a request for letters of intent for local charter schools — schools that would be chartered through both the local district and the state — and Halsey’s team jumped at the opportunity. In January 2013, Halsey formed an official board and began the process of applying to open a local charter school. Bosson-Heenan was particularly excited by the prospect of opening the Montessori school as a local charter. “This really appealed to me,” she says. “One of the problems I have with charter schools is that they’re not really working with the district...I liked the local charter because it really integrated the district. It was about partnering to create another high quality option.”

The local charter model satisfied NHPS as well, as it essentially brought new state resources to the district. Under other circumstances, the issue of ECMS being proposed as a charter school may have led to conflict with the teachers union, but NHFT Vice President Dave Low’s presence in the project helped mediate that relationship for Halsey. “He was instrumental in engaging the union to understand that this effort was about bringing a new model of education to New Haven students,” says Halsey. Applying to be a local charter school made sense, given the state and local district interest in the option.

The team began working closely with John Freeman, the principal at Annie Fisher Montessori School, a public Montessori school in Hartford. Annie Fisher is a magnet school, with 50 percent of its students coming from the suburbs. The school emphasizes fidelity to the Montessori model, something that is very difficult to do within a public school. “It’s hard to meet John and then not want to start your own Montessori,” Bosson-Heenan says. “He is the world’s most dynamic Montessori advocate...he really speaks to the ways in which Montessori cultivates your child’s best self.” Freeman helped with the charter application, as he was eager to see public Montessori spread to other parts of Connecticut.

“In the set-up of the school, we were actually fairly lucky,” Debs admits. Halsey had formed relationships with several administrators in NHPS through her parent advocacy work, so she was established in the New Haven education community. The timing of the project was on their side, as it coincided with Connecticut’s solicitation of local charter proposals. NHPS was simultaneously dealing with an “overflow” of kindergarteners, meaning there were more children than they had seats for. The district was seeking a solution to their overcrowding problem, and Halsey and her team could point to opening a new school as a potential remedy. Low helped get the New Haven Federation of Teachers on board, and they provided a letter of recommendation that was attached to the application. This was critical to the application, as the union had strongly opposed some previous attempts to open charter schools, particularly in the Achievement First network.

“Charters are obviously a hot button issue, and a lot of it focuses around resources being channeled from traditional schools to help fund charter schools, as well as the issue of unionized teachers,” Halsey admits. The ECMS team took steps to ensure that the union knew that ECMS

would not be stealing funds from traditional schools, and that, as a local charter, its teachers would be union members.

Before they could get approval from the state, the New Haven Board of Education had to approve ECMS. This process included a public hearing where Halsey and her colleagues made a case for why there was a need for a public Montessori school in New Haven. The early months of 2013 were entirely consumed with planning for this hearing, where more than 40 people spoke in support of the school. Many people in New Haven didn't know what Montessori was, so they would need to be convinced that it was a viable school option for the city. All of the ECMS board members were working on a volunteer basis, providing a challenge in itself. Halsey was simultaneously starting a new full time job at All Our Kin, a non-profit that trains and supports community child care providers. "She basically doesn't sleep which is why she was able to [plan for the school] and start a new job at All Our Kin," says Debs.

The ECMS board held a successful public hearing and gained approval from the New Haven Board of Education. The next step was getting approval from the state. This step turned out to be easier, since the state was happy to open local charters, and the concept of a public Montessori school was not nearly as foreign to them. Elm City Montessori School was fully approved in July 2013.

Initially, the board envisioned ECMS as a New Haven-only school. Almost all of the board members lived in New Haven, and two of them were born and raised in the city. "It really was a New Haven-centric effort. This was a question of what are we doing for all children in New Haven," Halsey explains. The board did not want to open the school as a magnet, given that a disproportionate number of New Haven preschool magnet seats went to suburban children. "I don't believe magnets are racially integrating schools [in New Haven]," Halsey says confidently.

Financial constraints forced them to reconsider their stance, however. As ECMS was not part of a larger charter network, they did not have access to the same level of resources that many new charter schools have. NHPS submitted an application for a federal magnet grant for ECMS. In order to persuade the ECMS board to compromise on this point, the magnet grant was written to include language that only mandated 10 percent of seats be set aside for suburban students.

The federal magnet grant made ECMS part of a local regional educational service center named Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES). ACES operates a number of schools and coordinates the open choice process through which suburban and New Haven students are placed in magnet schools. Suburban applicants to ECMS would apply separately through ACES.

“Anecdotally, I would say roughly half of our [ACES] kids are white,” Halsey estimates. “Open choice is estimated at getting racial diversity, but that means bringing in white kids, because a majority of NHPS students are black and Latino.” All of the seats in ECMS, both local and suburban, are distributed through a random lottery with sibling preference.

While ECMS is technically a charter and a magnet school, Halsey does not believe either term is representative of the school. “We don’t use charter in our name, because it’s not an important piece of who we are,” she explains. “If we said ‘charter’ we’d be associated with Achievement First and other networks that don’t have the same relationship with NHPS as us.” The school is federally required to use “magnet” in its name, but they don’t use it in their public documents. In Halsey’s view, the operations of ECMS are much more similar to those of a traditional public school than to a charter. The magnet seats are managed by the district via the federal magnet grant, and the unionized teaching staff is on the district payroll. When the school makes purchases or has facilities-related expenses, they go through NHPS. Two factors make ECMS distinct from a traditional public school: First, the school has its own board of trustees

that is responsible for school policy and governance, although they work closely with the New Haven Board of Education. Second, ECMS has complete control over their curriculum, which allows them to utilize the Montessori method. In that sense, the school runs closer to a charter model.

NHPS placed the school in Fair Haven because the district had an available building in the neighborhood. The ECMS board had little control over the placement of the school, but they were happy to be placed in a neighborhood that was representative of the city as a whole. “There were an awareness that the school could become so popular with middle class families that we couldn’t serve as many low income and people of color as we wanted to,” explains Debs. “We were really deliberate that we didn’t want the school located in East Rock or somewhere like that.”

Fair Haven is a low-income neighborhood, with a median income of \$37,357, only slightly higher than the New Haven median.<sup>20</sup> The neighborhood is racially diverse, with a population that is 52.5 percent Hispanic, 23.5 percent black, and 20.8 percent white.<sup>21</sup> Since racial diversity was a point of focus for the board, they concentrated recruitment efforts in Fair Haven. Although anyone in New Haven could apply to the school through the lottery, more applicants from Fair Haven would increase the number of neighborhood students. An outreach team of six to eight people handed out flyers in English and Spanish on Grand Avenue, the main street through Fair Haven. They concentrated their efforts on local stores and barbershops. The board also involved the community in selecting a principal. Formal interviews were held

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<sup>20</sup> City-Data.com, “Fair Haven neighborhood in New Haven, Connecticut (CT), 06513, 06511 detailed profile,” accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Fair-Haven-New-Haven-CT.html>.

<sup>21</sup> City of New Haven, “Demographics,” [http://www.cityofnewhaven.com/cityplan/pdfs/PlanningPrograms/ComprehensivePlan/Web\\_Data\\_Book/Demographics.pdf](http://www.cityofnewhaven.com/cityplan/pdfs/PlanningPrograms/ComprehensivePlan/Web_Data_Book/Demographics.pdf).

initially, but the top candidates were asked to give public presentations at two meetings, one in The Hill neighborhood and another in Fair Haven.

When the school was finally approved in July 2013, the board of trustees considered trying to open its first pilot classes that September, just two months later. NHPS Superintendent Garth Harries actually asked ECMS to consider opening two classrooms because the district was overenrolled for the coming school year. “Thankfully, we wisely realized that was too early,” Halsey says with a chuckle. Halsey and the rest of the board soon came to understand that there would be a number of unforeseen complications involved with physically opening the school, even once it gained approval from the local and state boards of education.

Teacher recruitment quickly proved itself to be a tremendous challenge for ECMS. “Finding public Montessori teachers is hard. There’s a shortage of them in Connecticut,” explains Debs. According to Palmer, public Montessori teacher recruitment is a difficult task in almost every school district in the country. While private Montessori teachers only need Montessori certification, public Montessori teachers are required to be dual-certified, first as public school teacher, then as a Montessori teacher.

“You’re asking a teacher to spend an extra year or two getting double qualified for a job that isn’t very well paid,” Palmer laments. The content of the two training programs also presents a point of conflict, in Palmer’s view. She thinks traditional teacher training directly contradicts Montessori teacher training. In the former, the teacher is taught how to control the classroom and focus student attention; in the latter, the teacher learns how to center the classroom around the student. “In a Montessori class, it’s quite hard to find the teacher in the room. The classroom belongs to the students,” she explains. “It’s very hard to go from controlling the class to being a

fly on the wall, as a teacher.” For a traditionally trained teacher to transition to Montessori teaching requires a complete unlearning of what it means to be a teacher, says Palmer.

In the United States, there are two umbrella Montessori organizations — Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and American Montessori Society (AMS). The two organizations have feuded over their methods since the 1960s and each has its own teacher prep program. Generally speaking, AMI adheres more strictly to Maria Montessori’s original methodology than AMS does. The teachers in the Hartford public Montessori schools were AMI certified, so ECMS decided to go the AMI route as well. Palmer’s experience also came from AMI, not AMS. Unfortunately, the only training center for AMI teachers in Connecticut is in Hartford, presenting another barrier for public Montessori teacher recruitment in New Haven. “We’ve had some really compelling AMS candidates, but we haven’t been able to get them AMI certified,” says Debs.

Everyone interviewed for this paper agreed that, once the school’s application was approved, teacher recruitment presented the biggest challenge for ECMS. There were a whole host of other small hiccups in the process of opening though. “I just remember we were hosting open houses at the school and we didn’t physically own very much, so we had...rented chairs, but the chair rental company kept taking chairs away,” Debs recalls. The night before one of the open houses, Halsey’s husband was forced to patch up a wall behind the school to make sure it would look presentable for parents in the morning. These anecdotes, while humorous, presented serious sources of stress for the ECMS board. They were all working on a volunteer basis, and Halsey in particular was stretched very thin. “I don’t think the school could have happened with her,” Debs says.

In its first year, ECMS received 500 applications and admitted 69 children ages 3 to 5 to begin school in three primary classrooms in the fall of 2014.<sup>22</sup> The school population in its first year, according to Halsey, was around 30 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 30 percent black, and 10 percent multiracial. ECMS added an elementary classroom for children ages 6 to 9 for its second year, as well as one more primary classroom. That year it received 544 applications for 40 additional seats. The school's population in its second year was closer to 45 percent black, as a result of random lottery selection. ECMS plans to enroll 140 students in the fall of 2016, adding another elementary classroom.<sup>23</sup>

"We're still trying to figure out why people choose us. They have different reasons," says Halsey. The ECMS board does not think the school's popularity is because of the Montessori name. "The majority of people here don't know Montessori or understand it," Halsey notes. In recruiting parents to apply for seats at ECMS, the school needs to explain the Montessori model, utilizing open houses and other forms of public meetings.

ECMS is on track to continue expanding each year. At the conclusion of its fifth year, it should enroll 209 students, up through the equivalent of 4<sup>th</sup> grade in a typical school. The school's charter will be up for renewal at that point, and, assuming it is renewed, the school plans to expand up through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>24</sup> As the school expands, physical capacity will become an important topic of discussion. The current building in which ECMS is situated cannot accommodate the hundreds of students the school eventually plans to enroll. According to Debs, NHPS does not presently have a large enough school building available. "To some extent, it's going to be a capital campaign for us," Debs admits.

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<sup>22</sup> Melissa Bailey, "Montessori School OK'd For 2014 Start," *New Haven Independent*, May 15, 2013, accessed April 20, 2016,

[http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/montessori\\_school\\_okd\\_for\\_2014\\_start/](http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/montessori_school_okd_for_2014_start/).

<sup>23</sup> Elm City Montessori School.

<sup>24</sup> Bailey, "Montessori School OK'd".

## Charter and union

Although ECMS is the first public Montessori school in New Haven, for many, the most interesting element of the school is the fact that its teachers are unionized, even though the school is a charter. This fact is particularly noteworthy in New Haven, where the NHFT has vigorously opposed the openings of many charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated, arguing that charters divert funds away from traditional schools.<sup>25</sup> While 68 percent of public school teachers in the U.S. are unionized, only 7 percent of charter school teachers were unionized, as of 2012.<sup>26</sup> Although the concept of a charter school was first proposed by Albert Shanker, the president of the national teachers union the American Federation of Teachers, charter schools and unions have clashed across the country. Shanker originally imagined that charter school teachers would be union members and play a large role in decision making. In his view, charter schools would collaborate extensively with traditional public schools, experimenting with new teaching methods and curricula that could be translated over to traditional schools. That has not been the case in practice, however. Many charter school networks use the fact that their teachers are not unionized as a selling point, claiming that unions prevent traditional schools from firing low-performing teachers. Far from collaborative, many charter and traditional public schools find themselves in fierce competition over scarce resources, as school districts look to cut costs.<sup>27</sup>

Heading into the process of gaining district approval for ECMS, Low was keenly aware of how most traditional public school teachers felt about charter schools. Some members of his union were unhappy about his participation in the project. Low believes the conversation around

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<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Swift, "Teachers' union opposes New Haven proposed public-charter school plan," January 26, 2015, *New Haven Register*, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.nhregister.com/article/NH/20150126/NEWS/150129616>.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, "When Charters Go Union."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

charters and unions is misinformed: “The picture is always painted as unions versus charters, but it’s more about...charters claiming to have a better answer to ‘failing schools.’” Low does not think charter schools are inherently problematic, although he thinks some charter schools’ proposed policy solutions are not good ones.

Low was deeply committed to opening ECMS, as an educator and as a parent of children who attended Montessori schools, so he served as a mediator between the ECMS board and the NHFT. Key to his role as mediator was explaining the difference between a local and state charter, something most educators in New Haven knew little about, as there were no other local charters in the city. Once it became clear that, as a local charter, ECMS would be a union school, the NHFT warmed up to the idea. “The bottom line is that the teachers are in the union, and they’re our brothers and sisters,” Low recalls telling the union executive board. “The point of [teachers] unions is to create positive working environments for teachers. If that’s being maintained, then unions have nothing to complain about.” As mentioned earlier, the NHFT eventually provided a letter of recommendation for ECMS, a factor both Debs and Halsey believe was critical to the school getting approved by NHPS.

Around half of the unionized charter schools in the country are unionized by default, as ECMS is. In the other half, teachers have independently organized a union, usually in collaboration with an existing union. Those union campaigns have become contentious in some schools, leading to conversations about the compatibility of innovation and unionization.<sup>28</sup> While Low acknowledges that these conversations have taken place on a national scale, he firmly believes that charters and unions are capable of collaboration. “There are no structural barriers to charters and unions working together,” he says confidently. “It’s not one versus the other.” For

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<sup>28</sup> Cohen, “When Charters Go Union.”

Low, the success of ECMS indicates that a unionized charter school is an effective school model that should be pursued elsewhere.

### **Inside the ECMS classroom**

After several months of speaking to numerous people involved with opening and operating ECMS, I finally stepped inside of a classroom at 375 Quinnipiac Avenue. Each of the four primary classrooms, which serve children ages 3 to 5, has its own theme. The classroom I was in was the “mulberry” room. From what I could tell, the mulberry designation primarily served as a tool for rounding up the children: “Mulberries to recess!” you might hear a teacher say. I arrived at the mulberry room at 9:30 am; school had started at 9:00 am. The children sat scattered around the room, eating breakfast in groups of two or three at child-sized tables. There were three teachers in the room of 20 students, around half of whom were black. Two of the teachers were black and the third one was white; all were women.

Even though they were eating breakfast, many of the children stood up to move around the room periodically. At the far side of the room, a table was set up with a large bowl of cereal and a carton of milk. The children confidently walked up to the table to serve themselves. If they spilled (and many did), they knew where to find a rag to clean up after themselves. I sat in a designated “observer chair” for the length of my time in the mulberry room. Although the chair was clearly designed for an adult — it was far wider than any child would need — it was low to the ground. The teachers sat in similar chairs, putting themselves at the same level as the students. Everything in the class, from the chairs to the tables to the drawers, was child sized. In a lofted section of the room, at least two dozen children’s cots were set up for napping. The only exceptions to this size rule were the refrigerator, dishwasher, and microwave, all of which were standard size. There were two sinks, one for adults and one for children. Whenever a student

decided to switch from milk to water, they would walk up to the small sink to wash out their cup before refilling it.

Most of the children happily chatted as they ate their cereal, stopping on multiple occasions to ask me if I wanted any. I politely declined. A few minutes after I arrived, however, a girl began crying because she didn't have a seat. Rather than direct her to a chair, one of the teachers got low to the ground next to her and began to go over the girl's options. She could sit by herself at the one remaining empty table, or she could elect to sit with an already-existing group at another table. The girl took a minute to process her options, and then chose to join two boys at a nearby table. The problem was solved.

The classroom was certainly loud — at one point a boy decided to bang his metal spoon against his glass cup for around two minutes straight — but the teachers made no attempt to reduce the classroom volume. Each teacher was focused on a different task: One sat at a table talking to the children about what they wanted to do with the day. Another stood near the food table, doing her best to prevent the students from making a huge mess with the cereal. The third sat on the ground alone, preparing colorful papers on the ground, presumably for an activity to be completed later. The room was filled with toys, many of which looked like they were designed for counting: blocks, marbles, and beads of varying lengths.

The children seemed equally content whether they were alone or interacting with others. Most of them seemed to switch frequently between sitting alone and in groups. Although the teachers said the students were used to having observers in the classroom, the children seemed very intrigued by my presence. “Are you sure you don't want cereal?” they asked. “Why are you writing words?” one girl repeatedly demanded. The same girl requested to use my pen to draw in

my notebook. When I said yes, a group of children gathered around, and they all took turns scribbling over and around my notes.

Eventually, some of the students were finished eating breakfast. As their peers continued eating, they transitioned to other parts of the room. They quickly took their bowls and cups to the dishwasher, and then proceeded to whichever activity they wanted to do. One boy began dancing by himself in the middle of a carpet, drawing laughs and cheers from his classmates who ate nearby. A group of four children sat on the ground with the teacher who was preparing materials. She pulled out a set of photos and began going through them one by one with the group. Soon, all of the children had switched over from breakfast to activity time. At this point, the class was getting uncomfortably loud. A teacher rang a set of bells to get the class's attention, reminding them that they were working on using inside voices. The order was not given in a stern fashion; it genuinely felt like a reminder.

The members of the mulberry class participated in a large variety of activities. One boy played with a miniature baking set, rolling play-doh into the shape of a pie. A group of girls used watercolors to paint different designs onto large pieces of paper. Another child sat alone ringing the bells the teacher had previously used. Other activities included cutting up pieces of paper with scissors, decorating paper with ink stamps of flowers and insects, and reading books. Again, the children comfortably alternated between independent and group activities. Most surprisingly, some of the children's activities appeared to be domestic chores. A girl elected to clean the children's sink, although it didn't look particularly dirty. She scrubbed it diligently, telling her teacher she wanted to leave it "perfect." Another boy helped one of the teachers do the "laundry," which appeared to be primarily rags. They left the classroom together to do this activity.

For the most part, the students immediately chose which activity to work on. A few of them seemed unsure of what they wanted to do; in those cases, a teacher would list several options for them, and the child would pick one of them. These activities went on for around 30 minutes before the teachers began transitioning for gym class. The 3- and 4-year-olds were scheduled for gym, while the 5-year-olds would go to a separate science classroom with one of the teachers. Rather than make an announcement about ending activities, the teachers walked around the room reminding the students gently that they should start cleaning up so they could go to gym class. Some of the students immediately put their materials away and headed out to the hallway to change their shoes. Others took a little longer to finish their activities. The teachers did not seem bothered by the staggered exiting from the classroom. “Remember to use your walking feet,” one teacher reminded a few children who had begun to run out of the classroom. Commands were few and far between in the mulberry room, but any commands were positive ones. “Use your inside voice” instead of “be quiet” and “use your walking feet” instead of “stop running.”<sup>29</sup>

The children filed out of the mulberry room, some alone and some in pairs, until only the 5-year-olds were left in the room. The teacher allowed two of the remaining girls to complete one last activity before going to the science room. The activity was called “nail care” and the girls took turns soaking their hands in a bowl of soapy water before applying clear nail oil to each other’s nails. While the activity did not seem remotely instructional, in a traditional sense, the pipettes and brushes the girls used were clearly designed to help develop motor skills.

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<sup>29</sup> I work part-time as a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom assistant at Wexler Grant School, a public neighborhood school in the Dixwell neighborhood. The contrast between Wexler Grant and ECMS was stark. Teachers at Wexler Grant regularly shout commands at their students. The students are accustomed to this — if a teacher tries to calmly suggest that students do something, they do not typically respond. Shouting seems to be the best medium of communication at Wexler Grant. This goes to show how children can easily be socialized to respond to very different types of discipline and instruction.

The two girls finished doing each other's nails, cleaned up, and left the room to join the other 5-year-olds in the science room upstairs. One teacher remained behind, straightening up the classroom. While the children did their best to clean their spaces, there were inevitable remnants of child's play scattered around the room — scraps of paper, water spillage, and individual pieces of cereal. It wasn't until we were leaving the empty room that I realized how chaotic the classroom had been when the students were present. It was loud and children were spread out all over the place, and they spread classroom materials with them. Somehow, the chaos felt anything but chaotic though. The teachers never told the students to do anything, yet there seemed to be some type of natural guidance over the class.

### **Looking to the future**

ECMS is currently finishing its second year of operation, so it's difficult to assess how the school is doing so far. Those interviewed for this paper seem satisfied with the status of the school. There have been a number of challenges, particularly with staffing, but none seem unusual for a new school. "Just getting the school off the ground was a major feat in and of itself," Clemons reminds me when I ask him what he thinks the school's biggest success has been. The board meets monthly, as stipulated by the school charter. While the board is currently focused on expanding to add new classrooms each year, and on the staffing challenges that accompany that expansion, they have begun to think about some potential long-term goals for ECMS and public Montessori more broadly.

First and foremost, they're focused on figuring out how to expand ECMS up through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They're going to need a new building, and they're going to need more teachers. Neither of those is easy to come by. Halsey is also interested in pursuing the possibility of becoming a neighborhood school, if ECMS remains in Fair Haven more permanently. Halsey and other

parents originally began organizing for high quality, *walkable*, schools, so she would like to see that project through. From her point of view, the magnet seats at ECMS only serve to bring in a disproportionately white group of suburban students.

There are also questions about making Montessori more widely available to New Haven residents. “If [public Montessori] is something people like, how can we expand it?” asks Low. While the ECMS board is focused on improving and expanding their own school, they have begun discussing the potential of opening more schools eventually. All of those interviewed who discussed this topic said they thought NHPS would be open to expanding public Montessori options, but that the district didn’t currently have the infrastructure in place to do so. “New Haven isn’t going to open more schools like [ECMS] without us promoting it,” says Low. “Absent our direct involvement, I don’t think they would.” It does not seem likely that Halsey or any of the ECMS board members will have the time or resources to invest in opening a new school anytime soon. Still, public Montessori may have a long-term future in New Haven.

### **Takeaways**

I came into this capstone interested in learning more about a unionized charter school. My hometown of Chicago has recently seen a surge in unionization at charter schools, and I was curious to compare it to New Haven. Of course, I quickly discovered that the charter and union pieces of ECMS were really more side notes than crucial elements. ECMS brings something far more innovative to the Elm City — public Montessori. Maria Montessori envisioned children of all backgrounds coming together in a classroom space that was their own, and ECMS is making that happen, on an intersection in Fair Haven.

Talking to ECMS board members, in particular Eliza Halsey, has revealed to me just how complicated the process of opening a school is. The ECMS team adopted a variety of

mechanisms in order to expedite the process of opening the school, specifically applying to be a local charter and accepting a federal magnet grant. Both of these strategies brought along their own complications, however. ECMS has to coordinate with two boards of education and a teachers union. Their admission operates through two parallel lottery systems in order to accommodate their suburban population. They have to find teachers who are dual-certified for Montessori in a city that doesn't offer certification courses. Somehow they pulled this all together with an entirely volunteer-based team.

“The thing I found the most empowering about this school was that we were a bunch of moms who wanted to make a change,” Joan Bosson-Heenan tells me near the end of our conversation. Her daughter Oona is currently enrolled in an elementary classroom at ECMS. None of the other founding members have children at the school. “Regardless of how successful this school is or isn't, it's empowering to know that you can create something new and different and not leave everything up to the bureaucracy.”

Bosson-Heenan is right. It's incredible that Halsey and her team pulled off what they did. They saw a problem — a lack of high quality preschool options for New Haven residents — and they took concrete action in response. They started with nothing and opened a school in a remarkably short span of time. Of course, ECMS can hardly accommodate every New Haven family. “The broader issue right now is that one in four New Haven families get one of their choices in the magnet lottery,” Mira Debs explains. “There's still really a shortage of good options for New Haven families.” New Haven needs more high quality preschool options, and the city needs to devise a strategy for ensuring that its residents have access to those options. This might mean reconsidering the way magnet seats are distributed. Elm City Montessori

School is doing what it can to provide a high quality education to New Haven students, but the school can't serve an entire system on its own.

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