

# **APPENDIX A**

## **TO THE CHARTER SCHOOL CONTRACT BETWEEN THE MILWAUKEE BOARD OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS AND HIGHLAND COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

**SUBMITTED BY: KATHLEEN RONCO AND  
HIGHLAND COMMUNITY SCHOOL  
PARENT BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**1706 West Highland Ave.**

**Milwaukee, WI 53233**

**SUBMITTED TO:**

**The Office of Board Governance**

**MPS Central Services Building**

**5225 West Vliet Street, Room 273**

**Milwaukee, WI 53208**

**DATE SUBMITTED:**

**02-10-2015**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

Highland Community School (Highland) is a Montessori school which seeks to increase the number of charter school seats and grades currently contracted through Milwaukee Public Schools. The school was previously located at 3030 West Highland Blvd., but moved its location to 1706 West Highland Ave., in August of 2012. Highland has a long history of academic excellence in a diverse educational environment, both racially and socio-economically. Highland seeks to continue this tradition as a non-instrumentality charter school through MPS.

Many parents in the community at large are interested in being more involved in the education of their children. Traditional public schools are organized as top-down hierarchies which can provide disincentives for the parents and families of students to be involved. The structure of a traditional public school may encourage parents to believe responsibility for education of children resides with the school rather than with the family. Studies show that greater parental involvement in the education of children leads to better outcomes.

Highland seeks to eliminate disincentives to participation by providing a model in which parent involvement in the education of children is expected. Highland attracts families with parents who are interested in being involved in the process. These parents are encouraged through a completed volunteer hours agreement, and by participating in an elected parent board of directors, to have a high level of participation in the social and operational aspects of the school. This leads to a sense of community at Highland which is unmatched at other schools, and provides additional incentive for parents to be involved in the academic success of their children.

Another critical feature of Highland is the Montessori method of education. The Montessori method emphasizes independence, freedom within limits, and respect for the natural development of a child's personality. Critical elements of this educational model are the constructivist or discovery model, which allows students to learn concepts through independent work with materials, rather than by direct education from an instructor. The educational model also includes

looping and multi-age classrooms, which allow the student and teacher to develop stronger relationships, and allow the student to learn by teaching others in the classroom.

Being exempt from the requirements of Chapters 115 to 121, Highland is able to construct a unique educational program based on the Montessori educational philosophy. Highland does not focus on traditional measures of academic success based on testing as the primary measure of student achievement. Rather, Highland seeks to create children who are confident and independent life-long learners who achieve academic success as a byproduct of their passion to independently seek answers to the problems of their generation.

Highland Community School strives to create a better world by being a leader in the education of children and families who will become creative and self-confident life-long learners, and thereby become the leaders of their communities.

### **Mission Statement:**

We are a community of diverse families and educators working together to offer quality Montessori education in a nurturing environment that enriches, empowers and inspires children to reach their potential and encourages parents to become responsible for and involved with their children's education.

### **Vision Statement**

Changing the world by nurturing children and their families to be informed, compassionate, life-long learners who are a force for change in education, the community and society.

### **Rationale for Charter**

Highland Community School has a 40+ year history of providing a high-quality, innovative, and independent educational program serving Milwaukee's central city. We plan to continue to expand and innovate in ways that will continue to create academic excellence for our students, families, and community. Highland has achieved a high level of educational attainment by creating a system of accountability to a parent board of directors, while having the flexibility to develop and adjust policies quickly by operating outside the MPS institutional framework. Highland has achieved educational success through the Montessori method of education.

HCS has led the way in Montessori education in Milwaukee, with staff from Highland helping to launch MacDowell, the first MPS Montessori school. Highland and MacDowell have had a long history of staff moving from one institution to the other, staff parents sending their children to the other institution, and close ties between the student bodies. Many of our graduates attend MacDowell, and that will only increase as our enrollment grows and MacDowell strengthens its high school programming in its new location. We are proud of our role in helping Milwaukee, and MPS in particular, to be one of the leaders in urban Montessori education, and we are committed to continue nurturing that expertise. In 1996, Highland joined the Milwaukee Public Schools as the first charter school in Milwaukee, and we have continued to support the growth of public Montessori schools in MPS.

Our teachers and instructional staff have strong backgrounds in Montessori educational methods and philosophy. We are committed to making sure that our staff have the opportunity for ongoing professional training and development in this area. Indeed, all of our lead teachers are certified by the American Montessori Institute, and many of our other staff members are also engaged in Montessori training. Historically, we have grown many of our own teachers, as Highland parents and other community members have worked first as classroom assistants at Highland before going on to complete Montessori training and to lead their own classrooms.

Highland is accountable to a Board of Directors made up of parent members. Parents are recruited by current board members and elected by all parents at the annual meeting. This creates both accountability and flexibility for the school. HCS is both accountable to the parent directors and reliant on those directors to understand and help create change when needed to maintain our organizational pursuit of academic excellence. For example, in a large district, personnel policies are necessarily based on purely objective criteria and provide an unimpeachable process by which hiring decisions are made. For a small school like Highland, however, where there is only one layer between administration and classrooms, our policies can be more flexible. This allows for more flexibility when urgency requires intervention or promotion.

Having both flexibility and accountability are critical to Highland's success as a MPS charter school. In order to continue our innovative tradition as a parent-run Montessori school, accountable first and foremost to our parent body through our elected parent Board of Directors, we need the flexibility afforded to us as a charter school.

**The name of the person who is seeking to establish the charter.**

On June 27, 1996, the Milwaukee Board of School Directors entered into a contract on its own initiative to establish an MPS Charter School, having considered the proposal submitted by Tamara O'Dell, Mary Andres, Danae Davis Gordon, Mary Ann Erdtmann and Tim Souers, the Proposal Development Team of Highland Community School. The current president of the Highland Board of Directors is Sharlen Moore, and the current director is Kathleen Ronco.

**The name of the person who will be in charge of the charter school, and the manner in which administrative services will be provided.**

~~Mark Joerres or his~~ [AT1] Tracy Williams or her successor, as designated by the Highland parent board of directors, shall be in charge of Highland Community School.

**A description of how the community wishes to assume more responsibility/support for, or leadership in, the educational process.**

Many parents in the community at large are interested in being more involved in the education of their children. Traditional public schools are organized as top-down hierarchies which can provide disincentives for the parents and families of students to be involved. The structure of a traditional public school may encourage parents to believe responsibility for education of children resides with the school rather than with the family. Studies show that greater parental involvement in the education of children leads to better outcomes.

Highland seeks to eliminate disincentives to participation by providing a model in which parent involvement in the education of children is expected. Highland attracts families with parents who are interested in being involved in the process. These parents are encouraged through a volunteer hours agreement, and by participating on an elected parent board of directors, to have a high level of participation in the social and operational aspects of the school. This leads to a sense of community at Highland which is unmatched at other schools, and provides additional incentive for parents to be involved in the academic success of their children.

**A description of the educational program of the school.**

Highland Community School is a Montessori program, with significant additional resources focused on multicultural education, creative arts, and non-violence.

The heart and soul of Highland is a shared educational philosophy that guides decision-making at every level. The teaching staff, the administration, and the parents are in agreement with the fundamental tenets of Montessori philosophy. This means that all of our teachers are Montessori certified, and the philosophical belief in Montessori pedagogy is fundamental to daily classroom

practices and childrearing at home. One of the most critical and key challenges is to maintain Highland as a true Montessori offering. This is a constant concern for the leadership, both parental and staff, at Highland. This understanding is critical in all conversations concerning our school.

The Montessori approach to education was initially developed by Dr. Maria Montessori in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Above all, Dr. Montessori stressed the importance of respecting each child as an individual, having a thorough knowledge of child development and being a sensitive observer of the child. She believed that these teacher attributes allowed one to “follow the child” in facilitating and creating opportunities for experiences and learning which are carefully matched to the child’s needs, interests, and developmental levels. She also stressed the importance of preparing an environment for every child which allowed the child to be a highly engaged and active participant. Montessori educated children are more self-directed as a result of their experiences, and arguably better prepared than traditionally educated peers to meet the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing world.

The Montessori model uses looping and multi-age classrooms to achieve additional benefits for the children. Montessori classrooms span multiple educational levels and use *looping* to develop longer term relationships between the teacher and students, and between the students with each other. As a child enters a Montessori classroom, there are older children in the classroom who already understand the classroom rules and procedures. Students benefit by having relationships with teachers for three years rather than one. Students also benefit by learning to work with both older and younger peers to both learn and teach.

### **The Montessori Preschool Program (3, 4, and 5 year old Kindergarten) – Children’s House**

Children’s House is a nurturing, homelike environment for young children. It contains materials that have been prepared by the Montessori teacher in order to help the children develop in various areas. On any given day, the children choose their own work from among materials displayed on open shelves (Montessori Tools), and may use any material for which they have received an introductory lesson. Over a period of time, the children learn to work with a high degree of

independence and concentration, developing intense focus and a greater depth of knowledge as a result.

There are five areas in the Montessori preschool curriculum:

***Practical Life:*** This area enhances the development of hand-eye coordination, gross motor skills, and cognitive order, through care for the child him/herself, the environment, development of social relationships, and coordination of physical movement.

***Sensorial:*** This area enables children to order, classify, and describe sensory impressions related to length, width, temperature, color, pitch, mass, etc.

***Mathematics:*** This area makes use of manipulative materials so that the children internalize concepts of numbers, symbols, sequences, operations, and the memorization of basic facts.

***Language Arts:*** This area includes oral language development, written expression, reading, the study of grammar, creative dramatics, and children's literature. Basic skills in writing and reading are developed through the use of sandpaper letters, alphabet cut-outs, and a variety of other presentations that support children in linking letter symbols and sounds effortlessly, and to express their thoughts through writing.

***Cultural Activities:*** In this area, children are exposed to basics of geography, history, world cultures, life sciences, and earth sciences. Music, art, and movement education are part of the integrated cultural curriculum.

In Children's House, children experience a unified social, physical, and intellectual development. They develop a solid foundation that includes a positive attitude towards school, inner security and a sense of order, pride in their physical environment, curiosity, skill in concentration, the habit of initiative, the ability to make decisions, self-discipline, and a sense of responsibility to other members of the class, school, and community. This foundation enables them to acquire more specialized knowledge and skills throughout their school career.



The older children within this group also begin to practice the expanded educational opportunities that will be the focus of the next phase of their education – moving beyond the classroom. Each late spring, the 5 year old students go on an overnight camping trip (a tradition that continues through the entire elementary program). Four year old students also begin to explore the world beyond their classroom, but with smaller scale activities like trips to the museum, the library, and the Urban Ecology Center at Washington Park.

### **The Montessori Elementary Program (1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grades) – Lower Elementary and Upper Elementary**

The Montessori elementary program builds upon the preschool experience. As such, the classroom materials continue to serve as a means to an end, developing imagination, aiding in abstraction, and generating a world view about the human task and purpose. Interdisciplinary studies combine geological, biological, and anthropological science. In each of these areas, children practice the skills of classification and critical thinking. Children engage with questions about the origins of the universe, the nature of life, people and their differences, and other substantial intellectual pursuits. These lessons support what Montessori called “the cosmic mind” and what former Highland teacher and principal Tim Souers described as “making the transition into the social world.”

The classroom environment for six to twelve year old students focuses much more on working in small groups, teaching children how to work together, and to solve problems in a proactive, social way as much as possible.

However, as this “cosmic mind” develops, the classroom alone is unable to meet the children’s needs for learning. Field trips and partnerships with community organizations become a critical part of Highland students’ elementary education. For example, in partnership with the Milwaukee Bicycle Collective, Highland’s 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Grade students – many of whom had never previously learned to ride a bicycle – met weekly to learn basic bike mechanics and bicycle repair. Students learned how to fix/replace flat tires, tighten brakes, adjust derailleurs, and other important lessons in math, mechanical engineering, transportation and our environment, while working

cooperatively. In the Montessori tradition, the first students to learn these skills assisted subsequent groups of students. The project culminated with a school bike ride, in which our students joined their parents, teachers and Milwaukee Bicycle Collective members in a community ride on the Hank Aaron Trail.

Each spring, Highland elementary students put on a school play. This helps them exercise their creativity, learn to speak and perform in public, learn to plan for things like costumes and props, and work together to create and perform an artistic project. Because our building does not have an appropriate theater space, it also fosters relationships between Highland and our community, and affords teachers, staff, and parents to model cooperative and sharing behavior with other community leaders.

Highland students have also studied art through the Milwaukee Art Museum's junior docent program, developed and implemented a recycling program within the school, and take on additional new projects as their studies and interests naturally lead to them. Highland faithfully implements the Montessori educational system in most areas, such as practical life, sensorial materials, language, and math. However, we augment several areas, such as study of physical geography with cultural information. We also augment our overall curriculum with additional enrichment in physical education, music, art, and along with our multicultural studies, food.

As a capstone to the elementary program, Highland 6<sup>th</sup> graders travel to New York City to participate in the Montessori Model United Nations (MMUN). This program is a year-long project, culminating in a three-day simulation session in which student delegates represent selected member nations of the United Nations and participate in writing, presenting and debating original resolutions that deal with current world problems, issues and political situations.

The MMUN offers students an opportunity to become active participants in the issues at hand through MMUN sponsored activities. Delegates interact and work with students from all around the world. A strong sense of community and social justice is forged as they must work together, observing rules of conduct, negotiate and reach a consensus. Student delegates also participate in

global education, social action programs and serve as mentors of the program. The participants actually hold their conference at the UN, where they sit in the seats of Delegates, in the meeting rooms where history is made.

### **The Adolescent Program (7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grades)**

The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade Montessori Adolescent Program, for the 12-14 year old, is built on the foundations of the elementary program. Students are expected to bring a high level of independence and self-direction, a comfort with collaborative work, and a love of learning for learning's sake. The manipulative materials of the elementary level are rarely present, as adolescents have moved beyond their applications and are now solidly comfortable with the more adult learning techniques of reading, discussion, and application to a task.

With their expanding capacity for abstraction and critical thought, adolescents are highly creative thinkers and learners. Our interdisciplinary project-based approach supports flexible thinking and a personal connection to what students are learning. While traditional education often teaches facts that are isolated from life outside the classroom, the Montessori adolescent program offers lessons with practical applications that allow students to make improvements in that community. "What will I use this for?" is an often-asked question of the adolescent, as he is determined to use knowledge to DO something in the world. Projects such as monitoring the neighborhood watershed, building and maintaining a large garden, or working at a homeless shelter, are real world opportunities for many lessons in science, language arts, and practical life skills.

In order to accommodate a wide range of interests and learning styles, teachers vary their techniques in the classroom; lectures, seminars, group learning, and hands-on activities are all employed to target different types of learners. In this way, teachers can expect students to be fully engaged in their learning. In the adolescent program, students demonstrate their mastery of material thorough various methods: quizzes and tests, book reports, oral presentations, group work, visual projects, demonstrations, and labs. Science, mathematics, social studies, language and writing are a natural outcome of the adolescent curriculum.

Montessori adolescents continue to learn without letter grades or gold stars. Conversations with the teachers and written remarks on papers compliment the most important barometer of success: the student's own knowledge that he has put forth his best effort. The mixed-age class supports each student in applying himself in a unique way to a group experience. Longer blocks of time each day for subject areas such as Humanities, Creative Expression and Math allow enough time for each student to follow personal threads of interest without interruption.

The Adolescent Program is holistic in its approach to educating the whole child, not only the child's cognitive potential, but also his or her physical, social/emotional, and moral growth. The courses are interrelated so that the student realizes the interconnections of life. It is also holistic in that the school, family and child maintain the partnership built in the child's younger years which promotes an optimal learning environment.

**The methods the charter school will use to enable pupils to attain the educational goals under Wis. Stat. § 118.01**

Highland will continue to meet or exceed legally required educational goals through our effective, well-documented implementation of the Montessori curriculum.

Assessment is a daily occurrence in each classroom. Because the Montessori curriculum is child-centered and is led by the individual child's needs and interest areas as well as her level of concentration and focus, teachers must be aware of where a child is at all times. Daily logs are kept on every student. Once they are given a lesson, they must master that skill before they move on to the next skill level. All assessments are ability based. Teachers meet with their peers on a regular basis to discuss ongoing needs, plan, organize and evaluate the progress taking place in each classroom. Highland also administers the standardized tests required in other MPS schools, and publicly reports and analyzes those scores for additional accountability. We believe that the most appropriate measures of success for Montessori students extend far beyond academic testing; however, we also take seriously our responsibility to ensure that all of our students demonstrate academic proficiency in addition to building essential character traits such as perseverance, intellectual curiosity, conscientiousness, self-control, and concern for others.

Highland believes that students with special needs can and should be, wherever possible, served within the same mainstream classroom as all students. A Montessori education is a wonderful match for children with special needs. The individualized curriculum allows all of our children, including children with special needs, to fully participate in the Montessori classroom. The mixed age groupings necessitate a wide and complete range of materials within each room and each child is able to move through these materials at his or her own pace. Since all children are working on different skills, no one is set apart or viewed as different from their peers. Additionally, children who are in mixed age classrooms stay with the same teacher for several years in a row. This means that their teacher has every opportunity to intimately understand developmental levels, learning styles, and family support systems. Highland takes great pride in being a welcoming and supportive school for all students, and we work hard to ensure through our Response to Intervention efforts that all students are fully supported.

**The governance structure of the school, including the method to be followed by the school to ensure parental involvement**

Highland's governance structure and level of parent involvement may be our single greatest strength as an educational community. Highland is run by a Board of Directors consisting of between 9 and 14 Highland parents, elected by the full Highland parent body. The parent Board has full legal responsibility for all decisions relating to the operation of the school. It sets and monitors the budget, makes and amends all school policies, hires and fires the director, and, in conjunction with the teachers, supports the curriculum.

One of the policy requirements that Highland's parent Board has created is a parent volunteer-hours agreement. While the exact number of hours required has varied from year to year, the concept is core to Highland's community, and has been since our inception more than 40 years ago. The school-parent contract also outlines how the school, parents, and students will share responsibility for ensuring student achievement including an expectation of volunteer time for each parent. This contract is signed upon admission to the school and is revisited on an annual basis. While Highland does not sanction families who fail to fulfill the volunteer commitment, signing the agreement sets the tone for a school culture in which families are always welcome in the school and are valued as essential partners in the education of our children. Students at Highland see that

their families are part of the school. As a result, the wall that exists in many schools between home and school is not present at Highland, and we have a productive partnership with the families of our students, even families that may not initially have felt comfortable in a school setting.

Many activities qualify towards volunteer time, including serving as a room parent, acting as a member of the Board of Directors, making healthy snacks for our children, helping set up or cleanup for school events, helping in our office, selling items in our fund-raising projects, assisting in our library, and working on available projects or providing childcare during our parent workdays. While circumstances do not allow 100% of our parents to volunteer extensively every year, all of our parents participate to the best of their ability, and we work with each family to find ways to make such participation succeed for both the family and the school. Furthermore, we do have nearly 100% parent participation in the most crucial activities, such as parent-teacher conferences.

Highland employs a full time Parent Involvement Coordinator, whose role is to engage parents through coordination of school-wide activities like Parent Work Days. The Coordinator also helps identify potential parent-leaders, helps new and returning parents identify volunteer committees and other opportunities that fit within their interests, skills, and available time, and tracks parent volunteer hours. This position has been part of Highland's culture for much of our history, and as such, we have developed considerable data over time, documenting our successful parent engagement.

Highland parents are actively engaged in every aspect of our school. Furthermore, over time, parents take the opportunity to explore new areas and contribute to Highland in new ways. This is particularly true for our parents who first come to the school with minimal experience as leaders and activists. Those parents are the most likely to initially fulfill their volunteer hours exclusively in "helping" roles. However, as they become more comfortable in the community, and as the Parent Involvement Coordinator gets to know them and helps them see where they might be able to take more leadership, they often become engaged at a deeper level, learning new skills and growing as

professionals as well as parents. Several current or former Highland staff members initially became part of our community in this way.

In 2008-2009, Highland parents volunteered a total of 8,800 hours (equivalent to over four full-time year-round employees) within the school.

**Subject to. Wis. Stat. §§ 118.40(7)(a), 118.19(1) and 121.02(1)(a)2, the qualifications that must be met by the individuals to be employed in the school**

Highland abides by all state and federal employment, record keeping, and contracting laws as applicable. Our lead teachers hold AMI or AMS certification as Montessori teachers; other instructional staff will be required to attend Montessori educational development programs and other appropriate professional development training as determined by the parent board and the director.

Highland also complies with MPS policies on criminal background screening, and all contractors will abide by the MPS policy on minimum wage.

**The procedures that the school will follow to ensure the health and safety of the pupils**

Highland will adhere to all Wisconsin state laws and MPS policies regarding health and safety standards.

**The means by which the school will achieve a diversity among its pupils that is reflective of the school district school-age population**

Highland Community School has a 40+ year history of being a parent-run, community-oriented, Montessori school in Milwaukee's near-west side. Before moving to the building at 17<sup>th</sup> and Highland, Highland was located in a historic Pabst mansion at 31<sup>st</sup> and Highland Blvd since the mid-1990s; before that, we were located at 20<sup>th</sup> and Highland in the Victor Schlitz mansion.

Throughout the last 40 years, our focus has been on serving the children of Milwaukee with a particular focus on our immediate community. 60% of our students live within our "primary target area" which is bounded by 35<sup>th</sup> Street on the west, I-43 on the east, North Avenue on the north, and I-94 on the south – approximately 1 mile in each direction from our original location. An

additional 25% live within our “secondary target area,” approximately an additional mile north and west of the primary target area.

In 2012-2013, our student population is 56% African American, 34% white, 8% Hispanic, and 1% Native American and Asian. 45% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. 6.3% of our students are in Special Education.

### **The requirements for admission to the school**

As described in the previous section, our admissions outreach is inextricably linked to our commitment to creating a school environment that is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse.

When demand exceeds the number of spaces available, as often happens, students are selected by lottery until the number of available spaces are filled. Because we select students by lottery, the primary work of ensuring a racial and ethnic balance among our pupils that reflects the City of Milwaukee and the MPS school age population is done by our Admissions Committee. They work hard to make sure that the families in our diverse primary and secondary target neighborhoods know about Highland, and have the opportunity to come in and see our school in action.

Because of our commitment to the Montessori approach, we admit the overwhelming majority of our students at age 3. Students are admitted in the later grades only as seats are vacated.

### **Enrollment and grade level distribution for each year of the charter**

For most of Highland’s first 40 years, we served students from age 3 through the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. We expanded to provide one of the first true Montessori programs serving toddlers from 14 months to 3 years, and in the 2008-2009 school year we began adding an upper elementary (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade) program. In the 2013-2014 school year our adolescent (7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade) program began.