

Inspiration

...where philanthropy begins

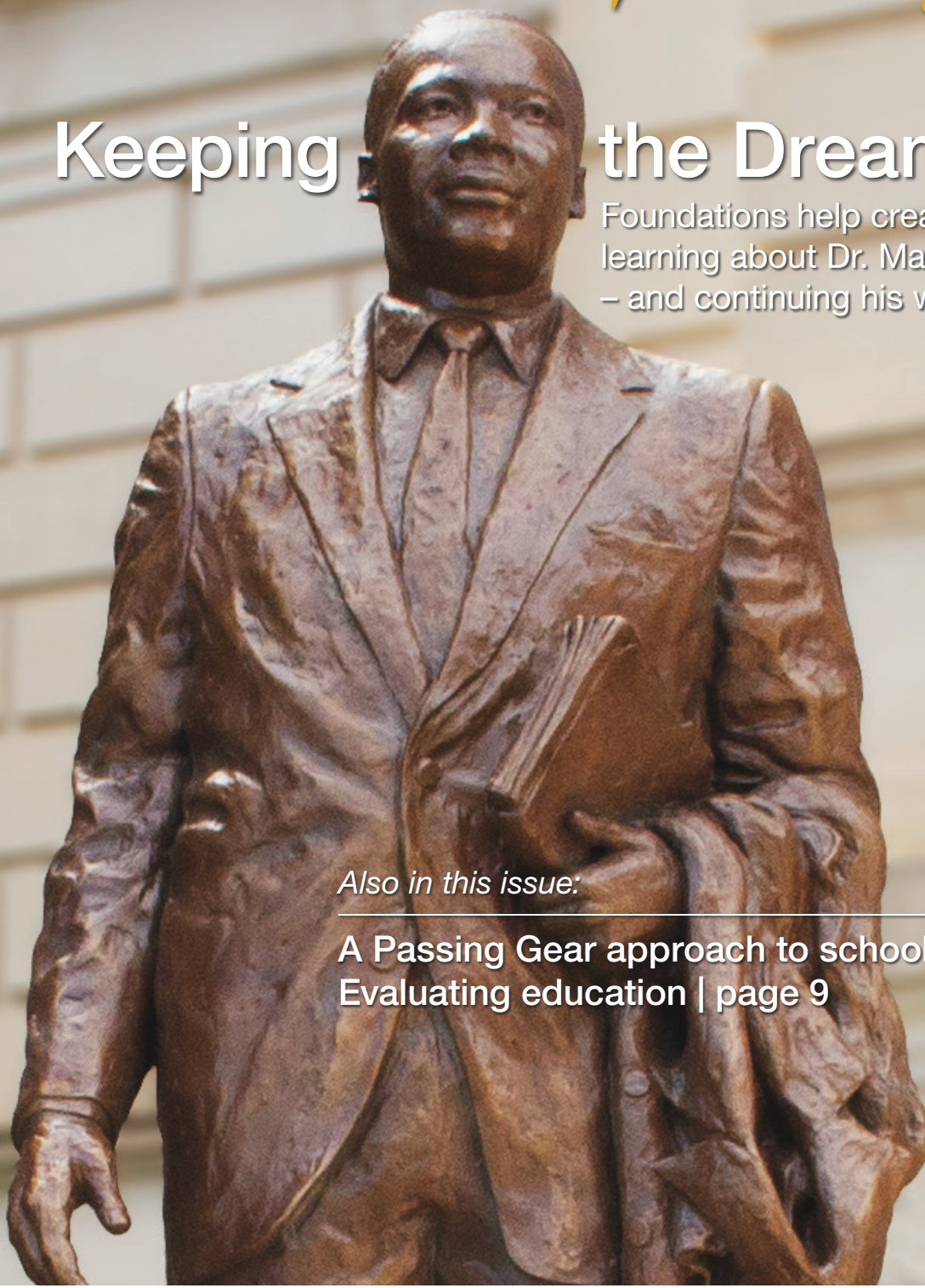
Keeping the Dream Alive

Foundations help create spaces for learning about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – and continuing his work.

Also in this issue:

A Passing Gear approach to school lunches | page 7

Evaluating education | page 9





PUTTING MONTESSORI ON THE MAP

A Family Foundation's Investment and Evaluation Draw International Attention

By Betsey Russell

A series of grants made by the Self Family Foundation – the small, \$32 million family foundation in Greenwood, South Carolina – is garnering international attention because of their impact.

Since the late 1990s, the foundation has made grants to support the expansion of Montessori classrooms throughout the state's public schools. Now, the foundation has also funded a five-year evaluation of its work.

The recently published results – from a study conducted by the Riley Institute at Furman University – show that children in South Carolina's public Montessori classrooms outperform their peers on state standardized tests, demonstrate higher levels of creativity, have higher school attendance, and fewer disciplinary incidents. **More specifically:**

- *Montessori public school students exhibited significantly more achievement growth on state standardized tests than demographically similar non-Montessori students in math, English language arts (ELA), and social studies. The results for science were mixed.*
- *Low-income, Montessori public school students scored significantly higher on state standardized tests than low-income, non-Montessori public school students in ELA, math, and social studies.*
- *Montessori students generally performed better than or similar to non-Montessori students on measures of executive function, although results were mixed.*
- *Montessori students exhibited significantly higher levels of creativity than non-Montessori students.*
- *Montessori public school students*

consistently demonstrated higher school attendance than similar non-Montessori public school students.

- *Montessori public school students were significantly less likely to have had a disciplinary incident during the school year when compared to similar non-Montessori students.*

This study, one of the first and by far the largest ever to explore public school Montessori programs, is making a splash in national media and international conferences. Brooke Culclasure, research director at the Riley Institute, has presented findings nationally at the American Montessori Society conference in Denver, and internationally at Montessori gatherings in Prague and Amsterdam. She credits the attention to the Self Family Foundation's willingness to invest in objective evaluation.

"The foundation made investments and wanted to do a rigorous study to make sure their investments paid off," says Culclasure. "The great thing was that they really understood the value of longitudinal research that's rigorous and uses sophisticated methods, and they understood that it takes time to do it right. It's a brave and useful thing to do and makes a lot of sense. A lot of people don't get the importance of evaluation and being able to show what your investment has produced."

Culclasure and her team worked with the foundation's staff and board to design the study, which included one year of planning and four years of data collection. After the first year of data collection, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee also helped researchers collect additional data and observe more classrooms. The Self Family

Foundation's reputation also helped facilitate data collection from the state Department of Education.

"It was helpful that this was a homegrown effort," says Culclasure. "The foundation knew the local setting and the players and understood Montessori. That not only made the research easier, but they are the reason that South Carolina has the largest number of public Montessori programs in the country. Our state is a leader because of their early investment."

Small Investment, Big Impact

Hallmarks of Montessori education include multi-age classrooms, uninterrupted blocks of work time, guided choices of work activities, and peer learning. In addition, Montessori classrooms are outfitted with specific learning materials, arranged in a precise way, in strategically designed learning environments. In Montessori education, there are no extrinsic rewards offered or grades assigned, and children are encouraged to explore personal interests while widely engaging with others.

The Self Family Foundation's interest in Montessori education came from the late Virginia Self, daughter of the foundation's founder and longtime board chair. Ms. Self learned about Montessori education when she spent time in London and brought a passionate interest home to South Carolina. Foundation President Frank Wideman III became an avid supporter after visiting the state's first public school Montessori classroom in 1998.

"I credit Ed Taylor, who was the new superintendent in neighboring Laurens County,



Enter a Montessori classroom and you'll see students quietly and intently engaged in a variety of independent or small group learning activities. Teachers coach and gently guide, rather than lecture.

In total, that amounted to less than \$1 million over almost 20 years.

“We tried to think strategically,” Wideman says. “How do we train teachers? Fund the program at Lander. How do we encourage teachers to participate? Pay their tuition. How do we get the state to invest? Fund a study that shows the return on investment. We made the initial investments, but as we demonstrated interest and impact, others have stepped in to sustain it.”

Of course, the foundation’s investment wasn’t without challenges over the years, and there are still some hurdles to expansion.

“You have to have a principal who believes in Montessori, otherwise leadership can be a barrier within some school districts,” says Wideman. “Also, Montessori learning doesn’t always match up well with state-mandated standardized testing. And the Montessori approach begins with three-year-olds, which can be a challenge for schools that don’t already have pre-K programs.”

Parents also can require convincing, since Montessori classrooms look very different from what they may associate with effective learning. Montessori education was initially developed to serve children in low-income communities but can carry an elitist reputation today. In some cases, parents may distrust the motives or methods of public Montessori and reject it.

Continued Growth Statewide

As the Self Family Foundation made its initial investments in public Montessori education, the State’s Department of Education began to take notice. In 2006, Dr. Jim Rex became state superintendent of education and wanted to expand school choice, including the option of Montessori classrooms. He created a new position at the state level to give school districts hands-on help.

South Carolina became the only state at that time to have a full-time Montessori staff person, and since then the number of programs across the state has grown from fewer than 20 to a total of 45 schools in 24 districts and 21 counties at the conclusion of the Riley Institute study.

Today, approximately 7,500 South Carolina students are enrolled in a public Montessori program, and 54 percent of them are from low-income families.

The combination of significant growth and positive findings from the study are more than enough proof for the foundation that the investment has been worthwhile, says Wideman. But the real reward comes from seeing the students in action.

“For me, the biggest win is seeing how kids thrive in our Montessori classrooms,” he says. “It’s inspiring to watch them become intrinsic learners. That will pay off for the rest of their lives.”

with introducing me to Montessori education,” says Wideman. “He had started a classroom in Clarendon County, one of the poorest areas of the state, and took me there to see it. I was very impressed with what I was seeing, and he explained the Montessori philosophy to me. He wanted to start the same approach in Laurens County, and we helped him do it. That was our first Montessori grant.”

From there, the Self Family Foundation board realized that expanding Montessori education to more classrooms would require creating a supply of Montessori-trained teachers. The foundation reached out to nearby Lander University and provided support to integrate Montessori certification into the university’s College of Education.

Lander became one of the only universities in the country to offer Montessori teacher education. Undergraduate students can pursue a Montessori education track and

graduate as certified Montessori teachers. Graduate students can include Montessori certification as part of a graduate teaching degree, then return to their districts to help implement the Montessori program.

Lander University and the foundation promoted this opportunity by working with the South Carolina Montessori Alliance. In 2003, the university created the Virginia Self Center for Montessori Excellence. Since then, more than 150 teachers have earned a Montessori certification.

The foundation’s financial investment included initial salary support for the Montessori education program director at Lander University, funding for Greenwood County teachers to obtain master’s degrees, resources to up-fit existing classrooms to meet Montessori standards in three counties, and, of course, funding for the Riley Institute study.



In Montessori education, there are no extrinsic rewards offered or grades assigned, and children are encouraged to explore personal interests while widely engaging with others.