

Montclair Community Pre-K

Montclair, NJ

Overview

In 1997, the racially integrated public school system in Montclair, New Jersey, decided that it could no longer afford its 20-year-old preschool program. In response, the township created Montclair Community Pre-K to provide equal access to all preschool-age children and to continue to reflect the diversity and racial balance of the public school student population.

The mission of Montclair Community Pre-K is to offer a high-quality educational program for families of young children that provides developmentally appropriate early childhood education and support for parents. The school uses a curriculum based on the work of Dr. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which recognizes that children have different strengths and seeks to build on these strengths to promote both learning and love of learning. The program focuses on hands-on exploration and discovery learning and actively incorporates the interests of children in developing classroom curricula.

The program is located in a spacious, three-story modern school facility with 12 classrooms specifically designed for young children. Adjacent to the main building are a small park, a playground, and a field, as well as a mobile unit annex that houses two classrooms and a large meeting room where parenting workshops and other activities for families are held. The school is open to all Montclair residents, regardless of their ability to pay, with priority given to 4- and 5-year-old children (3-year-olds are admitted when space permits). Among participating families, 47% receive tuition assistance; 25% have annual

Profile

Staffing

Total: 38 (25 teachers and teachers' aides, 6 lunch aides, 1 family coordinator, 5 administrative staff, and 1 nurse)

Children & Families Served

- 225 children in full-day preschool
- 75 children using extended-care services
- On-site summer program provided by YMCA

Budget

- Total: \$1.8 million
- Per child \$7,237

Services Provided On-Site

- Access to social services
- Before- and after-school care
- Comprehensive early childhood education
- Home visits
- Parenting education
- Summer program for children

Partners

- COPE Center of Montclair
- Junior League of Montclair-Newark

household incomes of \$30,000 or less. Just over half—51%—are white, 43% are Black, interracial, or Latino, 2% are Asian, and 2% are of other ethnicities.

How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Montclair Community Pre-K builds five key protective factors that reduce child abuse and neglect. Programs, services, and characteristics contributing to each protective factor are listed below:

Parental Resilience

- Access to Social Services
- Emergency Support
- Family Network Center
- Pajama Club

Social Connections

- Parents Association
- Social Events
- Volunteer Opportunities

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Informal Resources and Interaction with Staff
- Parent/Caregiver–Teacher/Staff Communication
- Parenting Education Workshops

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Access to Social Services
- Emergency Support
- Family Network Center
- Parent/Caregiver–Teacher/Staff Communication

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Arts Activities
- Child-Emergent Curriculum
- Intergenerational Program
- Parent/Caregiver–Teacher/Staff Communication
- Parenting Education Workshops

- Local businesses
- Montclair Board of Education (Preschool Disabled Programs)
- Montclair Counseling Center
- Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence
- Montclair Nonprofits Organization
- Montclair YMCA

Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Staff are trained to notice indicators and warning signs and to observe and listen to children.
- Regular health checks are conducted in classrooms.
- Each teacher keeps a running journal on classroom activities and keeps track of situations that may warrant attention.

Staff take special care to reach out to families with:

- Children with special needs
- Multiple children in the home
- Multiple stressors
- Few outside supports
- Irregular attendance

Response Protocol

If a staff member is concerned about a family, he or she:

- Observes the child
- Talks to the family coordinator or the executive director

The family coordinator then:

- Meets with the parent(s) to talk about what is happening in the home
- Creates with the parent(s) a plan for resolving the issue and connects the parent(s) to additional services or resources, if necessary.

Key Program Features

Access to Social Services and Support in Times of Need

Classroom staff are often the first to be aware of family emergencies; they share information and concerns with an on-site family coordinator when they see signs that a family might need support. These staff members have daily contact with parents and support families in times of need.

The school is also connected to other resources in the community to which families may need to turn—including health, mental health, and child welfare services—and encourages families to reach out to each other in times of need. Last year, one of the families lost everything in a house fire. The entire school came together through a telephone chain, and parents and staff donated goods and money to help the family recover. In addition, classroom teachers, the school nurse, and the family coordinator offer services and support to families who are facing other types of crises, such as custody disputes, excessive corporal punishment at home, and financial crises.

Arts Program

In addition to regular classroom activities, specialized art teachers provide 45 minutes a week of visual art, music and movement (including drumming), vocal music, and physical education. Children explore aesthetic and musical creativity with accomplished artists from the community. The arts program also contributes to children's social and emotional development by encouraging self-expression.

Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

The director of the school is a recognized expert in the field of child welfare who brings years of experience working in prevention and intervention to the school setting. All staff are educated and knowledgeable about identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect and are sensitized to high-risk situations in

If a staff member suspects child abuse or neglect, he or she:

- Reports suspicions or concerns to the family coordinator, school nurse, or executive director

The family coordinator, school nurse, and executive director then:

- Meet to discuss the information
- Report the suspected abuse to child protective services, if warranted
- Inform the staff member of the report and of any follow-up that will take place
- Follow up with child protective services and the family

The staff member has the option to report the suspected abuse if the administrators do not, without repercussions (as required by law).

Staff Resources

When staff are concerned about a family, they can get support and information from the:

- Assistant executive director
- Executive director
- Family coordinator
- School nurse

Licensing & Accreditation

- Licensed by the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services
- Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children

which parents may need assistance. They are also trained to help parents access the assistance they need.

The school offers several features that help break the isolation of parenting, including supports, respite, and resources. A full-time family coordinator is available to counsel and refer parents to outside services and to help teachers address issues with children who are struggling or displaying challenging or disruptive behaviors in the classroom.

Cultural Responsiveness

The staff makeup of the school reflects the diversity of the area. Celebrating diversity is part of the school's mission. The school reaches out to families to ask for information about their cultural heritage and often includes this information as part of the curriculum. Staff are multilingual and assist in translation for families who are not native English speakers.

Extended-Care Programs

The school is open from 7:00 am–6:30 pm. The Early Risers Club, run by Pre-K faculty, provides fun and games, quiet activities, and arts and crafts for children who need care before school hours. The Pre-K also offers two after-school alternatives: after-school care and an after-school enrichment program (children enrolled in after-school care may also participate in enrichment activities). The after-school care program runs from 2:30 pm–6:30 pm and provides arts and crafts, story time, table games, music, and outdoor play. The after-school enrichment program supplements the daily school program from 2:45 pm–3:30 pm with such classes as foreign language, science, computer, dance, cooking, sports, arts and crafts, and drama.

Family Support and Parenting Education Services

The on-site Family Network Center is available as a resource to parents and caregivers of students at Montclair Community Pre-K. It provides drop-in hours twice weekly for parents and caregivers to meet each

What People Say

“When our son started at the Pre-K, he was almost four and had never been away from home. Everyone helped to make it a smooth and easy transition for all of us. We tell all our friends how much we like it here. The staff welcome everyone with open arms. We are so comfortable here, and our son loves it!”
—Parent

“Montclair Community Pre-K is truly an answer to every parent's prayer. They provide a warm, safe, and nurturing learning environment with an innovative and effective curriculum. The board of trustees, parents association, executive director, business manager, educational director, and caring teaching staff are supportive to Pre-K parents in countless ways via workshops and family activities. Thank you Montclair Community Pre-K for two truly unforgettable years.”
—Parent

“Our families feel welcomed and supported here. The Pre-K is a place where families with young children can be assured that many of the needs that they have will be met.”
—Eve Robinson,
Executive Director

“The school is progressive in the best sense—believing in the development of children as human beings, stimulating their various intelligences, a wonderful emphasis on the arts, and very humane teachers.”
—Dr. Howard Gardner, upon visiting the school on October 9, 2003

other and offer mutual support and hosts a monthly support group meeting and potluck dinner. Parenting education workshops include such topics as: how to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk, positive discipline, basic child development, sibling rivalry, understanding the Pre-K curriculum, and the social life of preschool children. The school employs a full-time family coordinator who oversees parenting education programs and family-related services and is available to parents for counseling and consultation. The family coordinator maintains a family resource library in her office and refers parents to community social services and supports, including programs to help with school tuition.

Health-related Services

The school promotes family health and well-being by educating families about issues that affect their children's health, such as nutrition, exercise, hygiene, lead paint, and immunizations. It also employs a full-time registered nurse who is available both for children's health needs and as a resource to parents on health issues. Educational and informational materials regarding health issues are available in the school's lobby, as is referral information for mammography, depression, blood pressure, and dental health screenings. The school nurse performs routine health screenings for all students—including hearing, vision, and dental health screenings—and follows up with families if she detects a need for further examination.

Intergenerational Program

The intergenerational program brings senior citizens from local senior centers to the school for interaction and storytelling with the children. Both the seniors and the children enjoy this opportunity to develop nurturing and caring relationships. The seniors visit classrooms weekly and participate in such activities as story time and art projects. Some years, the school also sponsors class visits to the senior centers.

Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent communication is a key principle in the school and among the larger community, which has worked hard to create a dialogue about social problem solving and violence reduction. The township sponsors a forum called Conversations on Race that helps bring different groups together to discuss issues that are at the root of some forms of violence. The school's curriculum emphasizes peaceful conflict resolution and problem solving.

Pajama Club

On Friday nights, Pre-K staff members operate a pajama club for all students and their siblings 3 years of age and older. The pajama club offers parents a night out from 7:00 pm–10:00 pm twice a month for a charge of \$12 per child, paid in advance. Children are encouraged to come dressed in their pajamas for stories, art, and music. Every month, the club “travels” to a different country and explores it together. Local restaurants have begun to offer discounts for families whose children participate in the club.

Parents Association

The parents association is very active, organizing activities for family involvement and offering parents volunteer opportunities at such events as a book fair, gift wrap sales, holiday celebrations, an African American heritage parade and festival, ice cream socials, and international potluck dinners. The association is also an active force for fundraising.

Parent/Caregiver–Teacher/Staff Communication

The school encourages active communication between parents and teachers around the needs of children. Parents are welcome in the building throughout the day and often visit classrooms to serve as resources or “extra hands” for certain activities. Teachers are encouraged to discuss any concerns and are happy to see parents regularly volunteering in their classrooms. On occasion, parents have been hired as substitute teachers, teaching assistants, and lunch aides. Teachers and other staff engage parents

informally by greeting them each day when they drop off their children and again at the end of the day at pick-up time. Classroom News, a newsletter outlining classroom activities, is sent home at least three times a week, classrooms feature bulletin boards where weekly lesson plans are posted, and teachers contribute to the organization's quarterly newsletter.

Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled twice a year, in the fall and in the spring. Conferences offer parents an opportunity to meet with the classroom team and to discuss issues related to their child's preschool experience. Parents are also encouraged to call their child's teachers to discuss concerns at any time and to schedule additional conferences as needed. Relationships between staff and parents are often close and reciprocal, with staff providing respite to families in times of need and offering help with childcare arrangements and other concrete support.

Staff Training

Staff participate in in-service trainings several times during the year. At least one of these sessions focuses on child abuse and neglect issues, including refreshers on identification and reporting. In addition, staff are encouraged to seek out professional development opportunities throughout the year. Many attend such summer institutes as Harvard University's Project Zero and the Schools Attuned Summer Institute. Staff are actively involved in attaining higher-education degrees, which the school supports through a tuition reimbursement benefit, and are encouraged to attend at least one early childhood training session or conference each school year.

Support for Children with Special Needs

Montclair Community Pre-K is a full-inclusion school, which means that its classrooms welcome children with varying levels of ability. The full-time family coordinator works with parents of children with special needs to ensure that their needs are met in school and to help parents connect with resources and gain knowledge to help them nurture their children. The school district's developmental learning center (DLC),

which offers a half-day program for children with special needs, is housed in the school. Some special-needs children attend a typical Pre-K classroom all day, with in-class support from DLC staff; others attend the half-day DLC program and attend the Pre-K for the rest of their day. The family coordinator works closely with the school district's child study team and the DLC teachers to make sure every child's needs are met.

