

# ***Proposal: A Pre K-8 Montessori School in Greater Fulton Hill***

**Date:** June 16, 2006

**To:** Neighborhood Roundtable-Ad Hoc Education Committee

**From:** Greater Fulton Hill Civic Association

**Re:** Proposal: A Pre K-8 Montessori School in Greater Fulton Hill

## **Why a school in Greater Fulton Hill?**

One hill beyond Church Hill, bordering Eastern Henrico and Varina to the east, and Shockoe Bottom to the west, Greater Fulton Hill is a community of 4,600 persons tucked away in Richmond's East End. One in three Greater Fulton Hill (GFH) residents is a child under the age of eighteen. Spread out over three census tracts: (Fulton-211, Fulton Hill-212, and Montrose Heights-210); Greater Fulton Hill is an urban village without a school, library, adult education, job training, or health center to support life-long learning and wellness. Consequence or coincidence? Forty-eight percent of GFH residents 25 years and older do not possess a high school diploma or the equivalent. Forty-one percent of residents live on less than \$15,000 per year. Truancy, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, poverty, poor nutrition, and gun violence are among the challenges GFH residents face.

To help break the cycle of low educational attainment and poverty in their community, Greater Fulton Hill residents wish to work together with all parties concerned to establish a Pre-K-8 Montessori School in the community. Thirty years ago, the Robert Fulton School (located in Fulton Hill) was closed. From that point on GFH children were bused to schools in Church Hill.

Living in 1,700 homes, half-rented, half-owned, there are nearly 1,000 Greater Fulton Hill children ages three through thirteen (2000 Census) who could benefit from a neighborhood school. Through their civic, business, and neighborhood watch associations, residents of GFH have been working for years to establish long-term community-building resources in their community. A community without a school is like children without parents. With no center for learning in the community, valuable relationships between neighboring families are not forged. Over time, this weakens the fabric of the community. The corner stone of sustainable community development, is a quality neighborhood school. The construction of a Pre-K-8 Montessori School in GFH would fortify the immediate community and the City as a whole.

## **What is the Montessori Method?**

Over a hundred years ago, Dr. Maria Montessori developed an educational method to work with children in the orphanages and slums of Rome, children who were thought to be unteachable. She designed an intentional educational environment wherein the child, the teacher, and the classroom play equal roles in the child's success. To stimulate their curiosity, Dr. Montessori designed hands-on learning materials that were inherently appealing to the children. By using these materials, the children were able to develop academic strengths, social/emotional well-being, and fine/gross motor skills. In this paradigm, the teacher observes, records, and assesses how each child interacts with the materials, intervening to reinforce lessons and to introduce the child to the next skill-based challenge when he/she has mastered the previous lesson.

## **Why Montessori?**

- **Montessori Schools work.** They produce self-directed, discerning, problem-solving young people, who enter the work force prepared to work and able to innovate. Not originally intended for use in exclusive private schools, because of its effectiveness the Montessori method became a pedagogy of choice for privileged American families. But that is changing. The academic and social success of students who receive a Montessori education is convincing public school districts to adopt the method. There are over 5,000 public Montessori

Schools in 120 school districts across the nation. Schools in Hartford, Connecticut, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati are among those achieving outstanding results.

- **Individualized instruction is a keystone of the Montessori method.** Montessori classrooms focus on individualized learning, respect for the students, and self-initiated discovery. Children advance through the academic curriculum at their own pace. They are assisted by older students and teachers who are monitoring the daily progress of each and every child.
- **Montessori classes use multi-age groups, which foster peer teaching.** Multi-age groupings enhance the Montessori dynamic by reducing competition, maximizing curriculum options available to any one child, and providing a real world atmosphere that plays a vital role in socialization. Older children model advanced work for younger children in the group. Because one set of materials suffices for three grades, multi-aged groups are cost effective. Montessori programs group children as follows: Preschool: Ages 3-6, Elementary I: Ages 6-9, Elementary II: Ages 9-12.
- **Montessori schools involve parents in the educational process.** Parents are updated on the progress their children are making during regularly scheduled conferences. To enhance their child's school experience parents are taught how to utilize Montessori methods at home. Parents are encouraged to observe their children in class, attend parent workshops, and volunteer in meaningful ways.

Educational success, in the Montessori tradition, is realized when a child has developed a life-long love of learning, when he or she experiences success in future educational settings and professional endeavors, and when he or she begins to contribute to the well-being of his local and global communities. However, it must be said that children who have been through a Montessori preschool typically outscore children who have been through other preschool programs in all areas of learning.

To support the community's goal to have a Montessori school built in GFH, the Neighborhood Resource Center (established in 2005 to provide free educational, cultural, and community organizing resources for youth and adults in GFH), is piloting a half-day summer Montessori program for 3- and 4-year olds. Funding is being sought to make the program available year-round. As plans are developed to build a pre-k-8 school in GFH, the children and families participating in the NRC's pre-school program will be ready to transition into the larger school. Starting a school with children and parents already familiar with the Montessori method will help create a strong foundation for the new school.

**Cost:** In the long-run Montessori classrooms save money. Montessori materials are expensive but they last for years and years. Montessori teachers attend a year long training program before they enter the classroom. This training costs approximately \$6,000 per teacher. A Montessori training center is being planned and should be up and running in Richmond by next summer. Once trained, Montessori teachers' salaries are comparable with public school salaries. Montessori school tuitions are less than \$12,000 per year per student, which is what Richmond public schools pay per student. Tuition costs at Richmond Montessori School (a private Montessori school in the west end) are as follows: Toddler through Primary (ages 2 ½ -5): \$7,150, Kindergarten-5<sup>th</sup> grade: \$10,250, Middle School (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade): \$10,500.

**Site:** There is a 3.8-acre site in Fulton at the corner of Government Rd. and Admiral Gravelly Blvd. The vacant land is owned by RRHA. The land was designated for a school in the City's 1982 Master Plan when the first phase of the Fulton Redevelopment plan was being implemented. Today, within walking distance of the proposed school site, scores of single-family homes fill a new grid of streets know as Fulton Manor. Bigger, more expensive homes are being constructed in the remaining lands between Fulton Hill and Williamsburg Avenue. We often hear people in the suburbs talk about how they would love to live in the City...but in the end, they choose suburban life for the schools. A public Montessori school in Fulton says Richmond is serious about providing innovative educational opportunities that have a proven track record. What better anchor for existing residents; what better magnet for prospective home-buyers, than a community-supported Pre-K-8 Public Montessori School in Greater Fulton Hill.

# PROPOSED SCHOOL SITE

