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## Two early childhood Montessori Schools team up for fall opening

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By: [Patrick Larkin](#) [1]



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Janice LaFloe, founder of a new American Indian Montessori school looking to start this fall on the East Side, stands with her assistant teacher Annette Whitener outside the school building at 1909 Ivy Ave. (Patrick Larkin/Review)



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Curriculum at the American Indian Montessori will include hands-on exercises to instill an ability to focus in youngsters. In one activity available to kids, they'll polish wooden eagles. (Patrick Larkin/Review)

## American Indian and Hmong pre-schools add early childcare options to neighborhood

Two small early childhood education Montessori schools focusing on language preservation will likely be coming to the East Side this fall.

One, an American Indian Montessori school, will focus on the preservation of the Ojibwe and Dakota languages, while offering early childhood education and childcare for low-income American Indian youths.

Similarly, a Hmong Montessori School called Hmoob Toj Siab Montessori Academy, started by Hmong American Partnership, will focus on preserving the Hmong language and will offer early childhood education.

The two schools were independently looking for a building, and decided to partner up and share a building owned by Hope Lutheran Church, 1909 Ivy Ave, in the Greater East Side neighborhood.

Both schools are part of a Montessori Center of Minnesota initiative called Montessori Partners Serving All Children.

The schools will start out with around 15 kids apiece, ages 3 and 4, and will expand to around 30, with a mix of kids ages 3 to 6. The majority of the kids enrolled will likely be from low-income

families. If all goes well, they could open this fall.

Connie Black, director of outreach programs at the Montessori Center of Minnesota, said these schools are “two new examples of communities of need that are going to be able to access high-quality early childhood education.”

Black said the schools’ opening is one step toward closing the achievement gap. The hope is that by connecting low-income kids with early education, they’ll stand a better chance at succeeding once they’re in the school system.

Black noted that the two schools have been looking for locations for nearly three years.

“We’re very excited to see these two finally launch,” Black said.

Margaret Olson, lead teacher for the Hmong Montessori, said the students there will be among native Hmong speakers. Though Olson herself will speak English to the students, the environment will be designed to maintain the Hmong language and cultural heritage amongst young Hmong kids.

East Sider Janice LaFloe, founder and lead teacher for the American Indian Montessori, is hoping the school will be a small but well-needed resource for the American Indian community.

Early childhood education is “a huge gap for the American Indian community,” she said.

The school will offer Dakota and Ojibwe language instruction via two trained instructors.

LaVon Lee, advisor to the school, noted both languages are indigenous to Minnesota and both are dying out quickly.

Lee said the languages are “on the brink of becoming extinct.”

Lee also works for the Grotto Foundation on their Native Language Initiative program. The program emphasizes preserving American Indian languages.

American Indian elders are dying, and there aren’t new people to take their place, Lee said. But on a positive note, she added, the kids at the new Montessori will be absorbing the languages, and hopefully with helping preserve them.

Starting kids early on language acquisition can help the language take hold in kids’ minds, she said, and hopefully stay with them as they mature. There’s some Dakota and Ojibwe language education available for older kids, Lee said, but it could be better.

LaFloe cited low graduation rates among American Indian students as part of the motivation for starting the school.

By plugging some kids into the education system early and preparing them for kindergarten, she hopes American Indian kids will have a better shot at succeeding in school.

As it stands, “We’re not even coming close to prepping our kids for school,” Lee said.

The East Side Neighborhood Development Company has been helping the school line up its financing, which comes from a variety of sources - the St. Paul Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, Sheltering Arms Foundation and Grotto Foundation.

John Vaughn, director of ESND, said partnering with the school was an obvious choice.

“It’s Janice,” he said. “She has a long history with ESND. ... She’s been working on the East Side for many years.”

LaFloe said she’s also hoping to land funding from a St. Paul neighborhood STAR grant to do renovations on the new building. The funding request was approved at a July 9 city council meeting.

With those funds are landed, the schools should be able to open in the fall, sharing a kitchen and other facilities, while maintaining two separate classrooms.

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