

**ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE 1ST PUBLIC MONTESSORI
HIGH SCHOOL IN THE US
CLARK MONTESSORI, A COMMUNITY WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE
GROW & BECOME**

By Leon G. Caesar

“How do we encourage a sense of generosity and abundance rather than scarcity and fear? Teachers design activities and lessons to show students that ‘Everybody does better when everybody does better.’¹

Nestled on a serene, wooded property in Hyde Park, Cincinnati, Ohio the students of Clark Montessori go about their days among attractive surroundings and top-class facilities. In close touch with nature, their backyard is a small wood with short trails; their inspired locations feature an electronic music computer lab, a modern physical education gym, and a resurfaced soccer field. The 600-seat auditorium is a gem of a facility, and the rooftop garden and greenhouse are creative attempts to enhance the students’ interactions with nature.

Clark is what is called an ‘urban compromise’ program². This classification was given to post-elementary Montessori schools by the Erdkinder Consortium and reflects the difficulties associated with implementing the Erdkinder program in its ‘pure’ form, which is a farm-based, residential school away from home.

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Sertel Djelal and Mustafa Hassan constituted the Editorial Panel. Djelal and Hassan are both educators, and Hassan is the Editor-in-chief at www.youmemontessori.com.

Our Thanks to Berna Elias for her input. Elias is currently a doctoral student at the University of Montreal.

Our heartfelt appreciation goes to Dawn Flanigan Johnson for her generous assistance with the sharing of documents, pictures and a video, and for keeping communication channels open. Johnson is the School Community Coordinator and Student Advocate at Clark Montessori High School.

All responsibility resides with the author.

¹ From the Clark Website: <https://clark.cps-k12.org/academics>

² This reference is to be found in the very useful article on secondary Montessori education, titled *Montessori at the Secondary Levels*.



Photograph by Dawn Flanigan Johnson

“My vision of the future is no longer of people taking exams and proceeding on that certification from the secondary school to the university, but of individuals passing from one stage of independence to a higher, by means of their own activity, through their own effort of will, which constitutes the inner evolution of the individual.”

(Montessori, M. (1976). *From Childhood to Adolescence* (2nd Revised edition; A. M. Joosten, Ed.). New York: Schocken Books Inc).

THEY CALL IT INTERSESSIONS OR FIELD STUDIES

Imagine a school in which the regular curriculum is put on ice for two weeks every semester and learning is taken off campus - into the city or just into the whole wide world. Were you a student at this imaginary school, then for two weeks you could follow your passion by taking an educational trip to Morocco or Spain. If you like to learn about biodiversity you could do that on a trip to Costa Rica; if you were an outdoors fresh air type, then you could choose a trip along the Appalachian Trail to study the flora and fauna. If your love is sports and/or number crunching, you could forget about all your troubles for two weeks and immerse yourself in Sports Statistics and Computer Literacy. If none of these were to your fancy, there was also the Art Course in New York. Internships at exciting companies are also normally on offer. Such a school is no figment of the imagination, it is as real as the words you are now reading - it is called Clark Montessori High School, aka Clark. Should the student be interested in more than one course, not to worry, because it is mandatory for high schoolers to participate in eight Intersections or Field Studies (as Clark calls these educational excursions). Courses naturally change from year to year; this is merely a snapshot of

some recent excursions for the high school students. Fall Intersessions are assigned by class, but students get to choose for themselves (with guidance) in spring. Not only do students have fun and learn that school does not have to be a drag, each completed Intersession awards them a 0.5 credit. This is one of the ways in which Clark makes its motto, “Bringing Education to Life”, a living reality.

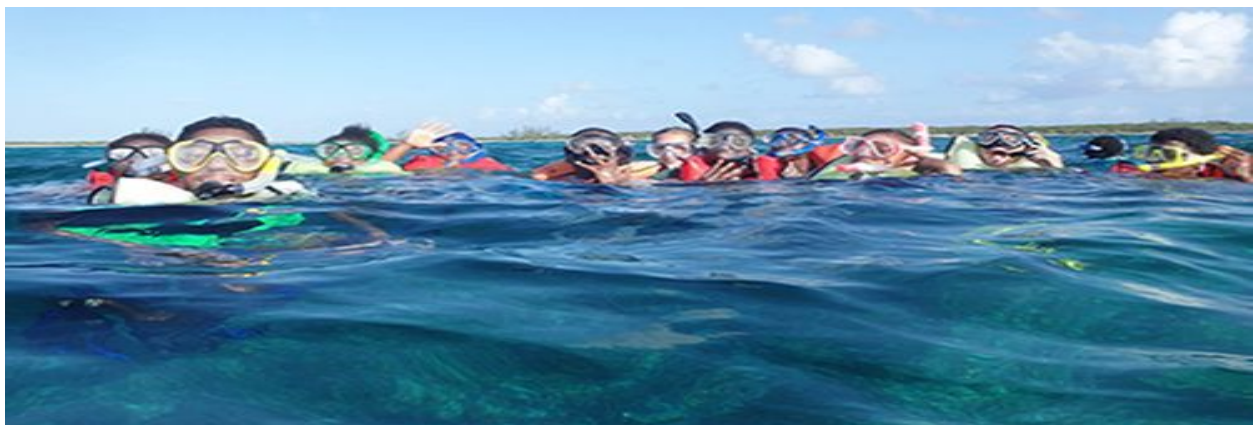
On the Clark Website, a mix of fifteen representative high school intersessions are listed, check them out here: <https://clark.cps-k12.org/content/high-school>)

Furthermore, we had access to a list of 56 high school Intersession choices revealed in the document titled, “Clark Version for Dean 10.3.2018”.

At Middle School level the term, field studies, is preferred. The opportunities here are tailor-made for the younger adolescents, and prepare them for the high school stage. The highlights for grades 6- 8 are the Fall Camping excursion, the Leadership Camp, and the Andros Island Marine Biology field trip. The latter is the culmination of the middle school field studies program.

We are highlighting the Intersessions and field studies because they are out-of-this-world creative and uplifting, and consciously aligned with Montessori’s approach to the teaching of adolescents. This can be seen from the following passages in, “*From Childhood to Adolescence*”. “The essential reform of our plan...during the difficult time of adolescence it is helpful to leave the accustomed environment of the family in the town and go to quiet surroundings of the country, close to nature.” (p.67) “But the thing that is important above everything else is that the adolescent should have a life of *activity* and *variety*... [italics in original] ” (p.70). “We must say at once that the aim should be to *widen* education instead of restricting it [italics in original].” (p.71). We add a few statements she made while discussing the elementary level, but they are applicable to the next level as well. “Let us take the child out to show him real things instead of making objects that represent ideas and closing them in cupboards.” (p.18) “Instruction becomes a living thing.” (p.19).

Grade 8 Students on the Andros Island, Bahamas field trip (Clark Website)

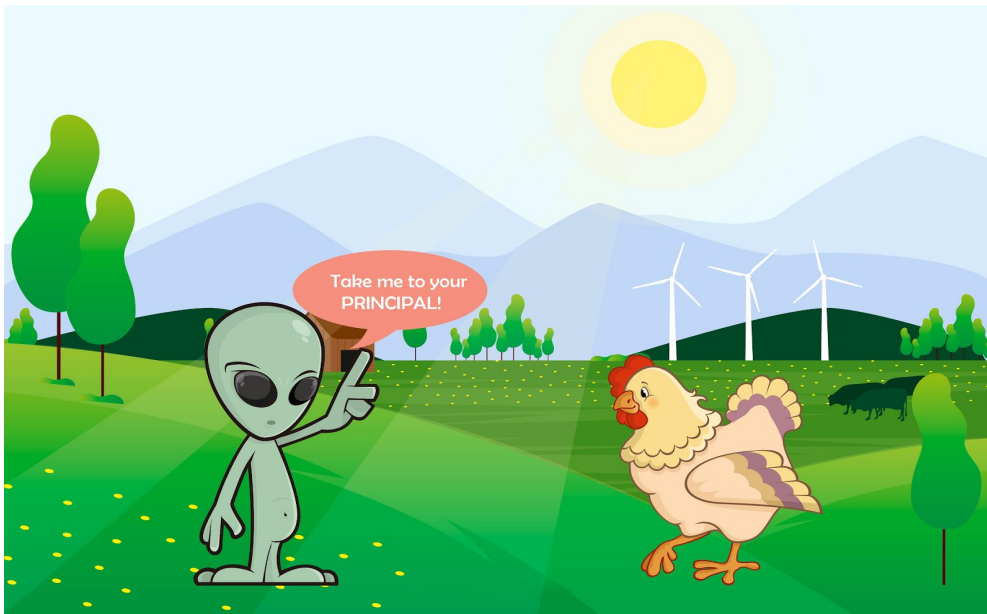


However, Clark has many more inspired innovations, which - with the Intersessions and field studies - combine into an unforgettable Montessori experience for the students and staff. We share some of them:

- ★ Students sign contracts every year that enshrine their commitment to learning, community involvement, and respect for each other. (Parents and teachers do likewise).
- ★ Mandatory Community Service that open up the real world with its real problems to students on an ongoing basis. “This is an essential component to a developmentally appropriate curriculum for the adolescent.” (Clark Website:<https://clark.cps-k12.org/academics>). Clark graduates are not sent into the world, they have always been right there, learning and growing as persons while **doing**. High school students have to complete fifty hours per year; middle school students thirty six. This program is a key aspect of the school’s *education for peace* orientation. “*Meaningful service work happens when students are prepared for the work of the heart.*” (Clark Website:<https://clark.cps-k12.org/academics>).
- ★ The Clark community is proud of their extensive Student Services group, which works with students who have a variety of challenges. They practice an inclusive approach, “Students are supported in the general education classroom by an Intervention Specialist who collaborates with the community teachers to provide accommodations and modifications aligned with each student’s Individual Education Plan.”
(Clark Website:<https://clark.cps-k12.org/academics/middle-school>)
- ★ A Year Long Senior Project based on a question of choice: Over the course of the year, seniors complete a research paper, and a physical product based on their research. At the end of the year, they exhibit and present their work at a hugely anticipated school event. In this day and age when technology is driving us all to flick hastily through sites and memes - always looking for the next cyber stimulant - instilling in students the almost forgotten discipline of patient, plodding work, is just what the youth of today need to find themselves and their place in society. Later in life, such graduates should easily be able to make the shift from these projects, to masters and doctoral theses, or even the authoring of books. Should they prefer a different direction, they can put their acquired 21st Century critical thinking, communication, and presentation skills to excellent use in many different career paths.
- ★ Other innovations or practices that Clark has made its own include having no entrance requirements (yet producing near-perfect graduation figures). A strong sense of community pervades the educational approach. Clark is widely praised for the natural manner in which they apply the horizontal integration of subject groups and thematic emphasis and connections across the curricular spectrum.

The manner in which the integration and thematic focus are done, displays the greatest planning and organizational skills.

- ★ The extensive program of extracurricular activities allow students to live themselves out in their passions that cannot be catered for by the regular curriculum. America is a sports-crazy nation, and with their wide repertoire of sport offerings, Clark fits right in with the rest of the crazies. The music and arts program is legendary, and some of the special-interest clubs prickle the curiosity - for example the chicken club!



Cosmic Education of the 2nd kind

We sum up this section with a passage from Blase and Donahoe, respectively former principal and founding teacher at Clark, “A curricular context that fosters a sense of hope and progression of the human spirit: This curriculum includes action in stewardship of the Earth and humanity.”³

³ This passage is also found on the Clark website.

Clark Music Students Jamming Away (Clark Website)



“Young people in the secondary schools are compelled to study as a ‘duty’ or a ‘necessity’. They are not working with interest nor any definite aims that could be immediately fulfilled and would give them satisfaction and a renewed interest in continuous effort.” (Montessori, M. (1976). *From Childhood to Adolescence*; p.62 (2nd Revised edition; A. M. Joosten, Ed.). New York: Schocken Books Inc.)

GENESIS OF THE FIRST PUBLIC MONTESSORI HIGH SCHOOL IN THE US - *Peter H. Clark Montessori Junior High and High School*

Bob Townsend, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) Director of Magnet Schools in 1992, made it very clear: *IT WAS THE PARENTS!* In an interview broadcast as Xavier podcast 019, he is full of praise for Montessori parents, they are truly one of a kind - activists for changing society through education. There was a serious educational problem in the city at the time, namely the high dropout rate of Montessori educated elementary students who gave up in droves after joining regular high schools. It is interesting that Clark’s graduation success rate is phenomenal - problem solved!

It was this initial impetus by parents who wanted their children to continue at a public Montessori choice in the next stage of their education, that cleared away the cobwebs and opened the way for Clark. CPS displayed tremendous foresight and wisdom and must be lauded for listening to the parents and really putting its whole heart into the project, under the leadership of Bob Townsend, who was himself passionate

about the initiative. A committee was formed in 1992 and a process started that drew in a great many Montessorians from across Cincinnati to get the philosophy straight, place the training of teachers and administrators on the right track, and to put in place mechanisms to ensure continuous, sustainable success once the school was launched. The team also subjected itself to rigorous training on what Montessori meant for junior high and high schools. Originally, the endeavor was called the Montessori Secondary Project. And then, after a two years' parturient labor of love, Clark Montessori Junior High and High School emerged in 1994 - the first public Montessori High School in the US!

A legend was born, that was destined to illuminate the way for many to come. As Clark prospered, it added grade 8 and it continued to add its high school component (from grade 9). In the transition to the high school phase, students came to the fore and played a huge role. A group of five female grade 8 students, in a group research project, added their voices to the growing chorus for Clark to add a high school component.⁴ Their call merged with those of parents and educators, and CPS listened, the rest is now famous history.

Picture from <https://awfarrell.com/project/clark-montessori/>



⁴ This narrative is borne out by Blase and Donahoe in 2017, at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1183086.pdf>, as well as by Katrina Schwartz in <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/46166/where-are-all-the-public-montessori-high-schools>

A WIDELY FETED AND HONORED PIONEER

Nationally acclaimed for academic excellence, Clark Montessori is a jewel of the US education system and the Montessori world. This is an exceptional school, doing exceptional things - many of which we detailed above. For more descriptions of the innovations and activities that put Clark over the top, its website is very useful, as are many other sources (that we cite below). *Montessori schools everywhere are forced by regulations and social pressures to give in to demands that they comply with certain traditional types of assessments. On this point we will just say - they are learning to cope with it, and they are doing it pretty well, Clark being a case in point.* Below we share some of the accolades bestowed on this outstanding place of learning:

2001 & 2007: The nationwide studies (“Smaller, Safer, Saner, Successful Schools”), expounded the awesomeness of Clark Montessori.

2005-2006: Received the Ohio State Education Department award of **Excellent**. This was the highest recognition, yet Clark had actually far surpassed the criteria (as stated on their website).

2010: In President Obama’s Race to the Top Challenge, it reached the **Finals**

2010: The Ladies Home Journal (since closed), recognized Clark as **One of America’s Most Amazing Schools**⁵

- The Cincinnati Magazine listed it as one of the nation’s **Top Four high schools**

2018: Accredited by the American Montessori Society for excellence in applying the Montessori Method

2018: Accredited by AdvanceED for continuous school improvement and increased student performance

How did Clark score in the last few state report cards? We reproduce the highlights:

⁵ This article is exceptionally important because it was based on thorough research and the findings of a strong team of experts in the field.

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|---|--|
| <u>2005-2006</u> Ohio Department of Education: "Excellent" | <u>2015</u> C- Student Performance <u>2016</u> B- Graduation Rate |
| DISTRICT REPORT CARDS | |
| <u>2017 & 2018</u> B- Graduation Rate & C- Overall Grade A - Graduation rate | <u>2019</u> C- Overall Grade A - Graduation rate |

FROM THE MONTESSORI LEGENDS CONSPECTUS: CLARK MONTESSORI HIGH SCHOOL,
www.youmemontessori.com

One of the greatest honors for any school is the appreciation of parents. One such parent (name not provided), who happens to be a journalist at *The Daily Bellwether*, in a 2007 piece, virtually gushes with admiration. “Clark Montessori is one of the best things in the United States... It is a public school in the city system, a magnet open to children of all races and incomes, and it is highly successful. Amazingly successful, really.” “Two of my kids are Clarkites, and I sent them there because the school is so damn exceptional. Example: They both spent nearly two weeks of their freshman year backpacking on the Appalachian (T)rail.” “This is a public school, a big city school, and it sits there in Ohio defying all stereotypes.” (Read the full article here: <http://thebellwetherdaily.blogspot.com/2007/07/clark-montessori-high-school-ohio-has.html?m=0>)

THE CLARK MONTESSORI FOUNDATION, MAXIMISING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The huge role played by the foundation in the Clark success story, cannot be stressed enough. Their hard work is essential for making and keeping Clark a true beacon of diversity, where no student is left behind on account of financial difficulties. This is no easy task considering the gamut and quality of activities that make Clark what it is today. Referring to the foundation, Principal Eric E. Higgins stated that its main role is to “... raise funds to support the educational program. The largest percentage of their money goes to support the eighth grade Andros scholarship account.” Yet, in their approach to fundraising, the foundation follows guidelines set down by Montessori herself. The economic independence of students is an important Montessori principle; Clark encourages students to raise at least half of the financial requirements for Intersessions and field studies. The foundation acts as a ‘clearing agent’ for scheduling fundraising activities and allocating funds. *We call on all readers who are of the means*

and inclination, to support this noble cause. Every journey begins with a single step, if you wish to support, please click on this link:

<https://www.paypal.com/donate/?token=sEmKHC9mfQYpUL3SboWw6huqIkclVJrSLMF Mtt4p-lusOKgOE5X-uZclX62O3Gq1AccahG&country.x=US&locale.x=US>

CLARK IN LITERATURE

Clark is famous, and for all the best reasons. Articles on the school as well as references in other articles and books can fill a large room. Some are listed on the website of the Clark Montessori Foundation and the Clark Wikipedia site; some are articles in journals and magazines, or sections in books; others are diffused throughout the blogosphere and cyberspace.

This is a natural outcome of Clark's contribution to education and society. The body of literature continues to grow.

IN CONCLUSION, BUT NOT THE END

Reading and writing about Clark are highly satisfying and rewarding pleasures. Despite not being a residential farm-school, Clark has proven itself to be true to the Montessori philosophy and educational method, leaving no stone unturned to find creative ways to apply the approach with authenticity, irrespective of challenges. Therefore, nothing of the soul of Montessori has been compromised. The school is a living example of how education - which is in perpetual crisis in many countries - can be saved. It shows us that by defying orthodox stereotypes, synchronising education with the natural personality characteristics of the student, and freeing the adolescent from repressive practices, her/his mind and soul are set free to soar the seamless realms of the academic and personal worlds to find that place in society to call her/his own. Upon closer reflection, the school seems more like a living exhibition - reminding of the glass classroom that Montessori gave a model lesson in during one of her US visits. We asked Principal Eric what his dream job would be. He replied, "I have it right now as principal at Clark Montessori Jr/Sr High School." This says it all.

This article constitutes part 8 of the [History of the Montessori Movement in the US](#) series by www.youmemontessori.com. We first featured Clark in a blog titled, 'Origins of the First Public Montessori High School in the US', on 31 August 2019. The Clark story so inspired us that we just had to share it and dig more. We find the entire history of the Montessori Movement in the US fascinating; hence, we decided to publish a whole series on it. Clark was given passing reference in Parts 6 and 7 of the series, paving the way for this article, Part 8. This will be followed by a special, one-page publication that we call, [MONTESSORI LEGENDS CONSPECTUS: Clark Montessori](#)

High School. This will be followed by the highlight of the series and of the Clark focus within it – which for the moment will remain under wraps.

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