

Education Week

The 'Montessori Mafia': Why Tech Titans Like Jeff Bezos Support the Model



Preschoolers Alaya and Jerome work together on a project at the MacDowell Montessori School in Milwaukee.
—Sara Stathas for Education Week

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Just what is it about Montessori education and billionaires?

Jeff Bezos is just one of several tech titans who are part of a so-called "Montessori Mafia," **a term coined in a 2011 Wall Street Journal article**. It named Bezos, along with Google founders Larry Page and Sergei Brin, and Will Wright, the designer of the videogame The Sims.

The article also noted that young Bezos "would get so engrossed in his activities as a Montessori preschooler that his teachers would literally have to pick him up out of his chair to go to the next task," according to his mother.

Little wonder, then, that free "Montessori inspired" education is an interest for Bezos's **recently announced \$2 billion Day One Fund**.



Camden, a preschooler, stacks blocks at the MacDowell Montessori School in Milwaukee. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos experienced a similar Montessori education as a child.
—Sara Stathas for Education Week

"It is potentially a game changer," said Jacqueline Cossentino, the director of research for the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector. "There hasn't been this kind of investment in any model, let alone Montessori. We're eager to see what he has in mind."

Over time, Montessori education has taken on a stereotype that it is mostly for the rich, because, in the United States, the educational framework is primarily offered in private schools.

But Maria Montessori, the Italian physician and educator who built the educational framework in the early 1900s after years of observation on how children learn, started her work with children with disabilities and from low-income families—examples, perhaps, of the "underserved communities" that Bezos says he wants to reach with his new initiative.

Distinguishing Features

Montessori education offers several features that distinguish it from typical preschool classrooms. For example, classrooms feature multi-age groupings. They use specific materials intended to encourage touch and play appropriate to a child's interests and development. Children are allowed much more free choice in what materials they can use, and there's a premium placed on intrinsic motivation: Children master tasks based on their own needs and wants, rather than working for praise or for other types of rewards. Under the educational framework, teachers are guides, rather than drivers of student activity.

"In that kind of environment, children are developing so many of the soft skills that 21st century learners need to have," said Andrea Corona, the principal of Macdowell Montessori School, a public school in the Milwaukee school system that enrolls children from age 3 to 12th grade.

There is research that suggests children from low-income backgrounds do benefit from high-quality Montessori classrooms.

Angeline Lillard, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, studied public Montessori programs in Milwaukee and in Hartford, Conn. In Milwaukee, she found stronger math, reading, and executive function skills among elementary-age children who attended public Montessori programs, compared with similar children who attended traditional schools. In Hartford, Lillard found low-income children in Montessori programs academically outperformed similar children enrolled in typical preschools.

'A Certain Dignity'

One big question, however, is whether it is Montessori that makes the difference, or whether the type of educators drawn to the philosophy are primed to be excellent teachers no matter what.

Lillard said some smaller studies suggest that Montessori materials do make a difference, but there needs to be more research. Lillard is among several researchers in the early stages of the first large-scale, federally funded longitudinal study of Montessori effectiveness that will study public programs in multiple locations.

"The Montessori environment has a certain dignity," Lillard said. "Regardless of their background, [children] have a sense of self and who they are."

Bezos' interest in expanding the educational philosophy further is exciting, she said. "All children should be able to have this."

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