

Testimony on HB 166: Main Operating Budget for FY 2020-2021
Senate Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education
Wednesday, May 8, 2019

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Chairman Terhar, Vice Chair Lehner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Subcommittee; my name is Amber Oxley, Director of Operations at Stonebrook Montessori. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on HB 166. I am here today on behalf of Stonebrook Montessori, its board of directors, staff, community partners, and as an advocate for the children and families of Cleveland.

In 2015, with the support of The Cleveland Foundation, The Gund Foundation, and Montessori Development Partnerships, Stonebrook Montessori opened in the historic Glenville neighborhood on the East Side of Cleveland. These foundations came together to support public access to a high-quality Montessori education for an underserved population of the city.

Stonebrook Montessori exists to disrupt inequity in public education and generational poverty in Cleveland, with priority given to Cleveland residents and a focus on those in the Glenville neighborhood who, because of income or location, would otherwise be unable to enroll in a private Montessori school.

- The median household income in Glenville is \$21,184, lower than the City of Cleveland (\$27,854) and Ohio (\$54,407), with 41% of the population living below the poverty level.
- 76% of Stonebrook's 3 and 4-year old families earn less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. For a family of 4, that's less than \$50,200.
- Educational attainment in Glenville is low with 24.2% of the population never having completed a high school diploma and 59.4% having completed only a high school education.

Stonebrook Montessori is a stand-alone independent public charter school and the only charter in Ohio that provides free, high-quality, Montessori education to children beginning at age 3. This rigorous program empowers children to make positive decisions, develop self-discipline and life-long curiosity, and experience a sense of responsibility and agency in the world.

The school opened in 2015-2016 with 95 students, ages 3-8 (2nd grade) in five multi-age classrooms. For the 2019-2020 school year, Stonebrook expects to enroll up to 230 children and will expand through 6th grade. The school will be complete for its approved chartered grade levels and has no plans for replication of additional primary and elementary classes or schools.

Stonebrook's charter is authorized by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) and partners with CMSD's Montessori school in crossover programming. Indicators of quality include: In 2017 Stonebrook received a 4-star "Step-Up-To-Quality" rating from the Ohio

Department of Education and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, and in 2018, an Associated Recognition from the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). Stonebrook is also recognized as a PRE4CLE Provider.

Justification of Need

Enrolling children at age 3 is critical to their social-emotional development and readiness for early learning, essential for the optimal functioning of the multi-age Montessori primary classrooms, and key to overcoming the impacts of generational poverty and systemic racism. Research indicates that a fully implemented Montessori program supports executive function skills, social development, academic achievement, and school readiness for children from all backgrounds. This emphasis on early childhood education is aligned with the Cleveland Plan's focus on the importance of high-quality early education as the first step on the education continuum of transforming Cleveland's schools. Furthermore, the tenets of Montessori pedagogy are entirely in-sync with Ohio's Birth through Kindergarten Entry Learning and Development Standards.

Montessori classrooms are multi-age classrooms that are based on children's stages of development led by one certified teacher and one assistant. Children in the primary classroom range in age from 3 to 6, creating a critical learning and leadership model from younger to older class peers. Classrooms are set up for optimal development of skills in five major areas: practical life, sensorial, cultural, mathematics; and language. Montessori education is conducive to meeting a wide range of children's learning needs, including students with high-sensory/physical needs and students with disabilities. Children with special needs are included in the classroom as much as possible and receive intervention services inside and outside the classroom. A significant strength of our program is there is no transition to Kindergarten since the children remain in the same classroom with the same teacher to complete the 3-year learning cycle and continue to build meaningful relationships with caring adults as part of a strong learning community.

Stonebrook's greatest financial challenge continues to be securing sustainable public funding, especially for our 3- and 4-year-old children. As a result of changes to state law advocated for by the school founders (ORC 3314.06), licensed Montessori model community schools are authorized to enroll children beginning at age 3 *as public school students*, not pre-school children. However, the law does not provide for any sustainable funding. As these are public school students, we are asking for an amendment to the budget that provides funding for these students equal to the formula amount of \$6,010. This would amount to approximately \$400,000 and would provide funding for full-day school for all of our 3- and 4-year-olds. This funding would remain static, as we are the only school in the state of Ohio that would qualify for this funding.

By investing in a public early childhood Montessori education model, the state can have a transformative impact for Cleveland's most at-risk children. At-risk children who have access to high quality early childhood experiences within their first five years of life are more likely to be kindergarten ready, graduate from high school, and have higher earnings and better health AND

are less likely to be held back a grade, be reliant on public assistance, and engage in criminal behavior. These improved outcomes not only position our youngest Ohioans for lifelong success, but providing high quality, early childhood education for Ohio's most at-risk children yields the greatest return on public investment, upwards of 13%. (*Equity at the Intersection of Race & Gender*, Groundwork Ohio, April 2019)

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about this program and our request for the state's involvement and support. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.