

# HILLTOP MONTESSORI SCHOOL

## 2010 STRATEGIC PLAN

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### BACKGROUND

This Strategic Plan was created by the Hilltop Montessori School Board, staff, and parents during the 2009-2010 school year. The process started with the Board charging a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) to create a new Strategic Plan. The first step taken was a survey of the whole Hilltop Community. The survey had both open- and closed-ended questions and had very high participation, especially among parents. The information from the survey was then used to create an agenda for a Community Meeting in January. This meeting allowed participants to divide into discussion groups tasked with exploring main themes that came up in the survey. The findings of the discussion groups were then presented to the whole meeting. The SPC next met with just the HMS staff, giving them some focused time to do their own thinking and problem solving around the survey themes. Once the staff had weighed in, this information, combined with the Community Meeting information, was summarized and used to designate topics for Task Forces to explore further. Each Task Force was made up of staff, parents and a Board member. The Task Forces worked over a number of weeks to identify the context and important and noteworthy goals and strategies for the strategic plan. The Task Force full reports are available as a reference for those implementing this Plan. When our new Head of School, Toby Welch, joined Hilltop in July of 2010 he was given time and space to familiarize himself with the Strategic Plan and to add his own imprint to its final version. Toby also worked with the HMS staff some more to ensure

that the Plan more clearly reflected their work and vision for Hilltop.

The goals under each subsection of the plan are listed in no particular priority order. Each goal is followed by a provisional timeframe that takes into account a general sense of urgency and practicality for taking action (ranging from within one year to within five years). Financial figures have been applied to goals where applicable. Some figures are better known than others. Where more uncertainty exists, a range of dollar amounts has been used. Many goals do not involve a budget, but will absorb many person hours of work to complete. These hours account for significant value and should be taken into account as implementation of the Plan begins.

## **I. PROGRAM: CURRICULUM AND FACULTY**

Over the last six years much energy has been put into solidifying Hilltop's Montessori-based curriculum. To this end, emphasis has been placed on supporting Montessori certification for all head teachers and on supporting continuing Montessori education at all levels, including cross-training faculty for multiple educational levels. As of 2008 there is at least one Montessori-certified head teacher in each program. This has resulted in a rich Montessori learning experience throughout the entire educational cycle that we are all proud of. In our continuing effort to be the absolute best we can be, the strategic plan process has identified additional areas to pursue with regard to curriculum and faculty.

### **A. Curriculum Map**

Since our last strategic plan, HMS has advanced our Montessori programs in every classroom. It is now time to stand back and examine what each program level teaches and how these lessons are carried through and built on as students progress from program to program. In this way we hope to strengthen and solidify the full Montessori educational experience from primary through middle school.

The modern necessity of integrating computer technology into our school has added a new twist to our Montessori classrooms. The challenge with regard to computers and the Internet, is to provide resources in ways that enhance rather than distract from the Montessori experience. Computer technology must be offered in ways that are developmentally appropriate, purposeful, and that accommodate the varied learning styles and interests of individual students. Moreover, use of the computer as a tool should complement, not supplant, acquisition of traditional print-based reading and research skills.

**Goal: Develop a whole-school curriculum map.** *(one to two years) Staff time.*

Evaluate the integrity of each program level and how separate curricular strands are carried through from program to program.

Determine the role of computer technology in the HMS curriculum continuum for elementary and middle school programs.

Evaluate current use of Montessori student assessment tools and add additional tools as necessary.

## **B. Foreign Language**

HMS has offered foreign language study intermittently as an after-school subject, but foreign language has never had a full place in our curriculum. Studying a foreign language would help prepare Hilltop students to become active and adaptive global citizens and aid in the development of cultural awareness and tolerance of differences. There is strong community interest in exploring inclusion of foreign language as part of the curriculum. As an approach rooted principally in process (as opposed to specific subject content), Montessori philosophy is not inconsistent with foreign language instruction. Recognizing that a foreign language program would have pervasive curricular, logistical and financial implications for HMS, this topic will have to be studied in depth prior to deciding on implementation.

**Goal: Establish a group that will pursue an exploration of goals, need, efficacy, cost and institution of a foreign language program.** *(one year) Review-staff time, if implemented \$30,000- \$50,000 yrly.*

Research the implementation of foreign language programs in other Montessori schools and identify associated curriculum.

Consider the pros and cons of different implementation strategies.

Envision a foreign language as part of the whole-school curriculum.

Make a recommendation to the Head of School regarding a foreign language program at HMS.

## **B. Toddler Program**

Prior to our move to Highpoint Campus the HMS administration had begun to investigate the establishment of a toddler program. Interest was intense enough at that time that a room for a toddler program was designed into Hilltop's new building. Due to the huge demands and stress of Hilltop's move, pursuing this new program was put on hold. It is now time to consider it again. HMS's current age threshold is 3 and out of diapers. Incorporating a toddler program at HMS may offer opportunities to enrich the depth and breadth of the school's offerings. At the same time, it poses substantial challenges with respect to financing, staffing and logistics.

**Goal: Explore the necessity, logistics and financial feasibility of establishing a toddler program.** *(two to three years) Review- staff time. If implemented, self-sustaining.*

Review the in-house research that has already been done on this topic.

Examine available funding options for toddler-age students.

Examine community need.

### **C. Montessori Accreditation**

Due to hard work over the last few years, HMS now possesses the necessary staff qualifications, administrative structures, facilities, financial systems and stability to successfully complete the Montessori accreditation process. Most important in this regard are a) the presence of a Montessori-certified teacher at each program level; b) the implementation of an annual financial audit; and c) the new campus.

Accreditation will serve as a logical step in HMS's deepening of its commitment to Montessori as well as providing HMS with a vital layer of academic, philosophical, and professional resources and support. Further, accreditation benefits marketing and, therefore, enrollment.

**Goal: Obtain American Montessori Society (AMS) accreditation.** *(two to three years)*

*Application cost \$500, initial admin stipend, yearly cost \$2,100.*

### **D. Staff Development And Support**

At HMS we have been fortunate to have a talented and committed staff that is also impressive for its longevity at the school. The HMS staff is strongly committed to Montessori philosophy and is continually seeking to deepen its Montessori practice. Professional development funds from the school have helped many staff members attend Montessori workshops and trainings and other professional development and continuing education programs.

**Goal: Continue investing substantially in professional development for staff.** *(ongoing) See FY 2010-11 budget.*

Develop a system to identify individual goals and action plans for individual staff members.

Identify opportunities for administrative staff for observation of external programs connected to Montessori philosophy.

Create additional opportunities for administrative staff and faculty to connect either through classroom opportunities and/or retreats.

## **II. FACILITIES**

In the fall of 2009 HMS moved into our new Highpoint campus. Prior to this we had always rented our space, now we find ourselves willing stewards of our own forty-three acre campus.

This campus encompasses new state-of-the-art buildings as well as some older buildings,

numerous outdoor learning environments and acres of prime forest and farmland. This gives us unprecedented opportunity and also great responsibility.

### **A. Campus Vision Overview**

While the potential for expansion within this campus is tremendous, all additions must be made mindfully and with a clear understanding of their long-term implications. The newly formed Buildings and Grounds Committee, in consultation with the Head of School, will ensure that any additions or changes to the landscape and facilities are consistent with our overall campus plan and meet some or all of the following goals:

**Goal: Develop the Hilltop campus as part of our learning environment.** *(ongoing)*

Continue to support the integration of our campus environment with the classroom curricula. Develop and continue maintenance of our outdoor resources. [See also "Playgrounds," below.]

**Goal: Create a facilities plan to ensure maintenance and development of our grounds and buildings.** *(one year)*

Aid the Finance Committee in developing a budget to support the campus. Create provisions for long-term projects such as garden expansion, playing field improvement and pond swimming improvements, as well as scheduled maintenance of buildings. Develop an efficient and safe campus traffic pattern.

**Goal: Establish our campus as a "green campus."** *(one to three years)*

Research and adopt a list of environmentally sound best practices to inform our long-term facilities plan as well as our daily maintenance practices.

**Goal: Investigate adopting various sustainable land management practices for the property.** *(two to five years)*

Research the feasibility of creating a forestry management plan with a consulting forester, and applying for a Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) grant from the state of Vermont.

### **B. Community Barn**

Completing the Community Barn is the major goal of Phase II of Hilltop's campus plan. (Phase I was completed with our move to our new campus.) The Community Barn has unrealized potential to become a flexible multipurpose space that can be used for activities including indoor physical education, classroom performances, community gatherings, indoor recess, after school programming and SummerFun. The building will also ideally house classroom and PE storage

spaces, a bathroom, two small meeting or tutoring rooms and a staff room.

**Goal: Complete the Community Barn.** *(three to four years) \$500,000 plus \$10,000 yearly maintenance.*

Form a Capital Campaign group to explore fundraising feasibility and lead fundraising efforts.

Form a Design and Building group that will recommend plans to move forward with obtaining designs and bids from local builders.

### **C. Playgrounds**

Montessori playgrounds are an extension of the classroom. They are a place for students to strengthen their physical selves, to build their social interactions, and to play. We seek to develop outdoor play spaces that take best advantage of the grounds, the needs of the students, and the vision of the faculty. We hope to provide developmentally appropriate facilities as soon as possible.

**Goal: Create Montessori-inspired playgrounds which serve all of our age groups.** *(one to two years) \$10,000-\$30,000.*

Form a playground design group consisting of staff and parents to develop a plan and a budget for the long-term development of playgrounds and playing fields.

Develop a timeline to begin improvements and installations as soon as is feasible.

Bear in mind our desire to be a green campus.

## **III. PARENT EDUCATION AND INVOLVEMENT**

For many years the Hilltop faculty has created academically based evening programs to introduce parents to different aspects of Montessori education. These programs have been very successful, however their impact is limited by availability and the amount of time and energy staff must put into each yearly presentation. Parent energy and enthusiasm for the Montessori philosophy and education is a huge potential resource for the school. It is in the best interests of HMS to tap into it through a variety of ongoing parent education activities. A basic working knowledge of what the children are experiencing will make parents' involvement in all aspects of the school more focused and purposeful and will encourage parents to become articulate advocates for the school to the community at large.

**Goal: Establish and clarify ways for parents to become meaningfully involved at HMS.** *(one to two years)*

*Focus on Classroom Coordinators and the HMS Parents' Association*

Establish clearly defined roles for parent Classroom Coordinators.

Institutionalize the current Classroom Coordinators' practice of meeting with the Head of School once per month.

Gather information about Parents Associations at peer institutions to help clarify the composition and function of the HMS Parents Association.

Make the Head of School an *ex officio* member of the Parents Association to facilitate open communication and productive collaboration between parents and the administration.

Continue to update the Parent Handbook to reflect parents' roles and responsibilities at HMS.

**Goal: Create an enriched parent education curriculum from admissions through graduation.** *(two to three years)\$0-\$1,000.*

Continue to provide comprehensive presentations that span the Montessori cycle from Children's House through Middle School (faculty and head).

Brainstorm additional ways to educate parents on the Montessori approach that parents can easily access.

Promote a culture of learning for parents.

Foster a connection between parent education/involvement and the school's mission and philosophy.

Enhance communication between HMS Faculty/Administration and parents.

#### **IV. CONNECTIONS WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY**

Students' connection with the wider community is intrinsic to Montessori philosophy. Starting in the primary years Hilltop students make regular explorations of the greater Brattleboro area.

These explorations peak in the Middle School with its "Brattleboro Community Project."

Connection to our broader community can be facilitated both by students going off the campus, and by taking advantage of the campus to bring the community to HMS.

**Goal: Deepen HMS's civic commitment both in the community and the curriculum.**

*(ongoing)*

Facilitate our curriculum/community connection.

Develop a policy to guide if, how, and by what criteria our spaces are made available to the public.

Explore how public use of the new campus could benefit the school financially and otherwise.

Review the recommendations of the diversity consultant. *(one year)*

Develop marketing strategies to gain broader community awareness of HMS.

**Goal: Develop Summer programming.** *(one to three years) Staff time.*

Evaluate community needs as well as the needs of HMS families.

Consider the different roles summer programs fulfill and prioritize these (community service, financial gain, recruitment, building community ties, etc.).

## **V. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

As with many institutions, HMS has added computers and computer software on an as needed basis to meet our day to day demands. Now, with computers becoming outdated at different times, and the desire of the admin staff and classroom teachers to use computers in ever more sophisticated fashion, there is the need to step back and evaluate where we are and what technology we will need to move forward.

**Goal: Review and address the school's IT needs.** *(one year) See FY 2010-2011 budget.*

Create an inventory of our computers.

Develop a schedule and budget for upgrades of computer hardware and software for administration, faculty and classrooms.

Secure needed technical support services.

## **VI. GOVERNANCE**

Hilltop's board has guided the school through two exciting years of change and transition as it pursued a capital campaign and planned and built a new home for HMS. The investment of time and energy on the part of the Board and its individual members has been extraordinary. The Board now has the opportunity to re-group and to institute structures and practices that reflect the needs, circumstances and opportunities of HMS as we move forward into the next phase of our growth. We seek to clarify board protocols and operations, and to create a new Board structure which relies more on committees thereby encouraging the active participation of more members of the HMS community.

**Goal: Take steps to help the board operate more smoothly and efficiently.** *(one to five years)*

*See FY 2010-2011 budget.*

Revise the "Guidelines for Trustees" to make it more complete and applicable to Hilltop's present circumstances.

Continue to establish core standing committees and use *ad hoc* committees as needed to address specific topics (e.g. Finance, Development, Building and Grounds, Governance) and provide

additional opportunities for HMS community members to participate.  
Implement a consistent schedule of board trainings.  
Examine governance-related topics (e.g. finances, communications).  
Develop Board assessment tools.  
Clarify the fundamental duties and responsibilities of trustees.  
Educate the Board on what it means to be a specifically Montessori board.  
Re-institute the practice of involving staff in Montessori education of the board through presentations.

## **VII. ADMINISTRATION**

The administration is the centerpiece of all supportive services at Hilltop. An efficient and effective administration can foster symbiotic relationships among the faculty, staff, parents and wider community. The administration must operate to its fullest capacity to continue to provide invaluable support to the school.

### **Goal: Review whether existing communication vehicles operate well and develop a systemic protocol for lines of communication within the Hilltop community.** *(one year)*

Review current communication vehicles and their efficacy (e.g. handbook, e-mail, etc.).  
Educate the community on lines of communication in terms of board, faculty, administration and parents (e.g. who to contact with questions on financial aid, etc.).  
Assist in defining protocols, leadership, structure, and communication vehicles for Parents' Association.

### **Goal: Review administrative structure and resources to support the strategic plan goals and future of Hilltop.** *(one to three years)*

Prioritize needs, define roles and direct tasks of administration and development.  
Identify skills within administrative staff and identify current needs.  
Continue data base training.  
Institute technology training.  
Integrate business administration into database and possibly student assessments.  
Explore document sharing amongst staff.

### **Goal: Develop consistent assessment tool for faculty and administrative staff.** *(two years)*

Create a committee to examine a range of assessment models.  
Have the Head of School establish a confidential evaluation record keeping system.

### **Goal: Enhance existing admission and enrollment strategies to maximize the admission and**

**retention of appropriate applicants.** *(one to five years)*

Develop the idea of a “best student” for our programs to improve the fit and retention of students.

Perform “exit interviews” on families who choose not to attend Hilltop, or leave Hilltop before Middle School, to gain insight into our accomplishments and failures.

**Goal: Review financial aid model and policies surrounding the model.** *(one to two years)*

Review how financial aid is currently being distributed in terms of match for the school, admissions, diversity, etc. and the need and ability to grow Hilltop's financial aid funds.

Determine what needs to be communicated to the community in terms of the financial aid model (while respecting the need for confidentiality).

## **VIII. FINANCE AND DEVELOPMENT**

In the Fall of 2010 Hilltop Montessori School opened its first academic year at our new campus. Owning our own campus is a huge milestone for Hilltop and provides many exciting opportunities, however, it also creates significant financial challenges. HMS has taken on a responsible, but significant debt to finance the campus, and, with the creation of this Strategic Plan, we have clarified our goals for ourselves over the next 5 years, some of which require financial commitments.

Hilltop has a well-established history of strong and responsible fiscal management. Our commitment to operating on a balanced budget sets the foundation for long-term financial sustainability and the ability to maintain the school's educational integrity. After our successful Capital Campaign for Phase 1 of our new campus, Hilltop has begun to more fully realize the opportunity and necessity of a strong Development program to balance our current tuition-driven budget.

**Goal: Continue to operate on an annual balanced budget.** *(ongoing)*

Format a five-year operating budget forecast that is based on realistic assumptions, the reality of our new debt, the reserve, maintenance of our new facility and change within our administration. Develop a five-year capital expenditure forecast that prioritizes the needs and identifies the sources of funding.

**Goal: Strengthen our Annual Fund and attain 100% Board, parent and staff participation.**

*(one to three years)*

see combined strategies below

**Goal: Complete a capital campaign to fund Phase 2 of our campus development, the Community Barn. (two years)**

see combined strategies below

**Goal: Increase revenue from Development to 10% of HMS's yearly tuition income. (four years)**

See combined strategies below

**Goal: Continue to Build the HMS endowment fund. (five years)**

Combined Strategies:

Establish a Development Committee of Board and Community members.

Foster and nourish philanthropy at HMS through relationship building in our immediate and wider community.

Continually educate the Hilltop community on the vital importance of giving.

Provide events to increase community wide understanding of the school budget.

Define and create the position of Development Director.

Continue to explore and support creative fundraising ventures such as the Hilltop Auction, community yard sale and Paint the Sky Festival.

**Goal: Define goals, opportunities, strategies and resources needed to improve connectivity with alumni. (two to five years)**

Develop a comprehensive list of alumni and their parents/grandparents.

Establish a tradition of alumni events.

Consider alumni as a resource to fulfill ongoing school needs.