



## Founded in

Preschool: 1995  
Pre-K - 8th Charter School: 2008

## Number of Schools, Location(s)

One in St. Louis, MO

## Number of Students

269

## Number of Teachers / Teacher Retention

20

100% teacher retention in 2019

## Per-Pupil Funding

\$11,000 - \$12,000

## Sector

Charter

## Grades Served

Pre-K through 8th

## Student Demographics

48% White  
42% Black  
10% Other

13% students with disabilities  
0% English language learners  
38% eligible for free or reduced lunch

## Teacher Demographics

60% White  
31% Black  
9% Other

## Anchoring to Established Cognitive Developmental & Educational Theories

### Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development — Constructivism<sup>1</sup>

**Researcher:** Jean Piaget

**Theory's Key Tenets:** Children learn as an artifact of factors both internal and external to the child. Children learn best by doing and through engaging in their environment and with the adults and peers around them.

### Social Learning Theory / Social Cognitive Theory<sup>2</sup>

**Researcher:** Albert Bandura

**Theory's Key Tenets:** Children learn and develop new knowledge and skills through observation and modeling. Individual, Proximal, and Collective Agency serve as mechanisms for shaping children's overall growth and life outcomes.

### Sociocultural Theory<sup>3,4</sup>

**Researcher:** Lev Vygotsky

**Theory's Key Tenets:** Children learn through hands-on experiences. Everyone in the child's environment and the overall culture and society are responsible for developing higher order cognitive functions. Learning is inherently a social act. Adults facilitate children's knowledge development through scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development — the space between a child's prior background knowledge and what they can do on their own, and the new knowledge, understandings, or skills that they need support mastering.

### Ecological Systems Theory<sup>5</sup>

**Researcher:** Urie Bronfenbrenner

**Theory's Key Tenets:** Children learn through both internal and external factors by engaging in several environmental or ecological systems:

- Microsystem (e.g. family, caregivers, school)
- Mesosystem (refers to relationships between those within the child's microsystem, such as parent-school partnerships)
- Exosystem (refers to larger social systems that impact the child's development, such as community-based resources or parent workplace environments that may cause stress on parents that lead to stress for children)
- Macrosystem (refers to cultural values, customs and laws)
- Chronosystem (refers to dimensions of time and the interplay between time and a child's external life changes and circumstances as well as the child's internal development and identity)

## Introduction

During a typical morning welcome on a recent warm fall day in St. Louis, Missouri, at least five adults greeted each student who entered the playground area of City Garden Montessori. Leaders and teachers asked thoughtful questions about a sibling's health, "Mama's" new job, or a new pair of shoes. Among the many students on the playground, one young Black student walked up to a visitor to share concern about her "White friend's" fall on the playground, while another girl gave the principal a big hug.



The warmth in these small moments reflects City Garden's big vision: to redefine education by developing the whole child in an excellent, inclusive Montessori school; to reimagine community by creating spaces and systems that help to restore our collective humanity; and to reinvigorate our world by creating a culture in which individuals and communities thrive without disparities or barriers to success. City Garden pursues this vision within a racially and socioeconomically integrated school environment, where students and staff reflect the diversity of St. Louis. Executive Director Christie Huck said:

<sup>[1]</sup> Jean Piaget, "Piaget's Theory," in: Bärbel Inhelder, Harold H. Chipman, and Charles Zwingmann, eds., *Piaget and His School* (New York: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, Springer Study Edition, 1976).

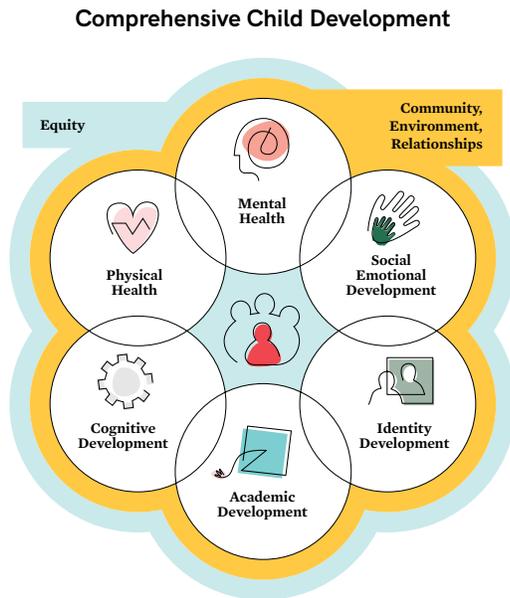
<sup>[2]</sup> Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory in Cultural Context," *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 51, no. 2 (2002): 269.

<sup>[3]</sup> Lev Vygotsky, "The Development of Higher Psychological Functions," *Russian Social Science Review* 18, no. 3 (1977): 38.

<sup>[4]</sup> James P. Lantolf and Aneta Pavlenko, "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition," *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 15 (1995): 108-124. doi:10.1017/S0267190500002646.

<sup>[5]</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological Systems Theory," in Ross Vasta, ed., *Six Theories of Child Development: Revised Formulations and Current Issues* (London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1992), 187-249.

“We believe integration is key to creating a new model for what is possible in education, in neighborhoods, in St. Louis and beyond. Through our school community, we are working to dismantle racism, to confront privilege, and to create a system that deeply supports and nurtures every child and family.”



The boldness of this vision is particularly powerful given City Garden’s location. St. Louis is the sixth most segregated city in America. It’s a place where complex racial dynamics mark both past and present. City Garden is located only 20 minutes south of Ferguson, where Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, was fatally shot by a police officer in August 2014. In October of the same year, another African American — 18-year-old VonDerrit Myers Jr. — was killed by a police officer in the Shaw neighborhood, where many City Garden students and families live. The neighborhood is unique in St. Louis because of its relative racial and socio-economic diversity. However, Huck — a White woman who moved her family to the neighborhood a decade ago because of its diversity — said that despite its demographics, neighbors from different racial or economic backgrounds rarely actively engage with one another. Deep structural inequities and power dynamics persist. Many existing neighborhood schools are segregated by race and socioeconomic demarcations.

It is within this context that City Garden has evolved from humble beginnings as a single-classroom independent Montessori school (founded in 1995) to its current status as a growing public charter school. The school manifests its vision via three key programmatic elements:

- City Garden offers a high-quality Montessori education that includes many — but not all — of the core elements of the model developed in the early 1900s by physi-

cian and educator Maria Montessori.<sup>6</sup> City Garden has maintained focus on student choice of activity, freedom of movement, multi-age grouping, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and thoughtful preparation of a child’s learning environment.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the school has worked to make the model more inclusive and equitable; this is seen by City Garden’s leaders as necessary given that the model was created over a century ago in a Eurocentric context and that even today, most Montessori programs are privately run and serve more affluent and homogeneous populations.<sup>8</sup>

- City Garden is a public charter school that is committed to free and public access to everyone, regardless of race, ability, or income. Changing demographics of the surrounding neighborhood (driven by gentrification) and increased demand for City Garden’s excellent education among White and more affluent families have required City Garden to be more proactive in ensuring equitable access to the school.
- City Garden maintains a laser focus on creating an anti-biased, anti-racist (ABAR) community in which community members not only live near each other but also deeply engage with each other. City Garden defines ABAR as the work “to be actively conscious of how bias and racism operate within our institution and committed to institutionalizing policies, procedures, and norms that contribute to equity.” City Garden’s work touches teachers, parents, and students. It involves forming common language, deepening knowledge and reflection, and increasing awareness. It requires delving below the surface into deeper institutional and individual issues.

City Garden seeks to prepare students to be leaders in the community who are ready to tackle academic and social challenges. It’s an inspiring vision for a city in need. Huck said, “I really do believe that City Garden will begin to have lasting impact on St. Louis. We — as staff, students, and community members — are getting to learn deeply about each other and translate that into how we interact with the world beyond our community.”

<sup>[6]</sup> It is important to note that this case study is not about all Montessori schools for two reasons. First, the delivery and fidelity of how the Montessori method is implemented varies from school to school. Second, while Montessori is a portion of the City Garden model, it is not the only key distinguishing factor. City Garden leaders built a school that prioritizes anti-bias, anti-racism (ABAR) work, which is designed to touch all facets of a student or family’s experience at City Garden. ABAR is not a common feature of Montessori schools. As a result, schools of all types — district, charter, private, Montessori, or not — can learn from elements of City Garden’s approach.

<sup>[7]</sup> Chloë Marshall, “Montessori Education: A Review of the Evidence Base,” *npj Science of Learning* 2 (2017).

<sup>[8]</sup> Montessori Census, October 2018, <https://www.montessoricensus.org/>.

## Defining and Measuring Success

**Definition of student success.** City Garden espouses a broad definition of student success. As Huck explained, “We’re preparing students as more generalists. We of course want them to have a very strong academic and intellectual foundation, be ready to take on whatever is coming next, but there’s not one particular path. Our goal is to fully and deeply support students in who they want and are meant to be. When we talk about our graduates, our goal is to effect broad, deep social change.”



**Current and desired ways of measuring success across domains.** The school has been urged to measure the breadth of its impact on student development by quantifying student progress in executive functioning, social-emotional development, racial equity, or racial identity development. Although early promising partnerships with researchers and organizations dedicated to measuring these outcomes exist, City Garden leadership noted, “It’s an emerging space for us.”

**Academic success.** Since its founding, City Garden students have excelled on state assessments, with all subgroups outperforming state and district averages. However, City Garden views student performance as a floor rather than a ceiling, and intensively focuses on closing the educational and opportunity gaps between children of color and White children, and between students from low-income backgrounds and children from more affluent backgrounds. Recent performance indicators include:

- In 2017, City Garden was Missouri’s first charter school to be granted a ten-year charter renewal, based on consistently high Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) scores, the state’s method of evaluating and accrediting schools.
- In 2018, City Garden was awarded the Missouri Charter Public School Association School of the Year Award.
- In 2018, according to the most recent test data available from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), 59% of all City Garden

students achieved proficient or advanced in Communication Arts, compared to 23% of all students in the St. Louis Public School District, and 43% of all City Garden students achieved proficient or advanced in Mathematics, compared to 19% of all students in the St. Louis Public School District (SLPS).

## How City Garden Facilitates Comprehensive Student Development

City Garden demonstrates integration across multiple domains of Comprehensive Student Development (CSD). In the sections that follow, we explain what City Garden’s model looks like. We also clarify how the model fuels CSD.

The following aspects of City Garden’s model are critical to its success in facilitating student development:

1. Diverse school community and a consistent focus on racial equity
2. Self-directed learning across domains
3. Nurturing environment built on strong relationships
4. Investment in parent and staff development around anti-bias and anti-racism

### 1. Diverse school community and a consistent focus on racial equity

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	<b>Social Emotional</b>	<b>Identity</b>

■ Primary Domain   ■ Secondary Domain

City Garden adopts a diverse-by-design model that prioritizes racial and socioeconomic diversity among the student body and staff. The school pairs this focus on diversity with a deep emphasis on equity. This environment enables robust social-emotional and identity development.

City Garden prioritizes diversity in all forms. Racially, City Garden is composed of 48% White, 42% Black, 5% Hispanic, and 4% multiracial students; this roughly mirrors the demographics of St. Louis. City Garden also draws from socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods. The resulting diversity is celebrated. As one student said, “Some people ignore differences; we embrace them.” It is also the reason that many parents choose the school. One White parent reflected, “We could have sent X to our very high-performing (parochial)

neighborhood school, but we wanted our kid to have a diverse set of peers and a high-performing school.” Another Black parent added, “I moved for the school. It’s exciting to find a school willing to talk the talk and walk the walk on diversity.”

For City Garden, diversity in enrollment is not enough; instead, the school strives for racial equity. City Garden manifests its commitment to equity in its Anti-Bias, Anti-Racism (ABAR) curriculum, staff training, organizational roles (e.g., director of racial equity curriculum and training), parent trainings, and long-lasting community partnerships.



This emphasis on diversity and equity fuels **social-emotional development** as students learn about difference, privilege, and bias. They practice social awareness and relationship skills across lines of difference and with an ABAR focus. Students also engage in **identity development** in an environment where differences and uniqueness are celebrated. As students encounter concepts of inequality and privilege, they are prompted to more deeply understand and challenge their roles in the broader society. Students are encouraged to be active and socially conscious leaders who ask not only “What can I do?” but also “What can we do together?” The empowerment strengthens students’ connections with the larger community. The vignettes below illustrate experiences that foster development in these domains:

- City Garden leveraged “Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves”<sup>9</sup> to develop scaffolded ABAR

<sup>9</sup> Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2010).

curricula for students. Work with preschoolers starts by teaching about difference and normalizing such conversations. During a recent lesson on skin color, students considered how they racially/ethnically identify and how they are similar to or different from others. They discussed how diversity is or is not present in their classroom and community. Students in City Garden’s lower elementary classes explore the concept of fairness, including the inequity or privilege that they have encountered as a result of their identities. The curriculum for upper elementary students incorporates more sophisticated language, history, and cultural studies with a focus on equity and social justice. In these upper grades, students explore implicit bias or racism. Students analyze and challenge inequitable structures. One student said of this scaffolding, “You’re not going to talk about big world problems with preschool children. But you might read a book about Martin Luther King Jr. Now that we’re older, we do Newsela articles about what’s going on — from Trump’s wall to school shootings and stuff. We take ABAR very seriously here.”

- Students also proactively discuss complex tensions around diversity and affinity. For example, several upper elementary students expressed interest in launching a Black-owned business. Two White students became aware of the business plan and wanted to be a part of it. A disagreement ensued: Some students insisted on the business being Black-owned and Black-operated, while others noted that students of other races should be invited too. Instead of shying away from this challenging debate, teachers called a community meeting to open the dialogue for the full class. Many students shared their perspectives, and there were strong emotions in the room. Ultimately the class came to a consensus that one leader summarized as, “It’s okay for the students to have a Black-owned and Black-led business. It is the classmates’ role to trust that the intention is to have affinity and a safe space, not to exclude others. If they want, the business owners might decide to invite White friends as consultants.” Students then wondered if it was okay for White students to meet together. Again, after a thoughtful discussion, the class agreed: “If it’s a space to talk about their identity, to seek betterment or affinity, to be in service of others, then it’s okay. It’s not okay to leave out others or put yourselves over other people.”
- Teachers focus on addressing any engagement gaps by race in the classroom. Teachers pay attention to whether children of all races are actively participating in learning, are not left behind or ignored, and are not bored. In cases where gaps are identified, teachers are trained to redirect and provide scaffolded supports to students.
- City Garden envisions students as ABAR leaders and advocates in their communities. One White student

recently shared a glimpse of this in action: “My grandparents say things that are offensive to me. I casually slip into the conversation the things that I’m learning about ABAR.”

## 2. Self-directed learning across domains

<b>Cognitive</b>	<b>Physical</b>	<b>Academic</b>
Mental	<b>Social Emotional</b>	<b>Identity</b>

■ Primary Domain   ■ Secondary Domain

City Garden fosters developmentally appropriate self-directed learning, student choice, and student ownership. As Huck explained, “If we truly follow the child, with our support and guidance, children can take ownership of their development — mind, body, and spirit — in really powerful ways.” This environment for self-directed learning prompts development across multiple domains.

True to its Montessori model, City Garden shapes classrooms into intentionally mixed-age communities. These mixed-age settings reflect the different pace at which individual students develop cognitively, socially/emotionally, and academically. The classrooms feature more personalized and differentiated supports for students based on developmental level (not age). These environments are also seen as “practice societies” in which children play a leading role in their community.

Everything about the environment of the school and classroom is designed to spark curiosity and provide resources for development. Montessori classrooms are structured such that learning materials are grouped by content area and activities are sequenced by level of difficulty. Classrooms are also decorated to be warm and engaging.



The role of teachers, then, is to “manage the environment, not the student,” as Huck said. Teachers occasionally provide lessons; they spend much more time observing, guiding, and removing barriers for student learning. As explained by a City Garden teacher: “Before asking a child something, I ask myself, is this for me or for the child? If it’s for me, I let it go. I question whether I am wanting to control something versus wanting the child to grow.”

City Garden’s attention to developmentally appropriate self-directed learning facilitates integration across domains. City Garden (and the Montessori model) supports **cognitive development**. The structure of the day and types of activities are designed to build skills like planning, reasoning, and problem-solving. Similarly, the model promotes **physical development** as activities engage fine and gross motor skills and as students frequently move about the classroom. Students engage in **identity development** as they explore their values and interests via engaging, hands-on in-school and out-of-school learning experiences. Students experience **social-emotional development** as they learn, work, and complete complex projects in groups; this not only enables students to flex relationship skills, but also builds agency and self-efficacy. The robust, rigorous curriculum and approach to learning fuel **academic development**. The scenes below demonstrate what this self-directed learning looks like:

- Staff at City Garden use what Montessori calls “sensitive periods,” or phases when children are naturally pre-disposed to learn a particular skill or habit, to inform instruction. For example, when a City Garden 3-year-old is in a sensitive period focused on writing instruments and begins to write on every surface, the teacher leverages that sensitive period to help the child master pencil grip and to engage in new and different writing activities. This is in contrast to many adults’ inclinations in this scenario, which might be to stop and control this behavior.
- Students have tremendous choice in what and when they learn. In a primary classroom, City Garden’s youngest students — some only 2 1/2 years old — engaged in “challenging work” for two to three consecutive hours during which they freely moved around the classroom and chose activities in reading, math, science, history, geography, or practical life. Students decided for how long they would engage with each activity and with whom they would work (independently or with a friend). In a recent “challenging work” session, one child independently counted beads (thus learning about quantity); two friends collaborated on a flower arrangement (thus practicing fine motor skills); and another child practiced yoga. One parent described the experience of witnessing this: “I imagined Montessori as kids running around screaming. I went to school sitting at a desk, learning the same thing at the same time as everyone else. Here, I was expecting chaos, but it was quiet, kids were doing things and work-

ing on things. A few kids needed support, and teachers gave that. It was eye-opening. It’s a mindshift that students can learn and not create chaos.”



- Lower and upper elementary students increasingly delve into “big works” or rigorous, specialized projects that reflect their interests and require increased ownership. Last school year, students in upper elementary researched unjust systems and structures around the country and proposed solutions. Students first conducted research, which resulted in posters on topics like health care, gun violence, poverty, and food insecurity. Students then brainstormed and developed a project to respond to an injustice. The class decided to organize a Black Lives Matter march and invited teachers, parents, and community members to participate.
- Upper elementary and junior high students interested in culinary arts arranged a mini-internship to learn from a local baker. Students made phone calls, coordinated chaperones and transportation, documented their knowledge, and presented their learnings to the class. Another student interested in cars planned a visit to a local car factory and showroom. Still other students organized a service learning outing to volunteer at a local food pantry and support a local environmental group.<sup>10</sup>
- Students in junior high operate the school store. This year, students decided to sell coffee to teachers and parents during morning welcome. Students ran experiments to determine which beverages to offer. They also led the store’s marketing, pricing, and financial projections.
- Students are supported in self-direction through explicit instruction in note-taking and planning. One City Garden alumna reflected: “I was amazed that other kids at my high school were not organized. We’ve been learning organization since kindergarten, and we know how to use a planner, how to take notes, and how to study.” Starting in early years, students are taught to “restore the environment” of their organized classrooms by leaving spaces clean and neat. In elementary years, students begin to use planners to document assignments and backwards plan for the completion of a “big work.”
- In the wellness-focused class Interplay, a student volunteer led the class in a series of stretches. Earlier in the class, students had practiced mindfulness, discussed healthy habits, learned about the recommended number of hours of sleep for kids, and practiced vocabulary to describe how they might feel with not enough sleep.
- City Garden classrooms each feature a “peace area,” typically a corner decorated with pillows, cushions, and stuffed animals. Students can self-identify a need to visit the peace area, where they can practice breathing exercises or other stress management activities.
- During lunch, students practice a short independent lunchtime meditation before a more traditional social dining experience. Students demonstrate ownership of the environment, as each student assumes a role in cleaning the space after the meal is over. One student may wipe tables, and another may sweep.

Students report bringing this self-direction, choice, and ownership with them beyond City Garden. As one alumna reflected, “I know how to go to a teacher with a purpose, and I learned that here. I go to my chemistry teacher now and his office is empty because kids don’t know what to ask. To me, asking for what I need specifically came more naturally.”

### 3. Nurturing environment built on strong relationships

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	Social Emotional	Identity

■ Primary Domain   ■ Secondary Domain

Relationships are central to City Garden’s work. City Garden strives to create an environment where every student is welcomed, every parent is supported, and every teacher is

<sup>10</sup> Katherine Scott and James Graham, “Service-Learning: Implications for Empathy and Community Engagement in Elementary School Children,” *Journal of Experiential Education* 38, no. 4 (2015): 354–372, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1053825915592889>.

respected. This basis in strong relationships is a critical lever for development across multiple domains.

Such an environment has a primary benefit on students' social-emotional and identity development. This nurturing environment fosters **social-emotional development**. City Garden's focus on creating a diverse, inclusive, and equitable environment enables a sense of belonging where each person is welcomed, respected, and celebrated. City Garden teaches social awareness and relationship skills like communication, conflict resolution, and empathy and provides authentic spaces to practice them. The focus on relationships also enables **identity development** as students learn about themselves in relation to others, including those who are different from them. This environment also benefits other domains. Students' mental health is supported as their emotional health is explicitly addressed. Finally, the integration of domains supports academic development. Within this nurturing environment, students can engage, ask critical questions, and take risks required for meaningful learning. The examples below show how strong relationships are forged at City Garden:

- Leaders check in with each student every morning. Leaders use this not only to welcome each child, but also to pick up subtle cues about emotional well-being from family members and students. If challenges are detected, a leader follows up with the teacher to ensure that the child is appropriately supported. A student described what this morning check-in does for his school experience: "We usually have five teachers greet us. They make us feel happy. If we're tardy, other schools might yell, but there's no yelling here. The teachers talk to you if it's too frequent in order to solve the problem, but they still smile and say 'Have a good day.'"
- Each morning, students and teachers participate in a "wishing well" activity. During this time, students and adults in a classroom can tell the others if they are having a rough time. Members of the classroom community listen, reflect, and wish each other well.



- City Garden provides students and families support beyond the classroom. One alumna reflected how her middle school teacher shaped her future while advising her and her family on St. Louis' complex and competitive process for applying to area high schools: "Being in St. Louis, it's stressful being an eighth-grader because you're applying to high schools. It's a big deal. Mr. X sat down with us, talked to us, and helped us not stress out. He was so comforting and professional, making my family more relaxed about it too." Another City Garden graduate spoke of a favorite teacher from a decade prior: "If you weren't doing well, she talked to you. She asked questions, she didn't accuse, she didn't show her dominance over people, and she gave us books to teach us about things like kindness when we needed the push. That shaped me, and I still talk to her."<sup>11</sup>
- Parents perceive that their children are well-known, as one shared about a recent experience at back-to-school night: "When I first sat down with the teacher, she talked about [my kid's] formal education, but there were also stories about his growth and stories about his interactions with other kids. I was shocked but so relieved to hear that this teacher — and so many others at City Garden — really know my kid." Another noted: "The support from teachers is so consistent. I get weekly emails from both of my sons' teachers. I can be a teammate with the teachers to support my sons." Still another said, "The teachers here care and love. The love that my kid gets from teachers makes my kid want to come to school every day."

#### 4. Investment in parent and staff development around anti-bias and anti-racism

City Garden makes a significant investment in adult ABAR development, which has a primary impact on social-emotional and identity development. The school knows the important role parents and staff play in the school's commitment to enabling high student achievement and creating an ABAR community.

The journey to anchor adult thought, language, and practice on ABAR has not always been smooth. In *Journey to Becoming an Institution Committed to Racial Equity*, City Garden shares its ten-step plan toward realizing its ABAR vision. Many of the steps require communication, training, and work from the adults in City Garden's community. City Garden has encountered adults who are strong supporters; it has also encountered strong opposition. One parent explained, "It's been a road. There've been parents who've left and think we think too much

<sup>[11]</sup> Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: A Meta-Analysis," *Educational Psychology Review* 30, no. 1 (2018): 1-34.

about it. There've been parents who say, 'You made my child see race.'" Huck added, "It's some of the hardest work I think there is, especially when going beyond the surface into deeper institutional issues. But it's so critical."

Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	<b>Social Emotional</b>	<b>Identity</b>

■ Primary Domain   ■ Secondary Domain

ABAR work with teachers enhances their **social-emotional development** as they foster greater social awareness; teachers report that the benefits extend beyond their practice into their personal lives. Staff also engage in **identity development** as they explore their experiences, perspectives, and practices through the lens of race. Staff develop a sense of purpose and agency in their roles as anti-biased, anti-racist educators. Educator development in these areas affects how adults teach and interact with students. It thus informs students' development across domains. The details below provide information as to how City Garden supports teacher ABAR development:

- Like many schools, City Garden provides teachers with intensive professional development, including deep dives into topics related to Montessori education and public education (e.g., Missouri state standards and policies). Leaders at City Garden, however, use every professional development opportunity to advance ABAR. Staff learn and use ABAR language, discuss readings, share personal and instructional practices to advance ABAR, and engage in deep, often uncomfortable, reflections. As one leader noted, "In the beginning of the year, we have four weeks where we prepare teachers. We focus on skills you might not get in a teacher prep program or Montessori program. The most important characteristic of our teachers is an extreme learner mindset/growth mindset. We don't expect people to be ABAR experts, but they have to be committed to growth, willing to be vulnerable, and able to be in relationship with others."
- Teachers are challenged to grow professionally and personally as they engage with ABAR. One White teacher said, "ABAR is personal. It gets into family and personal life. It initially feels weird to talk about microaggression and privilege, but it makes me grow personally in my relationships with students and outside of school." Another added, "We do work with ourselves because we can't do work with children if we're not working on our-

selves." Another shared, "I've learned so much from our ABAR work, like how making eye contact might be a cultural thing. In Montessori, we analyze moments like requiring a child to sustain eye contact. ABAR is about being okay with not requiring that. It's made me think about the importance of what we request from kids. It's made me more flexible with kids and open to more possibilities."

- City Garden developed a data dashboard to monitor discipline referrals. Data are segmented by race, special education identification, gender, and age. This enables staff to examine and challenge their practice. One teacher reflected on the impact: "I've become more mindful of everything that I do. I think about things like 'Who have I disciplined today? Is it all boys?' I am attentive and aware of every aspect of the classroom. 'Who have I smiled at more? Who is getting most of my time? What is equal versus equitable?'"
- City Garden has formed a coaching model through which instructional leadership team members coach teachers, peers observe one another and give each other feedback, and groups meet weekly for sessions. Groups engage in a lesson study every other week; they conduct a child study on alternating weeks, during which teachers problem-solve around a child's holistic needs.
- City Garden invests in formal professional development for teachers. Recently, teachers returned from a development course with ideas for a new discipline structure that supports holistic behavior support and restorative justice.
- City Garden is launching an institute to prepare adults to implement ABAR Montessori education in public schools.



Cognitive	Physical	Academic
Mental	<b>Social Emotional</b>	<b>Identity</b>

■ Primary Domain   ■ Secondary Domain

City Garden also strategically works with parents and the broader community to advance its ABAR vision. This attends to the **social-emotional development** of the community via facilitated relationship-building. It also enables adult **identity development** as parents and neighbors explore their values, form strong community bonds, and define a common identity over common goals.

- City Garden started a parent diversity committee in 2013, through which parents can engage in courageous conversations. The parent-led group defined a goal of being color-brave instead of color-blind. They developed and handed out resources to parents at parent-teacher conferences to help families have conversations about ABAR at home. They brainstormed responses to neighborhood crises, including during the aftermath of the deaths of Michael Brown and VonDerrit Myers Jr.
- City Garden leaders meet with each prospective family to share the school’s ABAR vision clearly and transparently.
- City Garden provides parents with resources and shared language to have discussions at home about topics covered at school. One parent recounted: “They give us common language to have conversations with my kids. My kid can have the tough conversations about empathy, emotions, and differences.”
- City Garden has engaged in broader community conversations. For example, several years ago, staff noticed that the success of the school was potentially accelerating gentrification of the surrounding neighborhoods. The school launched a housing task force to engage the local community. Staff at City Garden listened to neighbors, brainstormed ways in which the school could influence policies and investments to keep the neighborhood diverse, and eventually lobbied at the state level for updates to the school lottery system.
- City Garden is launching a Center for Equity, which will be a hub for the organizing, advocacy, and coalition-building required to create the broader community environment necessary to support City Garden’s mission.

## Conclusions

Core elements of the City Garden model — diverse school community, consistent focus on racial equity, self-directed

learning, nurturing environment built on strong relationships, and investment in parent and staff development — enable Comprehensive Student Development (CSD). Across its model, City Garden consistently addresses multiple domains of CSD. The particulars of the City Garden model are deeply informed by its Montessori influencers, St. Louis location, and homegrown ABAR approach; however, themes elevated in this case study about what development in these areas looks and feels like and details about how this development occurs are designed to be broadly applicable.

## What enables this success?

The section that follows summarizes aspects of the City Garden school model that enable its success in Comprehensive Student Development. This section is intended to demonstrate the intentionality and comprehensiveness of the school’s approach.

### The “What”: Mission, Vision, and Definition of Student Success

#### Mission/Vision

- City Garden’s mission focuses on a bold, broad set of work required for developing the whole child (e.g., City Garden exists to “redefine education,” “reimagine community,” and “reinvigorate our world”).

#### Standards

- Combining and upholding both Missouri public school academic standards and those from the Montessori Public Policy Initiative, City Garden balances traditional academic rigor with whole-child approach.

### The “How”: Curriculum and Educational Approach

#### Community engagement

- City Garden has defined and now conducts anti-bias, anti-racism (ABAR) work with staff, families, and students to embed equity as a focus of the school.
- City Garden adopts a diverse-by-design model, prioritizing racial and socioeconomic diversity among the student body and staff. The school is intentionally located to draw from diverse neighborhoods. Additionally, City Garden engages staff, families, and students to support equitable practices. With staff, for example, City Garden leaders review academic and culture data to identify and address racial gaps; City Garden provides students with age-appropriate language to discuss complex topics; leaders meet with each prospective family to share the school’s anti-bias, anti-racism (ABAR) vision.

- Students engage with the community via their self-directed learning experiences. Students self-select the topic of their “big work” (specialized, longer-term projects), resulting in research on social topics of interest (health care, poverty, gun control, etc.) and organization of events and outings, such as a local Black Lives Matter march.
- City Garden proactively engages its community on local issues. For example, the school launched a housing task force to address gentrification of the neighborhood.
- City Garden is establishing a Center for Equity, which will be a hub for community activism.

### Instructional methods

- The primary role of a City Garden teacher is to prepare the environment to enable student self-directed learning. Teachers use observations and targeted direct instruction to guide student learning. Staff intentionally support students through “sensitive periods” (a Montessori concept for when students are naturally predisposed to learn a particular lesson). Instead of setting restrictions on a child’s behavior, a City Garden teacher guides the child toward productive activities that fuel learning.

### Curriculum and materials

- Materials in Montessori classrooms are intentionally designed to provide students with developmentally appropriate, engaging learning opportunities. A flower arranging station in a preschool classroom, for example, helps build students’ fine motor skills.
- In younger classrooms, students have flexibility in what they learn and when. This allows each child to make progress toward learning goals at his or her own pace.
- In upper elementary and junior high, students engage with curricular materials that stem from student-led questions. Students recently arranged field trips aligned to their personal interests, such as one group that visited a local bakery.

### Student Culture

- The culture at City Garden is extremely warm and welcoming. Each morning, students are greeted individually by multiple adults at the school.
- City Garden’s ABAR work helps to develop a student culture that is accepting of differences, able to effectively resolve conflict, and relatively devoid of bullying.

## The “How”: Operational Systems

### Use of time

- Classrooms at City Garden feature two to three hours of uninterrupted work blocks per day. This creates space for self-directed learning and exploration.

### Use of physical space

- City Garden classrooms are marked by intentional organization of activities and resources by subject area (influenced by Montessori practices). This enables young students to associate the physical classroom space with specific content and activities. Combined with extended and uninterrupted work blocks, the structure of the classroom allows for fruitful self-directed learning time.
- City Garden’s building features multiple open common spaces outside classrooms. These spaces are used for community-wide meetings and collaboration among students and teachers..

## The “Who”: Talent

### Leadership

- City Garden school leaders prioritize the development of the whole child with a laser focus on equity. Through dedicated work to advance ABAR, school leaders make progress alongside students, families, and the larger community.
- City Garden has a racially diverse leadership team, reflecting the school’s value of diversity and the communities it serves.

### Staff

- The emphasis of ABAR in City Garden’s professional development supports educators’ identity and social-emotional growth. This in turn supports educators to equitably support students’ growth across domains.
- Strong student-adult relationships enable long-term growth and development of the larger school community.
- City Garden is developing a training institute in which teachers from across the country can learn the school’s approach to public, Montessori, ABAR-focused education.

Learn more at [chanzuckerberg.com/whole-child](https://chanzuckerberg.com/whole-child)



## Voice of a Leader

### **What are you most proud of at your school?**

I am most proud of our unwavering commitment to racial equity, and that this commitment permeates our school culture.

### **What keeps you up at night? What's been hardest?**

Finding and retaining great teachers is our greatest challenge. There are very few teachers in the United States who have both Montessori certification and state certification, as well as a strong equity lens.

### **Where to next? If your wildest dreams came true, what would we see at your school if we were to visit five years from now?**

We have a bold new plan to expand our impact! In five years, we will have:

- Launched an anti-biased, anti-racist Montessori teacher training center,
- Launched a Center for Equity that leads policy advocacy and neighborhood-based community organizing,
- Doubled the size of our current school and opened two additional schools in St. Louis, created tools to share our school model with others.