

La Tierra Montessori School of Arts and Sciences
Public Education Commission (PEC) Meeting, January 20, 2023
Charter Schools Division (CSD) Site Visit Report

In response to the Notice of Breach issued by the PEC to La Tierra Montessori School of the Arts and Sciences (LTMS) on December 20, 2022, the Charter Schools Division (CSD) conducted a site visit to LTMS on Monday, January 9, 2023, following federal and tribal holiday observances. CSD acknowledges the effort of La Tierra Montessori school to plan for and participate in the most recent school site visit, as well as the school's request to extend the deadline for the required Corrective Action Plan from January 6, 2023 to January 11, 2023.

For the site visit, a team was assembled that included CSD staff, as well as Special Education Bureau staff. The school-site visit included a meeting with the school's Interim Head Learner, classroom observations, as well as observations of the school facilities and grounds. The purpose of the visit was centered on assessing particular topics, as specified in the Notice of Breach, as noted below, well as the general condition of the school community:

- Educational Program, Mission, and Mission-goal implementation
- School staffing
- Staff training
- School health and safety [and]
- Special education program and services

Innovations, Highlights, and Recent Happenings at La Tierra Montessori School

The CSD would like to, first, acknowledge some positive innovations and things that have taken place at La Tierra Montessori School recently. The school reports that the Middle school students recently participated in the New Mexico Electric Car Challenge, sponsored by Sandia Laboratories, Los Alamos National Laboratory and UNM. With guidance from the S.T.E.M. teacher, students worked for weeks to design and build the fastest electric model car and compete against schools from across the state. On November 19, Students traveled to Albuquerque to present their model and compete against up to 50 teams, and placed 15th in the competition.

La Tierra also reported their plans to reignite their Agricultural program, and plans continue to grow the S.T.E.M. program, at the request of their students. LTMS has welcomed back their Agriculture Teacher, as has welcomed a new 5th/ 6th grade teacher to school. Additionally, LTMS has sought to increase parent and family involvement and engagement by starting a new Parent Teacher Association (PTA), which met for the first time on Wednesday, January 4, 2023. The school also plans to learn more from families and the community by hosting more town hall meetings.

Educational Program, School Mission, and Mission-Specific Goals

The CSD acknowledges the work that La Tierra Montessori School and the governing board have done to assess the current educational program, mission statement, and mission-specific goals. CSD also acknowledges the school's plan to seek amendments to the current charter contract, as well as their plan to submit those amendments prior to the February, 2023 meeting of the Commission, as outlined in the school Corrective Action Plan.

During the site visit, consistent, Montessori-based instruction, including the use of Montessori instructional materials, was not observed across all classrooms. However, implementation of Montessori instruction, including use of Montessori instructional materials, was observed in the lower grade classrooms (K-4). Additionally, Montessori instructional materials were present in all classrooms observed.

The Interim Head Learner, Ms. Herrera expressed a strong desire to continue and grow the school's heritage of Montessori practices, while also having the opportunity to integrate other innovative teaching and learning strategies, improve school-wide data collection and assessment, and to improve academic and developmental outcomes for all students at LTMS.

School Staffing

During the site visit, the team was able to observe that La Tierra Montessori School has maintained Patricia Herrera as the Interim Head Learner on a 0.19 FTE contract and as the Special Education Coordinator contract as the 0.50 Special Education Coordinator. La Tierra Montessori School also maintains one full-time Montessori-trained teacher, and, as previously reported, has CSD hired a new, full-time 5th/6th grade teacher, and has re-hired the Agriculture instructor.

As part of an interview with the Interim Head Learner, CSD sought updated information regarding the search for a full-time Interim Head Learner. Ms. Herrera was unaware of the current status of the search, but reported that she was previously aware of two candidates that had been considered. Ms. Herrera expressed a strong desire for and commitment to both her roles as Interim Head Learner and Special Education Coordinator, but acknowledged there are unique challenges and time requirements for both roles that exceed what she is currently contracted for. During the visit, Ms. Herrera was on site prior to the arrival of the team at 7:45 a.m. and remained on site after the team's departure at 4:00 p.m.

Ms. Herrera did disclose that La Tierra Montessori is currently navigating issues involving teacher licensure and is working quickly to reorganize staff to ensure that each classroom has an appropriately licensed teacher in place. Mrs. Herrera also chose to update CSD staff, to the best of her knowledge, on high-level personnel matters previously reported to CSD and the PEC, and reiterated that she was committed to safeguarding the needs of the LTMS children and families, while fulfilling her responsibilities as the Interim Head Learner and Special Education Coordinator to the fullest extent possible.

Staff Training

The Interim Head Learner reported that efforts have been made to establish and maintain a professional learning community (PLC) centered on teacher development of Montessorian strategies and techniques, with the school's single Montessori-trained teacher leading. CSD requested documentation of the PLC from the Interim Head Learner while on site, and were advised that the requested documentation would be promptly provided if and when it is made available by the lead Montessori teacher. Following the visit, the Interim Head Learner documented her requests for updated information about the Montessori PLC. As of the development of this report, an update on the status of staff Montessori training and the Montessori PLC had not been received by CSD. The Interim Head Learner also reported current plans for the school to collaborate with the Indigenous Montessori Learning Center for enhanced teacher Montessori training, which is consistent with what is detailed in the school's corrective action plan submitted to the PEC on January 11, 2023.

School Health and Safety

The Charter School Division acknowledges the work La Tierra Montessori School has done and is doing to address health and safety issues at the school. Although the school was able to provide policies codified in the employee handbook and student/family handbook, overall those policies lacked specificity and were unavailable on the school's website. Rather, the school provided the site visit team a binder of board approved policies. During the site visit, several areas related to school health and security were observed:

Student Meals/ Nutrition Program

The site visit team observed the student breakfast period inside the school cafeteria. Students were served a meal that consisted of a breakfast bar, a fresh orange or apple, and a carton of milk. When asked about the meal program, the Interim Head Learner, Ms. Herrera reported that the school orders breakfast and lunch meals via McCurdy Charter School, and she plans to bring back the salad bar. Lunch was not observed, however the Interim Head Learner reported that, to her knowledge, meals served at LTMS are the same as those served at McCurdy. Ms. Herrera also reported that she transports the meals to LTMS, and meals are served by the school cook, who also serves as the school custodian. The site visit team did not observe a posted lunch menu in the school cafeteria, or on the LTMS webpage, and current copies of meal menus could not be provided when requested.

Student Supervision

While CSD recognizes that personnel matters are a component of charter school autonomy, we feel it is important to be cognizant of how the potential effects of wider-spread issues concerning school personnel might impact school success, as well as school health and safety. At the start of the most recent site visit to LTMS, the Interim Head Learner disclosed to the site visit team that she did not, as expected by the Charter School Monitoring Protocol, share with her staff the plans for the site visit, so the conditions would be representative of a typical day at LTMS. The site visit team observed that students arrived at school as early as 7:45 a.m, however,

most teaching staff did not arrive at school until after 8:20 am. This resulted in insufficient supervision of students throughout the school building, and no student supervision outside of the school during student arrival and drop-off. The Interim Head Learner reported to the site visit team that despite exercising LTMS employment policy and reiterating school safety policy, staff continue to arrive at school after contracted hours daily and leave the building at various points in the school day, without her knowledge or approval. At various times throughout the morning, the site visit team observed students who were unattended for over 30 minutes, due to a lack of timely teacher arrival to schools and to classrooms. One teacher was also observed supervising multiple classrooms, in the absence of the regular teacher and the timely arrival of a substitute.

Security of Building Entrances

The site visit team observed a lack of consistent security of building entrances, particularly at the start of the school day. The school doorbell was not fully operational during the arrival of the site visit team, with the head administrator later noting that she suspects the doorbell is frequently disarmed (unplugged) by parties unauthorized to do so. Upon student arrival to school, the front door was propped open with a large rock, allowing free access to the building until 8:20 a.m. After the start of the school day, a side door to the school was discovered ajar by a member of the site visit team, and the Interim Head Learner was notified immediately. Upon notification, the Interim Head Learner explained that she has to “do door checks throughout the morning, every morning, because staff prop the doors open for their friends who come to work late”. At various points during the site visit, in the absence of the Head Learner and Office Manager, students were also observed giving other students, and adults, access to the building through the main entrance.

Visitor Screening

A lack of a clear, consistent visitor screening system was observed at the school. At the absence of the Interim Head Learner and Office Manager, no staff was present to screen visitors.

Attention to and Security of all Classroom Spaces

The site visit team observed that the S.T.E.M classroom was not secure and was unattended, posing a potential hazard, as it houses water elements and animals. The room also emitted a sulfur-like smell that could be detected throughout the school, however the Interim Head Learner explained that odor was due to a lack of new filtration equipment, which had just arrived.

General Property Use and After-hours Building Access

At various times during the site visit, the concerns were cited about general use of the property, building, and building access. The school lacks a safe and clear bus and pick-up and drop off areas, sufficient safe and accessible play areas and equipment. The Interim Head Learner explained to the site visit team that she is unaware of details of the businesses that share property with the school and any employees who are employed by the businesses. Lastly, the

head administrator reported that unauthorized access to the building and office spaces with “old or copies” of school keys is suspected, as well as access to confidential student and administrative-level documentation and records; an explicit desire for increased security measure, including cameras, and rekeying of locks was expressed.

Special Education Program and Services

Members of the site visit team included staff from the Special Education Bureau and CSD. The special education program at La Tierra Montessori was assessed via classroom observation, a review of special education files and related documentation, and an interview with Patricia Herrera, the Interim Head Learner (0.19 FTE) and Special Education Coordinator/ Special Education Teacher (0.50 FTE).

During the site visit classroom observations, delivery of specially designed instruction and special education related-services were not observed being provided to students. Following a review of special education records and the interview with the Head Learner/ Special Educator, instructional and administrative issues with the Special Education Program and LaTierra Montessori, were found, including but not limited to:

- Irregular delivery of specialized instruction/ special education
- Inconsistent and incomplete delivery of related services
- Failure to assign appropriate services, accommodations, and IEP goals
- Incomplete or absent service records/ logs
- Inconsistent maintenance and storage of records
- A lack of evidence of teacher knowledge of and access to student IEPs contents

The Interim Head learner expressed difficulty providing regular special education services due to the other many duties she is required to perform daily in her dual-role. Ms. Herrera shared that the school has taken steps to secure the appropriate related service providers, as of November 2022. She also expressed a willingness to improve documentation and record-keeping practices.