



Herald photo by Carol South

The Children's House, an independent Montessori School, was recently certified by the Association Montessori Internationale this year, culminating a two-year process by staff and parents. Here, guide Julie Shearer demonstrates to her primary students how to make sidewalk chalk.

School earns prestigious ranking

Children's House one of 170 Montessori schools nationwide to earn AMI certification

By Carol South

Herald contributing writer

The Children's House, an independent Montessori School on North Long Lake Road, has been certification by the Association Montessori Internationale this year.

The prestigious ranking

makes the school one of only three in Michigan to reach this level granted by the organization founded by education pioneer Maria Montessori. Out of 4,000 independent Montessori schools nationwide, only 170 have been recognized by AMI.

The Children's House began as a small 24-student preschool program in Suttons Bay in 1983. It was co-founded by retiring head of school Gretchen Uhlinger and current director of admissions and operations Colleen Christensen.

The school now boasts

225 students from toddlers through sixth grade, who learn and play on a scenic eight-acre campus across from Traverse City West Senior High School. Working closely with architects, the staff custom-designed the building and grounds

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Montessori school earns prestigious ranking

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around Montessori principles. The facility opened in 2002.

Achieving the AMI certification was an important goal for Uhlinger as well as the devoted staff and parents. Everyone embraced the two-year application and evaluation process.

“That’s where this recognition we’ve reached is so meaningful to us: you can operate an independent school without standards, but that’s where it was really important to me to have a bar set for Montessori education,” said Uhlinger. “This bar says that the teachers have graduate level of study, not a two-week fly-by-night program, and that our classrooms are run on a model that has proven to be effective.”

“To be a part of this international group, we’re really proud,” she added.

Uhlinger and her staff completed extensive documentation about the school, the guides (the Montessori term for teachers) and their education, grounds, students and activities as they applied for certification. Then in December, a representative of the organization, Molly O’Shaughnessey from Minneapolis, was on site for three days to see firsthand how the school operated.

“Having her visit, we went through out environment with a fine tooth comb,” said Michelle Shane, a guide at the school for nine years who will assume head of school



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Doing real work is a core of the educational philosophy at the Children’s House, an independent Montessori School on North Long Lake Road. Friday afternoon, Erik Anton and Briana Holden, both elementary students at the school, prepare a snack of fresh fruit for students.

duties next year.

“They have really specific requirements and just to have a pair of eyes sitting in, to have someone of that stature and to have her great feedback and tips on doing things better, was helpful,” she added. “She’s an internationally renown AMI educator and speaker.”

O’Shaughnessey left a number of recommendations for the school and will return for a visit next October to check in.

“They’ll keep us to those standards,” said Uhlinger. “When you live this far away, you own integrity is tested.”

In keeping with Maria Montessori’s vision of real work and engaged learners, Children’s House students are involved with all aspects of their day: from working in the greenhouse to preparing and delivering a snack to helping maintain the grounds. If a student is absent, the job might not get done, giving students a sense of ownership and responsibility.

The goal of the school is to create resourceful and respectful children who seamlessly fit into the community and their future schools after they graduate from the program. Uhlinger noted that former students have thrived

at a range of schools, including the Traverse City Area Public Schools junior highs, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Middle School and the Traverse City Christian School.

“Our mission as a Montessori School is to educate the whole child,” said Uhlinger. “First of all, they are great students because they know how to learn and they know the tools of the trades and have been encouraged to take charge of their education.”

“They’re really excited about homework and grades because they’ve never had that before,” she added of former Children’s House students.