Everyday moments show a school's mission to make students of all races equal

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Robert Nelson (left), who works with lower-elementary students at City Garden Montessori School in St. Louis, Missouri, says he was pleasantly surprised by the school’s devotion to anti-bias, anti-racist work. Photo by: Ann Hermes/The Christian Science Monitor

Anne Lacey sits on the rug at City Garden Montessori School in St. Louis, Missouri. She is a "guide," the Montessori word for teacher. Lacey teaches first- to third-grade students. She’s white, with wavy hair and glasses.

Robert Nelson is another guide in the classroom. He checks a boy’s math. He’s African-American, with a shaved head and beard.

The school’s educators reflect the mix of races in the nearby neighborhoods. Students from these neighborhoods have a better chance of being selected to attend the school.
Everyday moments show the school's mission for inclusion of all races. This year, students used popsicle sticks to make mini "Black Lives Matter" signs.

The school is less than 20 miles from Ferguson, Missouri. In 2014, the police killing of African-American teenager Michael Brown there sparked the “Black Lives Matter” protests. It is a movement to stop violence and racism against the black community.

Can't Pretend Race Doesn't Matter

Nicole Evans, the school's African-American principal, says they can't pretend race doesn't matter.

The United States has an estimated 4,000 Montessori schools. A total of 500 of them are public. Among those, a little more than one out of two are charter schools, according to Mira Debs of the Education Studies Program at Yale University.

Charter schools are different from traditional public schools. While both are paid for by taxes, charter schools are independently operated. Public schools are operated by a public school board. The people on the board are elected by the residents of the area.

Numbers show blending races hasn't been a focus for most charter schools. However, there was a new report published May 15. It says City Garden is one of 125 U.S. charter schools identified as "diverse by design." This means it's racially blended on purpose.

Bringing Race To The Surface "Gets Messy"

In 2008, black and white parents helped create the City Garden charter school. It offered a public Montessori through eighth grade. It also blended races. The city schools mostly had students of color. Private schools were mostly white.

When Evans arrived as principal, the school's educators had recently begun anti-bias, anti-racist education, or ABAR, training. Still, she says the school needs to make sure black students are as successful as white students. This has involved regular skill-building in addition to 20 hours of ABAR training each summer.

"It gets messy sometimes, because this is not easy work or comfortable work," says Faybra Hemphill, one of City Garden's leaders.

Lacey recalls how her first ABAR training caused "a desperate need to fix everything." She wanted to make sure she wasn't treating students from one race better than another. "I am questioning every decision I make. Every time I raise my voice, every child who gets in trouble, every child who gets praised."
Talking About Race Openly

City Garden students say they make friends of different races. Still, one challenging moment came up this school year.

Some black students were excited about creating a business to make play slime. They thought of it proudly as a black-owned business, but some white students wanted to be part of it.

Evans says the students talked about the situation openly. Some white students helped other white students understand they were overstepping. The black students had expressed a desire to keep it black-run.

A student suggested a solution. The business leaders could call upon other students as "consultants," or people who could help.

"That was a courageous conversation about race," Evans says.

Kim Dixon, a white mother, was impressed with what her daughter learned. "There are 30-, 40-year-old people that still don't get that," Dixon says, "that oppressed people need their own space."

People who are oppressed are restricted in what they can do. People can be oppressed because of their skin color, religion or gender. Black Americans were oppressed by white Americans for a very long time. That is why the community should be allowed to do things for themselves.

Outcomes Of Successful Integration

For charter schools blending races, it's a challenge to keep a balance of races. When the school becomes popular, wealthier parents apply, says Debs from Yale.

City Garden has been able to keep a mix of races. About one out of two are white students. However, the number of students from poor families has shrunk. It was once more than half the school. Now it is about four in 10 students.

The school has asked state lawmakers for help. They want to change the system for selecting students. A new way could help choose more students from poor families.
Quiz

1 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the article's central idea?

(A) The school is less than 20 miles from Ferguson, Missouri.
(B) Charter schools are different from traditional public schools.
(C) It says City Garden is one of 125 U.S. charter schools identified as "diverse by design."
(D) People can be oppressed because of their skin color, religion or gender.

2 Read the paragraph from the article.

The school has asked state lawmakers for help. They want to change the system for selecting students. A new way could help choose more students from poor families.

HOW does this paragraph support the MAIN idea of the article?

(A) It describes what City Garden wants to do to make sure it has students of different races.
(B) It describes what City Garden wants to do to make sure it has students from poor families.
(C) It explains why there are fewer students from poor families going to City Garden.
(D) It explains why state lawmakers have agreed to change City Garden’s system for selecting students.

3 Complete the sentence. Because of students’ conversation about the slime business, _____.

(A) adults felt proud of the students’ ability to talk about race and come up with a solution
(B) adults became worried that the students did not understand that oppressed people need their own space
(C) adults decided to help the students understand why the white students were overstepping
(D) adults were impressed that the students acted like they were 30 or 40 years old
4  What effect did ABAR training have on teachers?

(A) It helped them stop violence against the black community.

(C) It helped them make sure that no more students were getting in trouble.

(D) It helped them start a school unlike any other school in the country.

(D) It helped them think about how they were treating students from different races.