



January 15, 2021

Keith Whitescarver, Board Chair
Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School
1244 Taylor Street NW
Washington, DC 20011

Dear Dr. Whitescarver:

The DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) conducts Qualitative Site Review (QSR) visits to gather and document evidence to support school oversight. According to the School Reform Act § 38-1802.11, DC PCSB shall monitor the progress of each school in meeting the goals and student academic achievement expectations specified in the school's charter. Your school was selected to undergo a QSR because it is eligible for its five-year charter review during school year (SY) 2020 – 21.

Qualitative Site Review Report

A QSR team conducted a virtual site review of Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School from September 28, 2020 – October 9, 2020.

DC PCSB intended to conduct the QSR in the spring of SY 2019 – 20. However, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in all DC public charter schools physically closing in March 2020 through the end of the school year. As a result, the observations in this report were postponed to SY 2020 – 21 and took place remotely. The disruption in traditional school programming due to COVID-19 has had an untold impact on classroom environment and instruction, the primary areas of focus in this report. Observers considered these factors while visiting classrooms. Enclosed is the team's report.

Sincerely,

Rashida Young
Chief School Performance Officer

Qualitative Site Review Report

Date: January 15, 2021

Campus Information

Campus Name: Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School (Breakthrough Montessori PCS)

Ward: 4

Grade Levels: Pre-kindergarten 3 – Third

Qualitative Site Review Information

Reason for Visit: School eligible for Five-Year Charter Review during SY 2020 – 21

Two-week Window: September 28, 2020 – October 9, 2020

QSR Team Members: Four consultants, including one English learner (EL) specialist and one special education (SPED) specialist

Number of Observations: 11 unscored observations

Total Enrollment: 270¹

Students with Disabilities Enrollment: 21

English Learners Enrollment: 40

In-seat Attendance on Observation Days:²

Visit 1: September 28, 2020 – 88.9%

Visit 2: September 29, 2020 – 93.0%

Visit 3: September 30, 2020 – 99.6%

Visit 4: October 1, 2020 – 93.8%

Visit 5: October 2, 2020 – 85.0%

Visit 6: October 5, 2020 – 90.8%

Visit 7: October 6, 2020 – 93.4%

Summary

Breakthrough Montessori PCS's mission is "to provide families of Washington, DC, a fully-implemented, public, Montessori program designed to enable children to develop within themselves the power to shape their lives and the world around them."

¹ This enrollment figure is based on preliminary, unvalidated data as of October 5, 2020.

² During SY 2020 – 21, educational services are being provided both in-person and via distance learning. While during normal operations there is a consistent city-wide definition of what constitutes "present" (a student must be physically present for at least 80.0% of the instructional day), there is significantly more variation in what constitutes "present" during distance learning. In-seat attendance as presented here represents all students receiving educational services, whether in-person or remote. This rate is fundamentally different than in-seat attendance during a typical year.

The QSR team observed strong evidence that the school is achieving its mission. The team saw clear evidence of the school upholding Montessori principles. Teachers and students exhibited grace and courtesy, consistently treating each other with respect. The team also observed ample opportunities for exploration with students freely expressing their ideas and asking questions. Notably, the language and materials of the Montessori program were observed to have been successfully adapted to the remote setting.

During the two-week observation window, the team used a modified version of Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* to examine classroom environment and instruction (see Appendices I and II). After careful consideration regarding the uniqueness of virtual instruction, DC PCSB elected to summarize the overall findings from the observations using specific examples that apply to each indicator of the rubric, rather than assess individual scores and percentages for each domain. Therefore, the review team did not score any of the observations. Instead, observers used Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teaching* tool to determine how well Breakthrough Montessori PCS is meeting its mission, based on specific examples of evidence the team observed during remote visits.

In the Classroom Environment domain, observers noted that teachers conveyed a high regard for students' abilities. Students demonstrated effort on their assignments and participated willingly in class. A hallmark of the observations was respectful talk between students and teachers. In the Instruction domain, observers noted that teachers clearly communicated learning objectives and content explanations. In some observations, learning tasks involved high-level thinking and open-ended questions.

Governance

Keith Whitescarver chairs the Breakthrough Montessori PCS Board of Trustees. The School Reform Act requires each DC public charter school to have a majority of DC residents and two parents on its board, which the school has been compliant with for the past five years.

Specialized Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Prior to the two-week observation window, Breakthrough Montessori PCS completed a questionnaire about how it serves its students with disabilities. The QSR team looked for evidence of the school's articulated program. According to the school, its program consists of a differentiated menu of specialized services and instruction that help each student progress to the best of their academic, social, and emotional ability. General education teachers co-plan with special education teachers, and special education teachers modify and adapt general education content to ensure student access. The school also stated that observers would see

students working on the same materials with the special education teacher, and when the special education teacher is not present. Special education teachers work with students on their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, while also supporting their practice of general education curriculum content. The QSR team observed many of these supports and strategies. Overall, the school implemented its stated program with fidelity as evidenced by small group and individual pull-out instruction, as well as the implementation of specific strategies that support accommodations. Key trends from the SPED observations are summarized below.

- To demonstrate that students in multi-age classrooms proceed at their own pace, the school explained that the team would observe supports and accommodations designed to fade for increased student independence in small group lessons. In these observations, teachers presented grade-level content with scaffolds and supported students to plan their writing (e.g., a graphic organizer, sentence starters, and verbal processing). Teachers reviewed essential vocabulary, and students answered questions related to the definitions. Teachers used real-world connections and background knowledge to clarify the meaning of words. Teachers also coached students individually to complete the assignment at their own pace by asking questions, including “What part are you on?” and “Let’s remember our steps.”
- In pull-out sessions, the school stated that observers would see adaptations, accommodations, and scaffolds built into lessons. Additionally, students have choice in their preferred seating, learning activities times, and rewards. The QSR team observed this across pull-out sessions. In one observation, the teacher used below grade-level materials as scaffolds for students to meet on grade-level content. Two students used noise cancelling headphones during a writing assignment. The teacher reminded one student to “use the headphones to help you focus only on your writing.” During another observation, the teacher referred to an incentive to encourage a student to complete a math activity, “You’re really earning that treat! Keep going!” The teacher gave the student the choice to continue the math activity or transition to reading. The student asked, “Can I keep going writing these numbers?” The teacher responded, “Sure! Just keep going.”

Specialized Instruction for English Learners

Prior to the two-week observation window, Breakthrough Montessori PCS completed a questionnaire about how it serves its English Learners (ELs). The questionnaire included changes to the EL program based on the school’s move to virtual learning. The QSR team looked for evidence of the school’s articulated program. DC PCSB observed two 30-minute pull out sessions with two ELs each and two whole group lessons (with an undetermined number of ELs). The EL teacher did

not participate in either of the whole group lessons. Overall, DC PCSB found that Breakthrough Montessori PCS implemented the following aspects of its EL program with fidelity.

- **Targeted work with students:** The EL pull-out sessions included targeted work with two students. During the first session, students reinforced concepts from their whole class lessons, identifying vowels and consonants based on the sound they made (open or closed mouth). Students took turns saying the letter and its sound, and telling the teacher which column it should go in. The teacher reminded students of letter sounds when they forgot. In the second EL pull-out session, students reinforced vocabulary related to animals, as described further below.
- **Structured opportunities to practice new vocabulary:** The second EL pull-out session focused on animal vocabulary students learned in whole class lessons. The EL teacher performed a picture walk of a nonfiction text about animals. She asked students to identify the animals, activating their background knowledge. When students were unsure of the word in English, she allowed them to say it in Spanish, as when a student identified an elk as *el venado* (deer). The teacher then explained the differences between elk and deer. During the nonfiction read aloud, students experienced language coaching as the teacher helped them sound out words, reminding students of letter and vowel combination sounds, explicitly showing them how her mouth made the sounds. Students had structured opportunities for natural interactions with adults and students as they asked questions spontaneously like, “Why do giraffes have spots?” and, “Why do camels have humps?” They also conversed naturally with the EL teacher and each other during the pull-out sessions’ warmups when they talked about favorite colors, foods and animals.
- **Visual aids to enhance learning:** In the pull-out sessions and the whole group lessons, students had visual aids to enhance learning. Students in the first pull-out session (where they sorted vowels and consonants) had a picture of an open mouth under the “vowel” column and a closed mouth under the “consonant” column, reminding them how to distinguish between the two. In the second pull-out session, students read a nonfiction book with photographs of animals as reminders of the new vocabulary. Students listened to a read-aloud about kindness during a whole class lesson. The book included detailed pictures to enhance understanding of the book’s plot. Similarly, students in the other whole class lesson read a retelling of an *Aesop’s Fable* that included pictures. Teachers across lessons praised students as they used pictures as clues for meaning.

The EL specialist did not observe multisensory work with hands on materials; how to use specific social vocabulary to meet one's needs; work with vocabulary cards; sentence analysis and grammar work; or bilingual read-alouds (though these practices were listed in the school's questionnaire).

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT³

This table summarizes the evidence collected on the Classroom Environment domain of the rubric during the unannounced virtual observations. Please see Appendix III for a breakdown of each subdomain.

| The Classroom Environment | Evidence |
|---|--|
| Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport | In all observations, interactions between students and teachers were consistently respectful and friendly. Teachers greeted students by name and asked about their weekend as they entered the Zoom room. Most students demonstrated respect by paying attention, answering questions, and focusing on the screen as their classmates participated. Furthermore, teachers respected and encouraged students' efforts. In one observation when students shared their ideas for research questions, the teacher expressed excitement and enthusiasm. Teachers successfully redirected the occasional instance of disrespectful behavior. Several teachers reminded students to "check your environment," so they could be free of distractions and focus on learning. One teacher gently reminded a student, "Can you please not do that? I would love to see your beautiful face," when the student left the screen view. |
| Establishing a Culture for Learning | In all observations, teachers demonstrated high regard for students' abilities. One teacher prefaced a challenging task by saying, "This one is tricky, but I know you can do it." Teachers also consistently praised student effort, with comments such as, "You're doing a great job!" Most students expended good effort to complete quality work. In one observation a student asked to "write more and go past 30," to which the teacher responded with encouragement. In multiple observations, teachers communicated a genuine fascination for the subject matter, whether the lesson covered why giraffes have spots or where our alphabet came from. |
| Managing Classroom Procedures | In most observations, routines and the management of materials functioned smoothly. Teachers efficiently transitioned between screen sharing and breakout rooms, while students demonstrated proficiency in muting/unmuting, pinning a video, and switching between speaker and gallery view in Zoom. Students and teachers generally had materials prepared and nearby. Students mostly engaged in the work. In one outlying observation, routines were not smooth and students not working directly with the teacher were only partially engaged. |

³ Teachers may be observed more than once by different review team members.

| The Classroom Environment | Evidence |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Managing Student Behavior | <p>In most observations, student behavior was appropriate. Standards of conduct appeared to have been established and implemented successfully. Teachers monitored behavior consistently and respectfully. For example, one teacher redirected misbehavior by narrating the positive choices of other students: "I love how [Student A] is sitting quietly completing his assignment; excellent job, friend." Two observations stood out for entirely appropriate student behavior during the duration of the lesson.</p> |

INSTRUCTION

This table summarizes the evidence collected on the Instruction domain of the rubric during the unannounced virtual observations. Please see Appendix III for a breakdown of each subdomain.

| Instruction | Evidence |
|---|--|
| Communicating with Students | In most observations, teachers clearly stated what students would be learning. Teachers made no content errors and the explanation of content was clear, with students readily engaging in the learning tasks. Furthermore, teachers' explanations invited student participation and thinking. For example, one teacher read chunks of a fiction text and periodically asked students to identify characters and setting. In terms of teachers' explanations of academic vocabulary, some teachers defined relevant vocabulary for students when appropriate, while others passed over them and only offered pronunciation support. |
| Using Questioning/ Prompts and Discussion Techniques | In all observations, teachers made efforts to engage all students in participation, even those who didn't initially volunteer. Some questions had multiple correct answers (e.g., "What do we learn about voting in this text?"), while others were low-level (e.g., "Does anyone know what this animal is called?"). Few questions were high-level or open-ended. Observers noted that the Zoom format posed a challenge in cultivating genuine discussion between students without teacher mediation. |
| Engaging Students in Learning | In most observations, students were intellectually engaged in their learning tasks. The cognitive demand these tasks required, however, varied significantly. Many assignments were procedural and/or low-level, involving little student choice, while some allowed for high levels of personalization and required sophisticated thinking. Observers noted examples ranging from sorting vowels and consonants to developing research questions about a topic of students' choosing. Similar variations occurred in the alignment of assignments to lesson objectives. While most tasks clearly connected to learning objectives, one observer noted assignments that were unrelated to a grade-level learning objective. Most lessons observed had a clear, recognizable structure and were paced appropriately for students. Any grouping of students was suitable for the task. |
| Using Assessment in Instruction | In most observations, teachers monitored student understanding using a single method, which was verbally posing questions to students during class. For example, students were asked questions about word definitions, reading comprehension, or phonics. Feedback was mostly global, such as, "Good job," and was not oriented toward future improvement of work. In one observation, a teacher gave students specific feedback on research questions they had each developed, but this was an anomaly. |

Work Sample Review

As an added accountability measure to account for the limits of virtual observations, during SY 2020 – 21, DC PCSB reviewed ten student work samples in addition to classroom observations. Breakthrough Montessori PCS submitted five English language arts (ELA) samples and five math samples covering a range of grade levels and assignment types. The QSR team evaluated the work samples based on grade-level alignment to college and career ready standards, including Common Core.⁴ Each work sample was reviewed in the areas of content, practice, and relevance.⁵ The review tools are based on The New Teacher Project's report: *The Opportunity Myth*.⁶

The goal of the review is to answer three essential questions:

1. Does this assignment align with the expectations defined by grade-level standards, including a high-quality text and text-based questions?
2. Does the assignment provide meaningful practice opportunities for this content area and grade- level?
3. Overall, does the assignment give students an authentic opportunity to connect academic standards to real world issues and/or context?

DC PCSB used the criteria below to assign an overall rating to each ELA assignment.⁷

| | Content | Practice | Relevance |
|----------------|---|---|--|
| Sufficient | The assignment is based on a high quality, grade appropriate text and contains questions that reach the depth of the grade level standards. | The assignment both integrates standards and requires students to use what they learned from the text. | The assignment builds grade appropriate knowledge, gives students a chance to use their voice and/or connects to real world issues. |
| Minimal | The assignment is based on a high quality, grade appropriate text but does not contain questions that reach the depth of the standard. | Either the assignment does not integrate standards, or it does not require students to use what they learn from the text. | The assignment builds grade appropriate knowledge but does not give students a chance to use their voice and does not connect to real world issues. |
| No Opportunity | The assignment is not based on a high quality, grade appropriate text. | The assignment does not integrate standards and does not require students to use what they learn from the text. | The assignment does not build grade appropriate knowledge, does not give students a chance to use their voice and does not connect to real world issues. |

⁴See here for more information on the shifts in the college and career ready standards here:

<https://achievethecore.org/category/419/the-shifts>

⁵ Reviewers used this tool for ELA work samples: <https://dcpcsb.egnnyte.com/dl/SsIFfy9Ab7>. Reviewers used this tool for Math work samples: <https://dcpcsb.egnnyte.com/dl/Ca2F7INXld>.

⁶ See here for more information: <https://opportunitymyth.tntp.org/>

⁷ The overall assignment rating scale can be found here: <https://dcpcsb.egnnyte.com/dl/bzuOyBrYzK>

Of the five ELA samples submitted, two assignments received an overall rating of sufficient. These assignments gave students an opportunity to use their voice, integrated standards, and required students to use what they learned from a high-quality grade-level text. Two assignments received an overall rating of minimal. One assignment was based on a high-quality grade-level text, but did not require students to answer text-dependent questions. The other assignment integrated grade-level standards, but did not give students an opportunity to use their voice to support their ideas or explain their thinking. One assignment received an overall rating of no opportunity. This assignment did not give students an opportunity to answer text dependent questions or connect academic content to real world issues. Some evidence is captured below:

- Kindergarten students orally segmented, chose, and arranged letters to spell CVC (consonant vowel consonant) words to a matching picture. While this assignment met a grade-level standard, it did not require students to use what they learned from a text.
- First and second grade students sorted words by suffix and used their knowledge of the suffix to help define each word. The assignment met a grade-level standard; however, it was not based on a high-quality text.

DC PCSB used the criteria below to assign an overall rating to each Math assignment.

| | Content | Practice | Relevance |
|----------------|--|--|---|
| Sufficient | All the questions on the assignment reach the depth of the targeted grade-level standard(s). | The assignment includes an opportunity to engage with at least one mathematical practice at the appropriate level of depth. | The assignment connects academic content to real world experiences and allows students to apply math to the real world in a meaningful way. It may also include novel problems. |
| Minimal | More than half (but not all) of the questions on the assignment reach the depth of the targeted grade-level standard(s). | The assignment includes an opportunity to engage with at least one critical math practice, but not at the level of depth required by the standard. | The assignment connects academic content to real-world experiences, but the problems do not allow students to apply math to the real world in a meaningful way. |
| No Opportunity | Less than half of the questions on the assignment reach the depth of the targeted grade level standard. | The assignment provides no opportunity to engage with critical mathematical practices while working on grade-level content. | The assignment does not connect academic content to real world experiences. |

Of the five math samples submitted, one assignment received an overall rating of sufficient. This assignment reached the depth of the targeted grade-level standard, included opportunities for students to engage with mathematical practices, and included a novel problem. Four assignments received an overall rating of minimal. These assignments reached the depth of the targeted grade-level standard and included opportunities for students to engage with mathematical practices, but did not give students an opportunity to connect academic content to real world experiences. Some evidence is captured below:

- Second grade students used a pegboard to create arrays demonstrating two-factor multiplication. This assignment extended a grade-level standard but did not give students an opportunity to connect academic content to real world experiences.
- First and second grade students created a reference chart based on plane figures and angles they composed using concrete materials. This assignment met grade-level standards and gave students practice with grade-appropriate operations; however, the problems did not lend themselves to multiple solution paths.

APPENDIX I: THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT OBSERVATION RUBRIC

| The Classroom Environment | Unsatisfactory | Basic | Proficient | Distinguished |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport | Classroom interactions, both between the teacher and students and among students, are negative or inappropriate and characterized by sarcasm, putdowns, or conflict. | Classroom interactions are generally appropriate and free from conflict but may be characterized by occasional displays of insensitivity. | Classroom interactions reflect general warmth and caring, and are respectful of the cultural and developmental differences among groups of students. | Classroom interactions are highly respectful, reflecting genuine warmth and caring toward individuals. Students themselves ensure maintenance of high levels of civility among member of the class. |
| Establishing a Culture for Learning | The classroom does not represent a culture for learning and is characterized by low teacher commitment to the subject, low expectations for student achievement, and little student pride in work. | The classroom environment reflects only a minimal culture for learning, with only modest or inconsistent expectations for student achievement, little teacher commitment to the subject, and little student pride in work. Both teacher and students are performing at the minimal level to "get by." | The classroom environment represents a genuine culture for learning, with commitment to the subject on the part of both teacher and students, high expectations for student achievement, and student pride in work. | Students assumes much of the responsibility for establishing a culture for learning in the classroom by taking pride in their work, initiating improvements to their products, and holding the work to the highest standard. Teacher demonstrates as passionate commitment to the subject. |
| Managing Classroom Procedures | Classroom routines and procedures are either nonexistent or inefficient, resulting in the loss of much instruction time. | Classroom routines and procedures have been established but function unevenly or inconsistently, with some loss of instruction time. | Classroom routines and procedures have been established and function smoothly for the most part, with little loss of instruction time. | Classroom routines and procedures are seamless in their operation, and students assume considerable responsibility for their smooth functioning. |
| Managing Student Behavior | Student behavior is poor, with no clear expectations, no monitoring of student behavior, and inappropriate response to student misbehavior. | Teacher makes an effort to establish standards of conduct for students, monitor student behavior, and respond to student misbehavior, but these efforts are not always successful. | Teacher is aware of student behavior, has established clear standards of conduct, and responds to student misbehavior in ways that are appropriate and respectful of the students. | Student behavior is entirely appropriate, with evidence of student participation in setting expectations and monitoring behavior. Teacher's monitoring of student behavior is subtle and preventive, and teachers' response to student misbehavior is sensitive to individual student needs. |

APPENDIX II: INSTRUCTION OBSERVATION RUBRIC

| Instruction | Unsatisfactory | Basic | Proficient | Distinguished |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| Communicating with Students | Teacher's oral and written communication contains errors or is unclear or inappropriate to students. Teacher's purpose in a lesson or unit is unclear to students. Teacher's explanation of the content is unclear or confusing or uses inappropriate language. | Teacher's oral and written communication contains no errors, but may not be completely appropriate or may require further explanations to avoid confusion. Teacher attempts to explain the instructional purpose, with limited success. Teacher's explanation of the content is uneven; some is done skillfully, but other portions are difficult to follow. | Teacher communicates clearly and accurately to students both orally and in writing. Teacher's purpose for the lesson or unit is clear, including where it is situated within broader learning. Teacher's explanation of content is appropriate and connects with students' knowledge and experience. | Teacher's oral and written communication is clear and expressive, anticipating possible student misconceptions. Makes the purpose of the lesson or unit clear, including where it is situated within broader learning, linking purpose to student interests. Explanation of content is imaginative, and connects with students' knowledge and experience. Students contribute to explaining concepts to their peers. |
| Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques | Teacher makes poor use of questioning and discussion techniques, with low-level questions, limited student participation, and little true discussion. | Teacher's use of questioning and discussion techniques is uneven with some high-level question; attempts at true discussion; moderate student participation. | Teacher's use of questioning and discussion techniques reflects high-level questions, true discussion, and full participation by all students. | Students formulate many of the high-level questions and assume responsibility for the participation of all students in the discussion. |
| Engaging Students in Learning | Students are not at all intellectually engaged in significant learning, as a result of inappropriate activities or materials, poor representations of content, or lack of lesson structure. | Students are intellectually engaged only partially, resulting from activities or materials or uneven quality, inconsistent representation of content or uneven structure of pacing. | Students are intellectually engaged throughout the lesson, with appropriate activities and materials, instructive representations of content, and suitable structure and pacing of the lesson. | Students are highly engaged throughout the lesson and make material contribution to the representation of content, the activities, and the materials. The structure and pacing of the lesson allow for student reflection and closure. |
| Using Assessment in Instruction | Students are unaware of criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated, and do not engage in self-assessment or monitoring. Teacher does not monitor student learning in the curriculum, and feedback to students is of poor quality and in an untimely manner. | Students know some of the criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated, and occasionally assess the quality of their own work against the assessment criteria and performance standards. Teacher monitors the progress of the class as a whole but elicits no diagnostic information; feedback to students is uneven and inconsistent in its timeliness. | Students are fully aware of the criteria and performance standards by which their work will be evaluated, and frequently assess and monitor the quality of their own work against the assessment criteria and performance standards. Teacher monitors the progress of groups of students in the curriculum, making limited use of diagnostic prompts to elicit information; feedback is timely, consistent, and of high quality. | Students are fully aware of the criteria and standards by which their work will be evaluated, have contributed to the development of the criteria, frequently assess and monitor the quality of their own work against the assessment criteria and performance standards, and make active use of that information in their learning. Teacher actively and systematically elicits diagnostic information from individual students regarding understanding and monitors progress of individual students; feedback is timely, high quality, and students use feedback in their learning. |