

STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATE
Approved by the Board of Directors in March 2009

STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

As Great River School endeavors to become the public school of choice for highly motivated students, the school recognizes that it must:

- Stay true to its Montessori foundation;
- Provide an exceptional education that attracts and retains students;
- Grow slowly to achieve stability;
- Provide for appropriate physical spaces;
- Attract and retain exceptional teachers; and
- Continue to be a financially sound nonprofit corporation.

The founders of Great River School envisioned a place where Montessori education is offered in a public school setting. Montessori prepares students for life and higher learning while exploring education through “hands-on” experiences. Great River School’s conceptual structure and design is anchored in nearly 100 years of Montessori practice. Great River School must stay true to its Montessori foundation.

Great River recognizes it must provide an exceptional education that attracts and retains students. Current programs include authentic educational trips, International Baccalaureate, college preparation, and opportunities for independent work. Future program enhancements will enable Great River to attract and retain highly motivated students.

Experience in the first five years of the school’s operation indicates that growth in the number of students must be managed and limited to ensure the advantages of a small school as envisioned by Great River's founders. In order to remain financially healthy, program offerings must be continually reviewed and refined. Great River School must balance the need for a variety of program options with the primary goal of providing quality Montessori education in a small – school setting.

The current GRS site is being expanded in 2009. This expansion will allow for current programming to comfortably exist on this site. Ongoing discussions will determine if the site is viable for the long term, with modifications, or if a new site will eventually be needed. Attention will be given to creating and enhancing the prepared environment within the Montessori setting.

Key Experiences are a signature part of student life at GRS. Junior High students can expect an Odyssey trip each fall, which serves the developmental needs of early adolescents by providing opportunity for individual growth, independence from the home and family, and opportunities to try new and differing roles, and benefits the GRS

community by preparing students for a cohesive school experience.) The Junior High also has a January Term (J-term) Key Experience focused on theater production as well as a spring bike trip.

For High School students, the Key Experiences reflect the changing developmental needs of 9th – 12th graders. The increasing experience, self discovery, and outward focus of those years should be reflected in the design of these Key Experiences. While a fall team building trip takes place, it is shorter in duration than the Junior High. Throughout the year, Key Experiences may include internships, service learning, field trips, May Term, and other experiences appropriate to the individual and the developmental stage.

Great River cannot succeed without exceptional teachers. The staff's hard work and perseverance have enabled the school to become a stable place that can plan for its future. Great River's dedicated staff help shape a community that is focused and excited to learn. Great River will need to support the staff's hard work and reward their dedication by providing Montessori training opportunities, best practice exchanges, and other resources. Great River School recognizes that it needs to offer employee benefits that are comparable to other schools of similar size. It must maintain a healthy fund balance to attract, support, and retain exceptional teachers.

Great River's greatest challenge is to finance the school's aspirations in a thorough, orderly, and comprehensive manner. The school's options and tradeoffs must be continually assessed. The school must adhere to the sound financial policies which the school board has established. A strong and healthy fund balance is critical to the school's success.

The strategies and plans for achieving Great River's goals are contained within these pages. These strategies and plans are simply a blueprint for orderly change. We recognize that the blueprint must be flexible and dynamic to meet the school's future needs. Tactics to implement the goals need to be flexible. The School Director is responsible for implementing the academic and school program parts of the strategic plan with oversight by the Great River School Board.

MISSION

Great River School, an urban Montessori learning environment, prepares students for their unique roles as responsible and engaged citizens of the world.

VISION

Great River School is the public school of choice for highly motivated students. GRS is a Montessori environment where college bound students are excited and inspired to learn. Great River School encourages students to ask complex questions and seek new and difficult challenges. Great River School combines academic and social experiences in a culture of civility and trust through peaceful practices. Great River School is a place where students feel safe to express and challenges themselves. Every student at Great River School is a valued member of the community. The exceptional Great River staff teach teamwork through cross-country travel, experiential learning, drama, the arts, and micro-economic ventures while helping students set individual academic goals.

CORE VALUES

Great River strives to exemplify Montessori values and characteristics. To that end, these core values will guide GRS:

1. Great River School values learning in its broadest, most ecological sense. The school asks each student to make an equal commitment to all learning areas.
2. Great River School values community and the fostering and nurturing of the relationships that build community.
3. Great River School values the richness and strength that diversity brings to our community.
4. Great River School values hard work, great effort, and the willingness to meet difficult challenges.
5. Great River School values civility and good manners. Manners are an essential aspect of the way we show respect and caring for others. To act in a civil way means to act as a citizen of the community.
6. Great River School values acting responsibly. Acting responsibly to the school means students give first priority to their school work and to acting in ways that honor the work and dignity of their schooling.

KEY STRATEGIC GOALS AND STRATEGIES

GOAL 1: JR AND SR HIGH MONTESSORI EDUCATION THAT IS A NATIONAL MODEL

A. Montessori Training for Educators

Grounding in Montessori philosophy and approaches is essential for all teaching staff. On a yearly basis, an introduction to Montessori will be provided locally or on site to all new staff. At least 2 in-service offerings on Montessori philosophy, best practices and resources will be conducted for all staff throughout the school year. Montessori guidance will be included in the staff handbook.

2009/2010:

- 3 additional staff receive intensive training in Montessori methods
- document success and best practices for internal training and development

2010/2011:

- 3 additional staff receive intensive training in Montessori methods
- document success and best practices for internal training and development

2011/2012:

- 3 additional staff receive intensive training in Montessori methods
- document success and best practices for internal training and development

2012/2013:

- remainder of returning staff receive intensive training in Montessori methods
- share knowledge through publications and national forums

B. International Baccalaureate Integration with Montessori

2009/2010 will be the second year of the IB program at GRS. IB courses will continue to integrate with Montessori philosophy and approaches. Yearly, GRS will comply with IB authorization requirements. The school will monitor best practices in IB Montessori integration.

2009/2010:

- Training one additional teacher in IB to assure backup and flexibility
- Document effective practices for future GRS IB teachers

2010/2011:

- Train one additional teacher in IB to assure backup and flexibility
- Provide advanced training to one existing IB teacher
- Document effective practices for future GRS IB teachers
- Evaluate implementation of IB program and adjust if needed

2011/2012:

- Provide advanced training to one existing IB teacher
- Document effective practices to share with GRS teachers and broader education community
- Evaluate IB program

C. Prepared Environments

During 2009, the existing GRS building will be expanded and remodeled. Space reassignment will occur. Every year, GRS should assess and review its use of the building spaces to assure optimum environments for Montessori learning. Planning and implementing changes to these environments will occur as necessary.

2009/2010:

- Establish best practices for prepared environments
- Utilize the rearrangement of spaces as an opportunity to assess environmental needs
- Identify materials needed to prepare the environments for appropriate adolescent learning

D. Key Experiences – Junior High

Junior high key experiences meet the development needs of the early adolescent. On a yearly basis, the junior high will embark on an Odyssey trip in the fall, recommended to be at least 8 days in length. The trip should meet, in length, distance and experiences, the goals of establishing independence, interdependence and community building among the junior high students. In addition, a January Term (J-term) production provides opportunities to explore the performing arts. It is a chance for the entire junior high to work together on an extended project. Finally, a spring bike trip provides both a physical challenge and an experience in group travel and cooperation.

In 2009/2010, the experiential goals of these experiences will be clarified and communicated with staff and parents. On a yearly basis, experiences will be evaluated and future plans modified based on lessons learned.

E. Key Experiences – Senior High

Senior high Key Experiences will meet the developmental needs of the older adolescent. The fall Experience will be a minimum of 3 days off-campus. This experience or trip will provide a team building opportunity for the senior high. Further Key Experiences during the school year may include: May Term, internships, service learning opportunities, leadership development experiences, college visits, and other trips and learning opportunities. These experiences will be designed to meet the needs of adolescents as they develop leadership and life skills.

In 2009/2010, the experiential goals for the senior high experiences will be clarified by grade level, and communicated with staff and parents. On a yearly basis, experiences will be evaluated and future plans modified based on lessons learned.

F. Academic Rigor and Accountability/Student Achievement

On a yearly basis, GRS will meet or exceed goals established in the sponsoring agreement with Hamline University, and requirements of the MN Department of Education. Yearly, staff will review strength areas and development needs, and assess best approaches to assure student achievement in those areas. GRS will encourage IB diploma and certificate efforts by students.

G. Grade Level Groupings Optimum for Instruction

The Montessori approach is based upon six year development phases for individuals. In Montessori education, each of those six year developmental phases is taught in three year educational units. Thus in a 7 – 12 grade setting, there would be two levels, each with a grouping of three years (7 - 8- 9 and 10 -11 -12). GRS is currently in a 7 – 8, 9 – 10, 11 – 12 configuration. Movement to a three year, two level grouping will require careful assessment and planning.

2009/2010: Evaluate the 7 – 8, 9 – 10, 11-12 system at the end of the 2009/10 school year.

2010/2011: Use fall 2010 staff retreat to determine movement to the three year, two level groupings.

- If determination is made to move, use 2010/2011 year to plan with the full community for this change.
- If determination is made to not move, evaluate the 7-8, 9-10, 11-12 system at the end of the 2010/2011 school year.

2011/2012:

- If decision was made in fall 2010 to move to 7-8-9, 10-11-12 groupings, implementation takes place in 2011/2012.
- If decision was made in fall 2010 NOT to move, use the fall 2011 staff retreat to determine movement, then use 2011/2012 to plan implementation.

H. Curriculum Balance

There is a strong desire among the community for a variety of electives, including additional languages, physical education, arts and music courses. In addition, electives are seen as an opportunity for GRS students to learn together across grade levels. On a yearly basis, offerings at GRS should be evaluated to assure that electives are sustainable and best meet the needs of students within the core mission. The challenge is to remain true to the core mission of the school - providing rigorous, Montessori based academics and Key Experiences - while staying within a limited budget.

2009/2010:

- Reinstate Spanish in Junior High.
- Incorporate physical education as a regularly occurring offering (not just a semester course) in the junior high rotation.
- Incorporate physical education at the Senior High level as appropriate

I. Extracurricular activities and opportunities

To balance the limited elective options available in a small school environment, GRS should explore after school offerings including, but not limited to: music alternatives; language clubs; drama, arts or sports clubs; volunteer activities, cooking club and other cross grade level opportunities. These may be accomplished through partnerships with other schools; use of graduate students as student instructors; Amity scholars; foundation support for scholarships for fee based activities.

2009/2010: Poll students and parent community on interest levels; explore options for providing extracurricular activities; offer what is feasible during this school year.

2010/2011 and beyond: Continue to offer extracurricular activities, evaluating with community yearly.

J. Microeconomies/Staging Areas/Partnerships/Occupations/Internships

Beyond typical classroom activities and Key Experiences, GRS aims to provide opportunities for students to prepare for work, college, and life as well as to provide an enriched atmosphere for adolescent development and learning. Because launching a micro-economy, staging area, occupation and other approaches requires significant planning, investment, and outreach, additional work is required in this area to identify most likely options. Then concerted planning and implementation efforts on initial choices can be conducted.

2009/2010: Staff task force needed to fully define and explore these areas, and to develop opportunities both within GRS and in the broader community. Select options to assure development of 2 microeconomies each in A1 and A2 levels and begin initial planning. Select options for staging areas/partnerships and begin initial planning. Identify possible internship connects; work with A3 students to secure internship opportunities.

2010/2011: Implement 2 micro -economies in each level. Implement staging areas/partnerships in each area.

2. HEALTHY SCHOOL COMMUNITY

A. Community Building

Beyond trips and Key Experiences, plan and implement community events which provide opportunities for the student body (and the broader community) to experience shared activities and interaction. Especially important is the nurturing of connections made by students who have moved to different grade levels, so friendships can be maintained

across levels. Examples include: coffee houses, dances, fall arts festival, volunteer activities. On a yearly basis, plan in advance, advertise and conduct at least 5 community events each year.

B. Supporting Diversity among Students and Staff

Students of diverse backgrounds should be welcomed and included at GRS, and efforts should be made to recruit staff who better reflect the diversity of the student body. Staff and students should have opportunities to better understand diverse cultural perspectives and background through training and experience. On a yearly basis, recruiting efforts for both students and staff should include outreach to diverse communities. At least once each year, a learning opportunity should be provided for both students and staff on cultural differences and appreciation.

C. Peaceful Conflict Resolution

GRS is committed to peaceful means to resolve conflicts, through peer mediation and other approaches. At least once each year, a learning opportunity should be provided for both students and staff on peaceful conflict resolution.

D. Sustainable Compensation and Benefits for Staff

GRS is committed to providing sustainable levels of compensation and benefits. Upon establishment of sufficient (20%) fund balance reserves, dental coverage and retirement benefits will be explored.

GOAL 3: ROBUST SCHOOL OPERATIONS

A. Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Typical of evolving, young organizations, roles at GRS have sometimes been overlapping or confused. With the arrival of a new director, full enrollment, and entering a period of relative programmatic stability, 2009/2010 provides an opportunity for clarification and delineation of roles and responsibilities: between levels; among staff; among administrators.

2009/2010: Director clarifies roles and responsibilities.

Roles and responsibilities are clarified every year thereafter.

B. Limited School Growth

Experiencing nearly full enrollment and commitment for the near future to the existing building site has resulted in discussions establishing an optimum student population of 250-270. Recognizing this optimum student body size means that growth must remain limited to assure program integrity. In addition, it will be essential to recognize the budget available to a student body of that size, and create a budget which accomplishes core mission while assuring sustainability.

C. Facility Improvements and Stability

The current site expansion will be completed by fall, 2009. While this expansion meets the short term needs of the school, the longer term needs must be reviewed and planned for. Options available at this time are: 1) to lease the current space for the length of the lease (5 years –until 2014), and plan for movement to another leased space; 2) lease the current space for the length of the lease (5 years – until 2014) but begin planning for and funding purchase of a new or existing building; 3) lease the space until market conditions are favorable, then work with the GRS foundation for the purchase of the building, with plans to stay at this location; and 4) lease space until conditions are favorable, work with GRS foundation to purchase the building, then use the building as leverage to buy and/or build a new school. New site selection would require extensive research and community discussion.

Because market conditions are nebulous at this time, the options above should be explored and evaluated in 2009/2010, until a definitive approach can be decided.

D. Fund Stability

GRS is committed to remaining financially sound. To that end, the school strives to achieve the annual MDE Finance Award, through sound fiscal management and training of board members. This will remain an annual effort.

The GRS Board established the goal of 20% fund balance to assure financial stability in case of emergency. Each year, the goal has been to increase the fund balance toward that ultimate goal. Financial setbacks have necessitated using a portion of the fund balance. In future years, GRS will:

2009/2010: Restore fund balance to 2007/2008 level (12%)

2010/2011: Increase fund balance by 3% to 15%

2011/2012: Increase fund balance by 3% to 18%

2012/2013: Increase fund balance by 2% to 20%