



Mulberry Forest Montessori

Mary Jirmanus Saba, PhD & Ann Marie Faust, PhD
Co-Founders



School Description

Mulberry Forest Montessori

Proposed Location at Mattera Cabin, Reading Conservation Commission

Mission Statement

By centering our core principles of accessibility, land stewardship, and community care, we provide children with a high-quality education that nurtures the mind, body, and spirit through engagement with nature and the outdoor world. We foster care and stewardship for the land, our community, and each other while ensuring the chance to convene with nature is accessible to all.

Vision Statement

We are all interconnected - people, plants, land, animals, and other beings. Understanding our interconnectedness and direct connection to the land will ground children's inherent curiosity and commitment to making a positive impact on the place we live, while fostering deep commitment to caring for the land, themselves, each other and our broader community.

Guiding Principles

We are guided by the principles of accessibility, land stewardship and community care. Through outdoor, place-based education, centered in these principles, we foster critical thinking alongside important practical life skills, a love for learning, and a deep connection to ourselves, our histories and one another.

Instructional Philosophy & Focus

Montessori Education - Montessori is an education philosophy and practice that fosters rigorous, self-motivated growth for children and adolescents in all areas of their development, with a goal of nurturing each child's natural desire for knowledge, understanding, and respect. It is a very individualized approach to learning. Most lessons are given one-on-one, and this enables each child to progress at their own pace and level of ability.

Montessori materials incorporate the child's senses in the learning process. We believe children learn best by doing. Thus, materials in the classroom are for manipulating. This



nurtures the direct hand to brain connection in the young child. Many Montessori materials also incorporate a control of error which enables students to correct their own mistakes without adult intervention, encouraging confidence and problem solving.

Children in a Montessori classroom gain independence and develop responsibility toward themselves and their environment. A Montessori child is a well-rounded individual whose social skills are nurtured along with their academic skills. Children in a Montessori school enjoy the freedom to learn in a friendly, peaceful environment.

Forest School - For millenia, children have learned naturally outdoors. Friedrich Frobel, a German educator, formalized this approach almost two centuries ago, opening the world's first kindergartens ("children's gardens") more than 150 years ago. He believed that young children should spend their time playing in nature, with less emphasis on learning letters and numbers. While forest schools have long been popular across Europe, they have only rapidly spread throughout the United States in recent years.

Based primarily outdoors year-round, forest schools encourage children's connection to nature and land stewardship from a young age, foster problem-solving skills, and encourage children to take supported risks. Forest Schools connect curriculum to children's experience in the forest with broader experiences at home and in the community, scaffolding learning within a holistic connection to the world. Opportunities for collaborative problem solving and leadership skills development are integral to the forest setting, which offers a range of environmental contexts for exploration.

The Forest environment is intrinsically beautiful, quiet, and peaceful – with innumerable sensory opportunities that are not available in an indoor classroom setting. Learning outside has been shown to naturally encourage regulation and focus, improve mental health, and intrinsically build physical movement into the child and adult leader's days. Centering play, beauty, peacefulness, and context-based problem-solving, forest schools are deeply compatible with the Montessori approach.



Impetus for Founding

I. An innovative child-led learning model

Forest school and Montessori education compliment one another, together offering a rich, grounded learning environment. Mulberry Forest Montessori will nurture child-led learning experiences, grounded in nature and a place-based connection to the land. Very few schools in the United States combine these philosophies — we hope to be a model for other Montessori forest schools. Trees, not screens, are the future of education.

II. An opportunity to meet a need in the community

The growing network of Forest and nature-based schools in Massachusetts primarily focus on early childhood education. Mulberry Forest Montessori is nearly unique in offering nature-based education to children from age three to ten (and eventually older children), filling an undermet need for children who thrive in outdoor and alternative school settings as they grow older. As a micro school focusing on equity and accessibility, we bring high-quality alternative education to low-income families as well as families who can afford private education. Through a combination of grants, public after school funding, and tuition, we will serve a wide range of incomes. Once firmly rooted, we will also be well situated to partner with other community groups to offer free and sliding scale land stewardship programming to the community.

III. Community Care for the Long Run

The early years of a child's life fundamentally impact their development and sense of self going forward. By centering accessibility and healthy practices, we promote wellbeing for children, families, and our natural world. Through immersion in nature and exploratory learning, children will learn how to be good stewards of themselves, others, the land, and our natural resources. Understanding and caring for the land, climate, water, and other resources will be increasingly important in the coming years. Set in the forest and grounded in accessibility, land stewardship and community care, Mulberry Forest Montessori will also teach environmental education from a young age – creating caring community members with the knowledge to protect our environment, the land, themselves, and each other for generations to come.

Student Body

Pilot year: Ages 3-6 - up to 10 children; Ages 6-12 - up to 10 children (up to 20 children)



Proposed Collaboration with Reading Conservation Commission

Mutually Supportive Collaboration

Top Line

We propose to locate our school on Conservation Land at and around Mattera Cabin during school hours for the 2025-2026 school year. At a minimum, we would request access to bathrooms, emergency shelter, and secure shelving storage space.

We would participate in work days at the Cabin, take care of the land around it, and make a donation to the Conservation Commission Fund.

I. Location

For the 2025-2026 school year, we propose to locate our school at and around the Mattera Cabin. Our school hours will be 8:30 am - 3:00 pm, Monday-Friday. Our program is primarily nature-based, meaning that we are outside most of the day, year-round. This means that for most of the year (see calendar below), we would be primarily outdoors, locating indoors in the Cabin on rainy, cold, windy, and otherwise extremely inclement weather days.

Knowing that the Cabin has a myriad of users, we would propose to designate an exclusive storage area in the Cabin's upper level. We would communicate regularly with the Conservation Commission to create contingency plans in advance for days when the Cabin was reserved by other parties.

II. Supporting the Goals of the Conservation Commission

Our mission and vision align with those of the Reading Conservation Commission, and we aspire to a mutually supportive and adaptable relationship with the Commission and its conservation goals. To that end, we would be able to support the Commission's work in the following ways:

- Making a yearly donation to the Conservation Commission Fund
- Participating in work days in and around the Mattera Cabin as a "Friends of Mattera Cabin" initiative
- Maintaining a presence in and around the Conservation area to deter hunters



- Educating visitors to the Conservation areas about the reasons not to walk dogs on Conservation land. Could include a flyering campaign in accordance with Conservation Commission policy
- Identifying and Removing invasive plants from Conservation land
- Recording any land and/or facilities issues on the land around the Conservation area and the Mattera Cabin itself
- Other supports as requested by the Conservation Commission

We will regularly communicate with the Conservation Commission to assure our operations are dovetailing with the Conservation Commission's goals and work and those of the Town of Reading.

Operations and Facilities

I. Outdoor Classroom

We aim to be outdoors for most of the day year round. The Conservation areas around and behind Mattera Cabin and the Pavilion above the community garden will provide space for playing and exploring.

Outdoor "work" will take place on the grounds of the Cabin and Pavilion areas, with explorations into the woods and conservation areas. Children tend to select areas for play and work based on natural features. True to land stewardship principles, we will be mindful of children's impact on the land, and will relocate our "classroom" areas regularly and in conversation to minimize impact.

Outdoor Classroom Asks:

- a) For shelter from light rain, we propose to use temporary popup or canopy tents to create discrete work spaces close to the cabin in addition to the Pavilion.
- b) We would also request permission to install a portable, or connected outdoor sink to facilitate handwashing and minimize traffic to the indoor bathroom.

If permitted, Mulberry Forest Montessori would be responsible for the installation, upkeep, and removal of any structures as requested and the restoration of land to its natural condition.

II. Pedagogical Materials Access and Storage Space

Mulberry Forest Montessori will require accessible shelving storage space in a covered and secure location. Montessori pedagogy relies heavily on natural materials, placed on shelves



in appealing ways easily accessible to children. In addition, we will require emergency shelter for holding lessons in inclement weather.

We propose to place eight lockable storage shelves in a location inside the cabin in which we have semi-exclusive use, to prevent materials being lost or damaged. Children would enter the cabin each day to take their materials to outdoor work areas, or indoor work areas during inclement weather.

To start the 2025-2026 school year, we request non-exclusive use of one or more indoor spaces of the Cabin as “emergency shelter” during days when inclement weather prevents us from holding outdoor lessons. We request non-exclusive daily use of the restroom facilities in the Cabin during the school day throughout the school year.

We request to be notified if the cabins will have other users on a given day. We also request permission to create temporary outdoor classroom areas (popup tents), which we would be responsible for upkeep and rotation to minimize impact on the land.

We will tidy the Cabin at the end of each day and return the materials.

IV. Indoor Classroom in Mattera Cabin

While we will continue to be outdoors even on cold days, we anticipate spending extended periods indoors during the colder months (indicated in calendar below). During the winter months, in which the Cabin has fewer regular users, we would agree upon certain areas that we would be able to work in. We would be responsible for additional heating and electricity costs related to our usage. We would also donate and upkeep air purifiers in each of the rooms of the Cabin.

We anticipate bringing in small mobile furniture additions such as floor cushions, and/or a few small tables.

Cleaning and Upkeep:

We would clean the Cabin lightly each day after our use, and thoroughly at the end of each week to prepare it for any weekend users.

V. Bathroom Access and Handwashing Station

We would request bathroom access inside the Cabin throughout the school year.



We would request to either:

- a) place a portable outdoor hand washing station outside the Cabin to minimize traffic indoors for handwashing, or to
- b) install an outdoor sink adjacent to the cabin for which we would assume the costs of installation and maintenance.

VI. Parking

Most of our students will be dropped off in the morning and picked up at the end of the day. A small number of cars belonging to staff would remain on site in the Mattera Cabin and Community Garden parking lot. We plan to coordinate with the Conservation Commission and Community Garden to minimize our impact on the parking lot. We will direct additional visitors to park at other nearby public lots.

VII. Indoor/Outdoor Time

Given the average temperatures and snowfall in Eastern MA, we anticipate using the outdoor classroom as our primary classroom September through November, and April through June. The months of December and March will be transition months, with time spent both indoors and outdoors. The months of January and February will primarily be indoors. (See Table below.)

Table: Typical Conditions by Month with Anticipated Primary Classroom Setting

Month	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June
Avg. Temp. in °F & Snow	74-50 0"	62-39 0"	50-29 2"	39-21 8"	34-14 8"	37-15 11"	45-24 7"	58-34 1"	70-45 0"	78-55 0"
Class Setting	Outdoor	Outdoor	Outdoor	Outdoor + Indoor	Indoor + Outdoor	Indoor + Outdoor	Outdoor + Indoor	Outdoor	Outdoor	Outdoor

Source: <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov>

Tools will help us decide when to retreat indoors. Resources we will consult regarding heat and humidity include the following from the NWS:

- [HeatIndex chart](#)
- [Wet Bulb Globe Map](#)



- HeatRisk map

In cold temperatures, forecasts for extreme cold will be monitored. Below 40°F, wind chill factors will play a role in determining how frequently students go inside to warm up. The Iowa Department of Public Health's chart on wind chill factors will be a resource in decision-making. In temperatures between 40°F and 35°F, students will be both indoors and outdoors for periods throughout the day. When temperatures are 35°F or below, time spent outdoors will be limited, depending on other conditions.

Governance and Management Structure

Board of Directors

Ann Marie Faust, PhD Biologist

Ann Marie Faust is a Senior Principal Scientist at Novartis Biomedical Research in Cambridge, MA. She has a PhD in Molecular and Cell Biology from UC Berkeley. She has taught biology courses at the university level at UC Berkeley, Berkeley City College, and Novartis Learning. She has experience with project management in drug discovery and in Massachusetts homeschooling regulations. Ann Marie has also been a community organizer in Eastern Massachusetts since 2021.

Mary Jirmanus Saba, PhD Geographer

Mary Jirmanus Saba is a geographer, filmmaker and educator whose artistic practice bridges community organizing, land stewardship and household labor. Her multidisciplinary works have shown and been awarded widely at festivals, galleries and community spaces, from the Berlinale in Germany, to the ICA in London, the Busan International Film Festival in Korea and Anthology Film Archives in New York. She holds a PhD in Geography from UC Berkeley, and is currently a University of California Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Lindsey McGovern, Educator and School Administrator

Lindsey McGovern is a dedicated, creative and hands-on teacher and educational leader with a background in curriculum, instruction and assessment for diverse student needs. A lifelong learner, she holds two graduate degrees in education, and has completed extensive additional training.. She has worked as a teacher, special education administrator and



education director in public and private school settings, and has served as a Section 504 Coordinator, Civil Rights Coordinator, and Title IX Coordinator. At the university level, she supervised student teachers, assisted in educational research, and co-taught graduate courses in education with an emphasis on universal design for learning (UDL). Lindsey has also worked at the state level, providing complaint resolution to parents and monitoring school systems across the Commonwealth for compliance with federal program areas. Lindsey currently teaches English at one of Massachusetts's two public virtual schools. She is a fierce advocate for equity in education and is actively involved in disability and mental health advocacy work. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her husband and rescue dogs, walking on the beach and reading fiction. She has never turned down a cup of strong coffee.

Noel Sanders, Disability Rights Advocate

Noel Sanders, Disability Advocate and Senior Organizer Boston Center for Independent Living, Organizer at City Life Vida Urbana. Also an experienced Outdoor Educator, she has led rock climbing, hiking, and camping excursions to create spaces of belonging and facilitate team building.

James McGovern, Educator and Artist

James McGovern recently retired after more than 25 years as an educator. While he spent most of his career as an upper elementary school teacher, he also worked as a behavior support specialist, an after-school program leader, and a paraprofessional. As a founding member of a democratically-run progressive public school, James's classroom design and student-centered pedagogy has been featured in various film and print media. As a trained artist, one of James's passions is creating unique classroom spaces that encourage democratic process, social- emotional wellness and ongoing inquiry. James has supervised and recruited scores of student teachers and has appeared as a guest lecturer at schools of education throughout the Boston area. In retirement, James is an avid fan of science fiction and horror film, blogs frequently on these genres, and is in the process of building a museum for his collection of classic monster toys. In addition, he is actively involved in multiple progressive causes about which he engages in frequent, spirited debate on social media. Most of all, he enjoys spending time with his rescue dogs and his wife and working in his backyard creating relaxing, natural spaces.



School Calendar & Daily Schedule

I. School Calendar

Mulberry Forest Montessori will follow an academic calendar in line with Reading Public Schools, with some variation to accommodate seasonal weather changes. Instruction will begin the first full week of September and conclude the second full week of June.

Educational breaks will occur for two weeks from approximately December 21 through January 5; third week of February; and one week in mid-April. This calendar allows for long stretches of consistent instruction during the fall, winter, and spring, while allowing for a break during the winter and shorter breaks in line with local peers.

II. Daily Schedule

Staff will be on-site from 8 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Student drop-off will be from 8:30-8:50 a.m. and pick-up will be from 3:00-3:30 p.m.

Sample:

8:30 a.m. Arrival

8:30-9:00 a.m. Mindfulness activity, morning circle time

9:00-11:30 a.m. Play-based forest exploration

11:30-12:15 p.m. Lunch

12:15-3:15 p.m. Montessori work period (nap opportunity for youngest children) 3:15-3:30 p.m. Afternoon circle time

3:00 p.m. Dismissal