The last fifteen years have witnessed a surge of interest in Montessori education. This interest is evident in a rise in research on Montessori, increased mainstream press, and the opening of new Montessori schools. This growth in Montessori programs is evident not just in the private but also in the public sector, where we estimate that 290 new public Montessori programs have opened since 2000.

![Figure 1: Four Decades of Steady Growth](image)

Using a sample of all public schools reported in the 1986-2012 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) database, the 1993 NAMTA Montessori Public Schools Consortium Directory, crosschecked with the 2013-2014 USA Montessori Census, we have identified 635 public Montessori school programs that have opened since 1975, including 482 public Montessori schools currently operating.

As the figure above illustrates, during the same period, 153 public Montessori programs were moved to other school sites or were closed entirely. Our data shows that 42% were programs consolidated to other schools in the same city, 35% were district schools, 16% were charter schools and 6% were federally and state funded early childhood centers. Although further research is needed to better understand the reasons behind these closures, some of these closures coincided with the ending of court ordered desegregation programs. In other cases, programs were ended due to a shortage of teachers or a lack of support by principals and Superintendents. This points to the continued need for a pipeline of publicly certified Montessori trained teachers, and continued engagement of principals, superintendents and state and national stakeholders.

**Growth in both charter and district/magnet schools**

In the last 15 years, the growth of public Montessori programs has been roughly even between charter and district/magnet schools. States with the highest numbers of public Montessori schools are: South Carolina, California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Colorado, and Minnesota. Public Montessori has been growing solidly around the country.

Of the 290 new programs since 2000, 122 operate as schools within larger schools. This option is particularly popular in South Carolina, where 83% of all Montessori programs function inside larger schools. Other new schools, such as Alighieri Montessori in Boston and Spokane Montessori in Spokane started as schools-within-schools before moving to their own buildings. Approximately 82% of the 168 freestanding programs to open since 2000 are charters. (To view a complete map of US public Montessori programs accounted for on the 2013-2014 USA Montessori Census or to add your school’s data to the census, [click here](#).)
Historical trends: Four waves of intense interest and growth

The growth of Montessori education in the public sector mirrors the trajectory of the movement as a whole. We identify four distinct waves of interest in Montessori education, each corresponding to equally distinct political and social climates effecting the development of educational culture.

![Figure 2: A Timeline of Montessori in the Public Sector](image)

Phase 1 began in the second decade of the 20th century, with programs that were either fully public or designed specifically to serve high need populations. In 1913, Katherine Moore, opened a public Montessori school in Los Angeles; and in 1915, a free Montessori program in one of New York's new model open-air tenements was developed through the backing of New York socialite and reformer Alva Vanderbilt.3

By the 1960’s, a second wave of interest in Montessori began first in affluent communities. Catalyzed by a new generation of middle-class college-educated mothers seeking “the best” for the children, a rapid expansion of independent Montessori schools quickly extended into the era’s War on Poverty. Montessori was recognized as an effective model for application in Head Start, Get Start and other poverty-ameliorating programs.4

Beginning in 1975, the scope of Montessori in the public sector expanded as the War on Poverty shifted its focus to desegregation. Cities seeking voluntary methods of desegregating schools developed Montessori magnet schools, first in Cincinnati, and then in other urban systems, most notably Milwaukee and Kansas City.

As the rapid expansion of public Montessori indicates, we are currently experiencing a fourth wave of intense interest in and corresponding growth of Montessori as an educational approach. Beginning with the introduction of charter schools in the early 1990’s, along with the expansion of choice options in many urban districts, a growing community of parents and educators seeking alternatives to conventional public schooling continues to fuel exponential growth in the public Montessori sector.5

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1 This brief, part of a series of reports inspired by the 2013-2014 USA Montessori Census, is based on research conducted by Mira Debs, a research fellow at NCMPS and a doctoral student in sociology at Yale University.

2 If programs were reported to NCMPS as Montessori programs and/or if they had Montessori in the title in the NCES school database, they were included in the report.

