

U.S. Department of Education
2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [] Title I [X] Charter [] Magnet [] Choice

Name of Principal Mr. John DeVold
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Soldotna Montessori Charter School
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 158 East Park Avenue
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Soldotna State AK Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 99669-7552

County AK

Telephone (907) 260-9221 Fax (907) 260-9032

Web site/URL https://kpbsd.org/schools/soldotna-montessori/ E-mail jdevold@kpbsd.k12.ak.us

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent* Mr. Clayton Holland E-mail CHolland@KPBSD.k12.ak.us
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Kenai Peninsula Borough School District Tel. (907) 714-8888

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board
President/Chairperson Mr. Zen Kelly
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date _____

(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

**Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, leave blank.*

PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION

The electronic signature on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2021 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Data should be provided for the current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

- Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
 - 19 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 6 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 8 High schools
 - 10 K-12 schools

43 TOTAL

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

- Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
- Suburban
- Rural

- Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	13	7	20
1	10	12	22
2	12	11	23
3	9	17	26
4	9	13	22
5	6	14	20
6	6	14	20
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
Total Students	65	88	153

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 5.2 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 1.3 % Asian
 - 0 % Black or African American
 - 5.9 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 79.1 % White
 - 8.5 % Two or more races
 - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2019 - 2020 school year: ≤1%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	0
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	1
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	1
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	164
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	<.01
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	<1

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 0 %
0 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 14 %

Total number students who qualify: 21

8. Students receiving special education services: 12 %
18 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>0</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>5</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>4</u> Developmental Delay | <u>3</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>0</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>6</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 4
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	Number of Staff
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	8
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	3
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	8
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	0

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 19:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	94%	92%	92%	92%	92%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2020.

Post-Secondary Status	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.
 Yes No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

Our mission is to create kind, confident, self-reliant learners who are globally aware and impactful in and beyond their community, through our Montessori approach.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

The 2020-2021 school year has been filled with variations. Prior to the start of school, we offered families the option to enroll in our distance, teacher-led model, or in-person model. The district also offered a homeschool option through the local homeschool program. We found that students were unenrolling from our school to join the district homeschool program. This was our first extreme challenge from COVID-19. Our declining numbers resulted in declining funding, since charter schools are funded directly from the state. We needed to keep our enrollment numbers up, so we developed an in-house, parent-led, distance option, to compete with the district homeschool program. This allowed our families to maintain their enrollment with the school, not lose their lottery space with the school, and have the same option to “homeschool” as a distance option.

We started the first two weeks of school 100% remote for all students in grades 1-6. Kindergarten students attend in-person with half of the students attending in the morning and half of the students attending in the afternoon to maximize spacing and to minimize possible transmission. After the first two weeks of school, we were able to have all of our students whose families opted for the in-class instructional model return to school. We typically run three multiage classes of grades 1-3, and three multiage classes of grades 4-6. We altered this typical approach and provided single grade level class designations for grades 3-6 to provide consistent instruction of standards when facing possible school closures to in-person learning and required instruction via distance. This allowed our teachers to be able to meet more consistently with their students, rather than needing to

schedule unique meeting times for 3 grades for each subject. Our kindergarten remained a single class, and our grades 1 and 2 were multiage to keep our Montessori approach alive for those grade levels.

In October, COVID cases were such that we were required to deliver instruction at distance for all students. We provided distance instruction to all students until after winter break. After winter break, we returned to in-person schooling and continued our distance, teacher-led option and our distance, parent-led option. We have continued in this manner for the remainder of the year.

17. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

Students enrolling with Soldotna Montessori Charter School are primarily selected through a lottery process conducted by a certified accounting firm. The school also has a sibling preference policy that allows priority placement for siblings of currently enrolled students. The lottery application period is advertised in our local paper, on our website, and on our Facebook page. All applications received during the application period are entered into the lottery. Enrollments from the lottery list occur when vacancies occur within the school. If a vacancy exists in a grade and there are not students on the lottery list for that grade, we enroll students from a temporary waitlist of students who missed the lottery deadline. If a grade level does not have students on the lottery list or wait list, that spot may be filled at a different grade to maintain enrollment numbers.

PART III - SUMMARY

Soldotna Montessori Charter School is a small school with a large community influence. The school enrollment consists of 165 students from kindergarten to sixth grade. The school was founded in 2002 through the work of a group of parents and a Montessori teacher who still works and teaches at our school. Because we are a school of choice, our school consists of students from various communities outside of Soldotna, some traveling from as far as 24 miles. We serve families living in five distinct communities; consequently, we have families with diverse circumstances and needs. We share a building with the local neighborhood school. We occupy seven classrooms and an office space, all situated in the back wing of the school. The hallway is only five feet eleven inches wide, but this small footprint only adds to our close-knit, school-family atmosphere that is apparent to visitors from outside the school. They often comment about the welcoming and caring ambiance they experience just walking in. A substitute once commented that she gets excited about coming to work at Soldotna Montessori because she knows she will have a great day!

Soldotna Montessori Charter School (SMCS) is made up of an exceptional group of people. It is truly a family atmosphere where each member is honored and accepted for who they are and where each can exhibit their talent or skill as a contribution to the school. The primary environment that allows for this to occur is the Montessori principle of “following the child,” and the Montessori practice of three-year, multiage classrooms. These two practices provide the structure that allows our students, families, and staff to thrive and share in learning.

Due to the three-year, multiage approach, our teachers form a bond and connection with their students and their families that is not limited to a single year. Three years gives the student, the teacher, and the families time to know each other. Our teachers understand the power of this relationship that is built over time; they are committed to the success of each student. They seek a myriad of opportunities for students to learn and succeed in the way that fits their unique abilities and skills. It is noteworthy that the final parent teacher conference for our students transitioning out of a classroom is quite emotional, and, there is a sadness about leaving a person you have come to know, and with whom there is a shared commitment.

Another exceptional occurrence resulting from a three-year, multiage class is the commitment of students to each other. In a class with three grades, the younger students are mentored by the older students; and, when they become the older students in class, they value and pride themselves as leaders and examples. It is common to see students helping students, and to hear them relate the challenges they faced as encouragement to those they are helping. They offer, “When I was struggling like you are, this person helped me, and now it is no longer a struggle. Let me help you; you can do it too!”

A benefit of teaching a student for three years is the teacher is able to gain a deeper understanding of each student, observing their strengths, skills, abilities, and providing opportunities for each student to learn and share those strengths in the classroom. When our teachers “follow the child,” it exhibits itself as genuine care for the student because they are valued as individuals. Teachers spend a great deal of time observing their students formally and informally to understand how they learn and how a student can demonstrate their learning in a way that harnesses their uniqueness. The result is instruction that is tailored to each student’s readiness and provides for student ownership of their own learning.

At Soldotna Montessori Charter School, our families and students value demonstrating kindness and caring. That is where this small school has a large effect in the community. Student learning is enhanced by community outreach projects and environmental stewardship efforts. The students’ learning is applied in ways that allows them to see how they can make a difference in their community. This leads to rich field experiences where students are not only learning in a real environment, but they are considering how to apply their learning to make a difference for others. The results are student-initiated, school projects that benefit the community and our local environment. These projects provide the roadmap for developing on-going field experiences that support these efforts. They invite family participation in student learning where parent expertise can be harnessed and included in a unified effort that enhances the environment, the community, our families, and our students. Soldotna Montessori Charter School is an exceptional place where impactful learning is not limited by the size of the school and where “kindness is cool.”

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

Soldotna Montessori Charter School is accountable to state standards and has autonomy in our curricular selections to meet those standards. The Montessori method and approach to instruction is highly effective in meeting instructional standards, and the Montessori curriculum often exceeds the standards that are set for students at each grade level. The Montessori approach incorporates the use of concrete, tangible materials to learn and demonstrate learning before moving to abstraction where representations are used in place of a concrete material or manipulatives.

Language arts instruction progresses developmentally from kindergarten through 6th grade and beyond. At the kindergarten level, students receive a strong foundation of phonics and phonological awareness using the Orton Gillingham (OG) approach to reading. Students use Montessori materials to build their understanding of letter formations, vocabulary, and consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words. At the primary level, students continue with OG instruction and begin using leveled readers to build experience and fluency. At the intermediate level, students engage in literature-based reading of novels, encounter various genres, and respond to texts in summaries and narratives or through analysis, providing opinion, or compare and contrast responses.

Math instruction at the kindergarten and primary levels primarily utilizes Montessori manipulatives to build a concrete understanding of math concepts. Students in the primary grades use the golden beads, numerical rods, and the bead frame to develop number sense and learn place value. They use the stamp game, checkerboard, and test tube division to carry out arithmetic processes and algorithms. They also use various other Montessori materials that build geometric and algebraic understanding. We use an adopted textbook math curriculum at the intermediate level, and supplement the instruction with continued use of various Montessori materials and manipulatives. Students are grouped according to ability and readiness; and, they receive direct instruction in both whole group and small group settings. The curriculum provides continuous spiraling of concepts to ensure students receive multiple opportunities to practice and demonstrate proficiency over time.

The math, reading, and language arts programs' effectiveness are evaluated annually using the statewide assessment performance data. Ongoing differentiation occurs as a result of benchmark assessments carried out three times each year using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), AimsWeb, and Basic Reading Inventory assessments. Students may receive additional interventions or advancement based on these assessment results, allowing students to receive instruction that provides continual challenge and progress toward proficient and advanced levels. Ongoing informal, formative observations result in micro-teaching tailored specifically to individual students in the moment. This is done by the teacher but also occurs among students working in a multiage environment where students are able to observe and assist each other and benefit from the experience or expertise of fellow students. Lastly, computer-based programs, such as Lexia Core 5 and IXL, are used to deliver instruction and practice that is differentiated for each student; these programs also provide standards-based performance data, allowing teachers to use data from these programs to review or reteach concepts or skills.

Science and Cultural studies (social studies) are integrated into our reading and language arts program. At the heart, though, is the experience-based learning that is incorporated through hands-on approaches, project-based efforts, field-studies, simulations, and community service outreach. Maria Montessori stated, "There is no description, no image in any book that is capable of replacing the sight of real trees, and all of the life to be found around them in a real forest." This expression highlights the importance our school places on "going out" and generating real learning experiences, which enhance both students' reading and writing as they connect these two practices to tangible experiences and supports the idea of moving from the concrete to the abstract.

The social distancing and closure of schools to in-person learning affected the school greatly. We started in 100% remote learning; and, teachers had to prioritize learning standards, develop new frameworks for meeting family technology needs and schedules, and learn how to deliver instruction remotely. For us, that

meant not using our Montessori materials and many of the experience-based learning structures.

The school initially adopted online tools to provide instruction using materials that could easily be used and implemented both at school and at home. We used IXL, Lexia Core 5, and Redbird Math to provide asynchronous, individualized learning opportunities. These programs provided both teachers and families ongoing, formative assessment data on student progress. Teachers used this data to alter and tailored instruction to specific student groups. The school used synchronous Zoom sessions to provide targeted instruction, as well as student connection with each other and to support social-emotional learning.

Eventually, we were able to offer in-person learning; however, 33% of our students remained in distance learning by choice. We continued with many of our online tools for instruction, both at home and in-class, to provide continuity for students who may choose to return to in-class learning over time. While we missed many of our traditional curricular and instructional pieces, we are able to maintain ongoing, quality instruction.

1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):

1b. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

Soldotna Montessori has a variety of other curricular areas that students are able to participate in: physical education (PE), music, Lego Robotics, community outreach instruction, and our school garden and farmers' market.

Students in all grades receive two, thirty-minute physical education sessions with our PE teacher in the gym each week. During those sessions, students encounter acceptance of their uniqueness and physical ability, safety in trying any exercise or skill by receiving encouragement from each other, and room to excel at their fitness level. Students receive individualized assistance as they work on skill acquisition, locomotor movements, and increasing overall fitness. They develop an understanding of the benefits of being physically active to their health, growth, and well-being. While students are in-person, we are able to continue our PE sessions; when students are remote, the teacher provides asynchronous exercise ideas via a Google site, offers a live movement session via Zoom for students who wish to participate live with others, and collects activity logs as a form of demonstration of physical health and activity.

Students in all grades receive two, thirty-minute music sessions with our music teacher each week. During those sessions, students practice rhythm and beat, learn musical notation, develop an appreciation of various forms of music and instruments, and acquire vocal and movement skills. While students are in-person, we are able to continue our weekly music sessions; when students are remote, the teacher provides asynchronous music lessons via a Google site, and offers a live music lesson via Zoom for students who wish to participate with others.

Students in grades 4-6 are able to participate in our Lego Robotic Club after school. This activity provides students with an opportunity to problem-solve, research solutions to an existing problem, and develop teamwork and programming skills essential to robotics work. Due to limitations of COVID-19, this program was not carried out this year and was postponed.

Our intermediate students display a growing sense of community and an increasing sense of their place in society. In response to this, we spend nine weeks in extensive, community service programs: our 4th graders work with preschool children, our 5th graders work at the Food Bank, and our 6th graders work with seniors at an assisted living center. Student-led community projects include our garden and mini-food pantry, which have grown in significance and community contribution through continuing student development and

maintenance. The self-access, mini-food pantry is highly effective in providing food to families in need; and, our school garden is an ongoing, whole school event. It involves planting and harvesting crops by all of the students and supplying our community with fresh-grown produce at our farmers' market.

Restrictions due to COVID-19 did not allow for our preschool and senior visits this year, nor was the farmers' market held, but our community outreach grew to include sending cards of encouragement to area healthcare workers, and providing positive messages to the community on coffee cup insulators. The self-access, mini-food pantry continued to operate with students stocking and maintaining it. Students used the mini-food pantry to keep the connection with the Food Bank, and they collaborated to provide food used to fill the pantry.

3. Academic Supports:

Soldotna Montessori Charter School works diligently to ensure that all students reach their academic potential and achieve annual yearly progress, as well as perform proficiently on the statewide assessment. In order to accomplish this, student academic performance is monitored using the MAP and Aimsweb benchmark assessments at three times throughout the year. Data from these benchmarks is continually analyzed to determine instruction. Teachers make data-driven decisions to provide individualized instruction for each student according to their assessment data. Data from these assessments is used to provide intervention services, strategic short-term grouping for specific instruction, and individualized practice of concepts that are not yet mastered. This data is also used to make certain students performing above grade level are acquiring new understanding at the level they need, ensuring they encounter more challenging concepts. Individualized workplans are designed for each student, and they incorporate online instructional tools, for students to use, to learn specific skills and standards in math and language arts. Students work independently on IXL lessons and monitor their own progress and growth. Students also use Lexia Core 5, which provides remediation in reading and spelling, and is used for our in-person and distance instruction and provide useful data for tracking progress. The data is consistently compared to their in-class work to verify the accuracy of the assessment results and measure growth and effectiveness. Students are shown their test results to assist their motivation, inform them of their progress, and encourage continued diligence.

Interventions are provided by an intervention teacher; and, the intervention teacher uses student performance on standards to develop the instruction. Students in need of intervention receive this assistance in addition to the instruction received in class. This takes the form of small group instruction, guaranteeing students receive individual attention, modified pacing, and coaching with more specific feedback on concepts not yet mastered. They are taught strategies to use in class to increase their success.

A review of Soldotna Montessori Charter Schools most recent state assessment performance data yields four significant discrepancies of ten or more percentage points existing between the test scores performance of the total student population and the performance various subgroups. Of note, in English language arts (ELA), our students in the 'two or more races' subgroup outperformed the total population by 16% points. However, our total population outperformed our special services students by 12% in ELA. In math, the total population outperformed our special services subgroup by 25%, and our economically-disadvantaged subgroup by 22%.

Our special services program also focuses on specific standards and establishes goals for growth as part of the students' Individualized Education Programs. These learners are given tools, technology assistance, and instruction in managing their emotions to help them overcome the barriers to their learning. They are empowered by the results they experience and encouraged to advocate for themselves. These critical components of effective learning will serve them throughout their

educational careers.

The school continues to individualize instruction for all students, and provides specific, focused interventions for students who are in need of interventions as well as for students who exceed expectations. Our staff constantly works to refine and improve this process.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

Student engagement is a key aspect of Soldotna Montessori Charter School, and we have developed many strategies to enhance our students' experiences. Student self-direction and ownership of their learning is one key element. Teachers provide concrete models and hands-on activities allowing learning to be more tangible and self-paced. Students use work plans to develop the skill of choosing work, this provides students with the autonomy to select what work they would like to use to demonstrate their learning.

Another key aspect for engagement is the freedom of movement students enjoy while learning. Self-directed learning results in groups of students collaborating, choosing work locations, selecting learning partners, or even choosing to work independently. Students monitor their own pace, productivity, and completion; and, they can advance to another learning task without directive. These freedoms provide motivation resulting in sustained engagement.

Our students are grouped in multiage classes, giving students the experience of being mentored, and provide mentoring, over the course of their career. Students value interdependence and expend effort supporting and caring for each other. Commitment to each other results in engagement that is evident in our school and the entire community.

Lastly, many instructional units utilize student interest and skills to influence their engagement. A student may have a strong speaking ability, while another excels in artistic creativity. Students' interests and strengths are identified and incorporated into learning units and projects. The individuality of each student is valued and capitalized upon in designing learning.

With the need to adjust our typical practice to at-home learning, our staff created paper versions of our Montessori materials, that students were familiar with. These were sent home allowing concrete manipulation of materials to guide independent learning efforts. Teachers also located digital versions of the materials to aid in distance instruction, which were also a learning option for students. Students shared project work and made connections with each other via FlipGrid videos and completed group work in Google Docs.

Teachers continued small group and individual lessons via Zoom providing the longed for face-to-face interactions and personal connections which often included families, siblings, and even pets. Learning from home and over Zoom created opportunities to maintain connections, learn collaboratively, and promote unique engagement in this new type of learning environment.

Distance students continued to be connected with students in the classroom via Zoom gatherings, breakout room discussions, and games. Distance students and parent-led students completed parallel curriculum to our in-class students, so as they returned to school, they maintained continuity with their class.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

A central principle of the Montessori approach to education is the concept that the world is connected and interdependent; each individual is part of the greater whole with a personal responsibility for contributing in a positive way to the well-being of the world. At Soldotna Montessori Charter School, this translates into instructional units with an outward focus on community improvement. These units require the involvement of parent volunteers and community partnerships. We conduct extensive field trips; many are outdoors requiring additional adults to work with students. We cannot raft the Kenai River, hike the Hidden Creek Trail, overnight near the Swanson River, walk to monitor the health of Soldotna Creek, or encounter and classify over 80 organisms after traveling by boat to Jackaloff Bay without our parents and volunteers. They are the heart of our ability to provide a safe and robust experience for students who are learning about their community and the place where they live. Nearly all of our parents are a part of a field experience at some point, not due to any school requirement, but because they value the learning of every child. When a parent

has an opportunity to share in their child's learning, that parent is likely to continue to participate in future school events. Parent participation allows our families to learn about each other and build relationships, enhancing our school's sense of unity and commitment to each student.

Not only are our parents involved in the outings, but our community is also involved as well. We have successful partnerships with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, the Alaska Center for Coastal Studies, the Food Bank, the Soldotna Senior Center, the Soldotna Assisted Living Center, the Heritage Place, Ridgeway Preschool, and the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Our students have collaborated with the mayor and city planners to organize local activities and community improvements. Our food pantry, which supplies approximately thirty pounds of food each day to families in need, was established by SMCS students working with the City of Soldotna and the Kenai Peninsula Borough planners. Throughout the pandemic, we have successfully worked with the Food Bank and continued to keep the food pantry stocked. When unable to visit our Soldotna seniors in person during COVID-19, students continued to maintain connections with them via encouraging cards. They also established new community partnerships with local coffee businesses to provide positive, community messages that were well-received by the public. While we did alter many of our efforts this year, we were still able to continue and create new ways of connecting with the community around us.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

Soldotna Montessori Charter School enjoys an abundance of experienced staff. Our teachers have an average of 14 years of experience. Additionally, all classroom teachers are certified, and over 85% have an additional certification as a Montessori instructor. The culture is strong professionally; and, the staff pursues their own paths for professional growth. Additionally, the staff rely on each other for continued advancement.

The teachers' determination for personally-driven, professional growth is evident by the following actions: In the past two years, two teachers initiated and attained Montessori Certification. An additional teacher completed her master's program in the past year. In each of the past four years, a different teacher has requested and been granted the opportunity to attend a national Montessori conference. Furthermore, staff members have continued their professional growth by attending various webinars and online trainings with focus on Montessori principles, students-in-crisis, and research-based reading programs.

Within the school, professional growth is enhanced through a variety of opportunities. Our Professional Learning Community (PLC) teams meet twice weekly during the school day, and since the pandemic, daily. This process is supported by teacher and administrator training received at a Summit PLC conference. Monthly Montessori training sessions allow staff members to share Montessori manipulative instruction and application. Leadership teams comprised of teachers, aides, and other school members improve the school's efforts in locating and successfully winning grants, determining and responding to professional development needs, overseeing the school development plan, and continued Montessori growth strategies. Prior to the pandemic, the entire staff was able to attend the Alaska Montessori Conference held in Anchorage, focusing on developing self-directed learners.

In addition, the school district offers trainings and in-service opportunities that are available for staff to attend and refine their craft.

Since continued professional growth is built into our weekly and monthly practices, the teachers were able to use this time to meet the demands of altering our instructional approaches to accommodate distance and hybrid models of instruction required as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because teachers were accustomed to working interdependently, the staff was able to navigate through this enormous challenge by relying on each teachers' unique abilities and skills. They were ready to: support one another with learning new technology, collaborate in structuring varied lesson delivery models, and diversify and share their research efforts in preparing distance education. The structures and environment for learning and growth aided in successfully transitioning from our traditional instructional model to a distance or hybrid model.

4. School Leadership:

Soldotna Montessori leadership consists of an Academic Policy Committee (APC) who serve as a board, overseeing the school. The APC is comprised of six parent members, two teacher representatives, and the administrator. The board determines the employment of the school administrator and oversees the curriculum.

The administrator is guided by the APC and leads the school in carrying out the mission and vision of the school. The administrator implements school and district policies while overseeing the successful integration of Montessori instruction with current, educational best practices. The administrator also serves as a liaison between the school and district leadership.

The leadership philosophy is handled by the administrator and is best characterized as a belief in the ability of each student and staff member to achieve. This provides the framework for all leadership actions and decisions to be student-centered and open to possibilities, rather than a set standard. Administration places trust in the expertise of the staff, while encouraging them to find creative solutions to new or ongoing challenges. Staff members are supported in their roles as leaders and are encouraged to develop new instructional approaches or enhance existing instruction.

SMCS has a strong sense of family connectedness. We have extensive traditions, conduct many experiential-based learning opportunities, and carry out many community outreach efforts that result in family participation and opportunities to come together. These important aspects of the school require person-to-person connections, and they were impacted by social distancing requirements. Students shifting to learning from home due to school closures also threatened school connectedness, and the school's value of togetherness was undermined. However, the administrator embraced the challenges and continued to communicate a positively.

Leadership demonstrated innovation while addressing the potential decline in student enrollment by creating a parent-led "homeschool" program. This allowed families to remain connected to the school, retaining their seat, which is attained by lottery placement, something no other school offered. The result of this innovative thinking was minimal enrollment decline when most schools experienced a very significant enrollment loss. The administrator also developed remote assemblies and holiday celebrations via Zoom and encouraged teachers to drive to students' homes to provide well wishes. SMCS was the only district school to carry out an in-person Christmas program. The administrator developed a school "drive-in" event, allowing students to showcase student (and family) talent. This allowed families to come together in a safe and socially distant manner, while continuing school family connections. These efforts were adjustments and adaptations that allowed for continued student and family engagement, connectedness, and academic growth.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

Soldotna Montessori Charter School has a small population of students with diverse ethnic backgrounds. However, in order to address the diverse needs and backgrounds of students and families, the school provides ongoing opportunities for students to understand, experience, and value the various cultures throughout the world.

Within our primary program, students learn of the differing regions of the world and focus on learning the continents. While studying and learning about the location, shape, and size of the continents, students learn about the different cultures that exist on these continents. These engagements provide an opportunity for students and families to learn, share, and value their own culture, as well as the culture of others. Cultural lessons tie together the arts, culture, geography, cuisine, history, traditional dress, and spiritual traditions.

Our intermediate program mirrors the primary but with greater depth and opportunities for students to conduct additional research. Additionally, Soldotna Montessori is located on the Kenai Peninsula and within the historic, cultural area of the Kenaitze Native tribe. Our students spend a great deal of time connecting their learning to their immediate environment and engaging in

ongoing field trips that focus on the region in which they live. Weaved into that learning is the cultural aspects associated with the Kenaitze tribe. When students test water sources for health and to understand the watershed, lessons also include how it was used and vital to the native tribe. When students explore our forests and learn about forest succession and fire ecology, they are also taught the cultural importance of Ch'wala to the Kenaitze people. Students travel to coastal intertidal zones of the Kachemak Bay and experience a vast number of invertebrates and resources. During that experience, students are also connected with Athabaskan subsistence sites especially situated for their access to abundant resources.

The school infuses cultural studies throughout all learning, and students and families are encouraged to share and connect their unique backgrounds with fellow students. Sharing provides our students the opportunity to understand how each one's culture is important and valuable to our school family, and how influential these cultural differences and similarities are for being complete. Included within that sharing is the intent to foster each student's sense of independence, interconnection, respect for self and others, care, love, peace, and understanding. We accomplish this by weaving our cultural studies into all lessons, including student service, to build positive experiences in understanding and helping others.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The success of Soldotna Montessori Charter School's ability to educate and support students rests in the core philosophy of the Montessori approach: empower students and recognize their inherent curiosity and desire to learn. One practice that allows students at Soldotna Montessori Charter School to excel is the commitment to each student as an individual and valuing their uniqueness; this is known in Montessori as "follow the child." As one parent noted, there is "attentiveness to the individual child - allowing for the personal strengths, needs, and learning journey of each individual. Viewing the child as part of a unique family with its own needs and circumstances... [there is] attentiveness to the whole child - academic, personal, social, and emotional growth. The child is viewed as part of a larger whole (as a member of their family, as a member of a classroom, school family, and local/global citizen)."

One key strategy of following the child is teacher commitment to thoughtful, deliberate, and ongoing evaluation of both the child's academic and social-emotional needs through careful observation of each child. Teachers are able to see the results of this effort over the three year, multiage commitment that exists as part of a Montessori classroom. Another implemented strategy is a learning environment that allows students to engage in learning when they are ready and to the depth they are ready to explore the content. The process for each child is highly scaffolded and reflective, involving the development of a unique work plan for each child, that continually guides them toward high standards of academic excellence and personal responsibility. This process allows each child to build the life skills of organization, time management, self-awareness, and consciousness of their role in larger community. Ultimately, students leave our school with this self-awareness and a grounded regard for the unique trajectory of their own development as a student here. They carry this awareness as an asset into the next phase of their life as a middle school student and into the future as citizens in our local and global communities. Thirdly, the strategy of integrating student learning with community-oriented contributions causes students to be motivated outwardly toward the benefit of others. This strategy provides classroom work with a context and purpose greater than oneself, developing each child's sense of efficacy as a contributing community member.

The one practice of "following the child" enables our school to successfully educate students at all times and has allowed us to continue to be successful even during a pandemic.