

The background features architectural blueprints with various room labels such as 'Bath. 1 3,80', 'Garage 19,52', 'Entry 4,35', 'Dining Room 10,97', and 'Kitchen & Nook 19,87'. Several rolled-up blueprints are visible on the left side, and a wooden ruler is placed horizontally across the bottom of the page.

Planning Your Dream Community

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ONLINE WORKSHOPS

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DECIDE: Four-Part Visioning Process



Let's look how you can plan and create your dream Montessori school community.

Creating and communicating a clear vision of your dream school community is the first step to transform families into partner families, families who understand and value the difference of Montessori education.

To create and communicate a clear vision about your dream community I found it helpful to have a visioning process. A visioning process helps you find keywords to describe the qualities you desire in your school community.

This four-part visioning process follows:

VISIONING PROCESS

- PART 1: Creating A Vision Plan
- PART 2: Creating An Action Plan
- PART 3: Creating An Accountability Plan
- PART 4: Creating A Feedback Plan

Vision Plan +
Action Plan +
Accountability Plan =
WORKING PLAN

DECIDE: Creating A Vision Plan

PART 1: CREATING A VISION PLAN

Key Question:

What Do We Want Our School Community To Be?

This four-part visioning process takes time and shouldn't be hurried. This process also is an on-going exercise throughout each school year.

Each year I held a retreat with my staff and asked key questions in this four-part process.

Talk through the physical and sensory details to visualize the school that everyone wants.

- How do you want your school to look? Inside and out?
- What do the classrooms look like?
- What colors do you use?
- How do your classrooms smell?
- How do you want parents to feel when they walk through the front door for the first time? The thousandth time?
- How do you want people to treat each other?
- How do you want people to resolve differences and problems?

In our retreat, we'd sit in a circle and take everyone's ideas and write them on flip chart sized sticky notes. We put them on the wall for everyone to see. This also created a record of our thinking process.

Give yourself plenty of time to gather ideas so that everyone has time to think and to be heard.

We would begin this part of the process the first morning of our retreat. Usually we could finish up part one in about three-hours. Other times we would continue after lunch.

As you and your staff explore ideas...

- Be open-minded.
- Entertain all possibilities.
- Remember, it's your dream!

Refrain from making judgmental comments such as :

- That's too expensive.
- Oh, yeah, really.
- In a million years!

Keep a bit of magic in the air that anything is possible!

We're talking transformation here!

DECIDE: Creating A Vision Plan

After the last staff member has spoken and everyone is satisfied with the list, only then as school leader is it time to add your own thoughts and desires if they haven't already been expressed.

Read through the entire list.

Ask again if anybody would like to add another idea to the list.

At this point, work to consolidate the list to five items.

Three items are too few. Ten are too many. Five items seems to be just right.

I used a technique where everyone would vote for their top five ideas. That would help us prioritize and get to the five major points fairly quickly.

Only when everyone is happy with the wording on this list of five major points is it time to move on to the second part of your visioning process.

Summary Part 1: Creating A Vision Plan

- Ask key questions.
- Write on large sticky notes.
- Get everyone's input.
- Remain open to all possibilities.
- Add school leader's input last.
- Consolidate to five visioning plan items.

DECIDE: Creating An Action Plan

PART 2: CREATING AN ACTION PLAN



Key Question:

How can we make this happen?

How can we work together to create our vision of how we want our school to be?

Again, ask each person in the group how together you can have the school all of you dream of having. How can we make this happen?

Use the same process as before of getting everyone's input and writing it on big sticky notes.

Remember to remain open minded because what may seem impossible or improbable at first glance has an interesting way of appearing in a fresh form.

In each step, be sure to take plenty of time to hear each person's ideas.

For the quiet person, make a special point to ask their point of view.

As school leader, again, make your suggestions after all have spoken. Add only your ideas that weren't mentioned.

DECIDE: Creating An Accountability Plan

Read each suggestion out loud and consolidate the list to five action plan statements.

Summary Part 2: Creating An Action Plan

- Ask key questions.
- Write on large sticky notes.
- Get everyone's input.
- Remain open to all possibilities.
- Add school leader's input last.
- Consolidate to five action plan statements.

PART 3: CREATING AN ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN

Key Question:

What rules or guidelines do we need to have to make sure this happens?

Use the same steps as in the creating the visioning and action plans.

Make sure that all items are written in the positive.

Avoid using negative phrases.

For example: no gossiping. Instead, use a phrase like "open and honest communication".

When you are finished with Part 3 what you have created is a **working plan** for your dream school.

Vision Statement +
Action Plan +
Accountability Plan =
WORKING PLAN

DECIDE: Creating A Feedback Plan

Type or rewrite these questions and your answers in an attractive way on quality paper.

Ask each participant to sign the document.

Post your plan in visible places. In each classroom. In the office. In the hallway. In your parent and staff handbook. In your newsletters.

The fourth part is critical and it is easy to overlook and forget.

Part 3 Summary: Creating An Accountability Plan

- Ask key question.
- Avoid using negative phrasing.
- Type or rewrite your working plan on quality paper.
- Have staff sign.
- Post in visible places.
- Remember Part 4.

PART 4: CREATING A FEEDBACK PLAN

Key Questions:

In regards to our working plan...

- How are we doing?
- What can we do better?
- What do we need to change?

Ask your group these three questions in staff meetings or by email survey each month.

Have a copy of your working plan at the meeting and be sure to send a copy of the current working plan with the survey.

Your working plan is a working document. It's a flexible document.

These feedback questions create a process to assure that your groups' ideas are implemented and that changes are made when necessary.

Remember, your working plan is not written in stone!

A Working Plan Example

A WORKING PLAN EXAMPLE

Let's look now at a working document, from one school I've worked with recently.

What Do We Want Our School Community To Be?

We want families and staff members who...

- Appreciate our school and each other
- Understand and support Montessori ideas and practices
- Communicate and problem solve in open and honest ways
- Work to create school/home partnerships to support all our children's development and learning.

How Can We Make This Happen?

- Offer a quality Montessori program with on-going information to all our community members about Montessori and child development principles
- Use and teach problem-solving tools to all community members, children, families and staff members.
- Offer fun relationship-building activities throughout the year, i.e. open houses, picnics, etc.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Support all community members by listening.

To Make Sure This Happens We Will...

- Offer friendly reminders of what it means to be part of our school community: In our school we...
- Step up when we see a problem.
- Have the difficult conversations.
- Ask for help when we need it.

Signed this day:

That's what a working plan document might look like.

Not very complicated. Simple is better!

To sum up our four-part visioning process:

- Ask essential questions to create a working plan with a feedback plan.
- Remember, this plan is flexible and changes as the needs of the group change.
- Each year it is recreated as new people enter your community.
- This plan grows as your community grows.

RECRUIT: Finding And Using Keywords

FINDING AND USING KEYWORDS



In your visioning process you'll create keywords to describe the families you want to attract. You'll discover that the same keywords are used over and over again in your lists, words that convey strong meaning.

Let's consider how to:

- Find your keywords
- Use your keywords to attract your dream families
- Use your keywords to transform your current school community

As you go through your four-step visioning process to create your working plan, hang on to those big sticky notes. Those sticky notes contain your keywords. The words are right there to pick out. The work is done!

You'll want to make a permanent list of these words so you'll have these important words when you need them.

You'll be using your keywords on your website, in your newsletters, in your parent and staff handbooks, in brochures, in every talk you give in your school community. And you want to encourage your community to use those keywords, also.

RECRUIT: Finding And Using Keywords

Let's go back to our working plan example. Let's look for the key words.

I would suggest that you look through all your big sticky notes to capture all your keywords. There are more than the ones on your working plan.

What Do We Want Our School Community To Be?

We want families and staff members who...

- **Appreciate** our school and each other
- **Understand** and **support** Montessori ideas and practices
- **Communicate** and **problem solve** in **open** and **honest** ways
- **Work to create** school/home **partnerships** to support all our children's development and learning.

How Can We Make This Happen?

- Offer a **quality** Montessori program with **on-going information** to **all** our community members about Montessori and child development principles
- **Use and teach problem-solving tools** to all community members, children, families and staff members.
- Offer **fun relationship building** activities through out the year, i.e. open houses, picnics etc.
- Seek first to **understand**, then to be understood.
- **Support** all community members by listening.

To Make Sure This Happens We Will...

- Offer **friendly reminders of what it means to be part of our school community**...In our school we...
- **Step up** when we see a problem.
- Have the **difficult conversations**.
- **Ask for help** when we need it.

Use your keywords everywhere. They communicate **exactly** who you want in your school community.

These keywords also express what it means to participate in your school community.

Keyword Message

What if the following message, which is only a slight rewrite of the vision plan, were on the landing page of your website or framed in your front hallway at school?

Or posted in every classroom?

In your parent and staff handbook?

Or these qualities were mentioned in every meeting?

RECRUIT: Creating Clear Expectations

Keyword Message:

We are a thriving community of children, parents, and staff working individually and together to...

- Appreciate our school and each other
- Understand and support Montessori ideas and practices
- Communicate and problem solve in open and honest ways
- Work to create school/home partnerships to support all our children's development and learning.

With that message, what kind of people are you going to attract to your school community?

How will that type of on-going message keep and transform the right families in your school community?

Using keywords in all your communications helps you attract your dream families to your school.

Using keywords helps transform your existing community.

Our vision plan leads to our working plan.

Our working plan provides transformative keywords.

Keywords lead to our next big idea. Clear Expectations.

CREATING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Once I understood keywords, clear expectations followed.

For example:

In our community:

We expect our community members to take the time to find out important information about children and their school community.

We expect them to want to learn how our school will make a difference in their life and their family's lives.

We expect our families to:

- pay on time,
- arrive and depart school on time,
- understand children's sleep and nutrition requirements,
- be the adult in the relationship with their child,
- understand and use key Montessori concepts like freedom within limits, any unnecessary help is a hindrance, respect for the work of the child, and more.

I'm sure you can add much more to your list of expectations.

RECRUIT: Avoiding Difficult Families

Keywords and clear expectations allow us to communicate our desires and requirements for participation in our school community.

It all begins with your four-part visioning process:

VISIONING PROCESS

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FLEXIBLE WORKING PLAN

We get what we ask for. It's the first law of attraction.

We have to be clear, crystal clear about the kind of people we want in our school community.

Because not being clear attracts difficult families.

AVOIDING DIFFICULT FAMILIES

What are difficult families?

In short, they aren't our dream families.

These following descriptions may sound strong and unkind but working with school leaders for many years these characteristics come up time and time again:

- **Difficult families act entitled.**
- **They are habitually late—with the bigger issue that they think the school rules don't apply to them**
- **They spread gossip, falsehood and innuendo about the folks in your school community.**
- **They lack commitment to your school, much less to the idea of Montessori education.**
- **They seem uninformed about good parenting skills, and seem uninterested in learning about how to be a better parent**
- **They may appear unhappy, with unresolved personal issues**
- **They may interact with us in demanding, angry, blaming, and sarcastic ways.**

RECRUIT: Creating Unambiguous Consequences

When we lack clear expectations for how we want our school community to behave, we end up attracting difficult people.

When we compromise our expectations and start to fill spaces in our school just for the dollars, and not for the community building qualities we desire, we start to attract difficult families and staff members.

And, I know, it is scary and painful to turn away families when you need the dollars. It's hard to turn away staff when you are short-handed.

I found, though, that reaching out using keywords and clear expectations helped families and staff members self-select our school for all the right reasons.

Which helped me break-through with this idea:

Be clear about the consequences of not meeting expectations. Unambiguous Consequences.

CREATING UNAMBIGUOUS CONSEQUENCES

Be clear about the consequences of not meeting expectations. The answers to the following questions will vary from school community to school community, and perhaps year to year in your school.

- What happens when a family is habitually late?
- A student misses too much school?
- Gossips?
- Doesn't support the goals of the school community?
- Doesn't attend parent and community activities?
- Chooses to be uninformed, not reading newsletters or attending key meetings?
- What happens when someone speaks rudely, in a threatening manner, uses profanity?
- What happens when someone chooses to not seek to find a win/win solution to a problem?

Be clear about the consequences of not meeting expectations.

A Tip From Elvis Presley

Here's a tip I took from Elvis about understanding consequences.

RECRUIT: Creating Unambiguous Consequences



Elvis' business manager, Colonel Tom Parker, required that every venue that asked Elvis to perform to do a small task.

They were to deliver a matchbook from their business to Colonel Parker at an appointed place, day and time.

If the matchbook was delivered correctly, the Colonel booked Elvis for that venue.

For the folks who couldn't deliver the matchbook to his specifications, well...Elvis never played there.

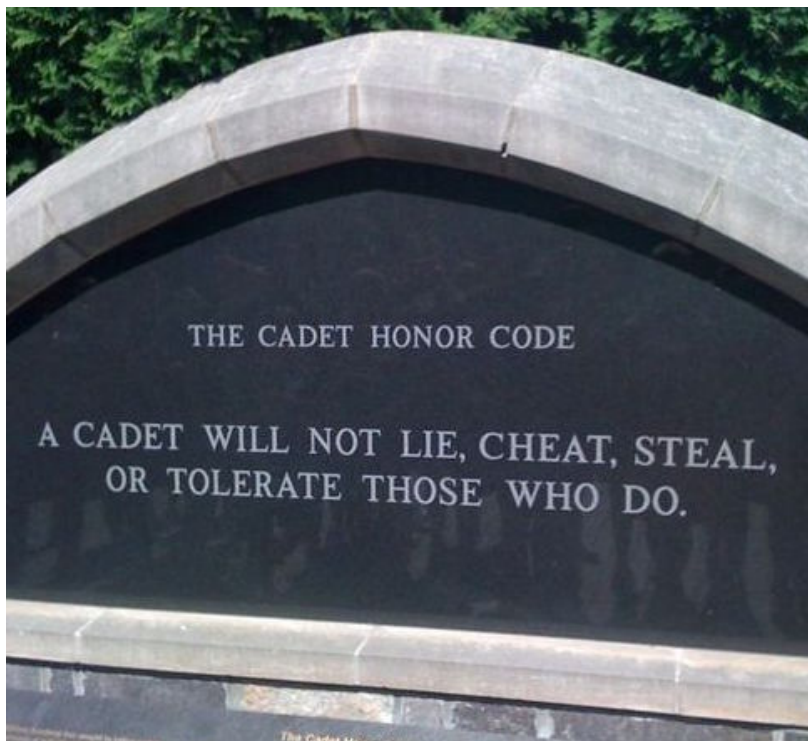
What the Colonel knew is that talk is cheap.

But being able to follow through is what you want from someone you are doing business with, someone who is in your school community.

- Your dream families have follow through.
- You set requirements for being part of your school community.
- You are clear about the consequences for not meeting those requirements.

RECRUIT: Creating Unambiguous Consequences

WEST POINT CADET HONOR CODE



I think we all could all take a lesson from this school:

West Point.

The West Point Cadet Honor Code says: A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do.

What kind of people do you think West Point attracts using that language, those keywords?

How do you think someone who had previously lied, cheated, stolen or tolerated that behavior in others—changed their own behavior if they were accepted into West Point?

And what are the consequences of violating the honor code? At West Point, every cadet knows the consequences.

At your school every adult should know the consequences of non-participation.

Summary

SUMMARY: PLANNING YOUR DREAM COMMUNITY

To plan your dream school community you need to create a working plan.

You've learned a four-part process to create a flexible working plan that contains a feedback plan.

VISIONING PROCESS

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FLEXIBLE WORKING PLAN

You've learned that in creating your working plan you used keywords that describe the kind of people you want to attract into your school community.

With these keywords you've learned how to create clear expectations and unambiguous consequences.

Using your keywords, clear expectations and unambiguous consequences help screen out difficult people in your school community.

Being clear will help you reach out and recruit the right people into your school community.

You have the first two steps out of a five-step system for creating your dream school community.

CREATING YOUR DREAM COMMUNITY Using the DREAM System

DECIDE who you want to be part of your school community. Use your four-part visioning process to create a working plan.

RECRUIT the Right People by using key words, clear expectations and unambiguous consequences.

Your DREAM System

This booklet shows you how to plan and decide what you want your school to be. It tells you how to find and use your keywords to create clear expectations and unambiguous consequences.

ENGAGE and EDUCATE your new community members by letting them know the following:

1. What we do
2. Why we do it
3. Why it matters
4. What the results are
5. What to do at home

With our new generation of families they prefer this engagement and education to be digital, clear, fluid and fast.

ACT to build relationships that are based on personal values.

For our new generation of parents these values include honesty, integrity, innovation, collaboration and respect.

MAKE IT HAPPEN. Obliterate the don'ts. Stop saying we don't have the money, we don't have the time, we don't have the right people. Make it happen.

You now have the keys to plan your dream Montessori school community.

You have an outline for a simple and effective five-step system, the DREAM System, to help you plan and create your dream school.

Here's to the school of your dreams!

About Maren Schmidt, M. Ed.

ABOUT MAREN SCHMIDT, M.ED.



Since 1980 I've been involved in Montessori education in some way or the other, as a parent, a board member, an AMI trained teacher, a school founder, as well as a school administrator.

I've written two books, *Understanding Montessori: A Guide For Parents* and *Building Cathedrals Not Walls*.

Since 2004 I've written the popular blog, newsletter, and newspaper column, Kids Talk. In 2012 I began doing online workshops with parents, teachers, and school administrators all over the world, work I truly love.

In 1990 I started a school, Walnut Farm Montessori School, in Bentonville, Arkansas.

The DREAM System I've shared with you, I learned at, let's call it, the Walnut Farm School of Hard Knocks. One of my favorite sayings is "Life is a great education if you can afford the tuition." Perhaps using the DREAM System will help you afford the tuition.

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