

# SCHOOL STARTS AFTER LABOR DAY

- ▲ **Good Cultures Commit to Excellence**
- ▲ **Make Sure the Members Understand the “Why”**
- ▲ **Be Willing to Address Uncomfortable/Controversial Topics**



## **We built a school in 90 days, but that last week must have lasted a month!**

When the Montessori school our children attended embarked on expanding into a full elementary program in 1994, we began to outgrow our space in the basement of a downtown church. Our vision was to build a facility at the southern edge of town to accommodate our needs now and in the future. We had developed a plan, figured out the financing, designed the building and secured the necessary building permits. We started construction right after Memorial Day 1999. We had to obtain a Certificate of Occupancy (COO) by Labor Day to start on time. With the challenges we faced, we needed a strong

culture; the last week tested a key factor: Our Approach.

The summer had gone as well as could be expected. Apart from some of the typical problems construction projects inevitably produce, we came into the final week expecting to move in over the weekend and start school Tuesday. The interior work was on schedule. What remained was to install the irrigation system and lay the sod for the front entry and the playground. **I showed up late Wednesday afternoon to oversee the progress and, I thought, take a personal, mental victory lap. We had been on this journey for five years, and we were on the verge of seeing our hard work pay off.**

I checked in with the Administrator. Normally a very unflappable person, she was clearly agitated. "The landscapers won't be done," she said.

Fortunately for us, the landscape supervisor was onsite. When I asked him for an update, he told me that he would have everything done by Thursday or Friday of the following week. I told him it was very important to finish on time. His only response was, "There is no way we will be done this Friday."

**Faced with the prospect of opening a week late, we had 132 students and approximately 120 sets of parents counting on us to open on time. I was not in a position to accept this man's limiting belief about completion.**

As we continued the dialogue, we discovered his people expected to leave early for the holiday weekend and he was going to allow it. I explained to him that we couldn't get a COO unless the landscaping was installed. Without that, we couldn't hold classes. That wasn't acceptable if we were to provide the kind of education we had promised.

Sometimes, people must speak up even if the topic is unpopular or controversial and be willing to act on those convictions. The discussion with the landscaper continued in this "no way" plane for a while until we turned it into, "What needs to happen to find a way?" We concentrated on what could happen, insisting that we needed to fulfill our promise. He allowed that his crew could complete the irrigation out front, but they couldn't lay the sod. They could then complete the irrigation on the playground by Wednesday.



Back to the building department we went. They were willing to issue a COO if the front was completely landscaped and we sealed off any doors leading to the playground. We had to complete the playground by Wednesday and open the doors to it on Thursday.

That left laying the sod. And the landscapers had washed their hands of that obligation!

This was a huge improvement. We had a promise from the landscaper and the building department. **As for the lawn, the only way to get the sod laid required an appeal to the parents: We needed them to give up their Saturday morning on Labor Day weekend. And then, we needed them to come Wednesday afternoon and do it all over again!**

This required clear and concise communication not only of the "what" but the "why" behind it. A lot of families

would have to put their plans for a long weekend on hold to connect to the purpose of opening the school that had started in the basement of a church.

One of the unsung heroes on the board was Darla Garey-Sage. She eagerly took the responsibility of recruiting parents. At 8:30 on Saturday morning, the parking lot filled with parents and students who eagerly rolled out 16 pallets of sod, completing the task by noon. The kids, all Montessori students, immediately set about getting the rolls down from the pallets. The parents split off into groups, and the green carpet rolled out as if choreographed.

**It was a very near thing, but on Tuesday morning, school opened on time.**



The Wednesday task could have been anti-climactic. Although we had fewer families participating, we had more ground to cover and an afternoon start to clear 20 pallets. As we lost daylight behind the mountains, we corralled the cars and, with headlights on, finished the job in the dark.

**Originally started as an outreach program for the Trinity Episcopal Church, the Mountain View Montessori School began its metamorphosis from cocoon to butterfly in 1994, with its first elementary class of four pupils and 50 primary (pre-school and kindergarten) students.** In 1999, when the new facility opened, enrollment had grown to 60 elementary and 72 primary students. Today, there are a similar number of toddlers and primary students; the school has expanded its facilities in the interim to accommodate 115 elementary and 35 adolescent (middle school) students. The facility boasts two greenhouses, one that is hydroponic. The produce they grow goes to local restaurants and area soup kitchens. The students raise rabbits, goats and chickens and have extensive studies in preserving the environment along with a rigorous curriculum. And this once “out of the way” school now sits in a thriving part of the expanded city and boasts a healthy waiting list.

Building and fulfilling the vision of the new facility required a healthy culture that leveraged the Approach factor. Completing the building on time required a vision of Excellence, Integrity and Transparency, key behaviors in this factor. Not bad for a determined visionary, the original Administrator Jackie Silveira-Sater, who passionately teaches her students to this day.