
Magnolia Montessori Academy



Our Story

Magnolia Montessori Academy was born in 2012 as a result of the passion, dedication, and perseverance of a few like-minded parents. Motivated by the impossibly long waitlist at the only other public Montessori school in the area, these parents had the “crazy idea” to start their own school.

With only three months to plan, write, and submit a charter application to the Polk County School Board, the founding team worked around the clock, nights and weekends, consulting other successful submissions, searching possible locations, and talking with Montessori educators. After tireless work and endless caffeine, they submitted their application in July of 2012. After a rigorous question and answer period by various members of the Polk County School Board, the application was approved in October of that year. Magnolia Montessori Academy was born!

Well, kind of.

The team still needed to actually open the school. They found a beautiful location off New Jersey Road in the educational building of Chapel in the Grove Presbyterian Church. While the verdant, five-acre property was packed with possibilities, the building itself needed a lot of work. But, as they had proven by now, there is not much that compares to the tenacity of parents on a mission to create a better future for their kids. The renovation of the building became a true community project. Volunteers rolled up their sleeves to tear down, rebuild, paint, and clean. Windows and doors were generously donated. Englund Construction pulled permits and helped with subcontractors for redoing lighting and the bathrooms. A few of the team members took out personal loans, and a couple of parents even paid their preschool fees in advance.

Still, it was a monumental task. Most new charter schools receive a startup grant of \$400,000. Unfortunately, Magnolia Montessori fell between the cracks in grant years. So garage sales were held to raise money and the Polk County School Board warehouse was scavenged for anything useful. When they were desperate and out of funds for shelves, Rotary South volunteered to make the shelves for them!

On opening day, they realized that they didn't have enough small chairs for the lunch room. As they were discussing the seemingly only option of carrying the chairs over from the classrooms at lunchtime and then carrying them back afterwards, the phone rang. The person on the other end said, “Hi, this is Publix. We have some extra chairs and were wondering if you would like them?” They came by an hour later and delivered all of the student chairs in the sizes the school needed!

It was through the parents' unwavering belief in the potential of the school, willingness to back it up with their hard work that Magnolia Montessori Academy came together in time to open its doors in August 2013 to 91 students from Pre-K3 to 5th grade.

Every year since then has carried its various challenges. But every year, Magnolia Montessori has risen up to not only meet, but exceed, the expectations.

Magnolia Montessori Academy



The first year obstacle was familiarizing all 91 students with the Montessori method of learning, which is radically different from what the children were used to in traditional public schooling. The MMA staff expected there to be a substantial learning curve and were grateful that they were to be given a year's grace period before receiving an annual school grade. However, the state of Florida changed the ruling during that first year, and Magnolia was awarded a grade. It was an "F." Although it was a devastating blow, the staff and parents held tight to their belief in the Montessori method and their children's ability to thrive in the school. The staff met with the representatives from the Polk County School Board to come up with a plan and to set a goal for the following year. They were told by the PCSB that Magnolia's goal of a "C" grade the next year was very unrealistic as just a single letter improvement was difficult, and they recommended that Magnolia aim for a "D" instead.

Once again, Magnolia Montessori put their shoulder to the wheel and got to work. They added before and after school tutoring, weekend camps, and extra materials to pinpoint specific learning differences. Parents and staff both pitched in. All of the students stayed, and sixth grade was added. When grades came out in the summer, Magnolia Montessori Academy had not only shot past their goal of a "C," but had achieved an "A" grade. They have maintained an "A" grade ever since.

The third through sixth years were filled with even more challenges, but Magnolia overcame them all. There were necessary expansions, a change in principals, the death of the pastor of the Chapel (who was a big supporter of the school) and the death of a parent in the school community.

In 2018 the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Act was passed, which included new legislation with 60 pages of additional school safety requirements and provided \$50 per child with which to accomplish these requirements. Magnolia had 99 Kindergarten through 6th grade students, providing an additional \$5000, which was not nearly enough to hire a full time student resource officer as well as accomplish all of the other changes that were necessary. Once again, the staff and parent community came together and raised the funds needed to provide a full time Lakeland Police Department School Resource Officer and update the school security measures.

During MMA's seventh and eighth years, the need for growth became even more urgent with the relocation of Lakeland Montessori Middle School. Due to space, their new location was no longer able to accommodate incoming 7th grade students from Magnolia Montessori. MMA had added multiple portable classrooms but was quickly outgrowing its New Jersey Road location. Parents who had seen the difference the Montessori method of teaching had made in their children started asking (and begging) the school to consider expanding to include middle school.

So, the staff and parents began the search for a new location. It was no easy task as they had a lot of "must-haves" on the list. The new location needed to stay within the City

Magnolia Montessori Academy



of Lakeland so they could keep the School Resource Officer. MMA offers preference to children within one geographic mile, so it needed to be close to a high-need area. The students' learning includes a lot of time outside, so the new location needed to have ample green space for PE, gardening, and outdoor learning. And, of course, they needed enough room for 180 Pre-K through elementary students and space to add 7th and 8th grades.

All of these "must-haves" were found at 815 South Central Avenue. Much like the original New Jersey Road building, this new location needs a lot of work. But it also comes with great opportunities: 24,000 square feet will allow them to add more elementary students and expand their curriculum to include 7th and 8th grades. The new location is in an opportunity zone, which will allow MMA to provide high-quality Montessori education to children of diverse economic and social backgrounds. The new location will not only anchor neighborhood improvement (plans are being made to beautify the campus with extensive tree plantings, butterfly gardens, walking paths, and fruit and vegetable gardens), but it will also provide the exceptional "A" grade education that Magnolia Montessori has become known for to the students in that area.

As Magnolia Montessori Academy has proven time and time again, they are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and get to work. With the help of local businesses like yours, this school will continue to grow and remain a bastion of learning and opportunity for all of the students who will walk its halls. Magnolia Montessori's story is one of passion and perseverance. It's a story of the staff, parents, and community coming together to create a better future for our children. Please join them and become a part of the next chapter in their amazing story.