

School Equity Self-Assessment

A reflective protocol for Montessori leadership teams. Not a checklist. Not a score. A structured examination of where your school's stated equity commitments meet, or fail to meet, your actual institutional practice.

Most Montessori schools have an equity statement. Many have completed professional development on bias, identity, or culturally responsive practice. Fewer have examined the structures underneath: the admissions criteria, the discipline data, the curriculum purchasing decisions, the hiring patterns, the family communication norms, the board composition, and the unwritten rules of adult culture that determine what children actually experience inside the building.

This protocol is designed for that structural examination. It is organized into eight domains. Each domain includes a framing statement about why it matters for equity and a set of questions that ask your team to describe what is actually happening, not what you hope is happening or what your handbook says should happen. The questions require specificity. They ask for data, examples, patterns, and honest assessment.

There is no score at the end. There is no certification. There is no passing. What there is, if your team engages with this honestly, is a clear picture of where the gap between commitment and practice is widest, and a starting point for structural change.

How to Use This Protocol

Who should be in the room. This is a leadership team exercise, not a solo reflection. Include your head of school, academic director or program coordinator, at least one classroom guide, and if possible a board member. The conversation matters as much as the answers. Disagreement between participants is data.

What you need before you start. Some questions ask about specific data: discipline referrals, enrollment demographics, staff demographics, assessment patterns, family survey results. Gather what you can before the session. If you cannot find the data, that is itself an answer.

How long it takes. Plan for two to three hours for the full protocol. You can also work through one or two domains per meeting over the course of a month. Do not rush it. The point is not to finish. The point is to see clearly.

What to do with the results. After completing all eight domains, turn to the closing section. You will identify the three domains where the gap is widest and name one structural change in each that you can make within 90 days. That is your starting point. If you want support with the next steps, the Montessori Makers Group Equity Audits intensive and Advisory practice are designed for exactly this work.

DOMAIN 01

Admissions and Enrollment

Admissions is where your school makes its first promise about who belongs. It is also where inequity is most easily hidden behind neutral-sounding criteria. Application fees, tour requirements, waitlist practices, sibling preferences, and 'readiness' assessments all shape who walks through your door and who never does.

1.1

What is the racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic composition of your student body? How does it compare to the demographics of your surrounding community within a five-mile radius? If there is a gap, what accounts for it?

1.2

Describe your admissions process step by step, from first inquiry to enrollment. At each step, who is most likely to be filtered out, and why?

1.3

What does your school charge in application fees, enrollment deposits, and tuition? What financial aid or sliding scale structures exist? Who knows about them, and how accessible is that information before a family applies?

1.4

Does your admissions process include any form of readiness screening, developmental assessment, or classroom visit evaluation? If so, what are the criteria, who developed them, and have you examined whether they disproportionately exclude children by race, language, disability, or socioeconomic status?

1.5

Look at the families who inquired but did not enroll in the past two years. Do you track that data? If so, what patterns do you see? If not, why not?

1.6

How does your school describe itself in marketing materials, on your website, and during tours? Whose family would see themselves reflected in those descriptions, and whose would not?

DOMAIN 02

Curriculum and Materials

The materials on your shelves and the stories you tell in your Great Lessons communicate what your school considers worth knowing and whose contributions matter. Curriculum is never neutral. The question is whether you have examined whose knowledge, whose history, and whose experience is centered, and whose is absent, supplementary, or distorted.

2.1

Pull five impressionistic charts or cultural materials from your elementary shelves at random. How many continents are represented? How many time periods? Whose civilizations are shown as innovators, and whose are shown as recipients of innovation?

2.2

Look at the books in your classroom library and your decodable or early reading materials. What percentage feature protagonists who are Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latiné, SWANA, disabled, or from non-English-speaking households? Are these characters in stories about their identity, or are they simply living?

2.3

When your school teaches the Great Lessons, does the narrative of human history begin in Africa and stay global, or does it funnel toward Europe and the West by the Third Great Lesson? Trace the civilizations named in your current presentations.

2.4

How are Indigenous peoples, SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) communities, and other historically misrepresented groups positioned in your curriculum? Are they present tense or past tense? Are they contributors to human knowledge or subjects of study by Western scholars? Does your curriculum use 'Middle East' or does it use the more accurate SWANA?

2.5

When was the last time your school conducted a formal equity review of its curriculum materials? Who led it? What criteria were used? What changed as a result?

2.6

How do you select new materials? Who makes those decisions, and what equity criteria inform the purchasing process?

DOMAIN 03

Assessment and Observation

Assessment determines what counts as learning. In Montessori, observation is the primary assessment tool, which means the observer's biases, assumptions, and cultural frameworks directly shape which children are seen as thriving and which are seen as struggling. Schools that do not disaggregate their observation and assessment data by race, language, and disability are hiding inequity inside averages.

3.1

Does your school disaggregate assessment or progress data by race, gender, language, and disability status? If yes, what patterns have you found? If no, what is preventing you?

3.2

When a guide records an observation of a child who is not meeting expected benchmarks, how often does the observation include the guide's own assumptions, the environmental conditions, and the cultural context of the child's behavior, versus focusing solely on what the child did or did not do?

3.3

Which children in your school are most frequently identified as 'not yet normalized,' 'having difficulty concentrating,' or 'not choosing work independently'? Is there a racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic pattern in those identifications?

3.4

How does your school assess multilingual children? Are your observation protocols and progress benchmarks calibrated to monolingual English development, or do they account for the full linguistic repertoire of the child?

3.5

Who in your school has been trained in culturally responsive observation? What does that training include, and how is it reinforced in practice rather than treated as a one-time event?

3.6

When assessment data is shared with families, how is it framed? Do your progress reports and conferences communicate from a strengths-based, culturally informed perspective, or do they primarily communicate distance from a normative benchmark?

DOMAIN 04

Discipline and Conflict

Montessori schools often say they do not use punitive discipline. That claim deserves examination. Redirection, 'taking a break,' family phone calls, shortened days, 'not a good fit' conversations, and quiet counseling-out are all discipline actions. The question is whether those actions fall equally across your student body or whether some children bear a disproportionate share.

4.1

In the past year, which children have been sent home, placed on shortened days, or had families called to pick them up early? Disaggregate by race, gender, age, disability status, and language. What do you see?

4.2

Describe your school's process when a child's behavior is identified as a concern. How many steps exist between initial concern and a conversation with families about whether the school is 'the right fit'? Who initiates each step?

4.3

How does your school distinguish between behavior that reflects a child's developmental needs and behavior that reflects a mismatch between the child's culture and the school's behavioral expectations? Give a specific example.

4.4

Does your school use restorative practices? If so, are they applied consistently across all children, or are some children offered restoration while others are managed toward exit?

4.5

When was the last time your leadership team reviewed discipline data for racial disproportionality? What did you find, and what changed as a result?

4.6

How does your school respond when a child reports experiencing racism from a peer? Describe the actual process, not the aspirational one.

DOMAIN 05

Family Partnerships

Schools often frame family engagement as a one-directional effort: educating families about Montessori. Equity-centered family partnership means the school is also learning from families, especially families whose cultural backgrounds, languages, and life experiences differ from the dominant school culture. The question is whose knowledge is valued and whose participation is shaped by the school's terms.

5.1

Which families participate most actively in school events, family education, volunteering, and governance? Which families participate least? Is there a racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic pattern? What structural barriers might explain that pattern?

5.2

In what languages does your school communicate with families? Are all communications, including informal ones like hallway conversations and teacher emails, accessible to families who speak languages other than English?

5.3

How does your school gather feedback from families? Whose voices are loudest in that feedback, and whose are absent? Have you designed specific mechanisms to hear from families who are least likely to speak up in traditional formats?

5.4

When a family's home culture or parenting practice differs from the school's expectations, how does your school respond? Does the school adapt, or does the family receive guidance about how to align with school norms?

5.5

Describe your school's family education programming. Does it position families as learners who need to understand Montessori, or does it create genuine exchange where families' knowledge and perspectives inform the school's practice?

5.6

How does your school handle the experience of being the only, or one of very few, families of color, multilingual families, or families with disabled children in the community? Have you asked those families what their experience is? What did they say?

DOMAIN 06

Hiring and Staffing

Children notice who teaches them, who leads them, who cleans their building, and who makes decisions about their school. The demographic composition of your staff and the equity of your hiring, retention, and promotion practices communicate more about your values than any statement on your website.

6.1

What is the racial, linguistic, and gender composition of your teaching staff? Your leadership team? Your support staff? Your board? How does each compare to the demographics of your student body and your surrounding community?

6.2

In the last three hiring cycles, describe the demographics of your applicant pools, your interview pools, and your hires. Where in the funnel do candidates of color, multilingual candidates, or disabled candidates drop out?

6.3

Where do you post positions and how do you recruit? Are your recruitment channels reaching diverse candidates, or are they circulating within the same networks that produced your current staff?

6.4

What is the retention rate for staff of color versus white staff over the past five years? If there is a gap, have you conducted exit interviews or other inquiry to understand why?

6.5

How does your school support staff of color who may be experiencing racial isolation, microaggressions, or the burden of being expected to represent or lead all equity work? Is that support structural or informal?

6.6

Review your interview questions and evaluation rubrics. Do they assess for equity competence, cultural responsiveness, and the ability to work across difference, or do they primarily assess for Montessori training credentials and classroom management?

DOMAIN 07

Governance and Board

The board sets the conditions for everything else. If the people making financial, strategic, and policy decisions for your school do not reflect the communities the school serves, and if equity is not embedded in their governance practices, it will remain aspirational no matter what the classroom staff does.

7.1

What is the racial, socioeconomic, and professional composition of your board? How many members are families of currently enrolled children? How many are alumni families? How many come from the communities your school says it wants to serve?

7.2

How does your board recruit new members? Is there a nominating process that intentionally seeks diverse candidates, or does recruitment happen through existing relationships and professional networks?

7.3

Does your board have an equity committee, or is equity embedded in the work of every committee? If you have a standalone equity committee, what authority does it have, and what has it changed?

7.4

When the board makes budget decisions, how does equity factor in? Can you point to specific budget line items that reflect an equity commitment, such as financial aid, staff diversity recruitment, curriculum review, or community partnerships?

7.5

How does your board hold the head of school accountable for equity outcomes? Are there specific, measurable equity goals in the head's evaluation, or is equity treated as a value rather than a performance expectation?

DOMAIN 08

Adult Culture

Children experience the organization that adults create. The norms, communication patterns, conflict practices, and unwritten rules of your adult culture determine whether equity is practiced or performed. This domain is often the hardest to examine because it asks leaders to look at themselves.

8.1

Describe the unwritten rules of your school's adult culture. What is rewarded? What is punished? What topics are avoided? Who gets to name a problem, and who gets labeled as the problem for naming it?

8.2

When a staff member raises a concern about racism, bias, or inequity in the school, what happens? Describe the actual sequence of events, not the aspirational one. How many times has this happened in the past two years, and what was the outcome?

8.3

How does your school handle conflict between adults? Is there a structured process, or does conflict resolution depend on individual relationships and informal power? Who benefits from the current approach, and who is harmed by it?

8.4

Does your professional development programming address equity as an ongoing structural practice, or as a periodic topic covered in annual workshops? How many hours of equity-focused PD did your staff receive last year, and what changed in institutional practice as a result?

8.5

How does your school distinguish between a staff member who is 'not a good culture fit' and a staff member who is challenging the culture in ways that are uncomfortable but necessary? Can you give an example of each?

8.6

Who in your building carries the informal labor of equity work: organizing multicultural events, translating for families, mentoring staff of color, explaining racism to colleagues? Is that labor recognized, compensated, and distributed, or does it fall disproportionately on the people most affected by inequity?

CLOSING

What Now

You have worked through eight domains of your school's institutional practice. If this protocol did its job, you have a clearer picture of where your school's equity commitments are structural and where they are aspirational. You may have found domains where you do not have the data to answer the questions. That absence is itself an answer worth paying attention to.

Now identify where the work begins.

Name the three domains where the gap between your stated commitments and your actual practice is widest.

For each domain, name one structural change you can make within 90 days. Not a training. Not a conversation. A change to policy, process, practice, or resource allocation.

Who is responsible for each change, and how will you know it happened?

This is a starting point, not a destination. If your team wants support with the next steps, the Montessori Makers Group Equity Audits intensive and Advisory practice are designed for exactly this work. The Equity in Montessori practitioner course provides the analytical framework for the structural changes this assessment surfaces.

Equity Audits and Adult Culture Design Intensive / montessorimakersgroup.org/institute

Equity in Montessori: A Practitioner Course / montessorimakersgroup.org/equity

Advisory / montessorimakersgroup.org/advisory

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