

WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT TUESDAY?

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EDUCATION

Local Montessori school celebrates 40 years

By **LAUREN FORMOSA**
Grand Haven Tribune

FERRYSBURG — The Walden Green Montessori school is celebrating 40 years of fostering child-centered holistic education within the Tri-Cities community.

On Friday morning, current students and staff were joined by family, friends and alumni at the school for its 40th birthday celebration. The Ferrysburg school was packed and lively as people enjoyed an array of breakfast foods, birthday-related activities, a 40th anniversary presentation that included the unveiling of the school's new promotional video, and an All School Sing that started with the group singing "happy birthday" to Walden Green.

The special day for the tuition-free public charter school not only recognized the hard work its current staff has done to cultivate successful learners but also commemorated the past 40 years of dedication to Montessori education that started with the school's founder, Jean Hicks.

"Jean poured her life, her heart and her soul into this school, so none of this would be here today if it wasn't for her and her vision and sacrifice and hard work for this program," said Principal Mark Roessing. "So much of our DNA stems from the legacy and the seed that she planted. It's just an honor and privilege to carry that on and expand upon that."

Hicks founded Walden



Tribune photos / Lauren Formosa

Students, staff, parents and alumni gather in the great room at Walden Green Montessori school for a 40th anniversary presentation as part of the Ferrysburg charter school's birthday celebration on Friday.



LEFT: Walden Green Principal Mark Roessing gives a 40th anniversary presentation to students, staff and the school community on Friday. **RIGHT:** State Rep. Greg VanWoerkom, left, hands Walden Green Principal Mark Roessing a state tribute commemorating the charter school's 40th anniversary.



Green in 1983 in the basement of Edgewood Lutheran Church near Fruitport based off the teachings and philosophies of Italian educator Maria Montessori, who developed the Montessori education method in 1907 on the

ways that children naturally learn — by teaching themselves.

Montessori education provides children a space to make their own decisions and explore their educational interests in an effort to cul-

ivate a life-long love of learning. The learning model also focuses on social-emotional growth and fostering a sense of global justice and peace in students in a community

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setting.

Roessing explained that Walden Green switched to tuition-free and became one of the first nonprofit charter schools in Michigan in 1995, steadily growing over the years to now educate a total of 237 Young 5 through eighth-grade students in a blend of Montessori core tenets and state learning standards.

"At a Montessori school, we're here to prepare them for life, and that's what Dr. Montessori wanted — education is an aid to life," Roessing said. "Are we preparing them for an end-of-the-year test like M-STEP? No, that's not education. Our students do quite well still, but what we're preparing them for is nothing short of adulthood, the skills that we really feel like will help them flourish in the 21st century."

In the school's small, family-like atmosphere, Roessing says that students work in small groups and independently at their own pace, helping build "critical life skills for adulthood" such as responsibility, self-regulation and time management. Walden Green also pairs the independent learning style with 21st-century learning skills to foster collaboration, critical thinking and compassion to help create well-rounded learners and future community members.

Walden Green's approach to holistic education has seen much success in both achieving academic excellence and promoting social, emotional and physical well-being in students, Roessing said. He explained that the charter school ranked above sur-

rounding public school districts in terms of standardized testing scores and was also nominated as a Michigan School of Excellence.

Also in attendance at Friday's celebration was state Rep. Greg VanWoerkom, who presented the school with a state tribute for the staff's commitment to student success.

"Having a strong education in your community is key for its growth and success," said VanWoerkom, R-Norton Shores. "When you can celebrate what a school like Walden Green has done ... it really highlights the area and makes people want to continue to live here and raise their kids here, and that's a key function to continue the prosperity here in West Michigan."

Walden Green also on Friday received a plaque from their partners at Central Michigan University's Center for Charter Schools, given by the center's executive director, Cory Northrup, who

explained that the school's dedication to fitting the needs of families and students is "the model of why we have charter schools."

"When you come into Walden Green, everyone is excited and happy to be here, and that translates into results," Northrup said. "Ultimately, we want our kids to be successful when they leave here, and that is equating into their test results. They're one of the highest schools in our portfolio, and I think that all starts from the culture that (the staff) sets here when the kids walk in the door."

Roessing said he is looking forward to what the future holds for the charter school in the years to come. Along with his fellow staff members, he hopes to continue providing public Montessori education for as many students in West Michigan as possible and provide them a school culture based on compassion, respect and peacefulness.

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