



# ATLAS ACADEMY

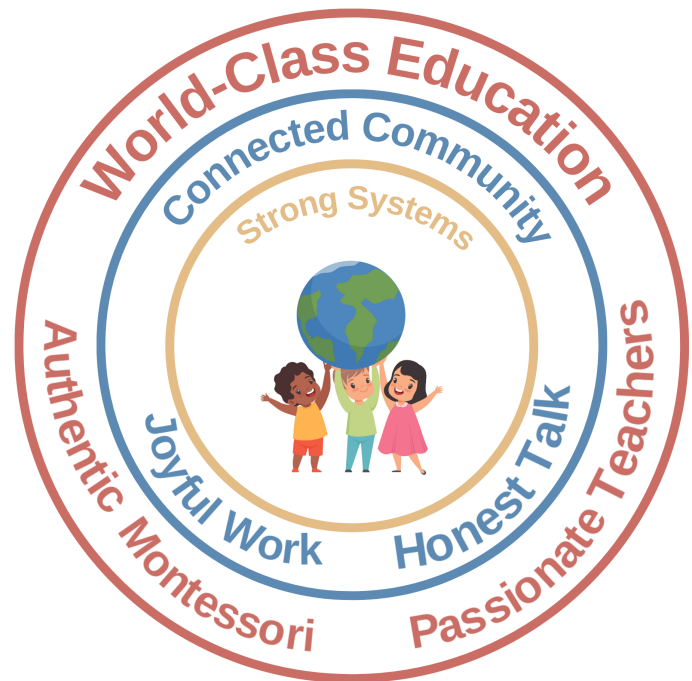
## THE ATLAS WAY

### A Strategic Plan

#### Our Vision

Our vision is of a world-class birth-to-maturity Montessori school on a beautiful sprawling campus, with obviously exceptional students, passionate teachers, and a strongly connected community.

Atlas Academy will add grades, year after year, up through high school. Currently, in MA, there are about one hundred Montessori schools. Of those, about a dozen have Elementary Programs. And of those, only a handful have Middle Schools. At the moment, there are no Montessori High Schools in MA. Atlas Academy seeks to become the first Montessori High School in MA.



We will achieve this through quality—by offering a world-class school experience and education to Atlas families. We will *not* try to achieve this through quantity. We will *not* accept (many) new students into our upper grades in order to build enrollment—that would negatively impact quality. And we will *not* try to build enrollment at our lower levels so that hopefully a few students trickle-up into our high school. What we *will* do—is to offer such an obviously high-quality, world-class school experience and education that all Atlas families continue to choose the Atlas Way year-after-year. This means that the key performance indicator for our success will be our year-to-year retention rate, that is, how many families re-enroll each year. The higher the quality of our program, the higher our retention rate, and the closer we get to achieving our vision.

We have identified three key factors to our success: (1) a world-class education, (2) a connected community, and (3) strong systems.

# World-Class Education

The term “world-class” is somewhat misleading, because what we’re actually seeking is something that has never been fully implemented. We’re going after the “holy grail” in education—an education that is BOTH directed and driven by the students AND leads to strong development and high academic achievement. We want our students to come away with BOTH a strong, defined personality AND an abundance of knowledge and skills. We seek to first join other world-class schools who are offering this to various degrees at certain levels, and then continue on to offer this kind of education with high fidelity at all levels.

There’s two things we need to achieve this. First, a strong, Authentic Montessori pedagogy; second, the Passionate Teachers to make it happen.



## Authentic Montessori

A key part of the Atlas Way is our take on what is at the heart of the Montessori Method. There is a great variety of training centers, schools, and teachers, within the Montessori world. Some people think that the essence of Montessori is being in touch with nature, others believe that it's hands-on materials, others believe that it's the fact that it's “child-led”, and still others believe that it's about education for peace. Because of this variance, we need to define what Authentic Montessori means at Atlas Academy, and how it leads to a world-class education.

We believe that Authentic Montessori—ie., an implementation that Maria Montessori herself would agree with—revolves around two points: the child and the environment, and that it is the unity of these two elements which distinguishes the Montessori Method and which make it so powerful.



Most educational approaches neglect one of those two elements—either they neglect the child’s unique personality and try to mold him into a one-size-fits-all curriculum—or they allow the child such complete freedom of choice that the child never learns anything.

And even with Montessori Schools, some teachers allow too much freedom at the expense of learning, and some teachers try to force learning on their students at the expense of freedom.

At Atlas Academy, Authentic Montessori means the union of the two—an education which respects the child’s autonomy AND leads to high academic achievement.

Our strategy for implementing Authentic Montessori is (1) to engage in Lesson Study and Child

Study, (2) to develop an Atlas Curriculum Album, (3) to continue refining our Progress Reports, and (4) to initiate Student Success Teams for students who need extra support.

Lesson Study and Child Study form the basis of our instructional method. Lesson Study is the systematic analysis of every material and lesson in our curriculum—ie., a systematic study of the environment. Child Study is the systematic observation of each student in the school—i.e, a systematic study of the child.

The purpose of Lesson Study is to take a broader look at the entire curriculum (i.e, the prepared environment) and analyze how it is meeting the general needs of children within a given developmental stage. And then to look specifically at each material and lesson, and analyze how it meets the specific needs of children within a given developmental stage.

As we review each element of our curriculum, we will be taking notes, finding resources, and building habits that support the Atlas Way—these notes, resources, and habits will be filed in our Atlas Curriculum Album, as a means of defining and preserving the Atlas Way.

The purpose of Child Study is to look in detail at each student, and determine—as a team of teachers, administrators, and parents—what each student’s particular needs are, and how those needs can be met within the prepared environment.

Child Study will serve as the basis for our bi-annual Progress Reports. These reports take the form of skills inventories, itemizing the specific skills students acquire by means of the prepared environment. Parents will learn how their child is doing by tracking their progression through the skills associated with each level. Additionally, teachers will summarize their observations notes in the form of narrative reports on each child’s Progress Report.

If, through observation, we determine that a child needs additional support, we initiate a Student Success Team to provide additional resources for that child, and to increase and formalize communication between the school and that child’s family.



Of course, the implementation of Authentic Montessori will be highly dependent on the quality of our teachers.

## Passionate Teachers

This is why we will be investing heavily in our teachers as part of the Atlas Way—both in our current teachers as well as in recruiting and training aspiring teachers.



We obviously want our teachers—like all members of our community—to be dedicated to Authentic Montessori as best educational practice. This is hard to find, as it is common for teachers to either follow their own anxious need for order at the expense of student freedom, or to follow the child's desires at the expense of effortful but rewarding work. In contrast to these types, Atlas teachers guide children towards freely choosing work which is both challenging and rewarding.

In addition to finding teachers who honor Authentic Montessori, the other important quality we look for is a genuine passion for child development, education, and teaching.

We, as adults, remember most those teachers in our lives who were passionate about their subject matter. The Math teacher who loved math, or the English teacher who loved poetry. But this is only half of the passion that we're looking for here at Atlas Academy. The other half is a love for children—for child development in general, and for each individual child in their classrooms.

In alignment with Authentic Montessori, our Passionate Teachers love both the content of their curriculum, as well as the children in their classrooms. And this is noticeable through conversation with them, as well as through observation in their classrooms. Our teachers truly love their students, and work really hard to help them meet their needs. And they also really love their materials and classrooms, and take extreme care to make sure they are prepared for the students each day. Our Passionate Teachers love their students and love their prepared environments. And it shows.

There are a number of measures we'll take to support our Passionate Teachers. We give them ample Prep Time to review their observation notes and prepare their classroom environments. We have also hired a Montessori Coach to support their implementation of Authentic Montessori, and to assist with any students who have Student Success Teams. We allocate time for them to have Meetings with their

teaching teams, with the Montessori Coach, and with the Head of School. We allocate time for them to do Observations of each other, and of teachers in other Montessori schools. We offer a full Staff Week of preparation before the school year begins. During that week, and throughout the year, we offer an abundance of Professional Development opportunities—such as formal workshops and training courses, consulting, conferences, etc. And finally, we ensure open and honest communication by means of bi-annual Teacher Appraisals.

There are also a number of measures in place to recruit and train aspiring teachers. We have developed a Partnership with the University of Massachusetts to provide us with interns who are interested in the Montessori Method. We offer our Become a Montessori Teacher program to aspiring teachers, who can work as an assistant teacher for a year, qualify for funding, and receive a very expensive Montessori Teacher Training course for free. We are also developing a Mentorship Program, to partner aspiring teachers with veteran teachers, to show them the Atlas Way.



Some minor ways which we also support our Passionate Teachers are through Birthday Lunches, a well-stocked Staff Room, out-of-school Dinners and Events, and showing appreciation through words and actions.

By supporting our Passionate Teachers, we are supporting the implementation of Authentic Montessori, and delivering on our promise of a World-Class Education.

But, in order to achieve our vision, the Atlas Way needs to be more than just a World-Class Education, it also needs to develop a Connected Community, and be supported by Strong Systems.

# Connected Community

They say it takes a village...so, what's our village like?

First and foremost, we are all connected by the promise of each child's potential. We, as parents, love our own children, and want each of them to reach their fullest potential. And we, as educators, love each child in the school, and want each and everyone one of them to fulfill their unique potential.

I think we are all also connected by our belief that Authentic Montessori is a huge part of what will help our children to reach their potential. We believe that an education which respects our children's individuality while also setting high expectations for work and achievement, is the best way to help them to be all they can be.

Helping our children to reach their potential, in part by means of an Authentic Montessori education—that is definitely a core value that we all share.

What else?

As part of this strategic plan, we're proposing two principles for our community—two key aspects of our culture, our village—which will help us to achieve our vision, and help each of our children reach their potential. The first we'll call Joyful Work, and the second we'll call Honest Talk.



## Joyful Work

For the students, Joyful Work is the style of activity we want them to engage in on a daily basis. We want them to be working and learning, but in a way that's joyful and rewarding. Luckily, Joyful Work is already an integral part of Authentic Montessori—we're already focused on making sure our students are working with joy.



The point of making this a cultural value—a value for our village—is to take this principle and apply it to ourselves. To make ourselves, as adults, the example for our children. To work joyfully in our own lives, and be the role-models for our children. To teach with joy, and to parent with joy. Raising children is a lot of work, especially if we want them to fulfill their highest potential—but we want to do this work, as a community, in a joyful way. This will make for a more pleasant village, and it will be more effective, as we'll be setting a great example for our children.

Our strategy for infusing Joyful Work into our culture will gradually unfold over time. But at first, it will focus on the issue of stress, as it is a prominent detractor from the joys of teaching

and parenting. There is a lot of stress associated with teaching and with parenting. It's a lot of work, sometimes too much work, and there never seems to be enough time to get it all done in a manner that meets our expectations of ourselves. We'll tackle this problem in two steps. First, this year, we'll focus on our teachers, and figure out ways to help them to teach with more joy and less stress. Then, the following year, we'll focus on our parents, and tackle the stress that comes along with being a parent.

A Connected Community, working with joy to help each child to reach their potential, needs a way to ensure open and honest communication, in order to preserve harmony among its members. That is the purpose of Honest Talk.



## Honest Talk

Honest Talk is our commitment to open, assertive communication among all members of our community (administrators, staff, and parents). The need to make a separate and strong point about this comes from the fact that we are dealing with two extremely important values: for our parents—their children; for our staff—their careers. Because of this, we cannot afford to let our passions get in the way of clear communication; nor can we afford to withhold communication for fear of hurt feelings. We must be committed, as a community, to clearly, calmly, and dispassionately state our true observations, thoughts, and feelings, and suggestions, knowing that we all share a common interest which is “the best interest of the students.” In practice, this means that teachers and administrators are committed to portraying to parents a full and clear picture of a student’s experience; it means that parents are committed to working through issues without defensiveness and working in partnership with the school; etc. We ask all members of our community to work together to uphold this basic principle of communication and to have those “hard” conversations, as this is the best way to ensure harmony among our Connected Community.

With a Connected Community based on Joyful Work and Honest Talk, and a World-Class Education of Authentic Montessori delivered by Passionate Teachers, we will be well on our way towards achieving our vision. But, in order to make sure we get there, we’ll need a number of Strong Systems in place to support our work and our growth.

## Strong Systems

A lot of the systems that will support our World Class Education and Connected Community have been mentioned already. These include our Lesson Study and Atlas Curriculum Album which will help us to prepare our learning environments; our Child Study, Progress Report, and Student Success Team procedures which will help us to focus on each individual child’s needs; Prep Time, Montessori Coaching, Meetings, Observations, Staff Week, and Professional Development to support our existing Passionate Teachers, as well as our Partnership with UML for interns, and our Become a Montessori Teacher and Mentorship Program for aspiring teachers; and finally our principles of Joyful Work and Honest Talk for our Connected Community.

Additional Systems which will support our World Class Education include a strong leadership team consisting of a Head of School, Assistant Head of School, Montessori Coach, and School Administrator. And also our Parent Handbook, Staff Handbook, and

Operations Manual, which clearly communicate our policies and procedures to everyone in our Connected Community.

Additional Systems which will support our Connected Community include a calendar full of Fun Events and Informative Events, the new Atlas App which will improve communication, a Partnership with Green Dragon to provide a farming/martial arts experience for the elementary students, a new Atlas PTO, monthly Newsletters, printed and digital School Calendars for both staff and parents, and bi-annual Parent Teacher Conferences.

## The Atlas Way

These systems will help to support our Connected Community, and our World-Class Education, so that we'll be able to provide the highest quality education possible, to help each student reach their full potential, and to grow Atlas Academy into a World-Class birth to maturity Montessori school.

