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**Subject:** Urban Montessori's Teacher Pipeline is Building Local Leaders  
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URBAN MONTESSORI'S TEACHER PIPELINE IS BUILDING LOCAL LEADERS



It's 9 am on a weekday morning and the class of Freedom Reign, a first-year lead teacher at Urban Montessori Charter School, is buzzing. There are 25 students in the class – 4th, 5th, and 6th-grade students, which is typical in a Montessori school where grades are put together to enable students to learn from one

another. The students are in 8-10 different small groups working on various projects before they are called to the front.

Freedom is an Oakland native who has been working at the school for seven years. He sits at a table in front of the class, and rather than lecturing, as you might typically see a teacher do in a traditional class, he works with small groups of students through particular assignments. ("This is how you calculate area," Freedom tells one group.) After a few minutes, they return to their seats and a different group of students comes to the front for their time with the teacher. All the while, a support teacher, Anna, circles the room to see if students need any help.

"The biggest thing I enjoy about being a teacher, especially a Montessori teacher at

Urban, is the cosmic connection with students,” Freedom said. “Helping them find their bigger place in the world or the universe and trusting them to be in charge of their own learning, make them feel responsible and have a sense of ownership over their education.”

Freedom is part of the first cohort of a Montessori teacher training program called the Oakland Montessori Teacher Residency that launched last year at Urban. There are five other teachers in the cohort, and all were previously school employees who expressed an interest in becoming a lead teacher. It’s a two-and-a-half-year program that includes full-time work for back-to-back summers. At the end of the program, the residents will hold a Montessori teaching certificate.

“Oftentimes they are from Oakland, they went to public schools in Oakland and they understand our kids and where they come from,” Krishna Feeney, Urban’s Head of School, said of the first cohort.



*Oakland native Freedom Reign is a Lead Teacher in Urban Montessori's groundbreaking new teacher pipeline. The program builds participant knowledge of the Montessori education model rooted in Oakland's rich local context.*

When Freedom was growing up in Oakland attending traditional schools, he did not have that same sense of ownership over his education and future that he is instilling in his students. He said, “school felt like a prison for your soul.” Teachers were “overseers” not “collaborators.” He wasn’t feeling challenged and by the time he was in high school, his confidence was shot and he bottomed out, ending up in continuation school.

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Freedom started at Urban in the afterschool program before becoming a substitute teacher and then a support teacher. The teacher residency program is a perfect fit for the

school, staff and city, Freedom said. “The staff who are in a support role, they know the kids, they have great relationships,” he said. “Why hire someone else from far away when you can have a system or a pipeline to produce your own lead teachers? This is an affordable path to become a Montessorian.”

The idea for the teacher training program had been brewing for years, but launching it felt daunting, Krishna said. But the national teacher shortage has worsened since the pandemic, and Montessori teachers, who require a Montessori certificate to be a lead teacher, are even harder to find, especially locally. Out-of-town teachers can often be unfamiliar with the challenges of teaching in an Oakland public school.

What was available locally, though, were committed support teachers, including Freedom. There tended to be more people of color staffing those positions as well, Krishna said, and though the pay was lower they would stay for years.

“We have this larger bank of entry-level teachers than most public schools,” Krishna said. “They love our kids, they love our work, and we know that they have the potential to be teachers who are here because they want to be with our kids.”

After their first summer of training, the Montessori teacher residents went straight into the classroom as lead teachers. During the school year, the residents have weekly coaching and lesson-planning assistance, and regular seminars.

“It really feels like it’s game-changing for our school,” said Daniel Bissonnette, Urban’s Assistant Head of School. “We have six teachers who entered the residency and they’re all now leading classrooms. So immediately, the school and students have benefitted from this.”

Krishna said the Urban staff have many big hopes and dreams for where the residency program could go since there is really nothing similar available locally. Right now, they’re focused on the here and now. “More people want in on the next cohort,” Krishna said. “We are building momentum for a pipeline for our staff.”

Freedom said he is excited to continue this phase of his career, building cosmic connections with students and helping them find their place in the universe. “I’d love to continue lead teaching, I’m going to stay in Oakland,” he said. “This is the city I grew up in and I gave so many teachers and principals hell, it’s time I pay that back. I feel really grateful to be in this position.”

*Learn more about Urban Montessori and its new teacher pipeline by visiting <https://www.urbanmontessori.org>.*

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