End of Year Narrative Addendum
Little Bluestem Philosophy

Since we have a homeschool co-op, students have a non-traditional school schedule. Our mixed-age group meets for school four days a week: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Our school day runs from 9 am to 3 pm, and these sessions are held at my home in Carbondale IL. I have a B.A. in Philosophy from Smith College, an M.S. in Curriculum & Instruction from McDaniel College, additional training in Waldorf and Montessori methods, and my public school teaching license. In 2021, I published articles in two Waldorf education journals (Gateways and Renewal). I write curriculum and do homeschool consulting for Waldorf families around the world, and I am co-founder and lead teacher at Little Bluestem (littlebluestem.org).

Families lend their many talents to the homeschool co-op throughout the year, and parents and grandparents often come in as special guests. We frequently take local field trips. Our list of Special subjects goes far beyond the basics of Language Arts, Mathematics, History, Geography, and Science. It includes Penmanship, Art, Handwork, Philosophy, and Structured Word Inquiry (understanding the interrelationship of morphology, etymology, and phonology in English orthography). The students also traditionally write and put on a Class Play each December.

Our classroom uses a blend of the Montessori and Waldorf methods. The Waldorf method, created by Dr. Rudolf Steiner, deliberately focuses on *building a capacity for sustained attention in children*, beginning with long stories being told to the children in the kindergarten years. In the grades curriculum, Waldorf encourages going deeply into one subject for several weeks. Our school day does not bounce briskly from subject to subject; rather, multiple subjects are incorporated into one integrated unit of in-depth study. These “main lesson blocks” last from 3 to 4 weeks.

The topics for the main lesson are deliberately rotated throughout the year, so that children transition from one mode of thinking into another. Thinking and writing about mathematics is very different from thinking and writing about history! Each discipline cultivates unique habits of mind. Being able to step into the shoes of a mathematician or historian for an extended period of time really allows children to have sustained practice in each mode of inquiry. In addition, there is more time for processing and reflecting and deepening their understanding of the subject. New topics are presented each school year from grades 1 to 8, so that students cover all subject area content in-depth over time. Waldorf education also places great emphasis on balance, *incorporating the hands* (through movement) *and the heart* (through art) into a child’s daily education, and not just focusing on the head (academics).

In addition to presenting the content through storytelling — allowing children to hear the information instead of just reading it — hands-on and artistic activities always are a big part of how the content is explored. Children then go home and sleep, continuing to process the material unconsciously. The next day, the class reviews and discusses yesterday’s lesson orally and then, and only then, does each student sit down to write about it. In essence, they are taking notes the day *after* they have the lesson. This requires tremendous mental organization, and strengthens the ability to recall, organize, and synthesize information, as well as giving children additional think-time before they are asked to make predictions or draw conclusions. Although challenging, students really enjoy this daily practice of focusing on making connections within a rich interdisciplinary topic of study.

Finally, in Waldorf education, students make their own books about what they are learning. After the classroom discussion of the topic, they write a rough draft (which is then edited by the teacher). This, along with an accompanying illustration, diagram, or related piece of artwork, goes into the "main lesson book" or MLB. These are bound books of blank unlined paper. The student is given great freedom into the organization of the blank pages and is asked to create a summary and illustration which will present the information to someone else — who didn't have the lesson — who is reading their book. They are creating a textbook, as it were, for an unknown audience.

The MLB process asks the children to focus on explaining the concepts and content in a way that would be understandable for *someone else*, not just for themselves. This brings about a fuller summary and recall of the information, far beyond just scribbling hasty notes for yourself while you're in a lecture. Being presented with a blank page and having someone ask you, "So, how would you create a book which teaches this topic to someone else?" is a formidable task and the open-ended and creative nature of the MLB is both a blessing and a burden. The approach builds higher level thinking in an authentic context (while further deepening a child's understanding of the information and, as a bonus, resulting in the creation of a wonderful portfolio).

Our classroom's Montessori Math materials were developed by Dr. Maria Montessori, an Italian pediatrician, and they are widely regarded as the best in the world. These carefully made hands-on materials provide students with the concrete help needed for abstract concepts. They can be used for remediation in the traditional classroom or used for the initial presentation of a concept. In the Montessori classroom, the child uses the Math manipulatives until he or she *is ready and chooses* to transition only to pencil and paper… but this only happens after the concept has been fully internalized.

The Montessori method overall places a consistent focus on students working individually on work which is differentiated to their needs. They have a period of time in the day when they can choose independently what they need to study, and all of the academic work is designed to be self-checking. This allows them to progress through their chosen work as independently as possible, and therefore their work time flows smoothly. The teacher moves throughout the room, monitors what choices the students are making, takes notes on their progress, and introduces new lessons when each child is ready. In our homeschool co-op, part of the day each day is set aside for individual work time using the Montessori curriculum materials.

Since our school day contains a mix of teacher-led (such as the main lesson) and student-led time (choice time), students are required to keep careful documentation of their activities throughout the day. All classroom materials are organized and color-coded by subject (Yellow - Language Arts, Orange - History & Geography, Red - Fine Arts, Purple - Handwork & Practical Life, Blue - Mathematics, Green - Science & Nature, Brown - P.E. & Health, Gold - Penmanship, Silver - Foreign Language, Pink - Play).

Each student has a black & white composition book, called a plan book, where he or she records the name of all work completed during the day and puts a colored dot in the margin by each. Obviously, some kinds of work are more than one color, ie. Cooking is Blue for Mathematics and Purple for Practical Life. The discussion of what subjects you are learning when doing an activity is an important one. The colors also provide students with a visual cue, helping them to independently monitor the flow of work throughout the day, and guiding them to strive for balance in their planning.