

MONTESSORI MAKERS GROUP

The Montessori Facility Planning Guide

*Square footage, licensing, ratios, and the building decisions
that make or break a new school*

A free companion to Build a Montessori School

montessorimakersgroup.org/build-a-school

READ THIS FIRST

Licensing minimums are survival numbers. A prepared environment wants more.

Every number in this guide comes from one of two worlds. The first is state childcare licensing: the legal floor your building must clear before a license is issued. The second is Montessori practice: what a prepared environment actually needs to do its work. The gap between them is large, and most facility mistakes come from designing to the first world and then discovering the second after the lease is signed.

Use the licensing numbers to screen buildings out. Use the practice numbers to choose between the buildings that survive the screen. And confirm everything locally before you sign anything: licensing rules, building codes, and zoning are state and municipal, they change, and the numbers here are planning guidance current as of mid-2026, not legal advice for your address.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Most states license at roughly 35 square feet of usable indoor space per child; a well-prepared Montessori environment typically wants around 50, and your whole building will run 100 to 150 gross square feet per child once bathrooms, offices, and circulation are counted.

SECTION 01

Indoor space: what licensing requires

The dominant national standard is 35 square feet of usable indoor activity space per child. "Usable" almost always excludes hallways, bathrooms, kitchens, offices, and storage - measure the space children can actually occupy, not the leasable square footage on the flyer. States vary more than most founders expect:

State	Indoor minimum	Outdoor minimum	Notes
Illinois	35 sq ft activity area per child (age 2+); infants 25 play + 30 sleep; toddlers 35-55 depending on cribs	75 sq ft per child using the area at one time	89 Ill. Adm. Code 407.370
Texas	30 sq ft per child, excluding restrooms, kitchens, hallways, storage	80 sq ft per child	26 TAC 746.4201
California	35 sq ft activity space per child, based on licensed capacity	75 sq ft per child, based on licensed capacity	Title 22, 101238.2-101238.3
Michigan	50 sq ft per child for infants and young toddlers; 35 sq ft older toddlers through school age	Outdoor play area required; 4 ft fence	R 400.8121 (2025 rule set)
Pennsylvania	40 sq ft per child, measured wall to wall (furniture counts)	65 sq ft per child of play space	55 Pa. Code 3270.61-.62

Do not plan on "35 everywhere." The realistic range is roughly 25 to 50 square feet depending on state and age group, infant and toddler rooms often carry higher minimums, and Pennsylvania measures wall-to-wall while most states measure usable space - two different rulers. Pull your state's actual regulation before you tour a single building.

BEST PRACTICE, NOT LAW

Caring for Our Children (the AAP/APHA national health-and-safety standard) recommends 42 usable square feet per child with 50 preferred, and says floor area under ceilings below 7.5 feet should not count. Research on crowding supports 42-54. Treat 35 as the floor, not the target.

SECTION 02

What Montessori practice actually wants

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector and its design partners describe ideal planning ratios of about 50 square feet per child at early childhood, 75 at elementary, and 100 at secondary - self-contained classrooms with a practical life/kitchen area, a classroom library, and direct outdoor access.

Environment	Community size	Typical prepared classroom	Planning ratio
Toddler community (14 mo-3 yr)	10-14 children, 1:5-6 with two adults	600-900 sq ft + adjoining bathroom	45-55 sq ft/child open space
Children's House (3-6)	24-30 children, guide + assistant	1,200-1,600+ sq ft	~50 sq ft/child
Lower Elementary (6-9)	28-35 children, guide + assistant	~2,000 sq ft	~75 sq ft/child
Upper Elementary (9-12)	28-35 children, guide + assistant	~2,000-2,400 sq ft	~75 sq ft/child

These classroom sizes are well-supported practice figures rather than official mandates: AMI and AMS publish class size and ratio standards, not square footage requirements. AMI's ideal community is 28-35 children with one trained guide and one non-teaching assistant; AMS accreditation contemplates roughly 20-30 at primary.

THE RATIO TRAP FOR 3-6 CLASSROOMS

A full Children's House of 28-35 children with two adults implies a 1:14-1:17 ratio. Many states license 3-year-olds at 1:8 to 1:12. Until enough of your class is kindergarten age, you may need a third adult or a smaller community to stay within childcare licensing - budget for it in years one and two.

THE NIDO SLEEP RULE

If you serve infants (8 weeks-14 months): the Montessori floor bed is a home ideal that licensed centers generally may not use. Caring for Our Children 3.1.4 and most state codes require each infant to sleep in an individual compliant crib - plan the sleep area around 12 compact cribs plus evacuation capability, roughly 2 to 3 feet of spacing, and in some states a separate or partitioned sleep room. Teach families floor beds for home; buy cribs for the building.

SECTION 03

The rest of the licensing checklist

- Toilets and sinks: the most common center standard is one toilet and one sink per 15 children (California, New York, Washington, Indiana); some states use 1:10 for toddlers and preschoolers. Toddler rooms generally need a bathroom directly adjoining or immediately adjacent, with child-scaled fixtures or safe step platforms.
- Adult facilities: nearly all states require a separate adult restroom, and most expect a staff break area, a director's office, and a secure reception/entry. These come out of your gross square footage.
- Isolation space: a supervised spot to separate a sick child until pickup is a standard licensing checklist item that surprises founders during walk-throughs.
- Egress: two remote exits per building and floor is the baseline life-safety expectation. Rooms serving children under 2.5 effectively need to be on the ground floor with direct exterior exits (see Section 04).
- Natural light: not universal in licensing, but several states require it in child-occupied rooms and every serious Montessori design guide assumes it. Plan for it regardless of what your state demands.
- Kitchen: if meals arrive by catering, a warming kitchen usually suffices. On-site cooking triggers commercial kitchen requirements and a health department food permit.
- ADA: private schools and childcare centers are Title III public accommodations - an accessible route, entrance, and restroom are required, with readily-achievable barrier removal in existing buildings.
- Playground: licensing typically requires a fence of at least 4 feet. CPSC guidance calls for protective surfacing (engineered wood fiber, rubber, or sand) extending at least 6 feet in every direction from equipment - twice the beam height in front of and behind swings - at roughly 9 inches of loose-fill depth.
- Outdoor space is usually calculated for the children using the yard at one time, not total enrollment. Rotating groups through the outdoor environment can bring a tight site into compliance - one of the few free square-footage wins available.

SECTION 04

The building-code surprise: Group E vs. Group I-4

Under the International Building Code, a program serving children older than 2.5 years is generally classified Group E (educational), where sprinklers are required only when a fire area exceeds 12,000 square feet. But care for more than five children aged 2.5 or younger puts the space in Group I-4 (institutional), which triggers automatic sprinkler requirements regardless of size and stricter construction standards.

The exception that saves toddler programs: if the infant and toddler rooms sit at the level of exit discharge and each room has a door directly to the exterior, the facility can typically be classified Group E instead. This single code provision shapes toddler wing design more than any licensing rule.

CONFIRM LOCALLY

Exact thresholds vary by IBC edition and state amendment, and some states layer additional fire rules on top. Before you sign a lease or purchase agreement, ask the local building official and fire marshal, in writing, how your intended use will be classified and what that triggers.

SECTION 05

Sizing the whole building: net vs. gross

Classroom square footage is net program space. Your lease is priced on gross. School buildings typically run 60-70 percent efficient - corridors, walls, mechanical rooms, restrooms, and storage consume the remainder - so divide your program space by roughly 0.65 to estimate the building you actually need.

Planning scenario	Rule of thumb	Example: 60 children
Licensable minimum	~100 gross sq ft per child	~6,000 gross sq ft
Prepared Montessori environment	120-150 gross sq ft per child	7,200-9,000 gross sq ft

Then add the non-classroom program: director's office, staff room, adult restroom, secure reception, laundry, isolation space, and storage that licensing reviewers will want to see. A building that is "big enough" classroom-by-classroom routinely fails at the gross level.

SECTION 06

Timeline and the gotchas that cost six figures

A realistic sequence from site selection to opening day runs nine to eighteen months:

Step	Typical duration	What can go wrong
Zoning / conditional use permit	2-6 months (public hearing processes)	Schools and daycares are frequently conditional uses even in commercial zones: neighbor notice, traffic studies, drop-off queue plans
Change-of-occupancy permit + plan review	4-8 weeks review, then construction	Converting retail, office, or church space to E or I-4 triggers current-code compliance: fire alarm, egress, possibly sprinklers and ADA upgrades. This is the classic budget-breaker in a "cheap" lease
Construction / build-out	Varies with scope	Child-scaled plumbing and the toddler direct-exit requirement drive cost
Fire marshal + health inspections	Weeks, schedule-dependent	Required sign-offs before licensing in essentially every state
Childcare license application	Commonly 60-90 days	Background checks, staff files, and a site visit; start the paperwork before the building is finished

- Rural sites: septic systems are permitted for a design occupant load, and a school's load usually exceeds the former residence's - budget for expansion or replacement. A well serving a school can be reclassified as a regulated public water system with ongoing testing requirements. Check both before purchase.
- Drop-off and parking: licensing rarely regulates it, but zoning boards and neighbors always do. Walk the morning traffic pattern before you fall in love with a site.

SECTION 07

The adolescent program: land, not classrooms

If your plan includes ages 12-15, the facility question changes species. Montessori's Erdkinder model is land-based: adolescents do real productive work - agriculture, animal care, construction, food production and sales - alongside seminar academics. You are not sizing a classroom; you are siting a small working farm with a school attached.

What real US programs actually use:

Program	Land	Model
Hershey Montessori, Huntsburg Campus (OH)	97 acres, working farm	The US reference implementation: ages 12-18, day + boarding, farm, barns, bio-shelter, student-run market
Oak Farm Montessori (IN)	150+ acre campus	Adolescent program runs animal care, greenhouse, and a micro-economy business
Montessori School of Greater Hartford (CT)	30-acre farm	Goats, sheep, chickens, bees, gardens, woodland
Stepping Stones Montessori (MI)	100-acre property	Middle school opened on the farm property
Greensboro Montessori (NC)	Satellite retreat parcel	Students travel for 4-day immersions every 6-8 weeks - the "land lab" adaptation
Montessori School of Denver (CO)	On-campus urban farm	Soil-based urban gardening, no separate parcel

Documented full-farm programs cluster around 30 to 100+ acres, but no AMI or NAMTA minimum-acreage standard exists, and the urban and satellite adaptations above are legitimized in the Montessori literature itself. The honest planning question is not "how many acres" but "which model": daily farm campus, periodic-immersion satellite parcel, or urban adaptation. A satellite parcel also simplifies zoning considerably.

Typical structures at the full build-out, drawn from the named campuses: a farmhouse or main building, seminar space (adolescent rooms are discussion-table environments, not shelf-lined classrooms), a barn or animal housing, a greenhouse or bio-shelter, a production kitchen for the micro-economy, a workshop, a farm stand or market outlet, and dormitory space only if residential.

THE LICENSING FLIP

Childcare licensing generally ends around age 12 or 13 (Washington defines school-age as five through twelve; Ohio's childcare statute covers children under thirteen). An adolescent program therefore usually sits OUTSIDE childcare licensing entirely - what governs instead is your state's private-school law, which ranges from no registration at all (Ohio non-chartered) to real operating standards. Verify both ends for your state before assuming either.

- Real work, real rules: federal ag child-labor rules (DOL Fact Sheet 40) allow 12-13-year-olds non-hazardous farm work with parental consent and 14-15-year-olds non-hazardous work outside school hours. Unpaid curricular work at the student's own school is generally not "employment," but the hazardous-occupations lists remain the right safety benchmark - and paying students stipends can convert them into employees. Get a state-specific legal read.
- Selling what students make: cottage-food laws are mostly written for home kitchens, so a school kitchen selling bread or preserves may need a retail food license instead; raw uncut produce is broadly exempt. Budget for a licensed kitchen if processed-food sales are central to your micro-economy.
- Zoning: the farm use is usually by-right in agricultural zones; the school use is what triggers a conditional-use process (traffic, parking, septic, occupancy). Expect a CUP when combining them.
- Water and septic: institutional septic sizing is set by state health-code tables, and a production kitchen pushes you into higher brackets with a grease interceptor. Irrigation planning number: roughly one inch per week - about 27,000 gallons per week per irrigated acre. Livestock water is trivial by comparison.
- Insurance and supervision: layer farm liability (barns, machinery, livestock, public farm-stand visitors, product liability once food is sold) onto the school package, and expect your insurer - not regulation - to drive supervision ratios for farm and workshop work. Written activity-specific supervision plans are the standard ask.
- Cost anchor: Hershey's newest classroom building ran about \$300 per square foot of institutional construction. Farmland varies 10-50x per acre by region, so price a worked local example rather than trusting any national number.

And if the program continues to a diploma (15-18), the land question inverts. Nobody adds a second farm: Hershey built a dedicated upper-school classroom building on the same campus, Cincinnati's Clark Montessori runs the first public Montessori high school in an adapted urban building and substitutes two-week travel intersessions for land, and The Grove School and Compass Montessori both shift the occupations off-campus into real internships at 15-18. What a high school actually adds is science-lab capability (a demonstration-scale chemistry setup runs \$15,000-40,000 in equipment; a full lab conversion \$60,000-250,000), arts or maker space, internship legal structure, college-counseling space, and parking for student drivers. The viability warning belongs in the facility plan too: the one purpose-built standalone Montessori high school with no feeder pipeline - Cleveland's Montessori High School at University Circle - closed in 2018 when enrollment slipped. A high school grafted onto an existing 12-15 program with its own feeder is a categorically different bet than a building looking for students.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS PART OF

The facility is stage four of a nine-stage build.

This guide is the free companion to Build a Montessori School, MMG's founder's map from feasibility through opening day: montessorimakersgroup.org/build-a-school.

When you are ready to fill the building, the companion budget workbooks price the complete program per level - Toddler, Primary, and Elementary materials by curriculum area with premium and budget supplier ranges, and an Adolescent Program Budget covering farm, workshop, micro-economy, and seminar equipment - all phased for opening day versus the years that follow, in the MMG Toolbox at montessorimakersgroup.org/toolbox.

And if you want this map read against your specific market, model, and timeline, book a founder consultation. It is a working session, not a sales call.

MONTESSORI MAKERS GROUP

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