

# The Resident Guide Model

## *A Framework for Staff Wellness and School Continuity in Montessori Communities*

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Most Montessori schools have a floater. Someone who covers sick days, emergency absences, the unexpected. That role exists everywhere because schools cannot function without coverage.

**The Resident Guide is something different entirely. This is not a coverage solution. It is a wellness infrastructure solution. And those are not the same thing.**

## What the Resident Guide Model Is

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The Resident Guide is a permanent, full-time faculty member whose job is to belong to the whole school rather than a single classroom. This person spends their first weeks in every classroom, learning every child by name, every guide's rhythm, every prepared environment's logic. After onboarding, they rotate on a planned schedule to cover for guides who are taking intentional, planned time away.

The critical distinction is the word planned. This is not reactive coverage for illness. This is proactive time that guides know is coming, can count on, and can actually use to rest, live, and return to their children whole.

## Why This Matters Now

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Montessori guide burnout is not a mystery. It is a structural outcome of a system that asks educators to hold the developmental wellbeing of 25 to 30 children as a personal and daily responsibility with no guaranteed recovery time. Guides are expected to show up fully, consistently, and relationally for years without interruption.

They do it because they love the work. And then they leave because the work consumed them.

The retention math is not complicated. When a school loses an experienced Montessori guide, the real cost of replacement including recruitment, training time, the disruption to children's relationships, and the months before a new guide reaches full effectiveness is estimated between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per departure. One Resident Guide preventing two departures per year pays for the position.

## The Resident Guide solves three problems at once

- Coverage anxiety is a retention crisis in slow motion. When guides know they cannot take time without leaving their children vulnerable to a stranger, they do not take time. They accumulate exhaustion. The Resident Guide eliminates coverage anxiety by replacing the stranger with someone the children trust.
- Random substitutes break the prepared environment. A guide who has spent years building a classroom culture, a set of relationships, a living system comes back from a sick day to a classroom that needs to be rebuilt. The Resident Guide knows the environment. The work cycle continues.
- Wellness that only exists in theory is not wellness. A PTO policy that no one uses because using it feels like abandoning the children is not a benefit. It is a source of guilt. Planned, protected, relational coverage gives guides permission to actually rest.

## What This Role Is Not

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The Resident Guide is not a substitute teacher. Substitutes are transactional. They come in, hold the room, and leave. The Resident Guide is a member of the community. They attend staff meetings. They know the families. They understand the school's mission deeply enough to hold it in the room without explanation.

The Resident Guide is not a floater in the traditional sense. Floaters exist to handle reactive absence. The Resident Guide exists to enable proactive rest. The distinction is the direction of causality. A floater responds to what goes wrong. A Resident Guide makes space for what people need.

The Resident Guide is not a second-tier position. This role requires breadth of experience, adaptability, strong relationships, and the rare ability to hold someone else's prepared environment with fidelity. It should be compensated and respected accordingly.

## Who Is Right for This Role

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Not every experienced guide is suited for this work. The right Resident Guide is someone who genuinely thrives on variety rather than feeling depleted by it. They read a room quickly. They build trust with children fast. They are not attached to being the lead of their own space. They find meaning in belonging to a whole school rather than a single classroom.

The candidate profile typically includes certification or strong experience across at least two Montessori levels, a history of working in more than one school, and a relational style that children respond to immediately. Many of the best Resident Guide candidates are people who have been described as “too senior for assistant roles but restless in permanent lead positions.” This role was built for them.

## How to Structure the Role

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### Onboarding

The first four to six weeks are spent exclusively in rotation. The Resident Guide spends time in every classroom, learning children by name, understanding each guide's rhythm, and earning trust. No coverage duties during this period. This investment is what makes everything else possible.

### Coverage Scheduling

Each guide receives a guaranteed number of planned wellness days per year, typically five to ten, in addition to standard PTO and sick leave. These are scheduled in advance, distributed across the year, and protected. The Resident Guide holds the calendar. Guides request their dates at the start of the year and the schedule is built around it.

### Reactive Coverage

When a guide is unexpectedly absent, the Resident Guide covers that classroom first because they already know it. This makes even reactive absences less disruptive. The children are not with a stranger. The work cycle does not collapse.

### Community Membership

The Resident Guide attends all staff meetings, participates in professional development, and is introduced to families as a full faculty member. They are not a support role. They are a structural role. That distinction matters for how the community receives them.

## The Financial Case

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School leaders often hesitate at the salary line. A full-time Resident Guide represents a real budget commitment. The question to ask is not whether this role costs money. It is whether the alternatives cost more.

Consider what a single guide departure actually costs. The recruitment process, the transition months where a search is open, the onboarding investment, the disruption to the children's relationships, and the months before a new guide reaches effectiveness. Industry estimates for replacing a skilled educator range from 50 to 200 percent of annual salary when all costs are included.

If a Resident Guide prevents one departure every two years, the role is cost-neutral at minimum. If it prevents two, it pays for itself with margin to spare. And the guides who stay bring compounding value: deeper relationships with families, greater pedagogical skill, and a culture of longevity that attracts and retains everyone around them.

## How to Introduce This to Your Staff

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The conversation to have with your team is not about logistics. It is about what you believe. If you genuinely believe your guides deserve to take real time away without guilt, without the classroom falling apart, without anyone else paying the price for their rest, then this role is a direct expression of that belief.

Lead with the commitment, not the structure. Tell your team that you are creating a role whose purpose is to hold the school while they step away fully. Then explain how it works. The sequence matters.

Involve guides in the onboarding of the Resident Guide. Let them introduce their classroom, their children, their rhythms. This builds the trust that makes the model work. A Resident Guide who was welcomed by the team is one the children will accept without hesitation.

## What to Call This Role

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Naming matters. Floater implies temporary and reactive. Substitute implies replacement. Neither captures what this role actually is.

### **Names that schools have used or that this model invites:**

- Resident Guide: positions the person as a permanent, embedded member of the community
- Sustaining Guide: names the function directly, this person sustains the school and the people in it
- School Fellow: used in some progressive education contexts, signals community membership over functional role
- Community Guide: broad enough to describe the relational nature of the work

## A Note on Where This Came From

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This model was not invented in a conference room. It emerged from a conversation about what Montessori educators actually need to sustain a practice for a decade or more. Schools that have built versions of this role often did so quietly, without naming it, because they were solving a problem they could feel but had not yet articulated.

Naming it matters because named things get resourced. When a school leader can say we are hiring a Resident Guide instead of we are trying to figure out coverage so our guides can take time off, the conversation changes. Boards respond to models. Staff respond to commitments. The Resident Guide model is both.



## **About Montessori Makers Group**

Montessori Makers Group is a multi-venture ecosystem for Montessori education built by Hannah Richardson, a Montessori educator and consultant with 25 years of experience across independent, public, charter, and justice-centered schools. MMG's work spans advisory consulting, leadership formation, school management tools, the MatchHub hiring platform, and free resources for the Montessori community.

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