2015-16 PK Program - Parent Questions and Answers
2/23/15

Why the new PK model? What are the benefits?

There is a wide range of "normal" in maturity and academic prowess in a three year old. A "young" three year old can be leagues away from an "older" three year old. One can be starting to identify sounds with letters, the other can be an early reader. The same happens at age four with a similar wide range of "normal." These ability ranges **are** normal in the early years. This wide range of normal narrows over the years. By third grade, for example, students typically read in the same range, regardless of whether they started when they were three, four, or even five years old.

Not only do children's academic and social/emotional stages vary widely by age in PK, but they often also vary by subject. A three year old may be more adept at small motor skills (which are needed when learning to write) than a four year old, who may need extra help with exercises designed to develop their skills.

These are typical scenarios in PK. Every PK class, regardless of its classification of younger or older has students in it who excel in some areas and need support in others.

The new PK program that combines 3s and 4s removes an artificial, grade-level distinction and allows ALL students' needs to be met more directly. It is solidly research based and exhibits best practice.

What was the impetus for the new PK model?

A task force was formed under Tom Woelper's direction last year to research/study PK. The task force members were made up of the PK teachers, Primary School teachers, Diane Frustaci and outside educational experts who worked through the spring and summer last year, and presented their findings to Tom in the fall. Their study produced the recommendation for a mixed-age PK to best align the program with the school's Mission and provide an optimal educational experience for every child in the program. Tom accepted the task force's recommendation. Since then an abbreviated group has been working to craft and refine the program. All of our PK teachers are on board and enthusiastic supporters of the new PK model.

How will it work?

The program is designed for 24-28 students maximum, with five teachers. Students will be balanced by age and skills to ensure a complementary mix of three and four year olds in the PK group.

Through frequent, direct assessment of each child, teachers will form groups, structure individual instruction, and tailor their guided instruction to meet each student at his or her level of skill and/or understanding and move him/her forward. Both informal and formal assessments are used throughout the school year.

Why is this the best way to structure PK?

Because it allows us to best teach our students. Specifically, it:

- allows teachers to appropriately group students for activities *based on their true skill level/level of understanding* – not by a defined age in a specific class, ensuring that each child is engaged, supported and challenged appropriately as they strive to meet and exceed the Grade Level Objectives (GLOs);
- provides a flexible structure to accommodate differences in student learning/understanding in *specific subject areas and during project work*;
- maximizes *each child's potential as teachers identify each student's "sweet spot"* for learning that is slightly above their current level of skill/understanding;
- promotes opportunities for students to nurture and model skills for younger children, which better solidifies student learning; and
- promotes opportunities for younger students to participate in more complex activities with older peers.

How will I know if the new PK program is rigorous enough and that my child is prepared for K?

Every grade's curriculum is designed with clearly articulated Grade Level Objectives (GLOs) to ensure that each student meets and/or exceeds these age-appropriate targets. The GLOs for PK will not change with the newly evolved PK program. Students will continue to be well-prepared with a solid base of academics and life skills when they enter kindergarten. The GLOs for the 2 year PK program are included with this document.

How will we handle the differences between a 3 year old and a 5 year old on the playground?

Play, indoor and outdoor, is an integral part of all PK programs. Teachers discover what makes each child special and how to best challenge him/her in the indoor and outdoor classroom. As such, the play yard is an extension of the classroom where bodies and minds are engaged in imaginative gross motor play and teachers provide active and appropriate adult supervision to ensure appropriate interaction and behavior.

Is the new PK model admission driven?

No. It is driven by our Mission to provide brilliant beginnings for *each* child. It is research-based and best practice. A benefit is that this model maximizes flexibility in an age of demographic change. No matter the enrollment, going forward this will be our PK model because it is best practice.

How will the new PK differentiate learning?

The program centers around teaching using a **project approach** where typically small groups investigate topics that interest them. Key to the approach is the extended research about something real that PK children investigate by asking questions. In the course of these investigations, children are encouraged to:

- formulate questions to be answered by the investigation;
- make predictions about what the answers might be; and
- compare their findings with those predictions.

In addition the investigations provide the context in which a variety of basic skills are learned and applied authentically, including math, science, language and literacy, social studies, and social-emotional skills.

An example of a PK project could revolve around an exploration of shadows from a question posed by a student that excites the class -- what is a shadow? Why does the size change if you look at it at different times of the day? Is the shadow there at night? What determines the size of a shadow? Do shadow's move? How do they move? Are shadows alive? What determines if something is alive? These types of questions from students determine the areas of exploration and lead to many learning pathways involving math (measurement of shadows,) science (earth revolving around the sun which affects the shadow,) social studies (how various cultures view shadows.) Teachers work with the children to extend and advance their questions, leading them to areas that most interest them that they want to research further. Significant time is spent on research to answer their questions. The project concludes with a discussion about the answers to their questions and a sharing of information and their research methodology with their classmates and others, including other classes, parents and guests.

The project approach to learning goes far beyond teaching information, facts and basic skills. **It gives students the tools to learn and the ability to practice using them** in a real-world learning environment driven by student inquiry.