

## **Viewpoint: Danvers offers quality kindergarten program**

by Liz Matthews, Principal of the Highlands Elementary School

*Danvers Herald* – January 29, 2009

***“I think you’re wonderful, as wonderful as can be.  
If we practice this phrase in the most honest way,  
and find something special in someone each day,  
we’ll lift up the world one heart at a time.  
It all starts by saying this one simple line.”***

In 1986, Red Grammer sang these award-winning lyrics to the American public. In 2008, Mrs. Wetherbee introduced them to her 5-year-olds on their first day of kindergarten. They now proudly and confidently sing, “I Think You’re Wonderful,” at the start of each day. Across Danvers, kindergarten children have become accustomed to their teachers’ faces, accustomed to their smiles, and accustomed to the morning routines and procedures that begin their day of learning. Throughout the day, kindergarten students are exposed to songs, stories, games, and group activities designed to enhance their creative expression and social cooperation. They interact with learning tools that stimulate their thinking and encourage active problem solving.

For nearly 18 months, kindergarten teachers from all five elementary schools collaborated to design a program that would support our youngest learners. They were enthusiastically joined by reading teachers, curriculum personnel, parents, and administration that shared their goal of building a kindergarten program in which we honored the historic roots of kindergarten philosophy in 1840 Europe, its American introduction in 1870, and the subtle changes that have been deemed necessary to meet the needs of our 21st century. As a result of this dedication, Danvers has implemented a full-day kindergarten program where play, socialization, and academic learning take place in a rich learning environment filled with the materials and structures that help our youngest learners to thrive.

A typical kindergarten day is filled with learning experiences that inspire creative thinking, is comfortable for children, and is always fun. Foundation skills in all areas of the curriculum are introduced and practiced using strategies and techniques that match the developmental stages of our learners. We know that kindergarten children are learning to trust their teachers and their schools, they are beginning to understand that mistakes are opportunities for learning, they are practicing their independence and enjoying responsibilities, they are learning to listen and be considerate, and they are frequently reminded that the needs of the group may be more important than their own needs at times.

Within each six-hour day, kindergartners are exposed to nationally-recognized reading materials. *Treasures* introduces children to high interest, developmentally appropriate text that emphasizes the learning of phonics, high-frequency words (those words that should become automatic over time), a variety of genres, and multiple opportunities to practice the reading skills that prepare them for future learning. They meet in small groups with teachers who emphasize specific skills and who pay close attention to the strides and struggles of our youngest readers.

To accompany this quality reading program, *Investigations Math* is an essential component of each day’s schedule. The development of primary skills is practiced within formal instruction and daily interaction with math tools and manipulatives that reinforce the learning of the day.

Most recently, kindergarten students traced the feet of their classmates and adults as a way of measuring; practiced the vocabulary terms “large, larger, small, smaller”; and used interlocking cubes to match their traced outlines as they counted the differences between their tracings and those of their peers.

A science lesson on the life cycle of trees and a social studies lesson on the economics of “personal wants and needs,” are highlights, as are the weekly visits to art teachers, music teachers, and physical education teachers. And if you were to ask our students, they’d be sure to remind you of “Choice Time.” Puppet theaters, sand tables, water tables, wooden blocks, book browsing, listening centers, painting stations, kitchen areas, and numerous forms of creative play are an integral part of every day in kindergarten.

“Children learn by doing and play is their work” comes from an unknown author, but I am most certain that this author would give a nod to our efforts in Danvers to create a kindergarten experience that is worthy of recognition and praise.