

Dear Parents,

I have to admit that when Kelly Robbin's letter about admissions was featured earlier this month, I was completely blown away by the SAT scores that were shouting at me from the top of the page. Yes, as a teacher and an administrator at Oakwood, I was well aware that our students do well on SATs and other standardized testing, but when I saw the actual numbers, it became even more clear to me what an important role our Lower School plays in preparing students for academic success.

I thought this would be a good opportunity to talk about how we lay the academic and social foundations at Oakwood to not only gain the academic skills necessary for being a successful 21st Century citizen, but also a place that will instill a love of learning along the way. The ultimate goal at Oakwood is to teach the "whole child" meaning academically, socially, physically, and emotionally. In Lower School, we begin the foundations of learning with an emphasis on academics and developing capable and responsible young children.

For most children, the core academic areas of reading, writing, and math follow a developmental sequence of learning. Oakwood's experienced and knowledgeable teachers are well aware that students will not be able to conquer the next steps in their academic foundations until they are developmentally ready and will not move forward until the earliest steps are solidly in place. In the earliest grades, we allow our students the gift of time for developmental reasons allowing learning to be a natural and joyous experience, rather than forced before they are ready. Without the pressures of end of grade testing, our students can achieve academic milestones without the pressure to perform before they are ready.

Social, as well as academic development, are the main goals in our **Pre-Kindergarten** and **Kindergarten** classes as we know that social skills are just as important as academic ones. If social skills are not allowed to develop naturally when children are young, social issues can sometimes interfere with the academic setting later on. Throughout the Pre-Kindergarten day, skills such as letter and number recognition are introduced and taught, but this is done through play, games, songs, and activities. At Oakwood, the Kindergarten year continues its focus on social development, but academics find a larger place in the day. Although there are some students who come to Kindergarten reading at an advanced level or who already have a good grasp of numeracy and early math skills, the Kindergarten teacher's focus remains one of reading readiness and laying a strong foundation for math with concepts of place value and numeracy. The Kindergarten teacher has a tough job...students will develop academically at very different rates during this year, and it is the teacher's job to guide them along without pushing those who are not yet ready.

First grade at Oakwood is where a strong emphasis on learning to read and working with mathematics is found. This is the year when students will take all of those sounds and letters, blend them into words, and begin to read with fluency and comprehension. Math becomes a bit more complex, and students begin to work with larger numbers and problem-solving to find answers to simple problems. Social development continues to be fine-tuned as students become more aware of classroom routines and navigate peer relationships with more confidence.

The **second grade** year is much like Kindergarten in that students will begin with a wide range of academic levels, especially when it comes to reading. This is where the chronological age of the child sometimes comes into play, as younger students may need more time for reading fluency to fully develop. It is during this year that reading and math skills fall into place, typically during the fall. Reading comprehension becomes more of a focus as students will typically be over the "learning to read" hump early in the school year. Multi-step math concepts are taught and students are now asked to memorize basic addition and subtraction as they are developmentally ready to tackle these. Again, social development is also another goal for the second graders.

By the time students begin **third grade**, students should have a strong grasp of their reading and math skills, be able to work independently, and be ready to expand their learning in all areas. Third grade is certainly a time when all the beginning skills come together and the teachers challenge their students with learning content, mastering higher orders of math facts, and introducing social study skills. Students are also asked to be good citizens of the Lower School and beyond. The third grader is a leader of the division and the students are treated with great respect and dignity.

How do our teachers measure student progress to make sure that students are learning and moving forward each year? One technique used by teachers in grades K-3 is a standardized instrument called DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.) DIBELS, administered three times during each school year, allows a teacher to see if students are meeting benchmarks for reading fluency based on national standards. Like all assessments, DIBELS is not perfect, but it is a quick method to track a child's progress with reading and look for patterns of growth and possibly areas for additional work. The DIBELS results are not used to determine if a child moves on to the next grade at Oakwood.

Teachers in the Lower School division are very much in tune with each child's progress and provide individualized assistance from time to time above and beyond regular classroom teaching. During each child's academic journey, some students may require supplemental support at home or through independent tutorial services or remediation outside of the classroom to help them achieve academic milestones. We cherish the learning team approach with our teachers, parents, and tutors when needed during each child's education journey as they are critical to their success in the Lower School. The teachers are constantly putting into place steps that help prepare students for the academic challenges beyond the Lower School and for a lifetime of success.

Early childhood learning is an inexact process given the varied development of every child. At Oakwood, we manage these variables without end of grade testing to remove any unnecessary pressures that might result; with outstanding teachers who are passionate about learning, knowledgeable, and care about each child; and through thematic teaching methods to instill a love for learning. While academics are at the forefront of a Lower School education, developing the 21st Century global citizen is very much a part of the curriculum through the development of social and emotional skills such as collaboration, acceptance, care and concern for others, and a focus on character education.

Oakwood's Lower School teachers welcome questions about your child's education journey and social progress. We are here to guide you along the way, just as we engage in your child's day-to-day learning and celebrate their accomplishments.

All the best,

[Susan Brown](#)

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