

Building a Strong Foundation
by Jo-An Vargo, Head of the Primary School

The topic of this month's article was inspired by two disparate events. Our entertaining and very successful Holland Hall auction was attended and enjoyed by many people who had not previously visited the renovated Primary School. One parent of a graduate remarked that not only is the renovation a beautiful success, but the current academic program is an excellent model of instruction for our young learners. Then, within a few days of the auction, I rediscovered a CD with photos of what I fondly call our "Extreme Makeover". My thoughts returned to the year of construction, complete with images of steel beams being raised to begin construction on the new preschool three-year-old/junior kindergarten/extended day building, the library, and the gym. A connection began to emerge ... our three-year-old program is the strong-as-steel foundation of our Primary School. Why invest in an early childhood educational experience at this age? Is it worth the value of tuition? Our opinion is a resounding YES!

Brain research has identified the time from birth up to age four as the most critical period with the most rapid growth of synaptic connections between neurons. This is the time when the brain uses the most energy (glucose) as it makes those connections. The period between age four to ten years is termed a sensitive time frame for optimum brain development because the brain maintains these very high levels of glucose, using over twice as much as that of adults. Only after the age of ten is there a gradual decline in these levels. Scientists call this neural "pruning", which helps the brain refine its circuitry, thereby making it more efficient. What is the implication for education?

The richer our students' learning experiences at the three-year-old level, the more highly developed their brains will be. This will have a direct impact on their learning and future potential. The beauty of our well coordinated three-year-old program is the consistency and wide ranging learning experiences it introduces to our students in all areas of their neural development. When you attend Holland Hall at this age, you are building the strong foundation that will support your growth during the remainder of your child's education.

Social and emotional learning is key at this age. Children are learning self-help skills and responding to classroom routines that foster independence. Consider the responsibility each child experiences when we introduce the "reading bags" in January. Each child receives a bag that includes a specific book, an activity to complete with their parents, and a journal to record their experience. Children at this age are also beginning to branch out and are learning the give and take of social relationships. The skills, independence, and social values we instill at this early age continue throughout their Primary School experience and beyond.

Large and fine motor skills are crucial for our students' future success. They need to develop the large muscle coordination, strength, and stamina that is the foundation of their small muscle development — so important for writing and other tasks. Our well-designed playground and indoor rainy day activities foster daily opportunities for climbing, running, jumping, balancing, and developing the core body strength that then nurtures their small muscles — so pivotal for

future learning. They also enjoy daily activities that pinpoint fine motor control and coordination, including afternoon art activities that use crayons instead of markers, playdough, and cutting or tearing paper for a collage. These process-oriented art activities (as opposed to other projects that are more product-oriented) allow for greater artistic expression. Each activity is tied to the current unit, so the children still experience repeated fine motor development within a new, exciting, and interesting theme of study.

The program's foundation for academic readiness is well-designed, and the students experience it as a natural part of their play. I am reminded of the receptive and expressive language skills that are embedded into the phonemic awareness unit that focuses on nursery rhymes. The extensive special library of books within the classrooms' pod is solely dedicated to texts that engage this age level, and they are available for daily checkout — an opportunity not typically found in programs for this age.

Our math consultant has always been impressed by the design of this age level's learning experiences. Each conceptual strand of mathematical understanding has been pared down to entice these very young children's interest. Their curiosity encourages them to explore and discover the math center activities. Together, the teachers and Peggy McLean have also designed a monthly addition to the newsletter (Math Matters). It provides our parents with a summary of each mathematical strand's content, a description of how the teachers repeatedly incorporate this strand into the yearly curriculum, a suggested list of books that relate to the particular mathematical concept, and a suggested activity that the parents and child can experience together.

Music is closely related to mathematical understanding because of its emphasis on melodic patterns, rhythm, and beat. Singing, movement/dancing, and exploration of beginning instrumentation are inherent parts of a quality preschool program. They occur daily within our group time instruction as does the students' introduction to Spanish.

I love watching the change that occurs from September to May. Maestra Hankins arrives in September, and our students are wide-eyed, puzzled, and quiet observers as she introduces a new language to their ears. By the middle of the year, they are learning a variety of vocabulary words that relate to their classroom units of study. Many are participating in the accompanying movements that help cement vocabulary into memory, and some are already verbally participating. When the end-of-the-year celebrations occur, I am continually amazed by the joy and enthusiasm that these little ones exhibit as they confidently share their knowledge of a new language in movement and song.

The depth of knowledge our teachers possess about who three-year-olds are, and what they are capable of, creates a foundation for learning at Holland Hall that is as strong as the steel beam foundation that holds up their new classroom building. It is shared with our students with consistent dedication, love, and enthusiasm that is as beautiful as our recently designed and constructed space. The mother of a graduate who attended the auction went "back to the future" that evening and shared with me that she hoped her grandchildren would one day have the

opportunity to experience the foundation for learning that is the heart of not only the three-year-old but the total Primary School program. I hope I have the chance to meet them and watch them bound out of their car, ready to start their day and eager to learn in the future.