

What to look for in a Junior Kindergarten or Kindergarten program

A Guide for First-Time JK/K Parents

By Matthew Bellas, CESJDS Lower School Principal

Choosing a school community is one of the early landmark decisions parents make in the lives of their children. While this decision is not as “high-stakes” as the ones that will follow in the years ahead, selecting a Junior Kindergarten or Kindergarten program can set the stage for your child’s confidence and developmental success in a variety of areas. To help, we’ve put together a top ten list of areas I believe merit your thoughtful consideration as you explore different options.

- **Personal Attention:** Class size and student-teacher ratios are essential. Parents should be looking for a ratio of 8:1-10:1 in the classroom. This staffing structure offers opportunities for small group work and personal teacher attention.
- **The School-Family Partnership:** A high quality program recognizes the centrality of the relationship between school and home in the growth of a child. Collaboration, communication and shared objectives and values are a must.
- **Play with Purpose:** Play is the medium through which young brains and bodies develop social skills, creativity, the ability to effectively collaborate, negotiate and problem solve with others...and learning should be fun! Programs that understand this develop a classroom environment that invites curiosity and engagement and lessons through which students learn by playing with purpose.
- **Academic Rigor and Differentiation:** Even at this early stage in cognitive development, children require intellectual challenge. Clearly articulated and developed curricula in the areas of literacy (reading, writing, and oral presentation skills), numeracy (mathematical thinking and practice), and science must be present to inspire curiosity and joy of learning. Students must be approached as individuals – especially at this age – given the potential for a wide range of development in a classroom. Look for differentiation among the materials in the classroom, approaches, and expectations as well as a language-rich environment for a strong foundation for reading and writing.
- **Focus on Social Skills:** The early childhood years are marked by the development of social skills, which are a foundation for learning and life. Look for a program with a clear social skill development philosophy that incorporates learning through play and cooperative academic learning.
- **Co-Curricular Opportunities:** Physical education, the visual and performing arts, and music education are essential. These types of co-curricular program offerings support development of gross, fine motor, and social skills as well as creativity. Research demonstrates that these co-curriculars improve student performance in core academic areas and make for happier and more well-rounded children. These learning opportunities should be taught both by “specialists” and integrated into the regular activities of the classroom.
- **Second Language Learning:** Four- and five-year-old brains are wired for natural second language integration as a “native tongue,” offering a much greater opportunity for the development of fluency. Research has shown that exposure to and learning of a second language specifically at this age inspires more rapid cognitive brain development, growth that does not occur if this learning is delayed even by only a few years. Early language learners acquire additional languages much more easily later in life.
- **Attention to Moral Development:** Few Kindergarten programs include this foundation, which builds a strong character and moral compass. Certain Kindergartens, particularly those found in faith-based schools, include values education and engage children in discussions and activities that require them to make choices informed by concepts of ethical values and social justice.
- **An Approach to Spiritual Development:** At this age, children are spiritually curious beings who are seekers and have “big” questions about the universe. A program of spiritual development, under the guidance of an expert/experienced teacher, will activate increased critical and analytical thinking, curiosity, and moral development.
- **Community of Learners:** When children are in a learning community that sees and values them, listens to them and challenges them, they flourish. Children in schools with strong communities are more engaged, motivated, and active in their learning. They develop strong self-confidence and personal identities and are able to take healthy and safe risks in order to grow.

For more information on CESJDS’s Junior Kindergarten or Kindergarten, please contact Pam or Ashley in the Admission office at admission@cesjds.org or 301.692.4870.



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