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Phone: 972.335.1181  
Toll Free: 877.781.7067  
Fax: 214.722.2313

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# This is NOT Your Father's Kindergarten!

By Caren Elizabeth Austen



Ms. Keller reads to Sophia Damin, Olivia Boswell and Lexi Jackson.

photo by Taylor Robinson

**FROM THE MOMENT** you step inside the room, you realize this is not your father's kindergarten. Step back into the kindergarten class of the fifties or sixties in Anywhere, USA. Notice the identical desks lined in rows with almost military precision and the bland walls usually adorned only by a border of the alphabet. The only fun apparent in those days of kindergarten was found in cutting out shapes in brightly colored construction paper and recess. Many who attended in those days report that the point of kindergarten seemed only to be to adjust to being away from mom and dad (in those days before preschool and Mothers' Day Out), and to learn to cut well with those round-tipped, silver scissors that were kept in a cigar box along with the other essential accouterments of the well-prepared kindergartner. Boys seemed to hone the skill of eating paste.

Now step into the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of kindergarten in the Frisco Independent School District (FISD). The room is splashed with colors and pictures. You are drawn into warm and inviting learning areas. This particular classroom happens

to belong to Bright Elementary teacher Shannon Keller. Her fondness for all things "froggy" helps bring this space to life. The mat where she asks her "small boys and girls with big hearts" to "snuggle in" for reading time resembles a miniature pond, complete with lily pads and frogs. The frog décor is carried throughout the room in posters, illustrations and the blue and green color scheme. There is a beanbag as well as an antique claw foot tub for comfy reading. Ms. Keller has moved the tub to all four of the schools where she has taught. Three computers are available for 21<sup>st</sup> century-style instruction. There are desks, but they are large and designed for group use. There will be no "duck and cover" drills under these.

#### INVITE THE CHILDREN TO LEARN

There are significant reasons for the inviting surroundings. Ms. Keller stresses the importance of the environment, saying, "This is their first real school experience. It is the basis for all that will come after. It's important that this is a place where they feel safe and comfortable," explains Ms. Keller. "This is where they come 'to

work.' We tell them that their moms and dads have jobs and learning is their job. They must have an appropriate environment in order to do their jobs well."

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Dr. Seuss is the celebrated author of the week and in recognition of that, Ms. Keller is dressed as "The Cat in the Hat." During story time, she urges the children to exhibit appropriate behavior with a rhyme the children repeat with her, a tool she uses frequently and with obvious success. As she reads Dr. Seuss' ABC Book, she explains the concept of alliteration and asks that the students



be “sound detectives” who listen for examples and point to their ears when they hear them.

Though I, a stranger, am present and observing, the children quickly seem to forget my presence as Ms. Keller’s reading and her observations of alliteration examples entrance them. When there is a slight disruption by an individual, her assertion of authority is gentle when she asks, “Do you need to be uninvited?” When the answer is “no,” the reading continues. Eventually she observes, “I’m losing you guys. Please stand up so we can exercise.” So for a few minutes, they all march in place and alternately punch their fists in the air in rhythm to an alphabet song. The song, similar in sound and energy to the theme song from the “Rocky” movies, also gives them opportunities to run in place, jump and do jumping jacks. This is definitely not your father’s kindergarten!

Once the song is finished, Ms. Keller once again instructs the children to snuggle in (code for find your places on the mat with hands and feet to

yourselves) to listen to the remainder of the book. While reading, she points out the illustrations and the way illustrations can help them understand the content. This is important, she emphasizes, for the writing they will be doing later in the day. After all, as she says, “Readers are writers and writers are readers.” Periodically, she interrupts her reading with a question for the students. When the question is answered correctly, the student is rewarded with an enthusiastic, “Great job! Kiss your brain!” At which, the child kisses his fingers and plants the kiss on his head accompanied by a big grin.

Ms. Keller agrees that kindergarten has changed drastically over the years. The industrial-era notion of assembly-line teaching, (e.g. presenting the same material in the same manner to all children) along with the ability-grouping concept has gone the way of shoe-skates. If you grew up in that era, you remember the reading groups. There were the fast readers, usually in a group called “The Jets” or “The Astronauts” and the slower readers, usually in a group called



*Curtsinger Kindergartener, Sydeny Wright  
photos by Beth Robinson*



*Kristen, Sydney, Tatam and Jim Wright*

*photos by Beth Robinson*

something like “The Robins,” or worse, “The Turtles.” The teachers didn’t point out which group was which, but everyone knew. Ms. Keller contrasts the differing approaches, “In the past, there was no room for deviation from the curriculum and the established pace that was to be followed for every student. Now, we allow the children to guide us, to tell us what they already know, what they’re ready for, and what they want to learn. We’ve learned to be better observers of our students and better at seizing every opportunity to teach. Children can learn anywhere. It doesn’t have to be behind a desk,” she states.

Though kindergarten is still optional in Frisco, for most students, the curriculum is more like first grade was in grandma’s day. Children entering kindergarten now, as opposed to those who attended in the fifties and sixties, are at a much higher educational level. She attributes this to the influences of parents, society, technology and the media. “Today’s five-year-olds

have access to so much more than their grandparents or even their parents did,” Ms. Keller observes.

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Kristin Wright, parent of Sydney who attends Curtsinger Elementary, is a teacher herself and she agrees, “Children entering kindergarten now have a much broader set of experiences, even more than those who were attending in the early 90s. Many already know their numbers and letters, and can write their names.”

Though the methods and the classrooms are less restrictive and more inviting, that should not be confused with an environment of chaos or a lack of set objectives. Nothing could be further from the truth. This was a well-behaved group of children, respecting their teacher and their peers, and learning, while still having fun.

Ms. Keller is clearly in her element with her five and six-year-olds. She says she believes in the educational equivalent of the “Field of Dreams” If you teach it, they will learn. Though she’s been teaching for 13 years, Ms. Keller says she’s amazed every year at what the children achieve. “We start the year at square one and look at where we need to be at the end of the year,” explains Ms. Keller. “I always wonder how we can possibly accomplish it all. Yet every year the children just soak it up. We give them an opportunity to learn and to shine and they do just that. They love it!” Mrs. Wright has evidence of that in her own daughter. “Sydney’s

## WHAT CAN I DO TO PREPARE MY CHILD FOR KINDERGARTEN?

- Make reading with your child part of your daily routine.
- When reading with your child, stop periodically to discuss the content of the text and pictures. This promotes reading comprehension.
- After reading a story with your child, immediately engage him or her in retelling the story (with your support).
- Provide a wide variety of books.
- Obtain a library card for your child.
- Give your child books as gifts.
- Accept your child's pretend reading.
- Make signs and labels for objects around the house.
- Have a place to display your child's writing efforts.
- Provide magnetic letters for your child to practice forming words.
- Encourage your child to recognize his or her first name in print.
- Teach your child nursery rhymes.
- Focus on your child's strengths and celebrate his or her accomplishments.
- Set up a routine or sequence for personal care and other daily routines.
- Talk with your child about what interests him or her.
- Ask open-ended questions that have more than a yes or no answer, such as, "What do you think?"
- Play rhyming games.
- Get down on eye level and show your interest.
- Provide age-appropriate toys that require thinking, such as puzzles, blocks, or sorting toys.
- Take your child to the park to play on outdoor equipment.
- Provide opportunities for your child to experiment with balls, tricycles, and jump ropes.
- Set expectations and consequences for behavior.
- Help your child develop appropriate skills for learning.

For more information go to [www.friscoisd.org](http://www.friscoisd.org) and click on PreK and Kindergarten Information, then proceed to Questions and Answers.



*Ms. Keller assists Jasmyne Trevino and Isaiah Neal on the computer*

*photos by Taylor Robinson*

experience this year has been absolutely wonderful. I wouldn't change a thing," she says. "Recently, Sydney's reading ability has just exploded and it's been very exciting for all of us."

### SEPARATION HARDER ON PARENTS

Though the beginning of each new school year is challenging for kindergarten teachers and students, Ms. Keller says that sometimes it seems to be most challenging for parents. "That first day, we pay a lot of attention to the parents because many of them are very concerned about leaving their children with us and we understand that." Wright attests to that as she recalls Sydney's first day. "The parents were invited. We attended an orientation and visited the classroom where we met the teacher, Stephanie Southard. We were given opportunities to sign up to be involved as support for the class, then invited to the library for a Kleenex® party!" She recalls, "It was very appropriate and a great, informal opportunity to meet other parents."

Ms. Keller stresses the importance of the occasion, "They're entrusting us with their most precious gifts, and that's an honor we take very seriously. At the beginning of the year, they give us a bud and during the year we water and feed it with instruction. At the end of the year,

their bud has blossomed into a flower."

When asked what makes it possible for her and the other FISD kindergarten teachers to achieve such success year after year, she's at no loss for words. "Frisco ISD is on the cutting edge of education. The district provides us with every tool necessary for excellence. We have great curricula, excellent support and training available to us. I can't imagine working anywhere else." She adds, "I love being in a place where I know that I, as well as each child here, can be successful every day." Wright, too, has high praise for FISD, "We're so impressed with Curtsinger Elementary. We chose our home so we could be near the school. The spirit there is just amazing. It's more than you see in many high schools. People are excited to be a part of the environment – everyone from teachers to parents to children. It's great."

### IS MY CHILD READY?

To prepare for kindergarten, Frisco ISD offers the annual Kindergarten Round-Up, coming soon to an elementary school near you. Round-Up is a time to register for kindergarten and an opportunity for parents and their children to see the school environment. According to Ms. Keller, taking advantage of this preview seems to alleviate a lot of concerns for

both parents and students by eliminating the unknown. "School' is a scary concept for many children. When they have the chance to go inside and see what it is like, they seem to relax." According to Mrs. Wright, "Round-Up was very helpful. We, as parents, got a lot of information, months before our child would be going off to kindergarten. It helped us feel on top of things."

Kindergarten Round-Up also gives the district a more accurate count of the number of students to expect for the next year. Due to the explosive growth in Frisco and the high percentage of young families, FISD projects that approximately 18,000 kindergarteners will enroll during the next five years. The district reports that it's currently expecting about 2,500 kindergarten children to register for next fall. It will use the numbers gained from Round-Up, combined with historical trends to project the figures that will determine how many classes will be needed at each elementary campus and hire teachers accordingly.

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When thinking about sending a child off to kindergarten, many parents are concerned about his or her readiness. There has been much debate concerning the value of holding some children back until they're a bit older, especially if they have birthdays close to the deadline. When queried, Debbie Whitt Jarzombek, director of elementary instruction, said, "That is a judgment that we leave to the parents. They know their child much better than we do at this point. However, we do offer a checklist on our website ([www.friscoisd.org](http://www.friscoisd.org)) for parents to use as an evaluation tool." She adds, "We also want parents to know we're aware that children are coming in with different skill levels. We expect that and our teachers are specially prepared to handle it."

Children start at different comfort

The logo for Frisco Style Magazine features a red square on the left containing the stylized white letters 'FSM'. To the right of the square, the word 'frisco' is written in a cursive script, and 'STYLE MAGAZINE' is written in a bold, uppercase, sans-serif font.

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levels as well, since many have been attending daycare, preschool or Mother's Day Out programs. Because of these experiences, those children often adjust more quickly to the full-day setting and to the group interactions. This is where the teachers' skills are critical as they adjust to help each individual child fit in and feel comfortable.

During the first few weeks of school, each child will be observed to evaluate his or her skills in language and early literacy, including speech, reading, comprehension and writing, as well as various mathematical abilities. Teachers will be looking to determine each child's ability to:

- Express himself/herself verbally, using age-appropriate vocabulary
- Identify rhyming words, as well as beginning and ending sounds
- Hold a book and turn pages correctly
- Understand that printed letters and words contain a message
- Read from left to right
- Predict an outcome of a story based on information in the story
- Write first and last names correctly
- Hold a pencil correctly
- Draw pictures to convey meaning
- Describe, compare and sort shapes
- Count objects correctly
- Compare, using the words, "more, less, equal"
- Compare and order objects using measurement tools
- Name the days of the week
- Identify coins and their values
- Know and use the five senses
- Identify farm animals
- Use technology to accomplish tasks
- Express himself/herself using a variety of materials
- Respond to music in a variety of ways
- Know his/her birthday, phone number and address
- Respect self and others
- Work quietly at appropriate times.

While these are many of the skills that will be evaluated, they are not skills required for entering kindergarten. Children learn at their own pace and according to their interests. Some children may be accomplished at certain skills, but not others. It is the task of the teacher to

observe and evaluate, then work with the parents to educate the child according to that child's individual needs. The goal is for each child to be well prepared, at the end of the school year, to move on to first grade.

When asked how best to prepare a child for that first day, Ms. Jarzombek suggested taking walks by the school, bringing the child to Kindergarten Round-Up and allowing him or her to help buy school supplies. She reiterated Ms. Keller's words, saying, "This is a rite of passage for the child. He will feel much more a part of what is happening if he can help choose his lunchbox and backpack, and be with you when you buy the crayons and other supplies." She also suggested role-play in which the parent and child take turns being the teacher and student. "Games like this help prepare the student for what will be expected."

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#### THE PARENTS ROLE IN EDUCATION

Both Ms. Jarzombek and Ms. Keller emphasize the role of the parents in education. "We are the professionals, but learning occurs all the time, every day. We appreciate that parents take an active role in their child's education, and we capitalize on opportunities in day-to-day experiences to make learning connections," says Ms. Jarzombek. Mrs. Wright agrees, "Education is just as much the parents' responsibility as it is the teachers'. Certainly, teachers are responsible for providing excellent curricula and methods of teaching. But the student's success is largely dependent on the involvement of the parents. It should be 100 percent/100 percent. Everyone giving his best." She feels strongly that motivated parents can take advantage of everyday teachable moments, "When Sydney and I go to the grocery store together, we look at labels, and read



#### FRISCO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT KINDERGARTEN ROUND-UP

April 10 – 13 • 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.  
Tues., April 11 only • 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Kindergarten Round-Up is open to children who will be five years old by September 1, 2006. Parents may register their children at the elementary school in their zone. Students who will be attending Sem or Ogle Elementary Schools in the fall may register at the current school in their zone, either Ashley or Isbell. Students who will attend Corbell may register at their current school, which is either Boals or Fisher. Students who will attend Taylor may register at the appropriate current school of Anderson or Borchardt.

To register, please bring the following:  
Child's birth certificate  
Child's Social Security card  
Child's immunization records  
Proof of residence, such as a utility bill  
Parent's driver's license

If you are living in temporary housing and are purchasing a home in the FISD, you must present a proof of contract if you want your child to begin school in the attendance zone where your permanent home will be. For additional information, please contact any elementary school.

them together. We cook together and she learns about measuring. We try to take advantage of what the metroplex has to offer. We go to museums, the zoo and attend other activities.” She feels strongly about reading, “Reading is essential. There are very few nights in Sydney’s life that she has not been read to.”

Education as much the parents responsibility as it is the teachers... motivated parents take advantage of everyday teachable moments.

The best education occurs when parents and teachers work together, according to Ms. Jarzombek. She adds, “Our teachers are very accessible and we want our parents to communicate with the teachers through email, phone calls or conference times. We encourage our parents to be involved.” Mrs. Wright says, “I have felt



very welcomed at Sydney’s school and in her classroom. I’ve been made to feel that I belong there as much as the teachers and students.” She adds, “When parents are involved in their child’s education, the child learns that the parents value education and she begins to internalize that for herself.”

Though the methods and the environment may have changed drastically since this young generation’s grandmas

and grandpas attended kindergarten, there’s no cause for concern, at least not for the children in the Frisco Independent School District. They’re still learning the three “R’s”—Readin’, ‘Ritin’ and ‘Rithmatic” plus much more, and they’re having fun doing it.

*Caren Elizabeth Austen is a freelance writer living in Plano.*



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