

THE SUZUKI SCHOOL: *A School or Daycare?*

By Debra Markham, School Director

Definitions:

School: *A place for learned discussion and instruction; an institution of learning; an educational establishment; a place for acquiring knowledge and mental training.*

Daycare: *Supervision of and care for children that is provided during the day by a person or organization.*

When Suzuki first opened its doors in 1976, we began as a preschool for children three years and older. At the time, there were no full-day academic preschools in Atlanta for the very young, other than part-day programs offered through places of worship. Marlene and Dr. Suzuki collaborated for the first year to create a preschool program which would combine his philosophy with her knowledge of early childhood development. After several years, the program was expanded to accommodate children as young as 18 months at the repeated request of the local community. Finally, we expanded to offer an infant program as more dual income families settled in Atlanta. As the years have progressed, we have had to rethink certain aspects of the school to better meet the needs of both the children and their working parents.

During this same period, we have assembled a strong teaching staff and been blessed with a proliferation of resources to create the best learning environment for all of our students.

I am frequently asked by new parents, "what makes Suzuki different and why is it considered a school instead of a high-quality, progressive daycare". I respond by giving five elements that, when combined, produce a school of excellence – one that is quite different from a daycare program:

1. Time-tested curriculum backed by a vast inventory of resources for the classroom and a variety of stimulating extracurricular programs.
2. Experienced and credentialed programs.
3. Collaborative team teaching.
4. Classroom expectations that are well defined and constantly reviewed.
5. Solid and consistent leadership.

Let me take a moment to further expand on each element of our academic program:

Our Curriculum and Programs:

We continue to develop and refine our curriculum, based on our observations, our research and on consistent internal debate. It is cohesive and solidly based on the principles of early learning and early childhood development. Since it is spiral, there are ample opportunities for repetition and reinforcement while adding new knowledge. We have a vast number of intriguing and appropriate resources for all age levels of the school. In addition to the foreign language and music programs, we offer other classes that stimulate a love of learning.

Experienced and Credentialed Teachers:

Being a good teacher is not about having the right credentials; it is about passion and commitment. Good teachers recognize teaching moments and derive deep satisfaction as a child grasps new concepts. A strong curriculum is useless with individuals who possess a “caregiver” mentality and pay lip service to the curriculum and the methodology. At Suzuki, our goal is to only hire individuals who have an aptitude for and an interest in teaching. Although we are approached by many applicants holding a CDA - Child Development Accreditation - degree, popular in the daycare industry, we do not necessarily recognize this as an educational certification. We look for something more, something intrinsic. Many of our staff hold degrees in education, but many more have degrees in English, History, and Psychology, to name a few. Others have years of experience in teaching very young children. We look for that individual who demonstrates an affinity for a specific age group, who innately understands the development and the ability of that age. Our strength is a core of dedicated, *intuitive teachers* who closely mentor our younger, less experienced staff. In this way, our values and our methods are instilled through modeling as well as instruction.

Collaborative teaching teams:

Our experience has shown that when teachers collaborate, the learning environment becomes immediately more stimulating and innovative from the collective ideas of all involved. It is far more flexible and responsive to the individual needs of each student than a typical small classroom. The key to this approach is both collaboration and focused learning periods throughout the day which are designed for small groups and more one-on-one interaction. This is a difficult model to implement and sustain, and can only succeed with motivated teachers who combine the talents of good communicators and good educators, a challenge in any situation!

Well Defined and Reviewed Classroom Expectations:

We can all remember being in school with a teacher who was unmotivated, unprepared and uninterested in teaching. Many times, these teachers had an ability to become good educators, but the school lacked the accountability systems to reinforce consistently strong teaching skills. There are four *teachers* at Suzuki that actively monitor classrooms, provide support and ensure that standards are maintained: Marlene Lerer (*founder*), Alla Morgulyan (*Admissions Director*), Allison (*Assistant Director*) and of course, me. This is an enormous part of what we do each and everyday and it is one of the most important of our responsibilities. Academic institutions without strong accountability programs are prone to become complacent with the status quo.

Solid and Consistent Leadership:

I am extremely blessed to have been at Suzuki for over 25 years working closely with Marlene (*our founder*) in building Suzuki into the school it is today. Although Marlene is not here every day, we communicate daily, working on issues and concerns as they arise, and collaborate together to push forward new initiatives (*such as additional accreditations*) and recommendations. Robert and Paula became involved with Suzuki in 2005 as co-owners with Marlene and me, and strengthened the leadership in areas that Marlene and I, trained as educators were missing. Their contributions have been extremely beneficial to the school. The school is the strongest it has ever been with significant continued investments in facilities

and our teaching staff, which is crucial, as we continue to raise our educational standards. Our leadership team has been focused over the last four years in redefining the academic expectations of the school. We realize that, in a sense, we will always be on this journey of introspection, observation and growth. Our philosophy and our students demand it.

When all five elements proceed in unison, we operate not just as a preschool, but as a stimulating learning environment, rich in experiences that offer the best in an early childhood education. I am fully aware that the journey will continue, but I am well satisfied with our progress and excited about prospects for continued improvement in the upcoming years. We are not yet the school Marlene and I set out to create, but we are well on our way!