For the past several years, increasing learning opportunities for our youngest students has been a focus of Arlington Public Schools. As research shows, the benefits of investing greatly in early childhood education are many. Early childhood experiences, occurring between birth and 8 years of age, positively impact a child throughout their school career and beyond. As adults, children with strong early learning experiences are more likely to be employed, will earn higher wages, and are likely to become good citizens.

This past summer, the district made great strides with our early learning offerings when over 350 preschool through fifth grade students took part in one or more of the district summer learning experiences. Whether it was a weekly trip to the “Books on the Bus” bookmobile, third grade summer literacy camp, or the bilingual summer program, students were immersed in meaningful learning that provided many opportunities to strengthen academic skills and interact with adults and peers in a relaxed, fun environment.

As we begin the 2015-2016 school year, early learning continues to be a priority for our district. For the first time, we are providing a full day kindergarten program for all students at no cost to the family. This has resulted in restructuring the kindergarten program based on research and best practices. If you walk through any kindergarten classroom in Arlington Public Schools, you will see puppet theaters, play kitchens, dollhouses, train sets, and Legos. All of these materials are part of the learning through play component embedded within the kindergarten day.

Few would disagree that children all develop skills at different rates and in different ways. Providing a kindergarten child with open-ended play naturally differentiates learning based on the interests, skill level, and unique needs of that child. When young children have the opportunity to engage in play on a consistent basis, they will develop stronger vocabulary, language comprehension, and problem-solving skills, and increase their attention span. These skills all link directly to the child’s ability to master academic content in areas such as reading and math.

Learning through play is not a new concept nor are the benefits limited to primary-aged students. Students of all ages and adults learn through play. Whether it is building a robot, taking violin lessons, or creating a structure with wooden blocks, learning through play allows children to build cognitive skills, develop socially and emotionally, and gain the self-confidence needed to participate in new experiences and environments.

The value of learning through play doesn’t begin in kindergarten. Beginning at birth, immersing a child in play activities is critical to the child’s development. These play times need
not be structured and planned by an adult, but rather let the child take the lead in their play. Exploration and experimenting should be at the heart of all play. Touching, banging, and throwing all are fascinating to children as young as four months old while an eighteen month old might be captivated with kicking, rolling, and pushing a ball. As children grow and develop new skills, their play will become increasingly complex and more imaginative. Pretend play and using familiar objects in new and creative ways are ideal for a toddler making connections and learning about the world around them.

As Arlington Public Schools continues our work to provide the best possible programs for our youngest learners, we look forward to strengthening our partnerships with families and our community early learning providers. These partnerships are critical in ensuring all of Arlington’s children have what they need to be successful in school and in life.