Over the summer, I found myself reflecting on the unique perspectives I hold in this community. The 2018-2019 school year is my twentieth year at Cambridge Friends School. During my tenure, I have held many roles: I have been a teacher, a cluster coordinator, a Board member, a clerk for our AISNE reaccreditation, and am currently both a parent and an administrator. It has been a privilege to have contributed to this school in so many ways.

I am often asked about my transition from being a teacher to an administrator. As a teacher, I felt that I had a good understanding of the developmental and academic progression from pre-kindergarten through grade five. Over the years, participation in numerous professional development sessions, vertical alignment processes, accreditation self-study reflections, and meetings with colleagues regarding the developmental and curricular progression of students through grades 1-5 have equipped me with the knowledge to lead the Lower School program. However, viewing the curriculum through the eyes of my child as a CFS student was particularly valuable as I moved into an administrative role. My eldest child completed grade five last spring, and I was struck by the ways in which the fifth-grade program meets students where they are developmentally and challenges them to stretch as learners and take ownership of the learning process.

Key developmental factors in fifth-grade students include working well in groups, engaging in active problem-solving, and, particularly at CFS, taking on leadership roles in the Lower School. The year-long recycling project is a great example of how our program is specifically designed to support those developmental needs. After learning about recycling in science class, fifth-graders are tasked with teaching the rest of the community about recycling. Working together, students write and perform skits, give informational presentations, or create fliers to help educate the community. By choosing how to deliver the information, they take ownership of the learning process. Additionally, they must plan and implement the recycling program for the entire school, a daunting and challenging task that our fifth-grade leaders always rise to.

Another example of how the fifth-grade curriculum directly supports the developmental growth of our students is the park project, in which students design a park from scratch, then keep a budget for the materials that are needed to create their unique plan. Additionally, fifth-grade students write a proposal at the end of the unit which, amongst other things, explains how the park meets a need in the community and why it should be created. While reinforcing math concepts like area and perimeter, this project also challenges students to complete a multi-stage, multi-step process, draw on prior knowledge, and stretch their problem-solving and perspective-taking abilities.

Perhaps one of the most impressive themes of fifth-grade development is their increasing ability to listen carefully and respond thoughtfully. Throughout the year, CFS provides a number of opportunities for students to expand these skills. In social studies, students explore the history and culture of the Cherokee and Seminole people, and the history of the Mexican/U.S. border.
During this unit, students read non-fiction material and then engage in a number of transformative discussions. The discussions that students in grade five engage in are distinct from those from previous years. At this point, students are able to hear and respond to one another, and to think critically in a way that allow their thinking to evolve and grow collectively. In addition to discussions, fifth-graders are able to engage in challenging role plays that require sophistication and sensitivity. The study of these topics leads to parallel conversations about current events. Last year, these conversations were specifically related to attitudes and legislation regarding immigration and the idea of a border wall. The academic context allowed students to grapple with complex current events. The depth of conversation around this type of topic is exceptional, and students in fifth grade are truly ready to engage in this important work.

Throughout all of these projects, students are guided, encouraged, and challenged to grow as learners and individuals.

The growth of students and their preparedness for the next developmental phase of their lives was even more evident to me as I observed my child embrace the challenges that fifth grade presented. I watched the confidence of my child, and that of others, soar. All of this increased my appreciation for the care and thought that my colleagues put into developing rich and engaging curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for children.

While the examples mentioned in this piece are all from fifth grade, I am cognizant of the fact that none of the projects and challenges that students complete in grade five could be possible without the building blocks that come before in pre-kindergarten through grade four. In each grade level, the connection between students’ developmental phases and curriculum is evident. As my professional role shifted and I now work to support my colleagues in refining and implementing curriculum that is best suited to their students, I am grateful that I have this additional lens that allows me to build upon my prior knowledge and incorporate my understandings of students’ experiences as they move through the grades.

Other key developmental points for this age include the ability to think abstractly and the ability to increasingly organize materials. The multi-genre biography project, which spans several months, not only requires students to employ basic research skills, knowledge of different genres, and practice writing skills, but also reinforces executive functioning skills like time management. Furthermore, students engage in critical reading and practice the ability to examine information from multiple perspectives. The presentation to classmates and family at the end of the project also allows students the opportunity to talk about and explain their learning.