**Reading**

Rabun Gap’s Lower School relies on three key concepts to build emotionally intelligent, confident, and independent readers: student collaboration, phonics decoding strategies, and student choice in reading.

Relying on the workshop approach developed by Lucy Calkins and colleagues at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, we teach reading through teamwork and collaboration, empowering students to take ownership of their learning and to support the efforts of their peers. During reading workshop, students first gather for a whole-group mini-lesson focused on a skill that they can use to become stronger readers. Teachers explain the strategy, model by thinking aloud how good readers use the strategy, and demonstrate how students will use the strategy in their own reading. Students are then given opportunities to practice with their teacher’s support. Depending on the setting, students may practice during the mini-lesson, with a reading partner, or in small groups. Throughout this process, teachers constantly perform informal assessments, using conferring notes, running records, and observations. Information gained from these assessments is used to individualize each student’s reading instruction and identify needed strategies for future lessons. Finally, students are encouraged to apply learned strategies in their independent reading, and across all genres of texts they encounter in other subjects.

We teach phonics based on the Wilson Reading Method in grades pre-kindergarten through third to ensure that our students gain strong foundational skills for reading, spelling, and penmanship. The Wilson approach emphasizes phonemic awareness, decoding and word study, high-frequency sight words, fluency, vocabulary, oral expressive language development, handwriting, and spelling. Teachers use a multisensory approach to build fluency and confidence, ensuring that students master these key concepts.

In every instance, students are encouraged to choose books based on interest, a vital part of our independent reading philosophy. Students read books from a classroom library designed to meet the needs and interests of a wide range of students. We want our students reading books that matter to them, where their motivation to read is driven by natural curiosity and the development of individual skills and talents.

**Writing**

Developing strong, independent writing skills is essential to student success in a 21st century learning environment. Students must be able to think and communicate with clarity and precision to collaboratively solve complex, real-world problems. Viewing themselves as authors, our students are encouraged to write about what matters most to them. We teach them that writing is not only a means to communicate, but that it also plays an important role in how we come to understand the world around us. To build emotional intelligence, we teach writing in a workshop model, where students review the work of their peers, supporting each other as they develop their skills. All grammar instruction is taught in the context of writing. Finally, students practice the skills we teach, writing every day across all areas of the curriculum.

We know that writers develop confidence and fluency by writing often. Relying on a Writing Workshop model for our Lower School curriculum ensures that every student practices the art of writing every day. As in our approach to teaching reading, the workshop model allows for students to develop the
foundational skills needed to become independent writers. Teachers begin the workshop by focusing on a mentor text, often in the form of a picture book, to help students understand the type of writing on which they will be focusing. When students are writing, they keep these mentor texts in mind, often referencing the text to develop specific skills and techniques. Instruction time spent conferring with students about their writing is a key component of the Writing Workshop. One-on-one conferences allow for individualized and differentiated instruction for each student.

As in our independent reading program, students are encouraged to write about topics that matter to them. Allowing for choice gives students ownership, and encourages them to develop their own voice in written work. Students are asked to express their thoughts and ideas to a variety of audiences and for a variety of purposes, but they are always authentically engaged in writing about a topic about which they are passionate.

Research shows grammatical study should happen within context. At The Lower School, students learn punctuation, spelling, and grammar as they work to craft their written assignments. Writing Workshop and the Wilson multi-sensory approach combine for a targeted approach for instruction in these areas.

In addition to explicit instruction during Writing Workshop, writing happens across all areas of the curriculum. Consequently, students are asked to write often and for a variety of purposes. In every case, we encourage students to take strategies they have learned in Writing Workshop and apply them to written assignments in all subject areas.

**Humanities**

At Rabun Gap, we know that our humanities instruction needs to prepare our young students to interact with a complex, changing world. We might not know exactly how our world will change in the coming years, but we do know that students need to be prepared to become effective citizens of an interdependent, global community. They need to develop habits of the mind that allow them to listen to other points of view with empathy and understanding, and to then act in accordance with their new understanding. In the Lower School, we believe that Humanities is, at its core, a study of people, and as such we focus on empathy and understanding throughout all levels of instruction.

We believe it is important for all students to begin understanding their place in a larger world. We model this understanding in pre-kindergarten. Beginning with our families and classroom community, our youngest students learn to see themselves as essential to their most immediate realm of influence. As our students advance, we encourage them to reimagine their identity in a larger, broader community and, eventually, in our nation. Our oldest students finish their tenure at the Lower School with the study of immigration. They learn how people from many nations immigrated to America, seeking opportunity and freedom. We emphasize the ways that immigrants have shaped America over time and how they continue to influence our nation today. Through this process, graduates of the Lower School see themselves as a part of the story of history and, as such, begin to think about how they will impact the broadest community, our world.

Lower School students study all aspects of a humanities curriculum, including literature, art, music, geography, economics, civics, government, and history. These strands are embedded into units of study, as opposed to being studies in isolation as specific disciplines. Informational and non-fiction texts are key
facets of the Lower School’s humanities curriculum. Multiple viewpoints are presented so that students may gain experience in critically examining historical events, rather than memorizing dates and facts. Students cultivate the habits of mind of thinking interdependently, questioning and posing problems, and remaining open to continuous learning when examining viewpoints that may differ from the typical historical narrative.

Math

All math instruction in the Lower School is problem-based, focused on the development of number sense and habits of mind that build confidence when encountering open-ended problems that demand thinking and communication. In accordance with the Singapore Math methodology, we hold deeply to the belief that students need to understand the way numbers work together before they tackle abstract mathematical concepts. We also believe that the means to mastery must always be based on problem-solving. Our math program seeks to produce graduates who can approach complexity, work together to build understanding, and rely on mathematics as a lens through which they can encounter the world around them.

Singapore Math, an approach steeped in number sense and the problem-based learning, is the foundation for grades pre-K to 3. The Singapore Math scope and sequence has been carefully constructed based upon the “Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract” (CPA) approach, developed by American psychologist Jerome Bruner. By introducing new topics in this three step process, students are provided with a conceptual understanding of math, where new topics build on the student’s emerging understanding.

Each new abstract concept is first learned with a concrete, or physical, experience. When students start with the concrete, they are “doing.” Students use real objects to model problems, as opposed to the teacher demonstrating how to solve a problem. By allowing students to experience and handle physical objects themselves, students learn that mathematics is a way to encounter the world, as opposed to pure abstraction, rules to be memorized, or simple exercises with one “correct” answer.

In the pictorial stage, students are “seeing.” They use representations of the previously manipulated objects to model problems. Students can then make a mental connection between the physical and abstract. They are asked to draw or look at pictures, circles, diagrams, or models that represent the objects in the problems they encounter. This makes more traditionally difficult concepts easier to visualize, which makes the concept more accessible.

Only after mastering the concrete and pictorial stages of understanding do students move the abstract, or “symbolic” stage, where they rely on mathematical symbols to model problems. At this point, traditional numbers, notations, and mathematical symbols indicate the operations for the tasks necessary to solve the problems they encounter.

While there is a natural progression inherent in the CPA approach, these three steps remain fluid throughout the student’s learning. Simply doing math is not regarded as fully developing the habits of mind indicative of the confident, capable math student. Teachers frequently move back and forth across the CPA continuum as they reinforce concepts. Students typically encounter a variety of manipulatives when being introduced to a concept, encouraging them to represent and solve problems in a variety of ways. Cultivating the habits of mind to strive for accuracy, to question and explore, and to pose multiple solutions to a single problem, students gain confidence and the capacity to confront complexity. Our
graduates learn to think towards solutions, remaining flexible, communicating openly, and relying on mathematics as a tool for understanding.

In grades 4 and 5, we continue with a curriculum rich in number sense, always focusing on problem-based learning, mathematical thinking, teamwork, and communication. Our upper level students are placed in math classes based on content readiness. Our goal is to ensure success while providing appropriate rigor and challenge. These classes, heterogeneous groups of ages and grade levels, are grouped based on math concepts students are ready to encounter.

Science

Using authentic experiences, our science program allows students to question, explore, and analyze the world around them. Our goal is to continually build a strong foundation in scientific understanding, then revise and refine scientific skills through real experiences and interactions with the physical world. The curriculum engages students, providing opportunities to deepen understanding through productive collaboration. Students learn factual information used to conduct tests and collect data within the content area they are covering in class. We recognize that covering all topics within the realm of science is not possible, so we value the acquisition of skills in the context of authentic scientific exploration. We believe this will develop lifelong critical thinkers who are armed with the tools to evaluate information from the scientific world. STEAM and Environmental Stewardship principles are infused throughout our Lower School science curriculum through consistent access and interaction with the Upper School STEAM and ESP students and faculty.

World Language

At The Lower School, World Language classes are taught using “Content Language Integrated Learning.” This model of second language learning has students fully immersed in the target language to best simulate a native speaking environment. As the name also indicates, the target language is integrated with other subject content to make a “stickier” experience for the student. This integration allows students to learn vocabulary and grammar through natural speaking patterns that mimic early language acquisition of their native language. Content integration with other subjects allows students not only more time to master skills and content, but also a more enjoyable experience learning a second language. Students apply language skills to all areas of their educational experience, as opposed to isolated rote dialogues and grammar work typical of traditional second language learning.

Physical Education

The Lower School physical education curriculum lessons are prepared so that each student has many opportunities to practice activities, skills, and games. Just one component of a student’s overall development, physical education provides poignant opportunities for students to develop in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. All Rabun Gap Lower School students participate in swim lessons and learn about safety in and around water. They also participate in conflict resolution skill practice, age appropriate health and fitness lessons, and social skills. The physical education program is designed to
Movement, Dance, Drama

The Lower School Creative Movement and Performance Program encourages children to discover and develop their artistic self in a positive, noncompetitive environment. Our curriculum aims to improve our students’ technical proficiency in the performing arts, while building self-esteem and teamwork skills. Class activities are designed to keep students engaged and attentive by combining technical exercises with expressive movement and group games to build musicality. We believe that movement and performance are an integral part of the education experience and help to develop our students physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.

Visual Art

The Lower School Visual Arts curriculum includes the arts not as a peripheral part of the curriculum but as an essential part of the knowledge all children should learn in the early grades. Our objective is to foster creativity and promote confidence in the students’ artmaking abilities. Students will gain a global awareness and cultivate an appreciation of visual arts throughout history. The curriculum is structured to build a strong art vocabulary, to provide exposure to a variety of media and techniques, and to create an exploratory atmosphere in which students may discover and develop their unique, creative voice.

Music

As an extension of the humanities program, music instruction is integral to all areas of study in the Lower School. Research shows that music appreciation and fluency supports the development of cultural understanding, as well as mathematical thinking and problem solving. Therefore, all Lower School students participate in Music Appreciation, with an intense focus on Strings Classes in kindergarten through first grade. In addition to performing regularly in chapel, both Music Appreciation and Strings students are given several opportunities throughout the year to perform in class and on stage.

In grades kindergarten through first every student participates in Strings Class, where they are introduced to the study of the violin. In grades second through fifth, students have the option to continue to participate in Strings with private lessons offered by The Studio at Rabun Gap.

Music literacy is an essential part of the Music Appreciation course. Using the Kodaly, Orff, and Suzuki approaches, students learn to notate, read, and compose music. Students experience music through learning songs from a broad range of cultures and genres. They also play and improvise on percussion instruments, learn choreography, and analyze musical compositions from famous composers. Music classes facilitate thematic and cross curricular learning through collaboration with classroom teachers and departments.
**Library**

The Lower School library program fosters students’ lifelong love of literature and learning, while supporting the broader curriculum and the development of reading and writing skills. Providing an appealing space and appropriate reading materials to support students’ personal interests and the classroom curriculum, the Lower School Library is an essential part of all students’ learning experience. All lower school classes visit the library weekly. During those visits, students enjoy hearing stories read aloud, booktalks, and checking out books. They also acquire information literacy and digital citizenship skills through librarian-led instruction and activities.

**Technology**

Guided by the belief that young students need human interaction as a means of building trust, confidence, and self-awareness, the Lower School approaches all technology integration remembering the following:

- Technology is a tool that we use in our life everyday.
- Technology aids us in accessing and presenting information.
- Continual technological progress brings both advancements and challenges.

Classroom teachers make wise-use of devices with students, and students have access to a variety of technological tools. Students become familiar with the following, keeping age appropriateness in mind: word processing and typing, multimedia, Internet usage, Web 2.0 tools, beginning coding, and digital citizenship.