



Reading: How Parents Can Help

Everyone Has Reading Homework

Carter, John, and I are committed to helping every boy and girl further establish the habits of readers and develop a lifelong love of books. Students will leave school with one or more books to be read at home and returned to school the next day. The goal is to read for at least a half an hour at home every afternoon or evening. Preferably your child will read independently, but depending on his or her needs, being read to (via human or audiobook) while reading along in the text, is acceptable.

There is no more important homework than reading.

Research shows that the highest achieving students are those who devote leisure time to reading, even when the school day and year are only mid-length and homework isn't excessive. Recently, the largest-ever international study of reading found that the single most important predictor of academic success is the amount of time children spend reading books- more important even than the child's economic or social status. One of the few predictors of high achievement in math and science is the amount of time children devote to pleasure reading. Not only that, reading is often relaxing and allows people to de-stress from our often overly busy lives.

As you know, children read for many reasons. They read in order to become smarter about the world and how it works. They read to broaden their vocabularies and to become better readers- faster, more fluent, purposeful, engaged, critical, and satisfied. They read to stretch their imaginations, and to escape to other lives, times, and places. They read to become good people- knowledgeable about and compassionate toward the range of human experience. In 7th and 8th grade this year, we will focus some of the students' reading choices. Specifically, we ask that each child, each trimester, in addition to other books, read a science-oriented book and a world history book. This year we will study Medieval Arabia/Islamic World, Medieval China, Medieval Japan, Medieval Africa, esp. Ghana & Mali, Medieval Europe, Maya/Aztec/Incan civilizations, and the European Renaissance, Reformation, Exploration, and Enlightenment.

There is no substitute for regular, sustained time with books. Please sit down with your child tonight and talk about the best time and place for reading to happen at your house. Is after school and before dinner a good point to catch his or her breath, curl up with a book, and escape into a good story? Or will your child join in with the book lovers who like to read themselves to sleep at night? Whenever the reading happens, be sure that the environment is quiet, the electronic gadgets (TV, cell phone, internet) are off, and there is a good light.

We've learned that the choices of books available to kids today are so wonderful that reading makes for joyful homework. We've also seen that children whose parents and teachers expect and encourage them to read are likely to grow up as happy, skilled readers.

Tips for Parents of Middle School Readers

The following are suggestions for different ways that parents might support middle-school-aged readers. If you have or discover more, please share!

- Drive your child (and a friend) to the library or bookstore to choose a special book. My daughter says, "Let them pick the book they like; don't criticize if the book seems too easy or too hard."
- Consider incorporating a "Book Wish List" as a regular part of gift-giving holidays.
- Be a model! Seek out books or publications that you enjoy reading. Join a book club.
- Be interested in what your child is reading. Talk about books as you would chat with a friend: "What did you think of the book? How did it make you feel? What did you like? How would you compare it to other books about ____ or by ____? Concentrate on your child's *feelings, preferences, and opinions* about the books he or she reads.

Three Kinds of Books

The books that children take home at night to read fall into three categories of difficulty. Leslie Funkhouser, a teacher in New Hampshire, defined the distinctions we make among books here at school. *Holidays* are easy first reads or old favorites: a book a student has read many times before or one that he or she picks up to take a break from harder books. *Just Rights* are new books that help a reader practice and gain experience. They contain a few words per page that the child doesn't know. *Challenges* are titles that a child would like to read independently, but are too difficult right now. There may be too many unfamiliar words, text that's too dense, paragraphs that are too long, a plot or structure that's too difficult to follow, multiple main characters, or topics that are so unfamiliar or complex that the reader can't grasp them yet.

We appreciate these definitions because they label books, not students. All readers of every age have our own *Holidays*, *Just Rights*, and *Challenges*. Often as we learn more about a topic, work with a particular text, or just gain more experiences as humans and readers, a *Challenge* becomes a *Just Right*.

Children should spend some time at home with all three categories of books, but most of their time should be spent with *Just Rights*, because these are the books that help students learn most about reading and the topics they want to read about. Some time should be spent with *Holidays*, to help children gain confidence, increase their reading rate, revisit old friends, and read for pure pleasure. Finally, children should spend a little

time with *Challenges*, because these often tell stories or convey information that children want and that they can figure out with our help- and because they show students the books that are out there waiting for them as readers.

Final Thoughts

Your child may select an overnight book with content or themes that you question. While we know that it's essential that children choose what they want to read, we also believe that your values matter. If a book bothers you and you feel strongly about it, ask your child not to bring it home, explain why, and call or email Melissa or Carter. The teachers have selected books for our libraries with many criteria in mind, from classic literature to predictable language and story structures to award-winning illustrations to cross-cultural themes to contemporary social issues. We're always happy to explain the merits we have found in a particular title, but we also want to support you if you have concerns about a book choice your child has made. I often put a white sticker on the front cover of books where the content seems disturbing or "adult" to me.

Because we use our science, history, and literature collections to teach reading, we count on the books being available to us each day. Because our library represents a substantial investment of school funds and teachers' own money, we're discouraged when books disappear for weeks at a time or never reappear at all. Until your child builds the habit, would you help us by checking each weekday morning to see that your child has a book to return, or continue to read, that day at school? Also, please scour your child's bedroom from time to time for titles that belong to the school or to one of the teachers. Last year, Anne Tharpe continued to input our library titles onto a laptop. Perhaps this year students will be able to check out books and hopefully there will be less attrition! If you are interested in helping maintain the data base, please let us know!

This newsletter about reading is, admittedly, lengthy. Reading has always been a priority activity at our school, and we plan on continuing to honor it this year. *We know that nothing is more important to the development of children's abilities in every subject area than reading and being read to.*

From the first day of school, we make time for looking at books, listening to books, talking about the ideas and people in books, learning how to read books, and reading them. We offer students the most generous invitations we can devise to help them spend significant time reading, fall in love with books, and see themselves as readers. Through frequent, voluminous experiences with books, your child should become a skilled, habitual, passionate, critical reader.