

Independent Reading Newsletter: *How you can help your child*

Dear Parent,

I am committed to helping every child in my class establish the habits of a reader and a lifelong love of books. Children should leave school with one or more books to be read at home and return to school the next day with their independent reading book in their backpack. The goal is that your child read at home for at least a half an hour every afternoon or evening. Depending on his or her preferences and what works for your family, your child may read to or with an adult or sibling, listen to the book being read aloud, or read independently.

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 a child spends reading books, more important than even economic or social status (Atwell 2007).

And one of the few predictors of high achievement in math and science is the amount of time children devote to pleasure reading, which does not include textbook reading. The idea of reading for pleasure means your child should be reading a book that he or she has chosen and finds true enjoyment in reading.

Children 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 and more fluent, purposeful, engaged, critical, and satisfied. They read to stretch their imaginations, to escape to other lives, times, and places. And they read to become good people—knowledgeable about and compassionate toward the range of human experience.

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 great story? Or will your child join the book lovers who like to read ourselves to sleep at night? And whenever the reading happens, is the environment quiet? Is the T.V. off? And is there 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 Reluctant (and Avid) Readers:

- Help your child select books and expose them to books as much as possible. Take him or her to the book store or the library. Help them select books from the Scholastic Book Order when brought home from class.
- Be sure to encourage your child to read and make sure they have a quiet place to do so each afternoon or evening.
- Talk about books with your child just as you would with a friend: "What do you think of the book? How does it make you feel? What do you like? What didn't you like? Who is your favorite character? What's your favorite part so far? How would you compare it to the other book you read _____?" Concentrate on your child's feelings, preferences, and opinions about the books he or she reads.
- Allow your child to reread books he or she really liked. Help him or her find similar books at the library, book store, or book order.
- Offer to read aloud to your child and to allow your child to read to you. This helps your child communicate about what he or she is reading and become more engaged.

Three Types of Books

The books that children take home at night to read, or hear read aloud, fall into three categories of difficulty. Leslie Funkhouser, a teacher in New Hampshire, defined the distinctions we make among books here at school. There are three types:

Holidays: easy first reads or old favorites. This could be a book a student has read before or one he or she picks up to take a break from harder books.

Just Rights: new titles that help a reader practice and gain experience—they contain a few words per page that he child doesn't know.

Challenges: 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 difficult to follow, multiple main characters, or concepts that the child can't grasp 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 experience as readers, a Challenge can become 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 the most, about reading and about 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 can figure out with our help—and because they show students the books that are out there waiting for them as readers.

When your child reads—silently, to you, or with you—ask about the book: Is it a Holiday? A Just Right? A Challenge? If it's a Just Right or Challenge be ready to provide help with unfamiliar words or concepts. And, again, bear in mind that readers shouldn't spend all their time with just one kind of book. Children need experience with materials of varying degrees of difficulty if they are to grow to be independent as readers and understand all the things that reading is good for.

Reading Aloud

Please don't ever consider your child too old to be read to. Here at school we read aloud to our students straight through promotion. Children of every age cherish the literary worlds that adults bring to life with our voices. The bonds of closeness that are created when a grown-up and a child enjoy a story together are one of the best things about being a parent, or having one. Strickland Gillilans's poem "The Reading Mother" ends with a stanza I think gets it right: family read-alouds are a treasure.

You may have tangible wealth untold—
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be.
I had a mother that read to me.

Final Thoughts

Your child might select an overnight book with content or themes that you question. While I know it's essential that children choose what they read, I 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 talk with me about it. I have selected books for my classroom library with many criteria in mind, from classic literature to predictable language and story structures to cross-cultural themes to contemporary issues. I'm always happy to explain the merits of a particular title but I also want you to know that I support you if you have concerns about a book choice your child has made.

Because my trove of books in the classroom represents a substantial investment of school funds and my own money, I am discouraged when books disappear for weeks at a time or never reappear at all. Could you help me by checking each weekday morning that your child has a book to bring back to class or continue to read that day in school? And please scour your child's bedroom from time to time for titles that belong to the school or to me.

This newsletter is, admittedly, lengthy. Reading is a priority activity in my classroom. I know that *nothing is more important to the development of children's abilities in every subject area than reading and being read to*. I know that the richness of your child's experiences as a reader will serve him or her well in their whole lifetime, and I look forward to partnering with you as grown-ups who nurture readers.

Happy Reading,

Sarah Acosta Landry



Please detach this portion and return to school with your child.

Student Name: _____

Parent Name: _____

I have read the information presented in this letter and agree to partner with Ms. Acosta to foster a love of reading in my child by providing encouragement, engaging in conversations with my son or daughter about what they are reading, and helping to hold my child accountable for reading 30 minutes every afternoon or evening.

Parent Signature and Date