

Sample Back-to-School Packet for Parents

Dear Families,

I would like to take a few minutes to describe our first-grade program for this year.

Language Arts

Five Star Comprehensive Approach to Language and Literacy, or CALL, is a framework for literacy instruction in K-3 classrooms. The framework consists of seven elements: interactive read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, interactive writing, writing workshop, and word learning. The *Rigby Literacy by Design* program will be used to reinforce the many reading skills children will be learning. This program is broken up into themes and will provide children with rich literature and various opportunities to practice the skills that proficient readers need. Students also participate in independent literacy centers during the small-group reading block.

Reading aloud is the single most influential factor in young children's success in learning to read. Reading aloud improves listening skills, builds vocabulary, aids reading comprehension, and has a positive impact on students' attitudes toward reading. In the classroom, a specific time is set aside to read a book specifically chosen from the rich array of children's literature. Read-aloud books are matched to the students' interests, listening abilities, and district, state, and federal standards.

Shared reading is a rewarding strategy in which the learners see the text, observe an expert reading it with fluency and expression, and are invited to read along. Shared reading replicates the experience of storybook reading, where a child sits on an adult's lap and listens or follows along as the adult reads aloud. In the classroom, shared reading involves using enlarged text with the whole class to support children as they develop and grow as readers. Shared reading for beginning readers occurs when someone who is already a proficient reader (the teacher) reads with someone who is still learning to read. Shared reading for more proficient readers allows the teacher to focus on comprehension and introduce content-area concepts, vocabulary, and advanced literacy skills.

The purpose of *guided reading* is to give students opportunities to practice strategies for reading increasingly challenging books. Teachers support children as they get meaning from the text while using problem-solving strategies to figure out words they don't know, deal with various types of sentence structure, and understand new concepts. Teachers use questions and coaching statements to reinforce and prompt the students as they use these strategies. The goal is for students to use reading strategies independently.

Independent reading is critical to successful reading development. Children learn to read by reading. Time must be set aside for students to independently read from easy or just-right texts in order to practice strategies and develop fluency. Children need to experience what it "feels like" to be a reader. To become lifelong readers, students need to choose to read, select materials, and respond to what they have read. Independent reading is the ultimate goal of a successful reading program.

Interactive writing is a cooperative event in which teacher and children jointly compose and write text. They share the duty of scribe. The teacher uses the interactive writing session to model reading, writing, and spelling strategies as she engages children in creating a model text. Students are engaged in the encoding process of writing and the decoding process of reading, all within the same piece of text. While the scribe is writing, the teacher instructs children in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, content, or handwriting.

Writing workshop is critical to the success of the writing program and is supported in a variety of ways. Teachers provide direct writing instruction through focus lessons. They write for their students in order to model writing expectations and crafting possibilities. Students then have daily practice time to orchestrate all they are learning about writing. The writing process (brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) provides the structure for most writing instruction. A time to share writing, called the "author's chair," is a necessary part of the writing workshop. Students are motivated to write when they have a real audience. Share time also offers a chance to reinforce the day's writing lesson and celebrates what students are doing well in their writing.

A student writing rubric is included in the packet for you to peruse. PLEASE be involved in your child's writing to help him or her become a proficient writer!

We will be using the Spell to Excel spelling program this year for the word learning component of CALL. This program focuses on two basic instructional approaches: word study and word walls. Word study and word wall activities will help students learn spelling generalizations and patterns that they can apply when spelling new words. Spell to Excel will include the following types of activities:

- Word study will require students to learn common spelling patterns. As students learn these patterns, they will be able to apply them to new words.
- Students will learn spelling strategies to help them spell unfamiliar words.
- We will also establish “no excuse” words. Students will be expected to learn these words and use them correctly in all of their writing. These no excuse words will be memorized, because they are common words that often do not follow a pattern.
- The word wall will be used to help students identify spelling patterns and to use as a resource for their daily writing.

The goal is to learn the generalizations—not memorize lists of words. Students' spelling grades will be assessed through mastery of spelling patterns in their daily writing, and not through a score on their weekly test. The focus of assessment is on learning the patterns and applying them to independent writing and to other words. A spelling list will be sent home each week (starting around the third week of school) and you are encouraged to work with your child in learning the patterns of the words. Your child will not be tested on the words sent home, but will be tested on words with the same spelling pattern. For example, the list sent home might include: *rake*, *snake*, and *bake*, but the child will be tested on the words: *lake*, *take* and *make*.

You are an important partner in your child's learning. There are many ways you can help with spelling. Some activities that you might try at home include:

- Read books to your child, including song books, alphabet books, and rhymes.
- As you read, have your child follow along, looking at the words.
- Ask to see your child's weekly spelling words, and then ask about the similarities or patterns in the words.
- Dictate the weekly words to your child and have him or her tell you the pattern.
- Talk about the tricky parts of words.
- Help your child notice letter patterns or how words are alike and different.
- Show pride in your child's attempts by noticing what is right about the words, not just what is wrong.
- Play word games such as Boggle, Scrabble, Wheel of Fortune, and so on.
- Encourage writing at home for real reasons—letters, notes, lists, and so on.

Literacy centers are designed to engage children in meaningful, independent work that reinforces literacy instruction. Students are offered work choices that provide opportunities to practice independently what they've done with support in guided-teaching context. While students are purposefully engaged, the teacher assesses students' reading progress, conducts guided-reading groups, reciprocal-teaching groups, or book clubs.

The *school library* is an integral part of your child's reading program. Students will be allowed to check out books from the school library. Students may keep the books until their due date, but are encouraged to read the books and return them the next day. Returning the book the next day helps prevent books from becoming lost, but most important, it will increase your child's enjoyment of reading, because he or she will be able to check out new books sooner, as children are allowed to check out new books when previous books are

returned. A shared book is a fantastic experience. Family enthusiasm and enjoyment of a book creates a growing environment for young readers. And you'll love it!

Reading homework is required Monday through Thursday (ten to fifteen minutes per night). Students will complete their Books I Have Read form after completing their reading homework. This form is part of each student's homework responsibility. Most nights your child will bring home a book from a guided reading group. This is the book he or she should be reading at night. If he or she does not have a book from a reading group, he or she should read other selections. A good choice would be the books in your child's treasure chest.

First graders also need to have stories read aloud to them in the comfort of their home. Choose a chapter book to read as a family. Brothers and sisters can join in. By hearing you read, your child picks up on the rhythm of language. Your child will be exposed to words that he or she will see later. Some authors to look for are: Beverly Cleary, E. B. White, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Mary Pope Osborne.

Mathematics

Math will be taught using the Everyday Mathematics Program. This is a quick-paced, spiraling program based upon the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards. We will often introduce a new concept, and then move on to another skill before most students have mastered that concept. The concepts are reintroduced and reviewed many times throughout the year.

There is a Math Home Link with each daily lesson, beginning with lesson eight in unit one. These are homework pages reviewing the skill worked on that day. The Home Links always have a brief description of the skill for parents. It is important for students to follow the steps learned at school for completing the Home Links, so they do not become confused. Home Links should be completed and returned the next school day for two reasons: (1) the homework reinforces that day's lesson, and (2) to receive credit for math homework, it must be returned *on time*.

The students do their daily math work in a workbook, and it is advised that the pages not be torn out in case we have to refer back to previous work. This means that you will not see a lot of daily math work come home in weekly folders.

Science, Geography, and Social Studies

The curriculum is integrated so that students can develop a deep, well-rounded understanding of concepts that were introduced in kindergarten, and will be expanded on in the first grade.

Topics of study will include:

- Pebbles, sand, and silt
- Plants
- Balance and motion
- Economics
- Family traditions and celebrations
- Community
- Geography

Friday Folders

On Fridays, your child will bring home a folder with the week's work, homework pages, and correspondence from the office or me. Inside the folder is a comment sheet for you to sign indicating to me that you have seen the work. There is also space for you to write comments or ask questions. I will get back to you with answers

to your questions as quickly as possible. This is our line of weekly communication. You may keep what is sent home, but PLEASE have your child return the folder on Monday.

Homework

First grade is a busy and exciting time. Parents are a child's first teacher. Therefore, it is important to establish a strong connection between home and school. One way we can accomplish this is through daily and weekly homework. Homework is given on a regular basis, Monday through Thursday, and should take about ten minutes, plus reading ten to fifteen minutes per night.

The purpose of homework is:

- To give the child additional practice on a skill
- To give parent and child the opportunity to work together on an assignment
- To teach children responsibility for doing and returning homework
- To help the students realize that learning does not just take place in the classroom
- To give students who need extra time to finish their daily class work an opportunity to receive credit for completing it

Your child will bring home a "daily homework" page. It will be filled out with checks next to the items your child is responsible for that evening. Please assist your child by setting up a homework plan that will let your child know:

- When he or she is to do his or her homework (that is, when he or she gets home from school, after dinner, or some other time)
- Where he or she is to work (It is very important that your child have a quiet place in which to work.)
- What he or she is to do when finished (Children want to know that you are interested in their work, so please look over your child's work and talk with him or her about it.)

Your child's work will be graded at school, but please check it over for completeness, so he or she has a chance to earn full credit (if completed correctly). Please initial each day's assignments to let me know that you've had a chance to review your child's completed work with him or her. Help your child develop strong study habits and a sense of responsibility by monitoring his or her homework *daily*.

Students who take the work home to complete must return it the following day to receive credit. If children are absent from school, they will bring home missed work the day they return to school. They have the number of days they were absent plus one day to make up the missed work to receive credit for it.

Classroom Discipline

Since lifelong success depends in part on learning to make responsible choices, the class will develop a classroom discipline plan that affords students guidance in making good decisions about their behavior and thus an opportunity to learn in a safe, educational environment. I know that together we can make this happen. First, students will brainstorm a list of rules for our classroom. Next, we will review the rules for the school, and compare our list to it. We will decide where our rules fit into the school's rules. We will probably discover that our long list (usually two-plus pages!) of rules all fit into the school's list. Once children see that their rules all fit into school's rules, we'll go with the building rules, since five rules are so much easier to remember than two-plus pages!

Sometimes we make poor choices. In our classroom, the sequence of events for students' poor behavior choices is as follows:

- **First time (green card)**—He or she will receive either a natural consequence or a reminder about the rule (depending on the seriousness of the infraction and the creativity of the teacher in thinking of an appropriate natural consequence)
- **Second time (yellow card)**—He or she will receive either a natural consequence or a choice (choice means fix the behavior or go to the “Thoughtful Spot” to think about what to do next time)
- **Third time (pink card)**—I make the choice. He or she goes to the “Thoughtful Spot” to think about what to do next time (5 minutes)
- **Fourth (orange card)**—He or she will write a letter to a parent during recess time, to tell them about the poor choices made that day. This letter will come home in the daily homework folder. Please be sure to discuss the behavior with your child, and positive choices he or she could make next time instead. Your child should return the letter the next day with your signature. If the behavior occurs too close to the end of the day to allow for letter writing, your child or I will call you to tell you about the behavior.

If a child reaches level four on a frequent basis, a child/parent/teacher conference will need to be arranged to assist the student in making better choices.

If a child makes good choices for the whole week, he or she is eligible to be selected for Captain of the Week. One good citizen will be selected each week of school to be our Captain. So, if your child comes home on Friday and tells you that he or she has been selected as Captain of the Week for the following week, give him or her a hug. He or she deserves it. Your child has done an excellent job in class! He or she may bring special sharing items all that week, which may include a favorite book, toy, or picture.

We also have a Classroom Reward Jar. When the whole class is doing an especially good job, they can add an item to the jar. When we reach our goal, the class votes on a group reward.

Birthdays

Birthdays are so exciting! You may send treats in for your child’s birthday, but please make sure they are self-serving treats such as cupcakes, brownies, cookies, candy bars, boxes or packages of fruit, ice cream bars, and so on. There isn’t time to serve treats such as cakes and scoop-out ice cream, as we share them during recess time.

Another idea I would like to suggest, for those interested, is donating a copy of a favorite book to the classroom library instead of bringing in edible treats. This would expand our collection, bring continued enjoyment to the classroom, and provide your child and his or her classmates with a great shared reading experience. Your child (or the teacher, if your child so chooses) will read the donated book on his or her birthday. We have a birthday picnic at the end of May or beginning of June for all summer birthdays.

Please do not send your child to school with personal invitations to a party. It is too hurtful to the students who do not receive an invitation. At the Meet the Teacher Open House in August, parents will have an opportunity to be included in a class address and phone book. If you would like your child to be included, please be sure to fill out the appropriate form. The information will be gathered, typed, and given out to those families participating. Families may use this information for mailing invitations, contacting friends for play dates, and so on.

Lunch

The school sells lunch for \$2.35 per day, or \$11.75 per week. I would like to encourage students who plan to eat hot lunch on a regular basis to bring money for at least a week of lunches at a time to put into their cafeteria account. This helps prevent a crisis of lost or forgotten lunch money. If you do not want your child to purchase snacks from the lunchroom with this money, be sure to write “lunch only” on the message line of your check.

Volunteers

Our classroom is a child-centered classroom. Using this approach takes much child-adult interaction. I am looking for parent (or grandparent) volunteers who can share an hour or more each week with us. For parents who are unable to come into our classroom but would still like to help, you can sign up for take-home projects. Attached is a sheet to fill out if you are interested in helping our class.

Adjustment

First grade is a difficult adjustment for some children. It's quite a change from kindergarten. The day seems so long. First graders will come home tired, so getting plenty of rest is especially important. It can take some children up to a month to feel comfortable. Anxieties may be expressed about going to school. This is caused by various factors, such as a new teacher, more intense schoolwork, a longer day, and social interactions. It is very important that your child feel comfortable and welcome at school. If your child is having difficulty adjusting, please let me know. We can work together to pinpoint the problem and work it out.

Assessment

Three times a year we will be conducting assessment days. On these days, your child will be individually assessed. You will sign up for a block of time for your child's assessment on these days. It is imperative that your child arrive on time on the day selected. The beginning-of-the year and midyear assessments will be used to plan appropriate instruction for your child. The end-of-the-year assessment will be used to help measure the growth your child has made in first grade.

Information and forms are included in this packet that will be used in each student's assessments throughout this year. These are for you to look at and use as a reference for your child's assessment this year.

First-Grade High-Frequency Reading Words

By the end of first grade, all first graders are expected to read this list of high-frequency words (also known as "no excuse" words) by sight. The students are tested in the fall and spring.

Writing Rubrics

These rubrics are used to assess a student's progress with writing skills. Students are expected to have mastered skills in the "proficient" column by their writing sample in May.

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I am confident that this year will be a positive learning experience for all of us. Please don't hesitate to call me at **[insert phone number]**, or email me at **[insert email address]** with any questions or concerns. If you are interested in volunteering, please fill out the volunteer sign-up form that follows. I am looking forward to this EXCITING year with your child!

Sincerely,

First-Grade Teacher

Source: Kim Caley-Oviatt, first grade at Adapted from Prairie Hills Elementary School, Thornton, Colorado. Used with permission.

Volunteer Sign-Up

☐ Yes, I have an hour or more a week to share with my child's class.

The best day for me is (please circle all that apply):

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

The best time for me to volunteer is:

Morning

Afternoon

Night

____ I'm an avid scrapbooker and would be very interested in working on a digital scrapbook for the class.

____ I'm not available to come into the classroom, but would be willing to do things at home. I would be willing to (please circle all that apply):

Type

Color

Glue

Computer work (that is, type stories)

Make games

Cut

Assemble student books

Cover/repair books

other: _____

Child's name _____ Parent's signature _____

Phone number _____

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