

### Classroom Practice and Community Building

Our day starts at 8.30, with a **class meeting**, run by each of the children in turn. By taking responsibility for the meeting, the children learn both how to lead a meeting and how to listen to other people's reports and opinions. We have begun the year with a number of community-building activities and games designed to foster cooperation within the class and the wider school community. The meeting also includes a minute or so of silence in which the children (and teachers) visualize the day ahead, and their part in it. Every week we have a 'questions session' in which the children can ask about any topic that interests them. We also have regular confidential whole-class discussions, using the 'dialogue' technique or a more formal council meeting, in which children can talk to each other about any problems that arise within the class.

### Theme

This year's theme is **The American West**. We will be focusing on the westward expansion of the United States, beginning with the Northwest Territory in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and moving on to the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition. We will consider why farmers in particular moved west from Massachusetts, and we'll read stories of westward migration along the Oregon Trail. We will study the experience of Native Americans, and we have already looked at what happened to Indians in the Northwest Territory. Among other topics, we'll cover homesteading, immigration, the California Gold Rush and the Civil War (briefly!). We will learn about the role of the railroads in development of the west, and in particular, the building of the first transcontinental railroad. We will be reading several books from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, to give a narrative thread, and provide a picture of the life of western settlers. There will be a strong geography element in the theme, and the children will engage in various mapping projects as we track the United States' acquisition of new territory, and the accession of new states throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Our **annual play** is an important part of our study, which draws together various aspects of the children's understanding of the year's theme. The children write the play together and everyone has a speaking role. This is a major cross-curricular activity, involving theme, writing, art, performance and music.

### Language Arts

**Reading:** Our reading program has three main strands: individual books, group readers and whole-class books. Each child develops fluency by choosing individual reading books from a selection that is 'just right' for his or her reading level. Comprehension is developed by discussion of the individual book with the class teacher, and through group and whole-class conversations about our various class readers. Each child has a reading/writing notebook in which he or she records aspects of their reading, makes notes of specific mini-lessons to do with both reading and writing. This year we will experiment with reserving two class reading sessions a week for non-fiction reading, apart from the non-fiction the class covers as part of the theme. Children have book-bags in which children bring their individual and group reading books to and from home every day. The aim is for each child to spend at least twenty minutes reading every evening. Our class meetings include regular book reports in which children describe and recommend books to each other. The daily schedule ends with the children listening to a read-aloud book. This is always a special part of the day, in which students and teachers enjoy a wide variety of books together, both fiction and non-fiction.

**Writing:** As usual we have begun the year with a poetry project, in which the children read and hear a wide variety of poems before writing poetry of their own. Other writing projects will include a memoir project

and a non-fiction report based on children's individual research on a theme topic that interests them. The play is also a major writing project in which the children work both individually and collaboratively.

We will also study aspects of grammar, including basic parts of speech and conventions of syntax and punctuation, but we will study these as part of the writing process, rather than as stand-alone subjects. There will also be regular exercises to reinforce the children's learning. Children learn various general spelling rules in class and will be taking home a weekly list of words to learn. These will sometimes be related to the spelling rule of the week, and at other times the words will be taken from the list of words each grade should be able to spell. In this case, weekly tests cover the ten words, plus four more from previous lists. Children will be grouped according to the spelling rules they need to be learning, rather than by grade.

**Handwriting:** In general, we expect that all 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>-graders will use cursive script as a matter of course for all their written work, from note-taking to final drafts. Fourth-graders will learn (or consolidate) cursive skills, so they can adopt cursive for all their work by 5<sup>th</sup> grade. When children have established a consistent and legible cursive script as their default style, they no longer have to do formal handwriting homework.

### Mathematics

Mathematics is the only subject taught by grade. In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Grades we follow the TERC **Investigations** curriculum, which enables children to build on their own understanding, and develop confidence in their own mathematical and investigative abilities. We're now using an updated Investigations curriculum that conforms to the national Common Core State Standards. Investigations offers students opportunities for varied experiences with mathematical concepts, through games and other hands-on activities. Children are encouraged to use multiple strategies to solve problems and engage with peers to stretch their thinking. The *Investigations* curriculum fosters an intuitive and collaborative approach to math, in which children often arrive at solutions because they recognize mathematical patterns, while at the same time learning a range of math skills. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade we work with the **Connected Math** curriculum, which is based on the same principles as *Investigations*, and our current curriculum, introduced last year, also follows the Common Core standards.

### Science

Our focus is to connect children with the natural world and explore major scientific concepts with hands-on activities. We will develop connections with the theme whenever possible. We will develop familiarity with the scientific method through independent science projects. The science curriculum is planned throughout 1<sup>st</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade so topics can be introduced during an appropriate theme and developmental stage. This year we will explore the changes of our landscape over time with trip to Fisher Museum at Harvard Forest. We will study trees, photosynthesis, ecological succession, and prepare a tree leaf collection. Later in the year we will study the main biomes of the American west. We will also explore simple machines including inclined planes, wheels, levers, pulleys, and gears. We do labs for each major topic. We use Lego Dacta lever, pulley, and gear kits as well as other materials. We will make electromagnets using common materials. We will explore series and parallel circuits. The students use the scientific method to do an independent experiment, after which they write a report using lab report format, prepare a poster explaining the experiment's findings and show their project at **Science Night**, which is a non-competitive event. We will do light and optics experiments. We will take photos using 35mm cameras, develop the film and print the resulting photos.

### **Art**

In art, the students will use their imagination, add to their visual repertoire, grow in confidence, and communicate in a non-verbal way. All the while they'll have lots of fun learning about art history and trying new techniques and concepts. This year's theme lends itself to students doing art work inspired by American Artists. Projects will include marbledizing, portraiture, observational drawings and print making. We will continue to study a 'painting of the week' using posters displayed in class, ranging from 15<sup>th</sup> century to late 20<sup>th</sup> century works.

### **Spanish**

Spanish is taught through movement, stories, games and songs, and is based on the TPR (Total Physical Response) system. Students actively participate in each class, learning basic conversational skills and telling simple stories, aided by movement and acting as they learn to understand and respond to the language.

### **Music**

This year we will focus on traditional American folk songs. Students will learn rounds and harmonies, with an emphasis on singing in parts. Students will also develop their understanding of rhythm and math in musical notation. Recorder lessons include learning to read music and play by ear on both soprano and alto recorders. Students should practice for 5-15 minutes a day at home.

### **Physical Education & Movements**

With the rest of the school, the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade class engages in a variety of physical activities on Friday afternoons, according to the season. These include hiking, soccer, skiing and swimming. The 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade also works at 'movements', rhythmic dances and exercises performed to music, that involve a combination of physical and mental attention.

### **Homework**

The core of our homework is a daily reading assignment, which the book-bag system is intended to support. We expect every child to read at home for at least twenty minutes a day. In addition there's math homework on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, designed to support the class lessons that precede and follow it. From time to time there may be additional specific reading assignments. There will also be some writing homework, generally to help develop individual writing projects, but sometimes on particular writing topics. Each child has a homework folder for carrying homework, and a weekly log in which to record homework for the day. We are developing a routine in which these are brought up to date in the lesson on which the homework is based. We would prefer parents to support homework by establishing routines, rather than by helping their children to do the homework itself. If a child is having difficulties – particularly in math - it is important for us to see that, so we can review the concepts and problems in the class (which benefits all the members of the group). The total time devoted to homework - including reading - should be no longer than 60 minutes a day, because we believe children need time to follow other pursuits at home.