

Breakwater School
K-5 Philosophy
April 6, 2006

Kindergarten

A large part of each Kindergarten child's experience is social. The activities and opinions of peers take on unprecedented importance, often eclipsing that of adults, and drawing the child further from his/her egocentric or self-centered stage of development. We work to enhance the development of each child's personal identity socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually, and creatively, by offering opportunities for every student to develop his/her strengths while supporting his/her areas of need.

Our balance of academic, physical, social and artistic activities provides opportunities for well-rounded growth. Our classroom structure allows for individual choice and responsibility, to encourage the growth of each child's independence and self-confidence. We also work to support each child's emerging social skills: the understanding of cooperation, consideration for others, and caring for the classroom environment.

The physical layout of our classroom environment is designed to encourage these skills. The use of both partners and small and large group activities further enhances each child's emerging understanding about being part of a community. Children develop a sense of group membership and identity through daily discussions, sharing during meeting times and whole class activities, and through the care and maintenance of the classroom environment.

Early literacy, math, science and arts experiences are abundant in our kindergarten curriculum. At this age, a child's emerging understanding of spoken language continues to develop and our curriculum builds on this skill while introducing concepts in written language or print. Literacy activities focus on the sounds letters make, the sequence of a well-told story and fine motor skills necessary to communicate using written symbols or letters.

Geometry, patterns, graphing, estimating and activities which teach the concept of measured quantities are presented as a foundation for mathematical understandings. Children are introduced to Cuisenaire Rods, Pattern Blocks, and measurement tools, the math materials they will use throughout their elementary school years.

Science, French, Gym and Art are available as special classes beginning in the Kindergarten year. Children work both inside and outside of their own classroom with Breakwater staff who specialize in these areas.

First and Second Grade

Coming upstairs to the first and second grade classrooms is a big step for Breakwater students. Although social interaction continues to play a central role in the first and second grade curriculum, our students have fewer independent work choices as their academic skills are sharpened through individual, small group, and whole class instruction. The newly arriving six year-olds are anxious to produce “work” and generally love to finish tangible tasks quickly. Since they have been accustomed to working in the social, play-oriented Kindergarten, ample time is given for them to adjust to the “upstairs” while learning from the encouragement and expectations of their teachers and the model set by returning second grade students. The incumbent seven year-olds, who tend to be serious, independent workers who prefer quality over quantity, love setting the positive example for the new arrivals. Our classes have the unique advantage of mixing six and seven year olds in the beginning of the year, allowing the discovery and discussion of how different types of people and learners make interesting communities and enabling the second grade students to act as models while the first grade students slowly adjust to the new way of learning.

The beginning of each school year is spent building community. Our focus for the first several weeks is on activities aimed at getting to know each other and feeling comfortable in our group. These activities demonstrate that each student is beautifully unique and a vital member of our group while setting the tone of our village-like classroom. Since social relations and interactions are an integral part of the life (especially for first and second graders), we discuss social situations throughout the year through real-life situations as well as literature. Like a village, we discuss social issues that arise and brainstorm ways to remedy difficult situations.

We believe that ritual builds community, and strive to empower our students with a predictable schedule and understandable, child-based guidelines for behavior. We start every day with a routine Morning Meeting in which similar activities are performed daily. This predictable start to the day eases the transition from home to school and provides a comfortable, reassuring start to the school day.

Since students have different learning styles, and their learning styles vary according to situations (time of day or teaching content, to name two), our instruction is conducted in a variety ways. We provide individual, small group, and whole class instruction. Students work individually, in partners, and in small groups, Using various teaching strategies ensures that students who are naturally inclined towards a specific type of instruction receive it while broadening their learning style to benefit from other types of instruction. For example, a student who works best in small groups will have the opportunity to do so several times a day but will also have several opportunities to practice working independently, a crucial skill.

Children in this age group learn best when the content matter is tangible and connected to real-life experiences. With this in mind, we construct integrated units of study to provide comprehensive learning throughout the year. We strive to tie all subject matter into our integrated units. In addition, we tailor each year’s units to the interests and learning styles of our current classes. Our units are also accompanied by field trips and discussions with guest experts. A recent unit on boats in Maine, for example, was loosely structured by the book *Young Man and the Sea*, in which a young islander raises money by selling lobsters and then fixes up a boat that has been neglected. As we read the chapters aloud, we acted out scenes from the novel, drew pictures to help visualize and remember the story, invited a Maine boat builder to demonstrate the work that the “Young Man” was doing, hosted a Maine lobsterman who demonstrated the functionality of the lobster trap, rode the ferry to Peak’s Island, visited the fireboats in Portland Harbor, and visited the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath. Students read boat- related books in their book groups (*Pippi In the South Seas*, *The Titanic Lost and Found*, etc.), in independent reading (*David Macaulay’s Ship*, *the Ultimate Book of Cross-Sections*, etc.) and in read-alouds (*Burt Dow*, *Deep Water Man*, for example). We tied math into our unit by calculating the Young Man’s lobster sales and used word problems that related to our focus. Students made clay boats in Art class, sang seafaring songs in music, and made floating, self-propelled boats in Science. Several such thematic units are conducted each year.

Reading, writing, and math are taught using a “workshop” model. Generally, teachers begin each workshop by teaching a short lesson to the whole class. Then, the class breaks into groups and moves to various stations. There are usually 2-4 stations. The teachers work with the small groups in at least one of these stations to ensure that each group receives quality small-group instructional time. Other stations might require students to work independently, in partners, or in their small groups.

Reading and Writing Workshop happens at least once a day. A mini-lesson is usually taught to the entire class, often focusing either on a specific writing or reading skill or on the current thematic unit. Then, the class breaks up into small groups. As a group, they travel through stations that allow them to apply the knowledge from the day’s mini-lesson and read and write with partners and/or independently. Each “Book group” also meets with a teacher for one or two stations. At the “book group” station, they read a book as a group and practice the reading skills that the teacher chooses for their particular group. For example, a book group reading *Frog and Toad* might focus on reading fluently with expression while a book group reading *Stuart Little* might focus on comprehension strategies. We celebrate the completion of books that each book group reads with creative displays such as plays, shadow puppet shows, and story sharing. Often, the classroom teacher will focus the small-group time on writing for one specific weekday. During this time, students meet with teachers to discuss the writing pieces that they are working on. We focus much of the school year on writing personal narratives because students can write best about real-life experiences. Students also write several reports, book reviews, and poems during the year.

Word Study is a structured time for students to learn about spelling words that happens for 10-15 minutes every day. Using a mix of whole-class, individual, and partner activities, students work on spelling commonly used words correctly. We also choose a spelling pattern to investigate each week, starting with simple vowel sounds and getting more advanced as the year goes on.

Handwriting is practiced for 10-15 minutes each day. We teach correct pencil grip, paper orientation, and manuscript writing using the *Handwriting without Tears* curriculum. This program is especially good for developing fine motor skills, and caters to both right- and left- handed students.

We believe that math should be fun and exciting. Our math curriculum, based on *Investigations*, revolves around child-centered discovery of our mathematical system through a series of hands-on activities and games. Students who enjoy math and who are equipped with a deep understanding of the way that the number system works tend to learn more advanced math more readily. Much of the math we do throughout the two years is focused on investigating the 100’s chart and the relationships of numbers. Similar to the reading and writing workshop, math is taught in whole-class and small group sessions. Stations often require students to work independently, in partners, or in small groups.

First and Second grade students benefit from Essentialists in Science, Outdoor Adventure, French, Performing Arts and Visual Arts. These subjects are taught outside of the classroom for 90 minutes a week. Essentialists collaborate with classroom teachers and focus on the same integrated units of study as much as possible.

Third and Fourth Grade

The upper grade years at Breakwater are an exciting time of transition and growth. Children are bridging or leaving the "primary block" of elementary school and are progressing through the stages of middle childhood. During this stage children work at solidifying knowledge and skills, while learning to apply them to the mastery of more complex tasks.

Our curriculum provides experiences which enable students to gain increased awareness of their own learning pace and progress. Cursive writing, multiplication and division, and standard spelling symbolize this flow into a more "grown up" world. Third and fourth graders are eager to embrace more conventional ways of spelling, for example, or take on longer, more challenging books.

A strong emphasis on meta-cognition (thinking about one's thinking or learning process) is apparent in the upper grades at Breakwater. Children are asked to reflect upon their experiences and to draw conclusions about their preferred styles of learning, their problem-solving strategies, and their own, unique learning process. "How did you get that answer?", "What are your goals for this week?", "How do you feel about your work during the last hour?", and "What do you plan to do next?" are a few of the questions you'll hear frequently in our classrooms.

Fifth Grade

Fifth grade is an exciting time, and marks the culmination of elementary school. In addition to what has been described in the third and fourth grade program, Fifth graders are engaged in many special experiences designed both to keep them involved in the community life of the school and to acknowledge their accomplishments as graduating "seniors". They volunteer as helpers on a weekly basis in the Pre-school and Kindergarten classrooms. They take a leading role in school-wide multi-age activities like Learning Buddies, Multicultural Travel Week, and Earth Week. They camp out together on a Survival Overnight experience. They plan, design, and fund-raise for their own end-of-the year Field Trip. And they are honored at Fifth Grade Graduation, when each student presents a speech before a large crowd of well-wishers.

The fifth grade program is designed to teach students to become critical thinkers. By fifth grade, students are in the wonderful position of having the basic skills - reading, writing, and arithmetic - in place. This means they are ready to be more analytical in their reading, more reflective in their writing, and more theoretical in their mathematics.

Fifth graders are described by Chip Wood of the Northeast Foundation for Children as the "most actively receptive learners of factual information" for whom "ordering their world is central." These children are solidly in the stage of middle childhood, so they demonstrate a strong need for mastery and organization as well as an ability to become critical thinkers.