Breakwater School
K-5 Language Arts Curriculum Overview
July 14, 2006

Children enter school already possessing a keen interest in language. They are curious about the magic contained in books, magazines, and newspapers. Breakwater's language arts program is designed to foster a love of reading and writing - a passion for the written and spoken word. We know children learn best when information is presented in a meaningful context. Skills traditionally taught in isolation (grammar, spelling, and phonics, for example) are presented through the study and enjoyment of literature. Skills are integrated throughout the curriculum as children write about their math experiences, learn new vocabulary in science, and interpret and discuss opposing viewpoints in social studies.

Current knowledge about child development and the stages of literacy acquisition inform our curriculum planning and guide programmatic decisions. During their course of study, children continually engage in activities that require them to use and interpret language. In grades one through five students learn about reading by studying different authors and various literary genres. They develop an understanding of spelling and grammar by writing and editing original stories and sharing them with peers in a 'Writer's Workshop.'

Presentation, listening, and speaking skills grow as youngsters share the work they create in response to literature. They learn to read and write by thinking and acting like authors.

Our classrooms are 'print-rich' environments filled with books, magazines, charts, poems, and songs. Short, predictable stories are used extensively in the lower primary grades to support emerging literacy, while older students expand their horizons by exploring literary genre and content area text. At all levels children are given ample opportunities to write. Their student-generated writing is used in a variety of activities including reading practice and skills instruction.

Our students celebrate their literary accomplishments in many ways. They publish their work, display and share their book response projects, and offer dramatic presentations of what they have read or written. All of these activities are designed to offer children a wide range of outlets for their work as readers and writers.

The following pages provide a curriculum overview grade by grade:

- Kindergarten
- First and Second Grades
- Third and Fourth Grades
- Fifth Grade

Kindergarten

Kindergarten children begin to learn written language as a means of communication with others. We present written and spoken language in a variety of formats throughout the classroom curriculum each day, drawing on each child's interests and experiences. Our primary goals are to share our love of language and literature with our students, to lay the foundation for formal reading and writing, to provide our students with the tools and experiences they need for further self-expression, and to provide ample opportunities to explore language and to practice skills. In our daily activities, we emphasize:

- the association of spoken and written language symbols; letter formation, letter sounds, and sight words
- expression of ideas and feelings through spoken and written language
- appreciation and enjoyment of language and literature, including poetry and prose
- comprehension skills (vocabulary, sequence of events, characters, main ideas, etc.)

Some of the ways we address these components include:

- class, small group, and individual conversations
- poetry readings and memorization
- stories read aloud, both in conventional and "big book" formats
- dramatic play and acting out stories
- individual journal writing and conferences
- story telling

First and Second Grades

The First and Second Grade literacy program uses a wide array of children's literature to instill a love of language and literature as students become readers. It also provides the tools and experiences needed to further each student's self expression and exploration of language, while providing ample opportunities for children to practice skills.

Students memorize and practice poems and songs, then make books to illustrate them. Rhythmic verses are used to help students learn to read words by sight and students then learn strategies to help them decode and make sense of unfamiliar words. Our classrooms have shared reading times when books and poems are read together. Children learn words, sentence structure, capitalization and grammar through reinforcement of what they are seeing and reading.

The ability to express thoughts and ideas in written form also follows a developmental pattern. Students write their thoughts down on paper using developmental spelling – approximations of standard spellings that reflect their growing understanding of letters and their sounds. Because the written word is a symbolic form of the spoken word, reading-writing and listening-speaking tasks are often taught together. This emphasizes the connection between written communication and the spoken word.

Children develop an understanding of different types of writing by applying their writing abilities in a variety of formats. Daily journal entries allow them to organize their thoughts in free expression without many external constraints. Through process writing they refine their skill in writing for a broader audience. Various individual and group reports provide experiences with informational writing. Using their own ideas for a story, students write rough drafts and edit for spelling, punctuation and capitalization appropriate to their level of development. Finally, they publish, bind and illustrate their books. The class is also frequently involved in directed writing for a specific purpose, like a group story, report or a thank-you letter to a classroom visitor.

The components of literacy addressed in first and second grade include:

- expression and communication of ideas and feelings through spoken and written language
- appreciation and enjoyment of language and literature, both fiction and non fiction
- basic mechanics of writing
- association of spoken and written language symbols, including letter forms and sounds and sight words
- comprehension skills, including sequence of events, characters, and main ideas
- learning to read through the use of meaningful books, stories, poems and language relating to the child's world and developmental level.

Third and Fourth Grades

Children's natural use and love of language permeates all we do in our Language Arts program. Language is one of the first things a child miraculously learns, shaping concept development and learning throughout life. This intricate system of communication opens up the world in myriad, splendid ways.

We capitalize on its beauty as we focus on four areas of language in our classrooms: Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. All four components are closely interwoven and explored together, and the classroom environment is rich with both the written and spoken word. Learning language and using language to learn are inseparable as language plays a critical role throughout all subject areas. Nurturing a genuine enthusiasm for and enjoyment of reading and writing are the goals of the Language Arts program.

READING

Third and fourth graders are moving into a more independent stage of reading which provides a foundation for lifelong enjoyment of reading and writing. As students move through the stages of reading, they use more conventional strategies to make meaning from print with ease and understanding. Reading fluently, however, does not necessarily guarantee there will be the motivation to read. The classroom becomes an extremely important setting in which the joy of reading is nurtured and shared.

Ample opportunities to read and respond to one's reading are provided in the third/fourth grade program. Support for the wide variety of independent reading activities listed here is at the core of our literacy curriculum.

Read at Home (RAH) Program: Students are asked to read on a daily basis at home and record the titles of the books they read as well as comment and note new or interesting vocabulary words. Parents participate, too, by encouraging their children to read. This is an extension of the program children are introduced to in first grade.

Independent Reading in School: Individual students read silently and respond to a variety of texts of their own choosing, expanding the depth and breadth of their reading with continuous teacher support and guidance.

Novel Study: Students regularly participate in small consistent groups to read and share thoughts about the same book. Books are selected based on the current classroom theme or on specific genre studies and students are given the opportunity to explore literature and elements of narrative fiction. Within this framework, children complete individual work which is brought to the group in a collaborative discussion. A broad range of projects is developed with students to enrich understanding of what they've read.

Read Aloud: High quality literature is shared aloud by the teacher on a daily basis.

Theme-related Reading: During our various curriculum themes, students are expected to explore the topic under study through reading, often of non-fiction. This reading takes place in small teacher-guided groups, in pairs and individually, depending upon the student's need. Projects or reports by groups or individuals can introduce the theme, explore it or bring it to closure.

WRITING

Third and fourth graders spend a great deal of time writing. Not only do they write in response to literature and teacher prompts, they also write on topics of their own choosing. The following activities provide many opportunities for students to stretch and grow as writers:

Personal Writing: The importance of self-reflection and personal expression is emphasized as students write about their own lives, sharing their feelings and opinions. Teachers respond and encourage inter- and intra-personal understanding.

Written Communication: Students are encouraged to write in real life situations - notes to friends, thank you notes, reminders to teachers, Letters to the Editor, etc. The power of the written word is stressed.

Writing Process: In a more formalized way, children are led through the “writing process”, learning various steps to produce a polished piece of writing (Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, and Publishing). Modeling and lessons provide a format for improving writing skills and gaining a better understanding of this process. Using their own topics and teacher prompts, some student writing will be carried through to publication, which is then shared with classmates, parents, and friends. Students also begin to understand and appreciate the importance of considering their intended audience as they write.

Exposure to a Variety of Writing Forms: Beyond personal narrative, responses to literature, and fiction, the students are exposed to a variety of other writing forms: poetry, letter writing, persuasive essays, and report writing.

Mechanics: The study of the mechanics of writing is an important part of improving writing skills. Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and format are addressed within the context of the students' own writing. Modeling and formal exercises teach specific skills the group, or individuals, need to learn.

WORD STUDY

Spelling and writing are intricately linked. Weekly spelling practice is focused on a structured program of spelling rules, and includes misspelled words from the children's own writing. Analyzing children's writing helps the teacher formulate what rules of English need to be emphasized in the spelling work.

In addition, Word Study focuses on the meaning of vocabulary. Analysis of word structure, use of contextual clues, and a comfortable understanding of reference books such as a dictionary or thesaurus, all help students develop richer vocabularies.

ORAL LANGUAGE

The third and fourth grade classroom is lively with natural conversation. Other activities that support development of speaking and listening skills include: sharing during Morning Meeting; plays, word plays, poetry recitations, and storytelling; book-project sharing, Author's Chair, and other reports; literature group discussions.

Fifth Grade

Fifth graders are entering the stage of Basic Literacy, which is the foundation for a lifelong enjoyment of reading and writing. At this point in literacy development basic fluency provides the opportunity to acquire an unshakeable love of language.

The goal of Breakwater's Fifth Grade Language Arts program is three-fold: to capitalize upon this moment of opportunity and instill a love of, and sense of competency in, reading and writing; to use this basic fluency to foster the ability to analyze and think critically; and to maximize this "teachable moment" to help students improve their reading and writing skills. These goals are arrived at through the following instructional objectives:

Encouragement of wide independent reading. The ability to read fluently does not automatically lead to motivation to read. It must be combined with a classroom environment that supports and promotes reading. This is achieved by:

(1) Reading and Responding - students select an individual book; enter into a contract with the teacher; read the book; discuss the book in one-on-one conferences with adults; complete a Book Review wherein they analyze the story's elements, including theme and author's style; prepare a creative response to the book (artwork, diorama, skit, clay scene, videotape, etc.); and present their work to the class.

(2) Novel or Genre Study - a small group of students reads, discusses, studies, analyzes, and responds to the same book or genre.

(3) Reading in the content areas - students read non-fiction or informational text in connection with a Social Studies theme that is under study; as research for a report they are writing; or as part of a Homestudy Challenge assignment.

(4) Read At Home - a nightly Homestudy assignment where students are asked to read and respond to their reading either through written comments or assigned projects.

(5) Story time - daily oral reading by the teacher of high-quality children's literature.

Development of a sense of oneself as a writer. While reading is often a receptive skill, writing is an expressive skill, requiring a student to "put themselves out there" in a unique way. Even more than with reading, acquisition of basic fluency in writing does not automatically lead to motivation or a love of writing. Here, too, a classroom environment that supports and promotes writing is crucial. This is achieved by:

(1) Writer's Studio - students individually decide to write a story or other piece of writing; complete a story plan that outlines the piece, including theme; enter into a writing contract that commits them to a completion date; discuss the writing in one-on-one conferences with adults; share the piece as it progresses with the entire group during Author's Chair; use a checklist to edit the piece; complete the final edit with an adult; publish the piece in book form.

(2) Writer's Workshop - students participate in a group lesson once a week with a focus on improving writing. Examples of group lessons are: use of a story plan, theme, paragraphing, proof-reading, mechanics of punctuation and capitalization, parts of speech, observational writing. In Writer's Workshop students also work on writing a particular kind of piece, which is published in a class anthology. Examples of assigned writing pieces are: realistic fiction, personal narrative, news article, poetry form, creation myth, personal and business letters, fable.

(3) Writing in the content areas - students learn about informative and expository writing through assignments related to a Social Studies theme, report-writing, writing for Math, and Homestudy Challenge assignments.

Growth in understanding of the conventions in reading and writing. Although most fifth graders are entering the stage called Basic Literacy, they are still on the threshold of being truly literate readers and writers. In this early part of the Basic level, they are able to both read and write with a degree of fluency, but need further development in the standard usages of English. This is accomplished through:

(1) Oral Reading - students learn to observe punctuation and other indicators of expression by reading aloud poetry, plays, their individual books, and their own writing.

(2) Spelling, or "Word Study", instruction - weekly spelling lessons about patterns, rules, and exceptions lead to a weekly home study assignment of five to ten spelling words and activities capped by a weekly quiz.

(3) Cursive instruction - weekly cursive lessons are blended with a gradually-increasing requirement to use cursive in written work.

(4) Instruction in mechanics - lessons on punctuation, capitalization, quotations, paragraphing, etc. are applied to directed editing activities as well as to the students' own stories.

Extension of meaning vocabulary. At the stage of Basic Literacy, students cross a major threshold in their acquisition of literacy and must meet the challenge of acquiring "meaning" vocabulary, that is, encountering unfamiliar words and learning to use contextual clues and analysis of word structure to discover their meaning. Extension of meaning vocabulary is addressed by:

(1) Defining new or interesting words - in all four areas of reading instruction (Reading and Responding, Novel Study, Reading in the Content Areas, and Read at Home) students are required to identify and define at least three new or interesting words on each written assignment.

(2) Using new words - in Writer's Workshop new words are introduced in lessons involving adverbs, synonyms, descriptive language, expressive modifiers, and adjectives and students then are asked to incorporate these words into their independent writing.

(3) Learning new words - every Social Studies theme and nearly every Math lesson includes the introduction and use of new language appropriate to the topic. Often these words form the basis of the list of weekly spelling words.

Development of appreciation of an audience. The reading and writing of a literate person are often directed toward an audience. Gaining an understanding of and a level of comfort with one's audience is a major task for most elementary-aged children. We foster the enjoyment of an audience and a sense of confidence in presentation through a variety of activities, some of which are: book contract presentations, Sharing Day Author's Chair (sharing stories with classmates and responding to questions and comments), presentations to parents and friends, report presentations, daily poetry reading, plays, and skits.