

Lower Elementary Parent Handbook

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Philosophy

The Lower Elementary program is thoughtfully designed to meet the needs of 6-9 year old children who are energetic, social and very curious about their expanding world. A *vigorous* (as opposed to *rigorous*) academic curriculum is blended with many enrichment activities and school life is permeated by an atmosphere of earnest respect for self, others and community. A love for learning and an appreciation of community- in the classroom, the school and the world at large- are at the heart of the Lower Elementary program.

Program Goals

- Nurture the innate curiosity of children.
- Encourage children to find joy in their work, discoveries and learning that will lead to a lifetime of purpose and continual self-education.
- Establish and strengthen foundational academic skills such as reading, writing, math skills, comprehension and critical thinking.
- Help each child discover his or her strengths and build resilience and strategies for facing challenges.
- Guide children in building positive relationships with peers and adults.
- Facilitate problem-solving among children in both social and academic situations.
- Engender a sense of community in the classroom, school and beyond, and teach children to understand the rights and responsibilities that go along with being part of a community.

Social Development

Overview

The Lower Elementary years mark a change in social development for children. Children at this age begin to develop strong social ties with their peers. Their focus shifts to these relationships, which start to take a front-row seat in their purview. You may notice that you increasingly need to share their attention with their friends.

They are learning what it means to be friends, to have empathy and how to navigate their social world. It is typical for children to experience the many vicissitudes of peer relationships that occur at this age. Friendship building and community building are an important part of formal and informal lessons and discussions every day. Teachers present and model conflict resolution strategies and positive communication skills. It is important to keep in mind that this is a process and as conflicts

arise or feelings get hurt, children are learning from these experiences with the caring support of the teachers.

Children are resilient at this age and, even as friendships shift and change, they enjoy the camaraderie, confidences, jokes and laughter of their classmates. If you have concerns or questions about any social dynamics throughout the year please contact your child's teacher so that she can work with you to resolve any issues as they arise. Check with her about the best ways and times to contact her.

Parties, Gifts and Play-dates

Another essential way for you to help create positive social dynamics is to be thoughtful when planning parties and get-togethers for children this age. ***There is no greater cause of hurt feelings than being left out of social events.*** The teacher will provide you a class list by grade and gender so that you may include all logical members when planning special events. Giving gifts at school can cause the same hurt feelings. Make sure that your child does his or her gift-giving outside of school. To avoid feelings of exclusion, children are asked not to discuss play date plans in school.

Academic Program

Child's work, Lessons, Assessments

In many ways a Lower Elementary classroom is a microcosm of the "real" world. Just as adults need to balance different aspects of their lives, students in Lower Elementary are learning to balance assignments and free-choice, working and socializing, building on strengths and trying work that is more challenging for them.

The Lower Elementary classroom environments are designed to encourage freedom of movement and allow children to make choices about where and with whom they work. This allows them to interact as they work, collaborate and engage in peer teaching, fulfilling their developmental need to socialize with each other.

They have daily and weekly assignments which they are expected to complete, but there is also ample opportunity to make their own choices to pursue work that interests them such as creative writing, investigating a math concept or researching a science topic.

Lessons are given in a variety of ways: whole-class lessons, small groups and one-on-one. Most lessons occur in the classroom but many extend beyond. Teachers might take a group of students outside for a nature lesson or to the Gym or Theater for a lesson that involves more movement, such as acting out different verbs.

While there is no formal testing at the Lower Elementary level, children have weekly spelling quizzes and periodic reading assessments. Assessments in all areas of academic progress are ongoing through careful daily observation and close engagement with the children. Teachers are continually observing children at their work, giving lessons or working one-on-one with children. This allows

teachers to get to know on a deep level how each child learns and the best ways to support each child's individual progress.

Homework

There is no homework in Lower Elementary, to allow children the free time they need to play and just be children. This decision is based on current research on health and development of children of this age, as well as confidence in the vigorous academic program that Lower Elementary provides during the school day.

There are, however, many ways you can help your child practice the skills he or she is learning at school and bring a love of learning into your home. Making reading part of your family's daily routine is a wonderful way to build skills and expose your child to a world of interests and ideas. In addition to reading with your child, practical writing opportunities such as writing "thank-you" notes or keeping a journal on a special trip, measuring out ingredients for a recipe, telling time and using money are just a few examples of other ways to make learning part of life outside of school.

Curriculum

The Lower Elementary curriculum is quite vast. Here is a general overview of the subjects and topics covered. Teachers will be happy to provide more detailed outlines and information on curriculum.

Language

The Lower Elementary classrooms are language-rich environments. Listening to and discussing novels; reading books, labels, card materials; writing stories, research reports and poetry; talking with peers about work and giving oral presentations are some examples of how language skills are integrated across the curriculum. In addition, the language curriculum itself covers all areas necessary for strong language development:

- Reading
 - Decoding
 - Comprehension
- Writing
 - Mechanics
 - Spelling
 - Cursive handwriting
 - Typing (for 2nd and 3rd year children)
 - Creative and research writing comprehension
- Grammar and sentence analysis
- Oral expression and listening comprehension
- Literature study
 - Read aloud with accountable talk
 - Great Books (for 2nd and 3rd year children)

- Great Books is a literature study program that includes critical analysis and discussion, as well as hands-on projects or writing assignments.

Math and Geometry

The math and geometry curriculum has a strong foundation in the Montessori materials, designed to present mathematical concepts in a concrete, hands-on way. As children work through the materials they gradually progress from concrete to abstract comprehension. This allows them to work with complex math concepts and to develop a deeply rooted understanding of these concepts.

Concepts delivered by the curriculum:

- Mathematics
 - Basic numeracy
 - Work in all four operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) with integers and fractions
 - Place value and work with large numbers (millions, billions, etc.)
 - Word problems and logical reasoning
 - Memorization of math tables
- Geometry
 - Progression through Platonic solids, plane figures, lines, points
 - Plane figures
 - Line and angles

Cultural

Overview

The Lower Elementary cultural curriculum encompasses many subjects including broadly geography, science, history and studies of other cultures. Ideas and areas of study are introduced through exciting, impressionistic lessons, designed to inspire imagination and charge children's already avid curiosity. Follow-up assignments and projects allow for further, more in-depth exploration of topics, as well as hands-on and interactive experiences. The lessons and projects provide children with a framework of inquiry to examine the profound and searching questions typical of this age: "Who am I? Where do I fit in (in my family, in my society, in the universe)? How did everything come to be as it is?" The theatrical lessons and exciting projects bring facts and information to stirring life, fuel the children's imagination and cultivate a respect for the miracle of existence, the complexities and interdependence of ecological, geographical and cosmic systems.

Some of the broad topics covered in the cultural curriculum are:

- Concepts of time: clocks, days, months, years. . . eras
- The Universe and Solar System
- Formation of the Earth
- Sun and Earth: day/ night, years, seasons, the Sun's energy, Earth's atmosphere
- Map studies and map making
- Fundamental human needs
- Classification of living organisms
- Time line of living organisms
- The scientific method

- Ecology

Continent Study

Each year all three Lower Elementary classes focus on one continent to study in detail: geography, ecology, maps, countries and cultural traditions. Children study aspects of the continent throughout the year. This study culminates in the spring with the Artist-in-Residence program and the Cultural Sharing Day (see Enrichment Activities, page 10). The seven continents are covered on a seven year rotation. The continents that are not the focus for the year can be studied as well but with less depth.

Nature Studies

Taking full advantage of the outdoor campus as an extension of the classrooms, lessons and projects about our local natural environment are an important part of the cultural curriculum. Teachers and students go on nature walks to identify plants, examine the ecosystems of the deciduous forest and vernal pools on the school property, practice scientific observation and just enjoy being outside and communing with nature. As weather permits, classes go outside for nature studies at least once every two weeks, but often once or more than once a week. On inclement days, nature lessons take place in the classrooms or Library and involve hands-on scientific experiments.

Specials Classes

The teacher will provide you with a specials schedule at the beginning of the school year.

Art:

Art class occurs once a week for 45 minutes in the Art Room. Each Lower Elementary class is split into groups for art class. Usually the 1st and 2nd year children are grouped together and the 3rd year children have a separate class. Children learn about many aspects of art- art history, artists, styles, media, technique- as they engage in fun and fascinating art assignments and create their own unique paintings, drawings and sculptures. Look for them displayed on the bulletin boards around the school throughout the year.

Spanish:

Spanish occurs for 30 minutes twice a week, either in the classrooms or in the Spanish Room. Groups are split as they are for Art. Children learn basic vocabulary such as days of the week, colors, animals and other things, as well as simple conversations. In addition to these weekly classes, teachers infuse Spanish into the classroom day in various ways, such as reading the date each day or singing *Happy Birthday* in Spanish.

Music:

Music class

Music class is once a week for 30 minutes in the Music Room. Groups are split as they are for Art and Spanish. Children practice singing, playing instruments and learning various group folk dances.

Music listening

Music listening occurs once a week in individual classrooms. This is a whole class Special, during which children listen to various types of music: opera, jazz, multi-cultural, baroque, etc. Lessons

include information about composers, types of instruments and musical styles. The teacher and children discuss the pieces of music they have heard.

Chorus

Chorus occurs once a week for 45 minutes. All three Lower Elementary classes meet together in the Theater or Music Room to practice singing as one group. They learn new songs and practice familiar ones. They are also learning the patience, poise and self-discipline it takes to perform as a unified chorus. Then they get to show off their skills and talents at the Winter and Spring Chorus Concerts.

Recorder

3rd year children take recorder lessons once a week for 30 minutes. 3rd year children should remember, with your help, **to bring their recorders to school on the day they have recorder.** They also get to perform what they have learned during Chorus Concerts and other special school events, such as the Moving-up Ceremony.

PE:

Physical Education (PE) class is 45 minutes twice a week. Groups are split as mentioned above. Children learn how to play various games and build their gross motor skills, strength and endurance. They also learn to play as a team, practice good sportsmanship and grow their self-confidence. **Please help your child to remember to wear sneakers on the PE days..**

Yoga:

An extension of our PE program, Yoga occurs once a week for 45 minutes. Groups are split as above. Yoga is a wonderful opportunity to practice mindfulness and to improve both physical and mental flexibility and strength. The many benefits of yoga are consistently being asserted by current research and so we are delighted to make it available to our students.

Running Program:

The running program is free and available to all students from **7:45-8:20 every morning during the school week on Tuesday, Thursday and Fridays.** It is supervised by a PE staff member. When the weather is good students runs outside on Pat's Track. During inclement weather they run in the Gym. This is a fun way for children to start the day. It is not required but it can be very beneficial exercise. Children who participate in the running program come into the classroom energized and focused, ready to take on the day ahead. Students compete in area marathons as part of completing their running goals.

Enrichment Activities

Please check the school calendar for dates for the following events.

Play-lettes:

After the winter holiday break, each Lower Elementary class spends a week working with our drama teacher. They learn to read lines, practice moving on the stage and make props and costumes as they prepare an informal performance for parents and the other Lower Elementary classes. This is a fun, relaxed introduction to drama, preparing them for plays they will do in Upper Elementary and Middle School.

Cultural Residency:

Each spring the Lower Elementary children participate in an artist-in-residence program. The theme is based on cultural traditions of the peoples of the continent they are studying that year. Like they do for the play-lettes, they spend a week working with the artist(s), learning stories, songs, dances and more. At the end of the week they present a performance for other students and for parents. Artists are usually invited from outside of the school and in the past have included folk musicians, professional dancers, and story-tellers.

Cultural Sharing Day:

Like the residency, this takes place in the spring, usually in late April or early May. Each year in Lower Elementary all three classes focus on one continent. Many aspects of the continent are studied: geography, ecology, countries and culture to name a few. The study culminates with a Sharing Day during which children present reports, maps and projects they have created. Parents and other classes are invited to come into the classrooms to see the children's work. The children become the teachers as they talk about all they have learned.

Field Trips:

Each year Lower Elementary classes go on one or two field trips. Sometimes these are organized for all three classes. Sometimes an individual class will go. They often coincide with an area of study and are meant to enrich the curriculum or provide an interesting cultural experience. Recent field trips have included a maple sugaring program at the Sharon Audubon and a play at the Warner Theater in Torrington. Field trips occur during school hours and either the WMS bus or one hired from the school district is used for transportation to and from the site. Teachers may ask for parent volunteers to come along to help on a trip. You must sign a permission form in order for your child to accompany his or her class on a field trip. This is provided by the school office before the school year begins.

Other Regularly Occurring Classroom Activities

Community Building:

Grace and Courtesy/ Conflict Resolution/ Social Skills

In addition to informal modelling of grace and courtesy, such as always speaking respectfully and shaking hands with children at the beginning and end of each day, teachers present lessons and activities which help build social skills and a sense of community and provide children with practical conflict-resolution strategies. These lessons are drawn from a variety of curricula, including the *Positive Discipline* program and *Don't Laugh at Me*. Lessons are presented regularly throughout the year and whenever the need arises to address a specific issue. You can access the links below to learn more about these wonderful programs.

<http://www.operationrespect.org>

<http://www.positivediscipline.com/>

Community Meeting

Community meeting, which is a component of *Positive Discipline*, occurs once a week in each classroom. This is a student-driven meeting with teacher supervision. During these meetings issues and concerns, which have been recorded as they arise by children on an agenda throughout the week, are discussed. Children share observations, talk about the importance of issues and offer solutions. Children take turns leading and acting as scribe each week. This is an excellent model for taking real problems and testing out real solutions. Children learn about constructive problem-solving and listening to others' ideas. Through this process they develop a sense of agency and empowerment to work through problems and make improvements to classroom life.

The Larger School Community

Beyond the children in their own classroom, they have many chances to interact and build relationships with other students throughout the school and at different levels. Each Lower Elementary class has a Middle School partner advisor group, with whom they meet for special occasions. They might make holiday cards or friendship bracelets, work in the garden or read picture books together. For some all-school events the Middle School students escort their Lower Elementary partners to the Gym or Theater. Often, from these interactions, older students become special mentors to Lower Elementary children.

Children from different classrooms and levels enjoy inviting each other for lunch, allowing them to visit with friends outside their own class. Also, occasionally lessons are shared between the three Lower Elementary classes, giving children an opportunity to work in different groups.

Community Service/ Service Learning

Each Lower Elementary class takes a turn preparing a meal for Loaves and Fishes, a soup kitchen in New Milford. They help to plan the menu and make the shopping list and then prepare the meal in our school kitchen. They learn basic cooking skills as they provide an important service to the larger community outside of school.

Care of the Classroom:

As an aspect of Practical Life, children help to clean and maintain the classroom environment and take on special jobs that help the classroom run smoothly. Jobs include, for example, dusting and organizing shelves, watering plants, taking out the recycling, taking attendance and dismissing from circle and at the end of the day. Through these jobs children learn a sense of responsibility for caring for their own classroom. Jobs rotate on a weekly basis.

Morning Snack:

Each week a different child is asked to bring in snack for the whole class. The teacher will provide you with a snack schedule at the beginning of the school year so that you will know when it is your child's turn to provide snack. The teacher will also provide you with a list of suggested fruits and vegetables which your child can bring in for snack. You may bring in all of the snack on Monday for the entire week or bring it in each day in smaller portions. Gluten-free chips, salsa and hummus are provided by the school to supplement the fruits and vegetables.

Please bring in only fresh, uncut fruits and vegetables. We ask that you do not cut up the snack foods at home to avoid cross-contamination with foods to which children might be allergic.

As part of Practical Life exercises, each child prepares snack for the class. With a teacher's supervision, they cut the fruits and vegetables and arrange them on plates- another reason not to cut them at home. The child arranges them on the snack table and figures out how much each child should get. Your child may bring in flowers or some other decoration to arrange on the snack table to make it beautiful.

Birthdays in the Classroom:

In an effort to keep birthday celebrations in the classroom simple and meaningful and in keeping with our healthy snack policy, our birthday celebrations will not include an additional snack. We will celebrate the child in the unique custom of each classroom on his or her special day. Some children, in the past, have chosen to donate a "birthday gift" book of their choosing to the classroom collection. It serves as a special reminder of their time with us. Of course, this is optional, but always appreciated!

Daily Schedule

Please be sure your child has a healthy breakfast to fuel their busy day.

Drop Off:

The Lower El day begins officially at **8:30** but the classrooms open at 8:20 for those children who arrive a little bit early. If you or another adult cannot wait with your child before 8:20 he or she should go to the MAP room.

Morning:

The academic day begins with quiet reading or work time. Soon after the children arrive, the whole class comes together for morning circle, during which we go over the schedule for the day, make special announcements or perhaps present a lesson.

The remainder of the morning is dedicated to small group lessons and work time. Children choose work to do and work independently or together with other children. In addition to group lessons, teachers help children choose work and provide individual instruction for children who need it. Teachers also carefully observe the children as they work and interact with each other. Some specials classes may also occur in the morning. Snack is available for children to eat when they are hungry or need a break from their work.

Lunch and Recess:

Lunch is from 12:00- 12:30

Lunch is eaten in the classroom. This is a favorite time for children to talk with friends. A common observation from parents is that their children do not eat all of their lunch. This is often because they are very busy talking and having fun with their friends. Teachers eat with the children and encourage a balance of fun chatting and eating, but if you notice your child not finishing his or her lunch often, please bring that to the teacher's attention.

Please try to provide a nutritious lunch for your child. Good complex carbohydrates and proteins are important to include, as well as plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Candy and soda are not permitted. **Because of allergies, nuts are not permitted in school.** Each classroom has a microwave so children may bring in food which they may heat up.

Recess is from 12:30-1:00

When at all possible recess is outside on the Elementary Playground. There are always three staff members on “recess duty” to monitor the children at play. They have two-way radios to communicate with the school nurse in case of an emergency.

During inclement weather recess occurs inside, either in the classrooms or in the Gym. At all times, children are overseen by a staff member.

Please make sure your child is dressed appropriately for the weather, i.e. coats, snow pants, boots, hats, etc. Sunscreen on hot days.

Afternoon:

In the afternoon there may be time for a special class project, work time, reading or creative writing. Specials classes as well continue.

Dismissal/ Pick-up:

Dismissal is at 3:10. Please be as close to on time as possible when picking up your child; it is a busy and vigorous day and your child appreciates your punctuality. Also, teachers often have meetings to attend and other obligations. They also appreciate your punctuality.

If you ask another parent or adult to pick up your child, you must inform the teacher of the change before pick-up time. Check with the teacher about the best way to contact her about these changes. You may also provide the teacher with a list of people who are permitted to pick up your child throughout the year. Above all, we value your child’s safety and want to be assured he or she is picked up by someone whom you have approved.

As much as possible, try to avoid last minute changes in pick-up plans. Dismissal is a busy time and it can be challenging for teachers to get last minute messages. Also, it can be distressing to some children when plans change all of a sudden.

Bus and Curbside Pick-up:

Bus service is available students living in Region 12 towns. If you would like to use the bus service, please contact the WMS front office. The front office and the classroom teacher should be notified of schedule changes .

Curbside pick-up is another option available to you. A staff member will bring children to the front doors of the school to wait to be picked-up. If you want this service , please arrange it with the front desk staff.

MAP:

The MAP room is available for children staying at school after 3:15 for special programs or because they cannot be picked up at the usual time. See our website for costs and hours.

Communication and Parent Involvement

Conferences:

Scheduled parent-teacher conferences occur twice each school year, once in November and once in February. These are opportunities to talk with your child's teacher about academic progress, social development, etc. The teacher will review her observations and assessments with you but it is also a chance for you to ask questions or raise concerns. They are meant to be open conversations and a chance for both you and the teacher to share your unique perspectives about your child, celebrate his or her strengths and discuss any concerns.

Contacting teachers:

Scheduled conferences are by no means the only times to talk with your child's teacher. Maintaining open conversation between home and school is essential to assuring your child's needs are met. It is important to let the teacher know of concerns or issues as they arise. Please check with the teacher to find out the best ways (email, phone, etc.) and times to contact her. She may also contact you if she has a question or concern.

Teachers also send out periodic emails to announce up-coming events or projects or just to let you know what children have been working on in class.

Parent Involvement:

There are many ways to become involved at school, such as volunteering for special events or activities like Loaves and Fishes or chaperoning a field trip. Keep a look out for these opportunities.

The Voyage

The Voyage is a great opportunity to experience the Montessori curriculum. You get to go into the classrooms and get your hands on all of those curious and enticing materials, sit in on lessons and see what it's like to walk in your child's shoes! Check the school calendar for the date. It is a not-to-be-missed experience.

Miscellany

Clothing:

Please make sure your child is dressed appropriately for the weather. Help him or her to remember sneakers on PE days. Children should not wear open-toed shoes at school but they may bring simple comfortable slippers with sturdy, non-slip soles to wear in the classroom

Personal Items:

Toys and other personal items should be left at home. They can become a major source of distraction during the school day and if they are broken or lost this can be very upsetting to the child who brought them in. This applies to electronics and hand-held devices as well.

The exception to this is that one day a week classrooms have a Sharing Circle when children may talk about special news they may have or show the class some special memento. These items may include pictures, something they made, special awards, family heirlooms or something educational. Children should not bring in toys for Sharing Circle. The teacher will let you know which day of the week Sharing Circle will be.

Faculty

Melora Mennesson: Head Teacher
Sonja Shivpuri: Head Teacher
Debbie DeGuire: Head Teacher
Jena Allee: Associate Teacher
Kimbery Blair: Associate Teacher
Marie Flamand: Associate Teacher
Greg DeRosa: Physical Education
Mimi Gillen: Physical Education
Ginny Habbas: Library
Nora Hulton: Nature Studies
Laura Hutchins: Drama
Emily Redmond: Art
Matilda Giampetro: Music/ Chorus
Sarah Jane Chelminski: Recorder
Amy Dunn: Spanish