

Middle School Curriculum

Language Arts

Reading

Sixth grade reading is about working harder, longer, and deeper. Students are building their reading lives to help them understand themselves and the world around them. They read in greater volume to build their stamina, fluency, and comprehension of increasingly complex texts. They read across genres, cultures, and centuries to gain an understanding of multicultural, political, and economic geographies. They begin to construct an appreciation for the human condition and build profound insights that serve as models for their own thinking. Students begin to appreciate that in books, as well as in life, we can watch how people act, noticing especially how they respond to events and how those experiences can shape their decisions and world view. Students engage with reading strategies, build rich vocabulary, and cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as note inferences drawn from the text. Content words become important to the understanding of thematic topics and issues. Throughout the year, students will engage in essential questions through the fiction and nonfiction texts they read, using these different works as lenses to analyze and explore their own identities.

Using primarily American texts, seventh grade students explore questions of time, place, and perspective in literature and non-fiction. A variety of critical analysis approaches are explicitly taught in an effort to move students towards a more nuanced and layered understanding of text. Integrated into thematic units, genre studies serve to expand student understanding of how universal themes are presented differently. Students are exposed to books at their instructional level and sometimes beyond in an effort to stretch their ability to engage in difficult reading constructively; essential questions guide these experiences. In addition, students develop their young adult reading personality, identifying good fit books through a social and personal exploration of texts outside the formal literature curriculum.

Eighth grade students use literature and informational texts (both primary and secondary sources) to better understand historical, scientific, and literary ideas and processes. They learn to move from narrow to broad in their thinking and to analyze how the past influences and shapes the present and future. Through interaction with a variety of texts, students learn how to reconstruct the past, which allows them to develop a historical perspective and to answer essential questions about the challenges and responsibilities of citizenship in the 21st century. Reading for pleasure continues to be fostered as students build a rich and varied reading life. Media literacy becomes an ever more essential understanding as students navigate the power of language in the creation of knowledge and culture

Writing

Writing instruction in sixth grade is geared towards more nuanced, complicated storytelling, with a more reflective stance and more use of figurative language and literary techniques. The skills of telling their own stories and narrative writing helps adolescents make sense of their lives. They begin to zoom in on a tight time frame, creating a story arc of tension and using a repertoire of dialogue, action, and inner thinking.



Students generate meaningful story ideas quickly and craft entries based on qualities of narrative writing through use of mentor texts. They work on planning and drafting to lift the level of their writing through the use of story structure to convey meaning. This emphasis on multiple drafts helps to develop a repertoire of writing skills. Just as scientists rely on the scientific process whenever they are investigating anything, so, too, writers rely on the writing process. Students learn to set goals for themselves and then choose the writing strategy that will help them achieve those goals.

Through ongoing and varied writing experiences, students in the seventh grade develop a personal writing style that will support the increasingly complex demands of upper middle school writing expectations. Using the writer's workshop model, students write across genres, on topics both self-selected and prompted by the curriculum. Students write often, moving through the writing process to varying degrees and with varying support over time; they reflect on the practices that support their best writing and select the best pieces for publishing. Individual feedback and writing goals provide students, at various levels of sophistication, with their next steps. As the year progresses, students learn that both fiction and nonfiction writing can put forth important ideas, transform readers' understandings, and appeal to the universal truths that connect all people.

Students in eighth grade write across the disciplines with increased purpose and ability as they tackle the increasing demands of preparing for high school. They become increasingly more adept at writing in a number of genres, organizing and clarifying their ideas, using the writing process more effectively and independently, while attending more closely to the mechanics of writing. Projects in cultural studies, language arts, science, and Spanish require written work of increasing sophistication, and rubrics guide students towards improving the focus, style, content, organization, and mechanics of their written work. Using a variety of media and technology to create content, to collaborate on projects, and to produce finished is stressed.

Speaking and Listening

Speaking and listening are critical as tools for learning and communicating. Oral communication provides the basis of language development, thinking, gathering information, and shaping how we see ourselves and how others see us. Students continue to work on becoming more attentive and empathetic listeners, more clear and effective speakers, and more attuned to the academic and social skills needed to be collaborative group members. Using a variety of media and technology allows students to present themselves and their work in ever more sophisticated ways.

As learners in a diverse and scholarly community, seventh graders learn the techniques of listening and building understanding through listening and speaking experiences and activities both inside the school building and in our city and country classrooms. Students learn to be presenters of specific ideas with well-supported evidence, to be engaged participants in meaningful collaborative work, and to be active listeners who connect new experiences to prior knowledge.

Speaking and listening are critical as tools for learning and communicating. Oral communication provides the basis of language development, thinking, gathering information, and shaping how we see ourselves and how others see us. Studies show that over eighty percent of communication is spent in speaking and listening, which lends credence to the belief that teaching these skills is not just desirable, but critical. By the end of



the year (as reflected in graduation speeches), students are expected to self-confidently and effectively present themselves to a variety of audiences.

Math

Middle school classrooms are buzzing with increasingly complex mathematical problem solving. Throughout the three years, students explore ratios and proportional relationships, rational numbers, linear algebra, and linear functions. Sixth graders apply their foundational understanding of fractions to ratios and proportional thinking. They develop efficient algorithms for performing adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing decimals. Students begin to represent unknown quantities with variables, and they reinforce their understanding of numbers by thinking statistically, in terms of variability and comparing distributions. Sixth graders also apply their understanding of geometric properties of two- and three-dimensional objects to solving more complex, applied problems. Each instructional unit focuses on understanding the power of making comparisons in mathematics with an aim toward strengthening proportional reasoning in later grades. During a cross-curricular project that integrates studies of human use of plants along with the production and economic distribution of free vs fair trade chocolate, students explore manipulating ratios in recipes and the percentage of cacao used to produce milk to dark chocolate.

Seventh graders concentrate on understanding proportional relationships and applying proportional reasoning. Students extend their understanding of number and operations to positive and negative fractions, and they become more fluent in representing unknown quantities with variables, simplifying basic variable expressions, and solving basic variable equations and inequalities. Seventh graders also apply their understanding of numbers to statistics, developing an understanding of sampling and comparing distributions. Students showcase their knowledge of probability through collaborating with peers to create and build an original carnival game. They provide all of the statistical data to show the likelihood of winning and losing their game and then present their creation and their calculations to the wider TPS community with a carnival, including a prize stand!

Eighth graders spend their year solidifying their understanding of the number system and operations, which now includes irrational numbers and negative exponents. Binomials, Polynomials, exponential functions, and the Pythagorean Theorem are all areas of focus. Our eight graders analyze and solve linear equations and inequalities and connect the idea of linearity to their sophisticated understanding of proportionality. They also begin to use function notation and to look at geometric transformations, similarity, and congruence in terms of functional relationships. They solve more applied problems in geometry with more complex two- and three-dimensional objects. As part of an herbarium project that takes place during outdoor education and science classes back at school, students determine the diameter of a tree after measuring its circumference and identify trees that branch out in a pattern that follows the Fibonacci Sequence. Our 8th grade math experience culminates with our study of quadratic relationships, where students create projects depicting real-world applications of quadratics.

Science

Science, engineering, and technology permeate every aspect of modern life and hold the key to many of humanity's most pressing current and future challenges. In order for our students to understand, participate, and eventually take a lead in public policy issues and environmental concerns, they must develop an expanding understanding of science and engineering content and practices. In 6th grade, through a year-long interdisciplinary study of the continent of Africa, students compare and contrast landforms, becoming deeply knowledgeable about biomes and



how the topography of a place impacts its inhabitants. In 7th grade, a study of migratory birds is directly connected to a study of human migration, and data collection becomes a key aspect of their learning experience. In 8th grade, students create chemistry textbooks, a resource that their younger schoolmates can use in their study of water. Across all middle school experiences, a complementary combination of rich content and scientific practices empowers our students to think across disciplines, to make informed decisions, and to be critical consumers of scientific information related to their everyday lives.

Spanish

Students in Middle School are able to connect Spanish to their thematic studies, such as Afro-Latino identity, the encounter between Europe and the Americas, and immigration. Group work, research, and presentations are all methods by which middle school Spanish students engage in this work. Students at this level are immersed in a more comprehensive study of grammar and language structure, including verb forms in different tenses. To improve fluency students work on several projects, such as writing and performing a series of dialogues and situational skits based on different vocabulary, history, and current events. Students learn to create complex sentences and to communicate sophisticated ideas. Writing activities include essays, poetry, dramatic skits, and plays. We often seek ways for middle schoolers to use their Spanish skills in real world situations, including traveling to predominantly Spanish speaking destinations. TPS's Spanish program is designed to complete the first level of high school. Most of our graduates place in Spanish II in 9th grade.

Physical Education

In PE class middle school students work towards mastering their skills, implementing strategies and tactics across a variety of games and sports, and exhibiting responsible personal and social behavior. Students also build upon a variety of functional fitness movements, with a focus on using proper form, getting stronger, and preparing oneself to be fit for a lifetime.

Middle school students are offered the opportunity to compete in interscholastics sports across three seasons, developing a sense of competition, commitment, and confidence for activities they may continue on with after they leave TPS. You can find more information on the TPS Athletics Program [here](#).

Music

The sixth grade music curriculum focuses on the traditional music of Africa, emphasizing dance, drumming, singing, and the African value of the good of the collective. Students prepare ensemble pieces and practice public speaking for their end-of-year Rite of Passage Ceremony. They learn "Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika," the national anthem of the anti-apartheid movement of South Africa, and recite the words of civil rights leaders; through these experiences students build empathy for the challenges of overcoming oppression. We support students as they learn basic hand-drumming techniques and rhythmic vocabulary, sing traditional songs in languages of Africa, including Ewe, Akan, Xhosa, and Swahili, learn traditional choreographed African dance, and become familiar with music inspired by the Shona marimba tradition.

Seventh graders begin the year by studying Afro-Cuban music. Students strengthen their rhythmic integrity and musicianship skills by learning a variety of complex polyrhythms used in Afro-Cuban drumming styles. They also gain a historical understanding of the origins and evolution of Afro-Cuban rhythm and its impact on world music.



Seventh grade students learn to play the twelve-bar blues harmonic progression on ukulele, bass guitar, and keyboard as a prelude to the class rock band project. Students also become familiar with such iconic blues musicians as Bessie Smith, Leadbelly, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters. Seventh grade students spend several months preparing and rehearsing for the rock band project. This is a great opportunity for students to play instruments with which they've had no prior experience. In the Spring, students perform both the original version of the rock song they have chosen, plus a version of the song that uses student generated lyrics inspired by their study of a science related theme. In the Spring, students create multi-track compositions with the GarageBand or Soundtrap sequencing software.

Eighth grade music students begin the year by carefully defining their own musical histories and identities through writing assignments, playlists, and a collage. Throughout the year, students explore new instruments, learn basic harmonic progressions, collaborate on selecting songs, and hone their musicianship skills through their participation in small bands and large instrumental ensembles. Students produce at least one ensemble performance and participate in activities that prepare them for songwriting. Later in the year, students create soundscapes for the Play Festival, and invest significant time with choosing and preparing songs for graduation.

String Ensembles

TPS has enjoyed a rich tradition of string playing thanks to an endowed program which supports the Sandra Dean String Ensemble. The Sandra Dean String Ensemble regularly performed for TPS audiences and in the local community. Because of COVID protocols, the ensemble was suspended in 2020. We are happy to announce that 10-12 scholarships for violin and cello lessons will be awarded to a group of kindergarten students this year. With time, practice, and parental support, these young musicians will form the core of the next Sandra Dean String Ensemble.

Art

The Middle School art curriculum synthesizes previous experiences with an emphasis on individual expression and increasingly sophisticated concepts and materials. Brainstorming and problem-solving skills are stressed as projects become more complex, often lasting an entire semester. The Middle School theme often informs the art curriculum. For example, during a study of rites of passage in Africa, students create masks that emphasize qualities of their emerging adult selves. Electives and mini-courses offer students an opportunity to explore mediums, crafts, and ideas on a deeper level or in an area not usually part of the general art curriculum.