

# Guide to Parenting a Sixth Grader at FMS

By Barbara Richman, 6th Grade Team Coordinator

## Introduction

Sixth graders are truly on the cusp. Although FMS is not new to many of them and most know their way around the building, sixth graders are **developing new skills**. A critical skill upon which we will focus is **independence**. Students must follow their own unique schedule, develop working relationships with many adults, manage their time and social interactions, and begin to make choices about clubs and extracurricular activities. They are beginning the journey to their adult selves. In addition to the content learning of the sixth grade, this year is a pivotal year where students need to learn a number of “good student skills”, which they will need to apply to their education going forward. This may, in fact, be the biggest transition that students will experience in terms of their day to day school experience.

Research shows us that the developmental stage of preadolescent students is quite varied. You can see that visually just by looking at the range in height and physical development present in a group of middle school students. However, cognitive and emotional development varies as well. Students may exhibit sudden growth spurts in all areas or develop earlier in one realm than in another. A student may very well look grown up, but act very much like a younger child. We know that this journey from childhood to adolescence to adulthood is not always smooth. There are challenges and successes. Sixth grade is a safe place to make mistakes, and develop strategies that work, often through trial and error. In addition to content mastery, there are many key skills that we hope students will begin to master in sixth grade. Thus, here, we hope to identify goals we have for sixth grade students over the course of the year and provide some concrete suggestions of how you, as parents, can help move your children towards reaching these goals. Keep in mind that there is a wonderful window in sixth grade where students can do many things that they couldn't as smaller children, but still very much need and want structure from parents. At this point, at the beginning of sixth grade, students still need A LOT of structure and guidance. We encourage you to continue to provide structure now, (especially with regards to use of media.) Hopefully, over the course of this year, students will develop some skills which allow them to find success independently and then parents can pull back on the support. At FMS, students are exposed to content instruction and the opportunity to learn skills that help them become independent, self-directed, reflective learners. In this presentation, we will highlight goals we have for sixth grade students and behaviors that will help them meet these goals. Of course, the teachers at FMS give students opportunities to practice these behaviors and offer strategies for students to meet these goals. By sharing these goals with you, we are hoping that you can also support your kids by reinforcing the same strategies at home.

## Student Goal: Be responsible for materials

### **At school, students...**

- have materials needed for that given day including a writing utensil and their agenda book.
- keep their lockers organized. Pick one time weekly to designate for cleaning if necessary.
- look for a missing item the day it goes missing; revisit all classrooms
- tell an adult when help is needed with materials.

- check the lost and found frequently (located in each classroom and by the locker room area).

**At home, students ...**

- label work and materials with first and last name.
- pack bag at night.
- pack a healthy snack in a separate bag.
- restock book bag with pencils every month.

**Parents can support students by:**

- ❖ posting checklists at home for what is needed when
- ❖ allowing for natural consequences. Resist the urge deliver missing materials to school
- ❖ establishing routines at home for where school materials are kept; when and where homework is to be done
- ❖ designating a place at home for students to file old work for a given year that is not used daily In June, students can decide what to save and what to discard.

**Student Goal: Manage time**

**At school, students should...**

- arrive in the morning on time by 8:05
- stow items in lockers and arrive to homeroom by 8:15
- move quickly in between classes so to be on time
- during 2:45 activity period, visit teachers and/or library
- complete daily work and long term assignments in the time given OR make and execute a plan to complete it within a reasonable amount of time

**At home, students should....**

- space out work on assignments so it is not done at the last minute
- utilize the block schedule by making choices about when to do an assignment within the two afternoons before the next class
- post a monthly calendar with school events, assignments etc.

**Parents can support students by:**

- ❖ avoiding pulling students from class for doctor's appointments and extended vacations
- ❖ designating sufficient down time for kids each day
- ❖ having conversations at the start of the week about the schedule so that kids know when they will have time in the evenings/afternoons to do work
- ❖ communicating to teachers if homework seems to be taking too long (>1.5 hours/day on average)
- ❖ being sure kids get enough sleep and have time to eat breakfast before the school day
- ❖ initially, checking agenda books daily to be sure that students are using it and bringing it to and from school; encouraging students to cross off what has been completed and use the agenda book as a to do list; pulling back when students are using it independently
- ❖ when students are absent, helping students make a plan to see the teachers of classes missed

**Student Goal: Socialize positively by:**

- making new friends
- being kind and inclusive
- interacting with peers in a learning environment (group work)
- being a leader sometimes and a follower sometimes
- resisting socializing during work times
- using social media wisely, if at all

**Parents can support students by:**

- ❖ giving students opportunities to interact with peers face-to-face outside of school
- ❖ considering limiting video game use during the week. See commonsensemedia.org for reviews of games and media
- ❖ considering limiting/monitoring access to youtube
- ❖ considering limiting use of smartphones
- ❖ Discouraging large group chats
  - Disable text notifications on phones and personal computers.
- ❖ Engaging students in conversations about social interactions. Ask:
  - Which person did you speak with?
  - When were you kind/helpful?
  - Who did you sit with at lunch/ play with at recess?
  - Where did you go during recess?

**Student Goal: Build relationships with adults and communicate their needs by:**

- speaking to adults appropriately in group and individual settings
- communicating needs/ask for help in class, at activity period or by email, when appropriate

**Parents can support students by:**

- ❖ finding relevant moments to encourage students to reach out to an adult; Afterwards, ask how it went and what might be done differently
- ❖ encouraging students to email teachers themselves with a problem or question.
- ❖ when an email to a teacher is needed, keeping emails brief and focused; being sure to use the first and last name of the student in the subject line
- ❖ considering bringing students to parent-teacher conferences

**Student Goal: Be successful learner/ have agency over learning by:**

- ❖ understanding personal strengths and weaknesses.
- ❖ striving to achieve a personal best; aiming to do great work, not just finish a task
- ❖ reflecting on work: Set goals and learn from mistakes
- ❖ asking for help from classmates and/or adults
- ❖ finding study strategies that work for different types of learning tasks
- ❖ using agenda book routinely both in school at home

- ❖ using resources effectively: teacher website, school supplies , assignment rubrics, counselors, nurse, social worker etc.
- ❖ making good choices in the classroom in order to maintain focus
- ❖ reviewing content frequently, not waiting for a test/quiz

### **At home**

- ❖ revising work as needed
- ❖ studying/reviewing materials nightly. Begin as soon as an assignment has been given
- ❖ visiting the school and class webpage to find needed information
- ❖ checking calendar on the 6th grade team page to see when quizzes/tests are scheduled
- ❖ solving problems and manage stress

### **Parents can support students by:**

- ❖ reviewing portal with students in the context of setting goals and recognizing strengths
- ❖ encouraging practicing mindfulness techniques or using music or journaling to relieve stress
- ❖ helping students brainstorm their own solutions to problems
- ❖ focusing on learning and not on grades. Ask students about what they learned, not what grade they got.
- ❖ asking questions like
  - What words did you learn today?
  - What did you read today?
  - What questions did you ask/answer today?
  - When did you learn something new today? What was it?

### **Parents can help with home assignments by:**

- ❖ reminding students of available resources (assignment sheets --there ALWAYS is one; performance rubric or list of expectations; textbook pages; homework buddies, school website, etc.) Students should begin working on a task by taking out and reviewing instructions and resources.
- ❖ asking students to share/explain assignment rubrics as they are working on a task
- ❖ engaging students in a discussion about a writing task before and during the process to help crystalize ideas
- ❖ asking students to “teach” concepts to parent as a way of studying
- ❖ asking students to share writing out loud; This will help students find places to revise.

As a successful sixth grade year is one of growth, many steps forward from wherever a student started. We look for opportunities to celebrate even the baby steps forward and encourage persistence. Teachers are trained to work with kids with a range of academic abilities. One of the biggest challenges a teacher faces is when a student disengages from the learning process either by avoiding work, or by refusing help or engaging in other behaviors that interfere with the learning process. Teachers rely on the partnership with parents to support student engagement in schoolwork to help them be persistent in the face of challenge. We ask that you reinforce these behaviors that students need to develop in order to have a successful and productive year.

### **How to speak to your children about academic performance:**

Currently we use a 100 point scale and report cards display one number at the end of each of the 4 quarters. Each subject and each teacher has their own formula for calculating grades. Some classes (like specials) may use a holistic method and give one summative grade. Many teachers use rubrics to evaluate tasks like projects and written assignments. Rubrics may also be used to evaluate skills or behaviors to generate a participation grade. Teachers have the option to write comments or to select comments from a list. Nonetheless, one number used as a quarter grade reflects a huge amount of hidden data. Rather than putting a lot of emphasis in quarter grades, we suggest that students monitor their progress on individual tasks. It is appropriate for you to ask students to show you the comments on the assignment rubrics so you can help them reflect on their progress and set goals for themselves. As some teachers do not return graded tests, you can contact teachers directly if you have questions about performance on aspects of a test or quiz.

In order to set reasonable goals, it is helpful to understand local standards. Here at FMS, in sixth grade, most students perform in the B range or higher for academic classes. Some students perform in the A range and some students in the C range. A very small number of students will perform lower than a C. When a student performs at a grade that is less than a 70, it provides an important opportunity for a conversation about what behaviors may have impacted this outcome and what might be done differently in the future. Sometimes, such performance is a result of circumstantial factors like illness or even family priorities like daily involvement in extracurricular activities. So, grades can be used as one way of measuring performance and setting meaningful personal goals. For some students, it takes time to meet goals and see results. They may meet these goals by the end of sixth grade and they may meet them by the end of 8th. There will be bumps along the road. Our hope is that when that happens, students can reflect (possibly with the help of an adult) and set a goal and work towards it. The good news is that, as of now, no college asks to see the 6th grade transcript. We can be forgiving and view each quarter as a new beginning.

### **Conclusion**

The sixth grade is a year of transformation for our students, who are becoming independent and aware citizens of the world. Parents and teachers each have a role in easing this transition. We look forward to a productive partnership with you this year. Please reach out to us to share any information about your children which will help us better understand their needs. The road ahead may be rocky, but we will work together to guide our preteens to learn from their mistakes and pick themselves up and move forward.