

THIRD GRADE FLIER
Wednesday, September 4, 2013

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September is Here!

Welcome, or welcome back, to St. Thomas's Day School! This is the first (and certainly longest!) of my occasional classroom newsletters, for this my twelfth year as the third grade head teacher. Through these letters, I'll do my best to keep you informed of upcoming events and to report on significant milestones in the life of the class. Often I'll be signaling an upcoming event—a field trip or special school day that may need some family support. Over the year, you'll be hearing from me, and also from our two "room reps" Asia Goodwyn Edusa (Malcolm's mom) and Danielle Morgan (Cole's mom). A thousand thanks in advance for their service on behalf of the class.

On another happy note, I am very pleased to welcome back our assistant teacher, Ann O'Connell, for her sixth year of service in the third grade. Many of you will recognize her as the wife of 1st grade teacher Craig O'Connell. Before joining us at St. Thomas's, Ann worked for over thirty years in the New Haven public school system; her intelligence and enthusiasm, coupled with her educational training and complete grasp of the St. T's academic culture, have made her an extraordinary addition to the school staff and to the life of the third grade. We are very fortunate to have her with us again this year.

Ms. O'Connell and I would like to extend a special welcome to two new third grade families joining or returning to the Saint Thomas's Day School community this year.

We are excited to have with us in third grade:

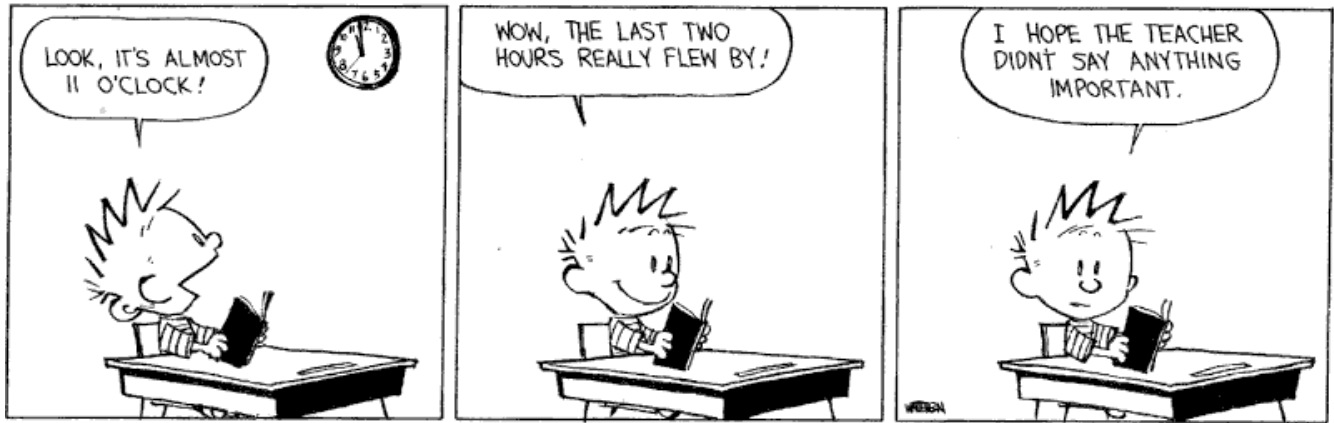
- **Sarah Bellaiche**, the daughter of Clementine and Joel Bellaiche
- **Carolina DePaula**, daughter of Gil and Fabi DePaula,
- **Cora Partridge**, daughter of Carmen and Waring Partridge,
- **Jahshua Toles**, son of Chantel and John Toles, **and**
- **Beck Isaacs**, son of Linda and John Isaacs, who is returning to St T's after two years.

Please join Ms. O'Connell and me in helping to make all our newcomers and returning students feel warmly welcomed into the Saint Thomas's community!

MEETING REMINDER

The 3rd Grade Parent-Teacher meeting will be Tuesday September 17, in the Third Grade Classroom. This will be a time for me to introduce the third grade programs and policies, review the year's schedule highlights, and answer any questions you may have.

We'll gather around 6:30 PM.



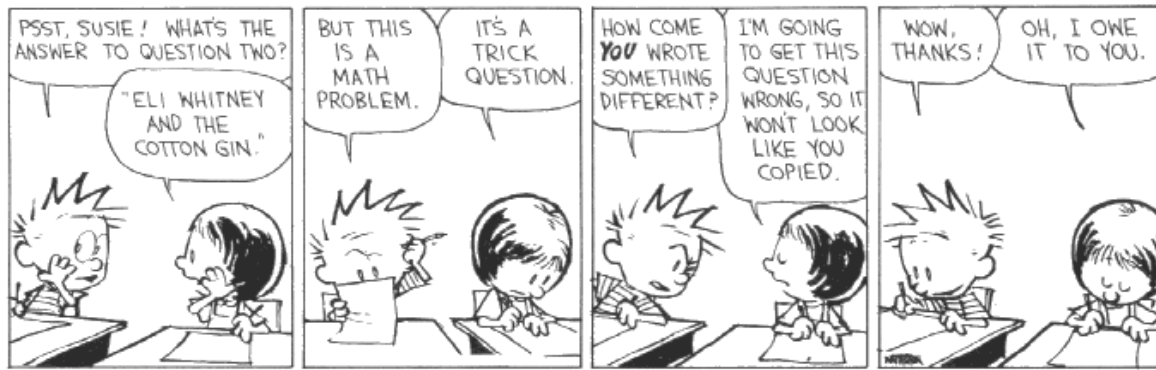
The Morning Routine in 3rd Grade

The classroom opens at 8:15 as we begin each day with a “morning page” of class work. Sometimes it’s a math sheet, sometimes a *Scholastic News* or *Weekly Reader* leaflet, and sometimes it’s a “word of the day” dictionary practice sheet. The idea is to get the day off to a structured yet varied start. Those who arrive at 8:15 have about 10-15 minutes to work on their morning page before the Chapel bell rings; there are often odd minutes throughout the day for students to finish up. Unfinished morning pages simply go into the home-school folder at day’s end to be completed for homework.

It is very important to have each student routinely arrive before Chapel; that is, no later than 8:25 and as close to 8:15 as possible. I am convinced that a good start to each school day is vital to making the most of our time together, and frequent tardiness is inimical to such a beginning. Of course there will be the odd days when schedules get set back; as with occasional homework setbacks, third graders will find me flexible and understanding in such instances. My concerns only arise when late arrivals become the norm rather than the exception.

On a personal note, please bear in mind that during the morning between 8:15 and 8:25, I am usually somewhat preoccupied with my own routines—greeting the students, writing the schedule and other pertinent information on the board, organizing papers, and the like. I tell you this because if I seem distracted or hurried in the mornings when you drop off your child, I ask you to please not take it personally! As with us all, some mornings are just more hectic than others, and my first priority is to greet the class and prepare for the day ahead.

I do appreciate that there are times when you need to communicate something specific to me in the morning—i.e. something unusual going on at home, or a doctor’s appointment for your child affecting that day’s schedule, or some other emergent event. I am of course grateful to receive such important information. What would help me **enormously** is if you could jot the news down on a piece of paper (there’s a box on my desk for such correspondence), even if you’ve spoken to me about it. I’ve just had too many experiences of my memory going blank amidst the morning rush. You may of course also reach me by email at: jpeters@stthomasday.org.



Homework Policies and Procedures

As school gets underway I will share with the class my expectations regarding homework. While we'll have a chance to discuss these matters at our meeting on the 13th, I hope it will be helpful to share this outline of my homework policies with you in anticipation of that discussion.

Homework Overview

Homework certainly has its proper place in the academic firmament, but over the years I've come to find that it can often be a source of frustration and stress out of proportion to its benefits. I try to model a compassionate disposition when homework is, on occasion, skipped or forgotten at home, and I try to make clear to the class my belief that homework doesn't have to be "correct" to be complete. ***Mistakes are OK in third grade—they're how students learn, and how teachers know what needs to be reviewed!***

In general, the goal of homework is to strengthen skills learned in school rather than to introduce new material. With math homework, I am looking for students to reinforce problem-solving strategies we work on in class, rather than to introduce "tricky" new problems. The goals of the language arts homework are more varied, but are generally intended to build vocabulary and practice grammar and writing skills.

One of the many complicating factors about school-night homework is that there are inevitably some days that are more filled with after-school activities than others. I am certainly aware of the problem of students coming home from music practices or sports scrimmages and being too tired to do much more than have dinner and get ready for bed. For that reason, this year I am trying a new strategy for the homework assignments **other than the nightly reading**: Monday sheets will be due on Wednesday, Tuesday work on Thursday, Wednesday on Friday and Thursday homework won't be due until the following Monday. Of course students may turn in any work the following day. The point is to give families some greater degree of flexibility around getting homework done in the context of busy schedules.

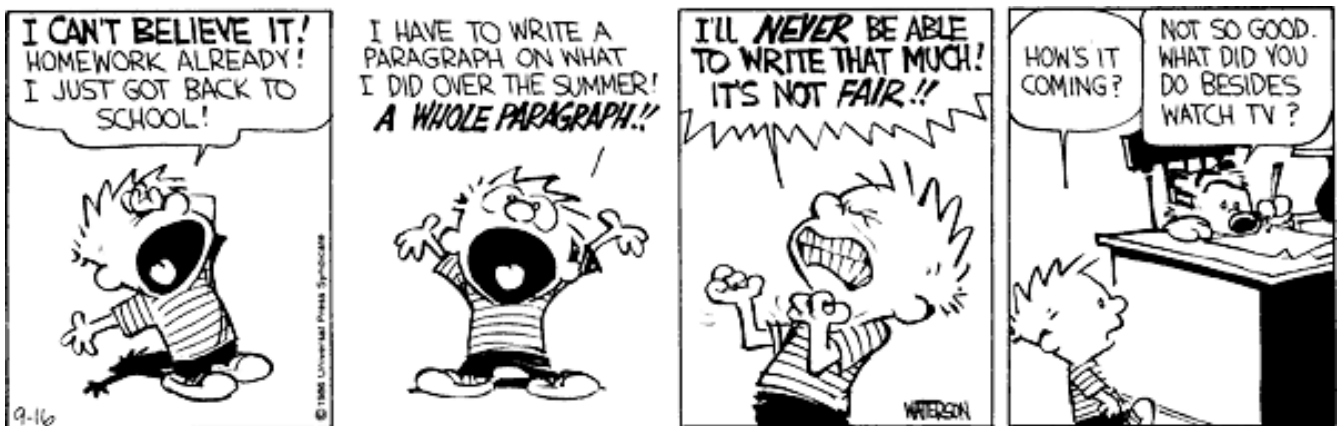
Within the first few weeks of school, on Mondays through Thursdays, math homework will normally be assigned. Depending on the time of year, this could be work to review math facts, or practice with calculations, or word problems, or combinations of these. Less frequently, language arts pages may also be sent home. I try to send home writing assignments with the expectation that the students' binders will be returned about

a week later—this will allow your third grader some flexibility in the timing of their work.

I do not typically assign homework on weekends. When the longer school breaks occur, (around the holidays and in mid-March) I do institute a vacation-reading homework-pass-earning program, strictly on a voluntary basis. I'll let you know more about that when the time comes.

Spelling quizzes are usually taken on each Friday. I try to distribute the next week's spelling words on the preceding Friday, to give everyone a full week to practice. This is an area where parental support is appreciated as students work to memorize the correct spelling of the list of words. If a spelling sheet gets mislaid, the word lists are available on the school website for download.

At the bottom of each week's vocabulary list, I've adding two multiplication "facts of the week" which will be included on our Friday quiz. The idea is that if we introduce the times table facts slowly and steadily from the beginning of the year, we'll have a leg up on the process as we proceed through the math curriculum.



I've explained to the class that I expect homework to be done regularly, to be done in a location conducive to focused attention, and for it to be worked on for a reasonable amount of time. While what is "reasonable" varies from student to student, I believe that in most cases **30 minutes for "homework reading" (more on that below) and 30 minutes for everything else is quite enough time to devote to one evening's homework.** I earnestly welcome feedback from parents if the homework experience at home is causing difficulty.

Ms. O'Connell and I will usually correct the homework the day it is returned and return it to the home/school folder that afternoon. We do this so we can have a feel for the "pulse" of the class, to measure the degree of understanding, and to set an appropriate pace for advancement through the curriculum.

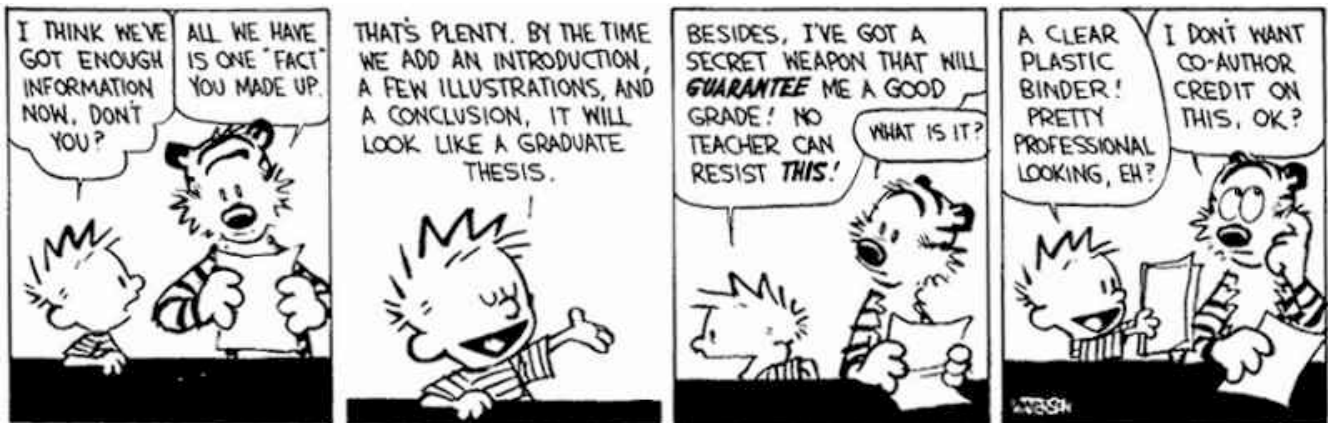
Several times during the year, students will be working on longer-term projects, such as a book report, or a country report as part of their Social Studies curriculum. At the outset of such projects, I'll send home a detailed description including the project's time-line and which parts of it are to be completed at home.

Q. How can parental help be most helpful, and what's to be done when homework becomes a struggle?

A. The **best** way for me to evaluate your child's homework is to receive it "as is." Homework returned to school perfectly correct, but only after substantial intervention on a parent's part, paints a picture of your child's progress that can be challenging to interpret.

At the same time, I'm aware that a wholly "hands off" approach can be uncomfortable for you and/or your child. It's common for some third graders to not want their teacher to know if they've had difficulties with homework. It's a "parent gets the tears, teacher gets the cheers" dynamic which I realize can put you in a tough spot.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution here. In some instances, parents choose to circle the problem number(s) in pencil to let me know that you've helped. Other strategies include writing a note on the homework sheet (or on a separate piece of paper) to let me know about some special difficulty (or breakthrough) you've experienced. I'll be happy to work with whatever procedure that seems best to you. In general, I find that as the students come to know me better, most become more comfortable speaking with me about their homework difficulties.



The Homework Reading Program

In addition to the math and language arts sheets, every third grader participates in "homework reading" throughout the year. This is a very important part of their academic development, and the class hears a lot about the program at the beginning of the year. In brief, students choose books from the class library in consultation with Ms. O'Connell or me, and then read for at least 30 minutes each school night until the book is finished. In September, as the class is getting accustomed to the new school year, the minimum reading time is reduced to 20 minutes. Each night, students fill out a progress sheet along with their other homework; these sheets chart the amount of time and the number of pages read each evening. When the book is finished, the progress sheet is filed in the classroom, another book is selected and the process repeats.

Homework Reading FAQ

Q: Thirty minutes seems like a lot longer than my child will be able to last in front of a book. Can we maintain the 20-minute time frame after September?

A: One of the overarching goals of third grade is to foster in each student a set of study skills to nurture the academic discipline that will serve them in the Upper School and beyond. I believe strongly that eight-and-nine year olds can adjust to the homework reading regimen. I've learned that keeping the rules very clear and very consistent shortens the length of the transition to habitual reading for those not already comfortable with the time requirement.

Q: We have lots of books at home that my child likes to read. Can we choose our homework reading from among them?

A: I'm sorry, but no—at least not in the first months of the school year. Obviously I am delighted when families report that their children are exposed to literature at home. It's important to me, however, that I have control over the selection process and that's most easily accomplished by sticking to the classroom library. As the year progresses and I gain a firmer grasp of each student's strengths and challenges as a reader, I do in some instances relax this rule.

Q: My child has started a book that may be too difficult, or too easy, or just not right. What should I do?

A: I tell the class that if they are not enjoying the book they have chosen, for whatever reason, they may turn it in for another. Especially at the beginning of the year, when I'm learning first-hand about each student's reading comfort zones, such substitutions are not infrequent, and are **not in any way** a problem.

Somewhat more complex is the situation wherein a student is making slow progress through a book that seems too hard to his or her parents. Some students don't want to "give up" even after I've told them they can. I've seen such circumstances lead to progress in some students' skill level and confidence; at other times it can be really tough for all concerned. This is a case in which we have to get together and talk it out.

Q: My child is filling out the homework reading sheet, but I know the information isn't accurate. What should I do?

A: There is an "honor system" component to the homework reading program, and I know it can be tempting for students at some time of the year to exaggerate their reading progress, either to impress me or their peers or simply to finish their homework responsibilities more swiftly. There's nothing especially worrisome to me when mistakes on the reading sheets are an occasional thing, but if you think there's a pattern of misinformation occurring, please let me know.

Homework Problem Solving

In my view, difficulties with the reading and written homework are best handled as a matter between student and teacher. I tell the class that when they have a problem, I'd like them, when they can, to speak directly to me about it, so that I can learn from them what's going on. I find that students grow in confidence when there is a free flow of

communication with their teachers about academic matters. On the other hand, if you're aware of a problem and feel I'm not hearing about it, (or not adequately responding to it) **please** communicate with me.

Homework for Parents (sorry!)

I do have some specific homework assignments for **you**:

1. Help your child to go to bed at a reasonable, consistent time. Fatigue is an all-too-common condition in third graders, and it really makes learning more difficult.
2. Send your child to school with healthy choices for snack and lunch. The growth rate of eight and nine year olds is phenomenal, and they need nutritional support to match. I believe strongly in having third graders participate with their parents in choosing foods that will be enjoyed and are also healthy—it can be done!

On a related note, I find myself in a perennial struggle to encourage students to drink the milk that's been ordered for them. For those who choose to participate in the lunch milk program, I urge you to discuss with your child your expectations about their milk consumption.

3. Read aloud to your child as many nights as you can. Many families, as their children evolve into increasingly confident and self-reliant readers, move away from the routine of parental reading. Even if it's only one session a week, please try to schedule time for reading aloud to your child. It really does make children better practitioners of the language, and I am confident you'll find it time very well spent!
4. Maintain awareness regarding your child's exposure to television and video games. What your family selects as appropriate material is, of course, for you to decide. I do urge parents in the strongest terms to restrict their third-graders' screen viewing to materials that parents have themselves pre-viewed. I am frequently surprised at the material presented on seemingly "safe" channels such as Nickelodeon or Disney—including the content of advertisements.
5. Try not to over-schedule your third grader. I am **all for** extra-curricular activities such as music lessons, sports, drama and the like. I think it's absolutely developmentally appropriate and valuable to have your child engaged in an activity that exposes them to a social group, or a learning experience, outside of the St. Thomas's context. I do become concerned, however, when too many of these good choices are selected at once. The result can often be an increase in stress, both on the part of the third grader, and also the rest of the family that struggles to manage the travel and other logistics.

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The Social Life of Third Graders



I'm fond of saying that I have the best job at St Thomas's Day School. Eight and nine year olds are a joy to teach. They are as full of curiosity as they are devoid of cynicism. They love to learn and to play and are unfailingly creative in all their endeavors. These are the years when the first tentative steps toward genuinely independent thinking and acting begin to be taken. Not every step is artfully made, (and some need to be taken back!) but on the whole it's a dynamic and exciting and challenging environment for teaching and learning.

I need you to know that I take your child's social and emotional health very seriously. Ms. O'Connell and I will work throughout the year to create in the classroom a space that is engaging, positive, and affirming as a prerequisite to all the other work we do. That said, having raised two former third graders, and having taught over two hundred more, I'm aware that for almost every student there will be times during the year when feelings of social isolation, or anxiety about coming to school, or a fixation on some problem with a peer or peers (just to name some of the more common issues) will arise.

Part of me wishes that I could wave a magic pencil and make every student's year absolutely stress-free. But the better part of me knows that such difficulties are the inevitable and natural consequence of life, including life in school. Sometimes students (and sometimes teachers!) make poor choices that lead to hurt feelings or misunderstandings. Learning from those choices and their consequences is part of what happens in every class, every day. Working through problems builds confidence, teaches important social strategies, and creates a crucially important sense of social cohesion.

When you're with a class for as many hours a week as I will be with your third grader, it becomes swiftly and unmistakably apparent when the normal social give and take becomes something more worrisome. Please be assured that in such instances I will not hesitate to engage all the resources at the school's disposal to respond. The more routine social stresses often require a subtler approach—sometimes I'll convene a class meeting, or speak with a small group, or with an individual. Often my intention is not to "solve the problem" for the students involved, but rather to support them as they work out their own solutions.

I write all this because I've become familiar with what I call the "highlight reel" method of elementary-age storytelling, which occurs when parents ask third graders

about their day in school. The dozens of peaceful, happy social interactions are rarely included in the list of the day's events, but a hurtful word or action is almost certain to make the highlight reel. This can lead to a skewed sense of the flow of your child's day. Of course, if you hear of something that concerns you, don't hesitate to contact me to discuss the matter. What I do strongly urge is that when you are concerned about the school-time behavior of a child not your own, please first speak with me rather than contacting another family directly. If the past is a guide, I may be able to provide greater context and a fuller perspective.

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Contacting me:

By email: jpeters@stthomasday.org or peters.jim@gmail.com.

You are most welcome to email me. I almost always check my inbox early in the morning, and then often not again until after school. If the matter is urgent, during business hours you can call the school (776-2123) and ask the front desk to have me check my email right away.

By phone: My home number is (203) 281-5993. This is another good way for parents or students to contact me. I don't regularly return calls after 8:00PM.

The School has a voice-mail system. Call the school main number (776-2123); my mailbox number is 33. **Please be advised that I don't check this number on a regular basis. If you do leave a message there, please ask the front desk to tell me it's there.**

A Concluding Thought:

I would just like to thank each of you for choosing to entrust St Thomas's with your third grader's education. I know personally the sacrifices such a choice entails; I will spare no effort to make your child's year as positive and nurturing and productive as I can.

Ms. O'Connell and I look forward to a great year!

All the Best,

Jim Peters

