

May 29, 2020

Hello GFB Families:

While we still have weeks left before the official end to an academic year like no other, many of us are already thinking about returning to school in the fall. Changes to the school building, the structure of learning and interactions among students and staff are only a few of the areas that will be heavily influenced by State health agencies and DESE recommendations. Like you, we are anxious to create a learning plan and just as anxious to share it with you. Fingers crossed the information we need to plan will come our way soon.

As we explained at the beginning of our change over to remote learning, third term report cards will not be issued due to the extended school closure and our earlier decision not to measure student achievement at this time. Student engagement remains very important and we ask for your continued assistance in keeping all students engaged until our last day on June 17th. We appreciate your willingness to work with our school and our teachers during this unprecedented time. Teachers will be reaching out to their students with end of the year plans shortly.

In the meantime, we are maintaining our usual approach to both classroom placements and instructional planning. As has been a long-standing practice, teachers are completing classroom placement grids. This document allows teachers to summarize student performance in a wide variety of areas and is used to help create classrooms that are balanced and afford students the best possible learning experience. Academic strengths/weaknesses, learning habits and social/emotional needs are all points of consideration in placing students.

Instructional focus is always guided by the standards (what students should know and be able to do for each subject). The approach and depth of coverage is something that is guided by our student's needs. It is for that reason that we begin our school year with a formal assessment of all students in primary content areas. The assessment data is examined through both a classroom and grade level lens. From there, teachers fine tune their approach to teaching within their own classrooms and collectively work on mapping out a broader approach, so all students exit the grade with common exposure to all content. We realize that the impact of such extended remote learning may reveal a bigger discrepancy among student skills as we begin this September. The practice of assessing students before mapping out our approach to instruction ensures we know the truest needs of our students and can incorporate a differentiated approach to satisfying those needs.

The reality is this: regardless of how diligently students engage in our remote learning plans, we expect that when students return in September, they will have lost academic ground. In other words, the skills that students left school with are likely to become a bit rusty and perhaps more so after a summer break. Naturally, our remote learning plans can be revisited over the summer and can go a long way to reinforce learning and provide much needed practice.

Two of my favorite learning tools, that don't feel like learning tools to students, are podcasts and books on tape. These tools can be accessed online and the topics tap into every child's area of interest. The advantages to these tools are many. Students who experience reading difficulties can free their brain from the challenging task of tying letters to sounds, blending sounds into words and translating words for meaning. As a result, they can focus on other important elements: structure of language, vocabulary, plot, characters and author's purpose. Fluency, attention to punctuation, cadence and details in writing are all effortlessly absorbed with podcasts and books on tape. And without illustrations or any visual input not only is listening comprehension exercised, our brains are forced to connect what we hear to mental images which activate our imagination. These tools can assist students with sight word recognition, letter patterns in words and reinforce many reading strategies already familiar to our learners. And with a good book on tape or well selected podcast, students have an easier time remaining engaged which pushes attention spans to the limit. That's a good thing!

The summer will introduce a variety of opportunities that are natural to learning and I'll make it a point to suggest a few in future Fort Reports. I am always concerned however about the amount of exposure to print and aspects of literacy instruction students experience. Yes, reading is difficult. That's why it must be taught systematically and explicitly. Listening however is an activation activity; we hear something and our brains are automatically activated. Let your child be active often. Check out this link for some great podcasts:

<https://www.wxxi.org/education/things-listen-your-kids-podcast-edition>

Your Partner in Education,
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