

# Grade 6!

*Curriculum Night 2017  
Ben Peebles*

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## *This grade...this age*

Exciting times! Students in Grade 6 are in a fascinating place...they are at their most capable and accomplished, and have become the leaders of the school. At the same time they are nearing the end of their stay at Jackman ICS and looking ahead to what is to come.

From an emotional and social standpoint, they are making the transition from childhood to adolescence. They are moving from a more sheltered experience to one of independence and exploration. And they are beginning to navigate the increased expectations of a more adult world of responsibility, accountability and social complexity.

As thinkers and learners they are moving away from a focus on the concrete and observable to an ability to explore more abstract ideas, deeper themes, and underlying causes and explanations for phenomena in the natural and human world. They are increasingly able to not only learn about a subject, but to think critically about it as well.

These transitions towards more mature and adult ways of thinking and being are just what makes Grade 6 such an exciting year. By helping children extend their skills in reading, writing, science and math – and by helping them take greater accountability for their learning and growth – it is my goal to make sure they are well prepared for all the changes ahead.

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## *Our classroom*

The Grade 6 class is a collaborative, cooperative learning environment where **students work together to build knowledge, and exercise considerable agency and choice over their learning**, all the while being **supported by targeted instruction in basic and advanced literacy and numeracy skills**. The children are given every opportunity to ask big questions, research, work together and go deeply into every topic. At the same time, they are continuously taught new skills in reading, writing, oral communication, mathematics, science and social studies, and encouraged to apply them every day. In other words, our classroom is a place where children...

- ☐ **feel secure to express their ideas and their interests**
- ☐ **strengthen their foundational academic skills on a daily basis**
- ☐ **engage in deep thinking and creativity every day**
- ☐ **are supported to be accountable and thoughtful about their own progress**

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### *A “straight” grade*

At JICS we have recently moved away from a long tradition of split grades for this age group. We did this to better meet the needs of the students at their developmental level, the change has been highly positive so far. Some noticeable benefits have been:

- ☐ a fast start to the school year, with students able to jump right in to complex material
- ☐ a wider range of social opportunities for students, as they are in a class with 23 other peers, rather than 11
- ☐ the ability to craft a program that meets students at their unique developmental level, with no compromises
- ☐ a greater sense of accountability and challenge for students
- ☐ a greater focus on preparation for Grade 7
- ☐ opportunities for student leadership within the classroom and school

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### *Language Arts*

Literacy is at the core of everything we do in Grade 6. Almost 40% of the students’ day is spent on learning in the wide domain for English Language Arts: reading, writing, discussing and analyzing words and vocabulary. Literacy in our class breaks down into three main areas of instruction – **reading**, **writing** and **word work**. Here are some examples of how each is addressed...

#### **Reading**

- ☐ **self-selected independent reading:** at the core of the reading program, each day students have a chance to read books of their choosing; teachers conference with students individually and help them build strategies from comprehension and a love of reading
- ☐ **guided novel studies:** in groups of 11-12, students read, analyze and discuss texts with the teacher; this guided reading focuses on developing strategies for advanced comprehension, making inferences, predictions, and detecting subtlety
- ☐ **supported reading of information text** for science and social studies: students read a variety of texts, in books and online, based on the current unit of study
- ☐ **dramatic reading of short and long plays**, to develop and assess reading fluency

### Writing

- **frequent full- and half-group writing** sessions: extended periods for children to focus on writing assignments, while receiving one-on-one support from the teacher and intern through conferencing
- **frequent mini-lessons** on the writing process: planning, creating drafts, editing, proofreading and publishing
- **use of a “mentor text” approach**, in which students will write several pieces of one type of writing, then choose a few to edit, polish and publish
- **News Writing** on a weekly basis, in which students write short opinion and commentary pieces on articles discussed in News
- **writing units** this year will include:
  - formal and personal essays
  - email correspondence
  - realistic fiction/short stories
  - anecdotes and narrative non-fiction
  - poetry

### Word Work

- **morphographic spelling**: in weekly lessons, students develop their understanding of the basic units of spelling and how they combine to form words in regular and predictable ways
- **explicit vocabulary instruction**: vocabulary is developed through weekly lessons in which children find, decode and develop an understanding of words they find in pieces of writing. Vocabulary is also developed through read-alouds and News discussions (see below), and through lessons on word choice, figurative language, and synonym brainstorming

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### Math

The Grade 6 Program in Mathematics is based on the Ontario curriculum, but we aim to go deeper and broader than the ministry expectations. By Grade 6, many children are consolidating basic computational skills and algorithms, and are ready to explore deeper questions and more meaningful mathematics. Recognizing that computation is an important part- but only one part – of mathematical thinking, the Grade 6 Math program seeks to help students both make accurate computations and estimates, and to engage in the “real game” of mathematics: the search for patterns, the analysis of ideas and theorems, and the application of numbers to real problems in the world.

**Consolidating computational abilities** is done through directed lessons, but also through practice and play. We have frequent “Number Talks” in the classroom, where students are given a mental math problem to compute without paper, and then encouraged to share and describe their strategies. Wrong answers and mistakes are discussed at

length, and even encouraged as the opportunities for learning that they are. Students also have abundant opportunity to practice math facts and computation through games and challenges. Accuracy is always emphasized over speed.

***Thinking like a mathematician*** is encouraged at all times as students learn new content and ideas. We begin the year in Grade 6 with Algebra in order to give students new tools for expressing more abstract math ideas. Students quickly learn how variables can be used to express patterns, formulas and conjectures. We often use “open” math lessons, in which children are presented with a pattern, visualization or problem, and are expected to explore the mathematics through numbers, pictures and words in combination.

***Applying numbers to real life situations*** is a major part of Grade 6 Math. Many of the ideas, concepts and methods that students learn in Grade 6 are foundational to the type of mathematics done in research, business, finance and everyday life. In Grade 6, students learn to make scatter plots to hunt for correlations and relationships among diverse sets of data, and to draw meaningful conclusions. Financial literacy is another significant aspect of the program, as students learn to calculate tax, simple interest, discounts, and also learn how to create monthly budgets and manage living expenses.

***Developing mathematical communication*** is a focus throughout the Math program in Grade 6. Students need to be able to express their math understanding and explain their ideas and strategies in words, numbers and pictures. They are often required to explain their thinking, justify their answers, and prove that their solutions are correct. As we often say in class, the “right answer” is one you can justify, explain and prove.

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## ***Inquiry***

Throughout ICS, **science and social studies are taught using an inquiry model**, in which children collaborate to construct their understanding of a field. They research in groups, discuss ideas, use the Knowledge Forum database, and share their knowledge with the whole classroom community in a variety of ways.

This is especially so in Grade 6, when students’ abilities to learn from discussion, text, exploration and experimentation become so well-developed. Our inquiry units are also “integrated” in the sense that they always involve instruction in reading strategies, applying mathematics to real problems, written expression, and arts-based learning.

We explore several large topics for extended periods of time, based on the Ontario Curriculum. Probable inquiry units this year include:

- ☐ Astronomy
- ☐ Canadian Government and International Relations
- ☐ Electricity

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## News

News is a central plank in the Grade 6 program. Several students per day bring in newspaper articles that they have read, researched and prepared for presentation. After the student provides the class with a summary, a discussion of the facts and issues of the article begins. Grade 6 students have become veteran News presenters, and so we focus on depth of discussion and real debate of ideas and opinions.

Additionally, in Grade 6, the News program is used as a jumping-off point for writing and other Language Arts activities. Students are given many opportunities to use the News presented by themselves and others to provide topics and questions to fuel writing projects, podcast episodes, speeches, posters, and more.

Here are some of the big questions we have explored through News in the past week alone.

- ☐ Should animals ever be killed to make luxury items?
- ☐ What should be done about high home prices in Toronto?
- ☐ Should there be more bikelanes and crosswalks at the expense of car traffic?
- ☐ Why are people so susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories?

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## Homework

Homework projects are a vital part of the program in Grade 6. **Each homework assignment is a chance for students to apply learning done in class** to an extended project or to independently demonstrate their skills and creativity. The assignments will be varied depending on what we are studying, and, over the course of the year, will give the students a variety of ways to show what they can do, from writing, to mathematics to design and the arts.

**Homework assignments will always go home on Friday, and will be due the second Monday following.** Students will always be given one or two class periods during the intervening week to work on their assignment, and to seek feedback from the teacher. Research shows that feedback which is given while the work is in progress – and thus can be directly acted upon by the student – is of far greater value to long-term learning than feedback or grades given after an assignment is complete. To make use of this opportunity however, ***students must be prepared to show their work in progress during the “feedback week.”*** They can bring unfinished work on a USB, on paper, or by sending it to me on our file sharing system, Microsoft Office 365.

In addition to this weekly assignment, there are **two standing pieces of “homework”** children should do each week:

- ☐ prepare their news article for their presentation day
- ☐ read independently at least 20 minutes per night
  - this is a major part of the Reading Program, and students are required to make progress in their chosen book each night, and bring the book to school with them the next day

Homework is intended to be work that can be done independently by the children. If children are unclear about the homework, they should speak to me well before the due date. The due date schedule is arranged for every project to include a time for students to receive feedback and assistance. But you too can help by:

- ☐ reminding your child to put **full effort** into all projects
- ☐ reminding your child to **manage time effectively**
- ☐ reminding your child that **presentation counts**: work should be neat, typed or in cursive writing
- ☐ **assisting with research**, gathering resources, or “scribing” so that the ideas can come faster

Lastly, homework in our class is almost always presented or shared on the day it is due, so **it is essential that students come to school with their homework completed** to be able to participate!

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### ***Leadership and Social/Emotional Curriculum***

In Grade 6 students are encouraged to be the leaders of the school. From the first day students are asked what legacy they want to leave as a class, and in what ways they could take initiative in the school community. This year, students have decided to start new clubs, possibly form a student council and to initiate new school-wide events.

With support from Chriss and Richard, students will work towards their leadership projects while at the same time receiving direct support and instruction in how to collaborate, create relationships and overcome problems. Students are learning:

- ☐ **how to identify who is affected by actions, plans and ideas**
  - ☐ **how non-verbal and subtle behaviours can help and hurt others**
  - ☐ **how to make decisions together as groups so that everyone is included**
  - ☐ **how to take the perspectives of others**
  - ☐ **how to identify the characteristics of good leaders, friends and contributors**
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### ***Use of Technology***

Children in Grade 5/6 are both allowed and expected to use technology on an almost daily basis. We make use of the full set of Mac laptops in the class for writing, research, Knowledge Forum inquiry, understanding math through graphic manipulatives, preparing presentations, and video editing. Some of the software we will use includes:

- ☐ **Microsoft 365 Office Online**
- ☐ **Microsoft Word, Excel, Teams, OneNote and Class Notebook**
- ☐ **GarageBand and iMovie**
- ☐ **Google SketchUp for 3D printing**
- ☐ **Knowledge Forum**

- ☐ **Raspberry Pi computer hardware**
- ☐ **Python coding**

This year the Grade 6 class is piloting the use of Microsoft 365 Online, a full suite of productivity and collaboration tools, that are a scaled-down version of students and professors at the University of Toronto will soon be using. Our server is fully separate from the rest of the university community, and students will be able to access all of their homework assignments, in-class handouts, and ongoing work at any computer connected to the internet. There is an email and collaboration space that students can use to engage in group projects, or message me for feedback and support. Nick Song and Krista Spence are working with the students and myself to implement this exciting technology.

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***Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions, concerns or idea***

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***to discuss*** a question, concern or idea...please call!  
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