

Getting the Most for Your First Grader

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No parent says, “Oh, mediocre is okay for my child. Please do things halfway; it doesn’t matter.” Parents want the best for their children. This is not a matter of spending the most money on education or buying the latest educational toy. It is a matter of spending time with your child and expending effort to maximize what he or she is being provided by the school, by the community, and at home.

Getting the Most from Your School System

You wouldn’t think twice about getting the most bang for your buck from a hotel, your gym, or a restaurant, and you shouldn’t think twice about getting the most from your school system. The school system was designed to serve your needs, and you should take advantage of that.

Public Schools

Part of learning how to manage life as an adult is knowing how to manage interaction with bureaucratic agencies, so it makes sense that part

of this learning take place within a kinder, gentler bureaucratic system. This is a good introduction to working within a system that was formed to assist in the development of children's abilities. Schools are also a workplace—with a chain of command—and that is a good induction into the workplace your child will enter as an adult. To further your children's educational experience, you and your children will have the opportunity to meet and work with:

- School personnel: your child's teacher, teacher's aides, specialists, the school counselor, the administrator or principal, and others
- Extracurricular groups: scouts, sports, after-school programs, and community parks and recreation programs
- Parents: of children from your child's class or grade level, school volunteers, and parent-teacher organizations

Participation in your child's education is paramount to his or her success. Active participation doesn't mean that you have to spend hours at the school as a volunteer, but it does include reading all of the communications your school sends either to you directly or home with your child. Also, read the school handbook and drop by your child's school on a regular basis if possible. If you can't stop by, check out the school or class Web site to see what units are being covered, any upcoming events, and so on. Participation means attending school events when you can, going to class parties when possible, and going to parent-teacher conferences. If they are scheduled at a time when you are not available, request a different time. The school administrator or principal usually requires that teachers try to accommodate your schedule.

The single most important thing you can do to get the most out of your local school system is to talk to your child's teacher. Find out what curricula your child will be covering and how you can help facilitate learning. Does the teacher see specific strengths and weaknesses that you can help enhance or bring up to speed? The teacher can help you

identify your child's learning style, social skills, problem-solving abilities, and coping mechanisms.

Teachers play a role that extends outside the classroom. Your child's teacher is the perfect person to recommend systemwide and community resources. Teachers know how to find the local scout leaders, tutors, good summer programs, and community resources. Your child's teacher may be able to steer you in the right direction for getting your child on an intramural team. Teachers are truly partners in your child's upbringing.

Your child's teacher cares about your child's well-being. Everyone has heard stories about having a bad teacher or one who was "out to get my child." If that's the way you feel, then it's even more important to have regular conversations with the teacher. Maybe his or her actions or your child's actions are being misunderstood. In any case, your child's teacher is the main source of information about school and the gateway to resources for the year, so find a way to communicate.

If you know there is a problem with the teacher that needs to be taken seriously, try the following:

- Talk to parents with children in the class ahead of your child. They may be able to tell you how the issue was approached by parents the previous year—and they will have lots to tell about their experiences with teachers your child will have next year.
- Talk to your child's principal. This may result in your child being transferred to another class, so make sure you are prepared for that prior to making the appointment. Be willing to work with your child's current teacher prior to transferring your child. The less disruption your first grader experiences, the better.
- Talk to your local school administration center to see what the procedures are for transferring to another school. You will likely be required to provide transportation to a school outside of your

home district, but if the problem is severe enough, it will be worth it.

No matter what, active participation and communication with your child's school is essential. It empowers you to:

- Accurately monitor your child's progress
- Determine which optional activities would enrich your child's learning experience
- Prepare your child for upcoming events, curricula, and skill introduction
- Share and add to the school learning environment
- Create a complementary learning environment in your home
- Spend time with your child

And just a word about the school secretary: this person knows more about what is going on in that building than anyone else. When I was a teacher, the school secretary always added to my and my students' success. The secretary is a taskmaster, nurse, mom or dad, and generally just a comforting figure in what can sometimes be a really big building. The school secretary always knows what forms to fill out, which teacher is where, what students are absent and why, when the next school event is, and how much candy money you owe for the latest fund-raiser. He or she is a source of lunch money, milk money, extra pencils, bus passes, and the copy machine. Get to know and love your school secretary.

Private Schools

On a micro level, participating in your child's education if she attends a private school isn't much different from participating if she attends a public school. Private schools have access to the same community resources. If you have a special needs child, the private school should

work with local education agencies to see that your child gets the appropriate services. Through active communication and participation, you will derive the same benefits as parents whose children attend public school.

On a macro level, private schools are different from public schools. Private schools are governed not by a school board but by an internal system. This can be both easier and harder to navigate. Dealing with private schools is easier because the schools realize that you are paying tuition every month, so frankly they want to please their customers. Dealing with private schools is harder because they aren't accountable to the community for their actions nor are they governed by the same due processes as the public school system. Check out the school's administration hierarchy to see how decisions are made and what roles have been created for parent governance. Also, get to know the school's secretary.

To really be on top of things, it's a good idea to print a copy of your state's learning standards (see chapter 4) and familiarize yourself with the topics and skills that your state thinks first graders should learn. You can find a copy at www.knowledgeessentials.com. Compare the standards to those of your private school's first grade curriculum. If the curriculum is drastically different from the required state learning standards, your child will have difficulty passing the required state assessments. If your child's curriculum meets and exceeds the standards, your child will be well served by that school.

Private schools have the flexibility to incorporate religious elements or varied teaching philosophies that public schools can't provide. They are not subject to the separation of church and state requirements. Private schools operate without depending on community support (such as bond proposals); so as long as their tuition-paying constituency approves of their methods and the students who graduate from the programs demonstrate success, private schools can implement teaching methods at will that fall out of the mainstream.

Getting the Most from Your Homeschool Curriculum

A little power is a dangerous thing. You are homeschooling your child because you want more control over what and how your child learns and the environment in which he learns it. That is admirable, but don't be fooled. To a large extent, your child's natural ability to learn certain things at certain times will dictate the way you should approach any homeschool curriculum (chapters 2 and 3 explain this more fully). The best thing you can do when starting to homeschool your child is look at books on child development. Start with these:

- *Children's Strategies: Contemporary Views of Cognitive Development*, edited by David F. Bjorklund. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1990.
- *Piaget's Theory: Prospects and Possibilities*, edited by Harry Beilin. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1992.
- *Instructional Theories in Action: Lessons Illustrating Selected Theories and Models*, edited by Charles M. Reigeluth. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1987.
- *All Our Children Learning*, Benjamin S. Bloom. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.

You don't have to homeschool your child all by yourself or by limiting yourself to a particular homeschool organization's materials. Each state has some form of a regional education system with centers open to the public. At your public school system's curriculum resource center, you can check out curriculum materials and supplemental materials. Most of these centers have a workroom with things like a die press that cuts out letters and shapes from squares to animals to holiday items. Regional education centers often provide continuing education for teachers, so they usually have some training materials on hand. Look for information about your regional center on your state

department of education's Web site. You can find a link to your state department of education at www.knowledgeessentials.com.

You can purchase homeschool curriculum kits designed to provide your child with a lion's share of the materials needed to complete a grade level. You can also buy subject area–specific curricula. It is important to ask the company that sells the curriculum to correlate the materials with your state's learning standards so that you can see which standards you need to reinforce with additional activities. You can find the companies that sell these kits at www.knowledgeessentials.com.

Using Supplemental Materials

You cannot expect any single curriculum in any public school, private school, or homeschool to meet all of the learning standards for the grade level and subject area in your state. Many will meet 90 percent of the standards and some will meet 75 percent, which is why there are supplemental materials. Schools use them and so should you. They are simply extra materials that help your child learn more. Examples of these materials include:

- Trade books. These are just books that are not textbooks or workbooks—in other words, the kinds of books, fiction and nonfiction, that you would check out at the library or that your child would choose at a bookstore. Trade books don't have to tell about many things in a limited number of pages so they can tell a lot more about a single topic than a textbook can. They give your child a chance to practice skills that she is learning. If you choose wisely, you can find books that use newly learned reading skills, such as compound words, blends, prefixes and suffixes, or rhyming. Sometimes these skills will be set in the context of newly learned science or social studies topics, such as weather, habitats, or your community. Many companies provide these

types of books for sale, but the most recognizable one may be Scholastic, Inc. Appendix A lists some books that are really good for first graders.

- Software and the Internet. Schools choose electronic activities and content, such as educational software and Internet sites, and electronic components, such as Leapfrog's LeapMat, allowing your child to expand his content knowledge while implementing skills just learned. Supplementing what your child is learning at school with these resources helps him gain technology skills within a familiar context. If you choose wisely, such as starting with the software choices listed in appendix B of this book, you can sometimes enhance reading skills and/or supplement a social studies or science topic while your child learns to operate a computer—talk about bang for your buck.
- Other materials. Videos, photographs, audio recordings, newspapers—just about anything you can find that helps expand what your child is learning is a supplemental resource. Loosely defined, supplemental resources can include a wide array of materials; your newly trained eye is limited only to what you now know is appropriate for your child.

Now you know what we need to cover, so let's get to it.