

# What's New in Lower School?

Fresh ideas have met quick success.

## Parent-School Communication

The better the collaboration between school and home, the better the outcomes for students. To reinforce this, Lower School Director Heather Wagner introduced a “Hopes and Dreams” conference for parents of 1st-5th Graders with the homeroom teacher. This is a conference where the teacher does the listening while the parents explain their goals for their child and offer context about the child’s background and family.

Another communication initiative improves the quality and consistency of weekly homeroom and grade level updates. Rather than each teacher using a different style, frequency, and depth to their newsletter, teachers take turns crafting a high-quality update for the entire grade. Specials teachers rotate adding a section on their course as well. The most significant shift is the framing of the newsletter itself. They are titled “Ask Me About...” as a way to inspire dialogue between parents and the child. In support of the Strategic Plan’s student-centric learning mandate, this encourages the child to feel ownership of his/her own learning.



Heather Wagner  
Lower School Director

## 1st Grade Tea 2.0

The evolution of this event is an excellent example of tweaking a beloved tradition, without losing its feel and essence, to evolve its educational and/ or community-building benefits. This hallmark 1st Grade experience still involves the children serving tea to parents in hand-made clay cups in an elegant setting in the dining hall, and still features children dressed in their finest for the occasion. However, rather than showcasing a study of England through a song and dance performance, the students showcase the trajectory of their writing throughout the year, reading to their parents over tea. The event is now known as the “1st Grade Authors’ Tea”. It also entails a walk-through of the collaborative 3D “community” built by each homeroom contributing assigned elements: public services, retail stores, residential and recreational areas.



## Community Groups

To establish bonds between grade levels and create an element of continuity throughout the Lower School experience, each student in the division is now assigned to a Community Group. Each group has a faculty leader and contains at least one student from each grade level. Group composition remains constant each year, apart from welcoming new 1st Graders in September and saying goodbye to 5th Graders each June. Meeting every six weeks or so, group activities incorporate service learning, such as making cards and letters for veterans or cancer patients, or simply reading picture books together or playing games. “The students just love being together, and getting to know kids outside of their grade,” says Wagner.



## Responsive Classroom

All Lower School homeroom teachers have undergone training in the “Responsive Classroom”, an evidence-based approach to enhance academic and social-emotional learning through focus on the homeroom environment. What constitutes a Responsive Classroom?

**Morning meeting:** Each child is actively seen and heard by their peers and teacher before the day gets underway. This engenders feelings of belonging and responsibility as part of the group and leads to children’s “best efforts” throughout the day.

**Routines:** Consistent expectations create safety, calm and a sense of order so that attention can be focused on learning.

**Teacher language:** 3 R’s include frequent **Reinforcement** (“I see Susie is quietly ready with her pencil.”), **Reminding** (“Who can remind me how we move through the hallways?”), **Redirecting** (“Let’s continue this conversation during lunch.”)

**Positive relationship with school:** Encouraging students to consider how and why things at school are taught and done creates ownership of their school experience. Where possible, teachers put things in students’ hands: “How can we organize the markers? How can we use the whiteboard to help with foundations today?”

**Problem solving:** Teachers have techniques to help students take agency in dispute settling.



## Responsive Classroom

### Social & Emotional Competencies

Cooperation    Assertiveness    Responsibility  
Empathy                      Self-Control

### Academic Competencies

Academic Mindset                      Perseverance  
Learning Strategies                      Academic Behaviors

