

8th Grade Academics: What To Expect

Classes get tougher, but students still have time to strengthen academic and organization skills before entering high school.

by Patti Ghezzi



This is the last year before high school, the last year you and your child don't have to worry about grades showing up on the high school transcript. Many 8th graders have already started tackling work at the high school level, especially in math. But they are still middle schoolers, and the curriculum, while challenging, is still aimed at the middle school child.

Preparation for High School

At Rising Starr Middle School in Fayetteville, Ga., 8th graders are given cumulative exams that resemble the midterms and finals they'll face in high school. The exams don't count as heavily toward the child's final grade. "It's more for the experience," says Principal Len Patton.

In 8th grade, your child may spend time with a guidance counselor, talking about high school, college, and even careers. One of the primary themes of middle school is exploration, and parents needn't freak out about such conversations about the future. The idea isn't to lock a child into one path, it's to make sure your child knows what paths are available.

Many schools will also give 8th graders opportunities to visit the high school and make a smooth transition. "It gives them more confidence going into 9th grade," Patton says.

From Science Labs to Shakespeare

Curriculum varies widely from state to state. In language arts, you can expect an emphasis on persuasive and expository writing. Many schools place strong readers in honors classes, and these students may tackle more challenging texts such as Shakespeare. Some students may still be struggling with basic reading and writing and may need extra support in preparation for high school.

In social studies, your child will be expected to relate the past to the present in more detail. Kids who are comfortable with class discussion tend to do well, while shy children may need encouragement.

Most science at this age is hands-on, and your child may be introduced to lab reports. Topics may be weighty, such as heredity, reproduction, and adaptation. Often a keen interest in science is piqued in 8th grade.

In math, your child will probably be placed according to ability. As curriculum has been pushed down, with younger children tackling harder work, many middle school students study concepts once taught in high school. In honors math courses, 8th graders may be exposed to geometry and advanced algebra concepts.

Honors Not for Everyone

It's unrealistic to expect all kids, even those who have always excelled in school, to be ready for such high-level work. "Math understanding is developmental," Patton says. "If a child is not ready, we tell parents, 'It's not a tragedy.'"

Some students will blossom in high school and be able to move up to advanced math classes. Others will excel on the regular track, which is still very challenging because of the curriculum pushdown.

Despite the more difficult curriculum, 8th graders still need to be taught in ways that recognize where they are developmentally. "They need to move around a little bit, work together in groups, and change it up," Patton says. "It's hard for kids at this age to sit in a desk while a teacher lectures."

To that end, 8th graders often are assigned group projects where they research a subject in depth with classmates and make a multimedia presentation. They're often expected to

integrate several subjects, such as math, language arts, and science or social studies into one impressive project.

Group projects can be stressful socially, technically, and academically. Many kids thrive, but others will struggle along with their parents, who must walk the fine line between being supportive and taking charge.

As they march toward high school, they'll have more opportunities to make choices about their coursework, not just in math but also in areas such as foreign languages. Eighth grade is still a time for exploration, and parents should encourage their child to try different things, Patton says. "If you give them some choices,...you'll see them blossom in areas that are their strengths."

Time To Read

In 8th grade, students are expected to read challenging texts in all their classes, including science, social studies, math, and electives. But they also need to learn to enjoy reading, says Elizabeth Moje, an education professor at the University of Michigan.

"We don't want kids reading for the sake of reading," Moje says. "If they do that, they're just 'doing school.'"

Parents can help their kids develop a love of reading by encouraging them to find activities they enjoy that require reading. For example, Moje's daughter, already an avid reader, enjoys sewing, so she devours anything related to fabric and stitching.

Modeling good reading habits also sends kids the message that reading is important. "They have to see us reading, going to the library, reading high-quality materials on the Internet, and digging in deeply," Moje says. "They need to see the purpose of reading, instead of seeing it as just something you do for school."

Today's 8th graders do much of their reading online, Moje says, and parents shouldn't discount that. Computer games often require a lot of reading, and they provide motivation. "Kids are learning a number of complex words, phrases, and concepts embedded in the games," she says. "They are not necessarily useful in school, but they show kids that there is value in being a proficient reader."

In school, students will be expected to read in order to find the right answer, but that's not enough. They also need to be able to infer meaning, to draw conclusions, and to relate one passage to another.

Organization Skills

Eighth grade is the time to shore up deficiencies in all academic areas as well as to get organized and learn the study skills necessary for high school.

Parents can help their children by teaching them how to organize their room, their folders, their notebooks, and even their lockers, says Jerry Parks, a teacher at Georgetown Middle School in Kentucky and author of *Help! My Child Is Starting Middle School!*

Parks recommends requiring students to keep an agenda and going over it together to make sure everything is getting done. Some parents may also want to explicitly teach their children how to study. He also suggests helping your child lay out her clothes, backpack, and other school necessities the night before.

Finally, he offers a suggestion so daring, only an adventurous and desperate parent would do it: Visit your middle schooler's locker after school once a month.

"The biggest single factor regarding homework incompleteness, other than not writing down assignments, is losing something in the bottomless pit known as the locker," Parks says. "Sometimes the very fear of a parent coming to school will lead to better organization skills."

For more information, read ["8th Grade Social Changes: What To Expect"](#)

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