

First Day of School

August 2014

On August 7, teachers in Whitfield County Schools will welcome approximately 13,000 students returning for another year of study, friendships, and play. About 1,000 of these students will be five-year-olds entering kindergarten and another 240 will enter Pre-K for the first time.

Thoughts of starting their school career can spark a wide range of emotions. A child enjoys the excitement of making new friends, playing on the playground, and perhaps riding the big yellow bus. A new year may bring worries for parents who wonder if their child will have friends on the playground or if the bus will bring them home safely. Some worry the teachers will not understand their children, appreciate their talents, or love them the way they deserve to be loved.

Sometimes, the first day of school is harder on the parents than the child. In the minds of mothers and fathers, especially those with children starting kindergarten or Pre-K, enrolling in school for the first time often signals the beginning of a new, more independent stage in their child's life.

One year, a mom brought her son to his first day of kindergarten and waited at his classroom door telling me how hard it would be on her son when she left. Her jaw dropped when her son ran into the room without a backward glance. He found his name on the table showing where he would sit and began to laugh and chat with another child. She burst into tears and turned away. I could hear her sobs as she walked quickly down the hallway.

I have some tips for parents to help their child start the year right that benefit all students, no matter their age or grade. Many children get in the habit of staying up late and sleeping in during the summer. Parents should set healthy bedtime routines that set limits on TV watching and time spent on computers or handheld electronics. These bright and engaging screens stimulate the brain, making it difficult for anyone (including grownups) to settle down and fall asleep. Try to provide at least 30 minutes of quiet time before going to bed. This is a great time for storytelling, reading, or for a quiet conversation between child and parent. This helps students sleep better and be ready the next morning.

Each night, work with your child to pick out the next day's clothes. Provide several choices and let your child make the decision as often as possible. Allowing children to choose will help them develop confidence in their ability to make decisions. Working with your child the night before can prevent stressful situations that may lead to arguments in the morning, and starting the day on a positive note can set the tone for the rest of the day.

Another tip for winding down the day is to plan with your child what he will have for breakfast and lunch the next day. It is okay if he does not want to eat breakfast right after he wakes because all Whitfield County elementary schools serve free breakfasts for all children. As one of the most important meals of the day, eating breakfast helps them do better in school. Of course, parents are always welcome to join their child for breakfast or lunch, but it is better to say goodbye as you leave the cafeteria. Walking them to class usually makes it harder for the child to say goodbye.

Talk with your children about how they will get home from school each day. Make sure they know if plans change, and when they do change, it is important to write a note to the teacher. Your child's safety is our top priority. We know last minute changes can happen, but asking a child to tell the teacher or calling the school may lead to miscommunication and missed messages. A written note is the best way to let teachers know about any change and ensure your child arrives home as planned. Even if they get home the same way every day, it helps children to be assured of the routine.

Even the best preparations cannot rule out all of the challenges a new school year brings as children adjust to changing routines. Once your child starts school, he may cry or suddenly develop an unexplained stomachache. Some children may scream and throw temper tantrums when parents try to leave them at school in the mornings. Although you may also be upset, if this happens, the best thing you can do is assure your child he will have a fun day, hug and kiss him, and leave. Your child will usually stop crying before you leave the school, and I assure you his teacher and friends will comfort him to help him feel better.

The first day of school is a big step in the lives of children and their parents, and our teachers and administrators are your partners in helping your child enjoy positive experiences at school. Working together supports our mutual goal of preparing students to grow into young adults who are ready for graduation.