

South Orange Middle School ~ Transitioning into 6th Grade

Frequently Asked Questions: The Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How...?

This document was prepared by the SOMS HSA 6th Grade Coordinators to help incoming parents understand how things work at SOMS. Please note that this is not an official communication from the school administration or teachers, but is intended only to provide some “unofficial” answers as you and your child embark on this middle school adventure. We hope it helps!

1. What are “teams” and how are they organized?

The 6th grade students at SOMS are assigned to one of three teams: Team A, Team B, or Team C. Each team has a set of core content area teachers (i.e., Math, English/Language Arts (ELA), Social Studies, Science, and Special Education). Each team also has one teacher designated as the Team Leader, who coordinates team information and communication with students and parents. The Team Leader is the person you will contact if you wish to meet with your child’s teachers. The HSA keeps an updated list of teams under [Staff Directory](#) on their [website](#) for your convenience. (Please note that the update takes place at the beginning of the school year, so the previous year’s teachers may be listed until then.)

The students on a team will generally have those teachers for his/her core subjects, and travel together as a group to most of their core classes. The only exception is math, because students on the same team may be in different math classes. In Related Arts classes (e.g., Spanish, Art, Drama, P.E., Chorus/Orchestra/Band), students will be in class with people from other teams.

2. When do I find out what team my child is on?

Short answer: Usually on the first day of school.

Longer answer: Here’s how it works... Before the first day of school, a letter will be mailed to your home. This letter will have your child’s homeroom number on it, which is the classroom number for their first period class. Because teacher assignment and team composition may change up until school starts, SOMS only releases the first period classroom assignment, with no teacher names. (The name that may appear on your letter is typically the name of the guidance counselor for your student, NOT the teacher.)

Students will receive their full schedule and be introduced to their team on the first day of school, which is different than in elementary school where they find out their teacher’s name in advance. Sometimes, the full schedules are released (with teacher names) in PowerSchool the day before school starts, but again, that depends on whether classes are still being reconfigured.

If you do not receive the letter in the mail and it’s the day before school starts, don’t worry! You can call the SOMS Main Office at (973) 378-2772 and select the Main Office option. Ms. Ritchwood or Ms. Smith will be able to help you and provide your child’s homeroom number. If, for some reason, you can’t get through before the first day, all school administrators are

available outside the building with student assignment lists at the beginning of the day to help guide your child.

3. How can I request that my twins, triplets, etc. are placed on the same team or different teams?

Please contact Principal Lynn Irby (lirby@somsd.k12.nj.us; (973) 378-2772, ext. 2000 or option 2) to make a request as soon as possible.

4. Where does my child go on the first day of school?

All 6th graders should enter through the main back door of the school building, on the first day and every day! The administrators will be outside to guide them as they arrive. If you are driving your child, please follow the designated "Car" lane and pull your vehicle up as far as possible. This will help expedite the drop-off process by allowing more students to safely exit their cars. Please note that idling is not allowed. The administration asks that you please exit the parking lot as soon as your child has exited the vehicle.

5. Whom can I contact if I have concerns about my child related to academic issues, behavioral challenges, or classroom/teacher placement?

You should consider the Guidance Department as your child's best advocate. The guidance counselors can help you and your child navigate various issues, and they are experts in problem solving and developing action plans for your child. The [Guidance Department website](#) is robust as well, and they have developed their own [FAQ](#) and a [chain of command guide](#) about whom to contact with various questions as you and your child navigate SOMS.

The letter you receive before school starts will include the name of your child's guidance counselor. You can contact him/her through their email, which is available on the Staff Directory, or by calling the Guidance Secretary at (973) 378-2772, and dialing by name. (Again, please see the chain of command guide about whom to contact when.)

6. Whom can I contact if I have concerns about my child's Individual Education Plan (IEP)?

If a rising 6th grader has an IEP, a member of the SOMS Child Study Team will be invited to that student's annual IEP meeting in the spring of 5th grade. A letter introducing the case manager assigned to that student will be sent to parents/guardians at the beginning of the new school year. The Child Study Team members can be found in the [Staff Directory](#) on the SOMS HSA website.

If a student does not have an IEP but is making minimal academic and/or emotional progress in the regular education setting, you can reach out to their Team Leader to initiate the [Intervention and Referral Services \(I&RS\)](#) process. The SOMS school I&RS Coordinator is Assistant Principal James Jennings (jjennings@somsd.k12.nj.us).

7. Who is the designated Section 504 Coordinator?

Assistant Principal James Waldron (jwaldron@somsd.k12.nj.us) is responsible for coordinating 504 Accommodation Plans, addressing questions about compliance, and/or making revisions to those plans. If a student does not have a 504 Plan but is struggling academically or social-emotionally/behaviorally, you can reach out to their Team Leader to initiate the [Intervention and Referral Services \(I&RS\)](#) process.

8. Whom should I contact if my child is feeling harassed, intimidated, or bullied (HIB)?

You should immediately contact the building principal, Principal Irby (lirby@somsd.k12.nj.us; (973) 378- 2772, ext. 2). She strongly encourages you to bring any situation to her attention sooner rather than later so that interventions can be explored. In addition, Ms. Steiner (SOMS Social Worker) is the HIB School Specialist. She can be reached at ext. 2012.

9. What time does school begin and end?

School at SOMS begins at 8:20am and ends with dismissal at 3:05pm. Students are typically allowed to enter the building at 8:12am, the first bell is at 8:15am, and class starts promptly at 8:20am. Students are expected to leave promptly at 3:05pm unless they are A) conferencing with a teacher (in which case they have 10 minutes and must exit by 3:15pm), or B) attending a YouthNet Club or YouthNet Extended Day.

10. Whom do I contact when my child is late, absent, or needs an early dismissal?

Please contact the main office by calling (973) 378-2772 ext. 1 to report these situations. If your child is late or if you require an early dismissal, you must accompany your child to the main office to sign them in or out. (The main office is just to the left after entering the front door). You can also report an absence via PowerSchool. Go to the "Ecollect Forms" section and scroll down to the part that says Attendance.

11. When can my child join band, orchestra, and/or chorus?

6th grade band, orchestra, and chorus will meet during one of the Related Arts (RA) periods. A student who is interested in both chorus and an instrument will work out a schedule with the teachers. (They will have been registered for only one, and will contact both teachers to become enrolled in the other.) If they choose to do both, your child will attend half the chorus and half the band/orchestra classes throughout the year. For example, if your child plays violin and sings in the chorus, he/she might attend chorus on one "A" day, then orchestra on the next "A" day. They will still be responsible for learning the music at the same pace as the other students.

For students who play an instrument, there are weekly lessons in addition to orchestra, which take place during another class period. (Your child will be excused from that class to attend lessons.) Lessons occur on a rotating schedule so that they do not miss the same class each time. Those schedules are handed out to the students.

Please do not have your child bring their instrument to school on the first day. They will be told when their first practice session will begin (usually after the first full week of school). The music department includes: Chorus Director Jacob Ezzo (jezzo@somsd.k12.nj.us) ; Orchestra Director

William Cook (wcook@somsd.k12.nj.us); and Band Director Don Tighe (dtighe@somsd.k12.nj.us).

12. What after school activities are available?

There are many after school activities and your child is encouraged to get involved! The two main school-based after school activities are:

- (1) [YouthNet Afterschool Clubs](#) – These clubs are run in 6-week sessions three times a year. These clubs have a registration fee which depends on the number of days you'd like to participate in the clubs. There are many to choose from and you can find more information on the YouthNet website. It will also be distributed at the beginning of the year.
- (2) School Groups – Throughout the year there are other opportunities to join in activities at SOMS, such as Yearbook, All School Musical, MLK Club, etc. These are other opportunities to interact with new friends and make connections with SOMS teachers. Information will be given to students during their homeroom period.

13. How will teachers communicate with my child and me?

The primary communication between teachers and students (outside of class) is through **Google Classroom**. Your child will be given the code for each class and teachers will help them log in during the first days of school. You can get their login if you wish to see Google Classroom and follow their assignments, projects, and class discussions.

Grades and attendance are available through **PowerSchool**. You should already have a login from elementary school, but because there aren't "real" grades through 5th grade, you probably didn't log in very often if at all. Now you can log in and see your child's overall grades, as well as the grades for their assignments.

You can also email your teachers if you have a question. They'll provide their contact information at Back to School Night, and it's in the [Staff Directory](#) on the HSA website. Phone conversations can be arranged, or in-person meetings. Please contact your Team Leader to set up in-person meetings with all or part of the team.

14. How am I able to track my child's progress in his or her classes?

The PowerSchool Parent Portal is an excellent resource to view and keep track of your child's absences, tardiness, grades, and missing assignments. In the past, a password was mailed to parents during the first week of school. Because all students (including elementary) had access to PowerSchool this year, they may not mail passwords again. (This password should stay the same through your child's high school years in the district, so keep the password handy!)

If you have any questions about PowerSchool, you can visit the [PowerSchool Help](#) section on the district website. If you still need support, you can email parentportalhelp@somsd.k12.nj.us.

If you notice that your child's information is not updated in a timely manner please contact your child's teacher, Team Leader, or your guidance counselor. If you notice many missed

assignments please reach out to the guidance department to develop a plan to keep your child on track.

15. When would I be able to schedule a conference with my child’s teacher since there are no regularly scheduled parent/teacher conferences in middle school?

You may schedule a conference through your child’s Team Leader at any time. The best method is to send an email request to the teacher or Team Leader. The guidance department has created a [guide](#) that will help you identify when it is appropriate to call the guidance department, the team leader, the teacher, or the administration. This information is available at the end of this document. Signing up for PowerSchool and checking it regularly will keep you in touch with your child’s academic performance.

16. What are progress reports and how are report cards made available?

Progress reports are issued halfway through each marking period to give you a summary of how your child is performing in their classes. This is a summary of what is available on PowerSchool, so should not be a surprise if you are tracking PowerSchool periodically. Progress reports and report cards used to be mailed home, but as of 4/30/2020, the district began to make them available online only due to the pandemic. We assume this will continue as it is more efficient, but please stay tuned to the district website for updates. For instructions on how to access the progress reports and report cards online, click [here](#) on the district website.

17. Where can I obtain a class list?

The SOMS HSA prepares a [school directory](#) in October. It is completely electronic and stored on the website. It is password protected, and a password is emailed out to families who subscribe to the weekly HSA e-blast. (You can subscribe to that by scrolling down and clicking the “Sign Up” button [here](#).) The data is sent to the HSA from the district, so it is imperative that parents complete the beginning-of-year forms in PowerSchool and sign the waiver to be included in the directory. If you wish to opt out, you can do so in PowerSchool.

18. How long are the 6th grade class periods, and what are the class times?

Most classes are 50 minutes long, with a 30-minute period for lunch. (In the schedule, lunch is considered 5th period.) Period 0 is an extra few minutes spent in the homeroom class at the beginning of each day. The 2019-2020 schedule was as follows:

Bell Schedule - Daily			
Period	Start Time	End Time	Duration
Period 0	08:15 am	08:30 am	15
Period 1	08:20 am	09:10 am	50
Period 2	09:17 am	10:07 am	50
Period 3	10:10 am	11:00 am	50
Period 4	11:03 am	11:53 am	50
Period 5	11:56 am	12:26 pm	30
Period 6	12:29 pm	01:19 pm	50
Period 7	01:22 pm	02:12 pm	50
Period 8	02:15 pm	03:05 pm	50

Please note that schedules sometimes shift, so your child’s schedule will be posted in PowerSchool at the beginning of the year.

19. What are “A” Days and “B” Days?

SOMS runs on a schedule of alternating “A” and “B” days, with slightly different schedules on each day. Specifically, students alternate between different Related Arts classes every other day, so on an “A” day, your child will have two Related Arts periods, and on a “B” day, they will have two other Related Arts classes during those same periods. (They attend all four core courses *every day* at the same time.) This might be best expressed through an example:

- “A” Day: My child has Physical Education for 4th period and Spanish for 7th period
- “B” Day: My child has Chorus for 4th period and Health* for 7th period

*Health is a trimester course, and your child will have two other trimester courses during the year. For example, they may have Art 2D for the second trimester and Drama for the third. All other classes follow a 4-marking-period schedule.

20. How many minutes does my child have to change from one period class to the next period class?

Passing time is 3 minutes long. This may seem like a short time, and many students are nervous because they don’t know the building. Please tell your child not to worry! For most teams, the classrooms are very close to each other. Teachers walk the 6th graders around the building on the first few days, and help them learn their way. Additionally, many students have several classes together, so will be passing from one class to the next with several classmates. In September and October the teachers are sensitive to 6th graders’ confusion and anxiety, and they provide support as needed. (Please reach out to your guidance counselor if your child needs extra support after the first week or so, and they can help your child become more comfortable.) By November the expectation is that students arrive to class on time, and it’s rare that anyone is still unable to pass in 3 minutes by that time.

21. What is the “Rotation” period?

The 8th period of the day is called “Rotation”. Each day, 6th grade students go to one of their four core classes (ELA, Math, Social Studies, and Science). Fridays they go to their first period (homeroom) class for Rotation. *Important Side Note: Some days your child will revisit one of their morning classes during this 8th period afternoon “Rotation”. Therefore, they need to have their morning binder/folders with them during those afternoons. They should organize their classwork so this is easy to do.*

22. Do all 6th Graders eat lunch together?

Yes! So they’ll see their friends outside their team during lunch. Also, when the weather is good, students are allowed to go outside for a few minutes after they finish their lunch. This little break to throw a ball, run around, or just get some fresh air helps a tiny bit with the loss of recess coming from elementary school!

23. How is the cafeteria food and process different than elementary school?

There are many more food options (e.g., made-to-order sandwiches, hot food options daily including a pasta bar, grill, and pizza), and kids say the food is much better! There are also more “snack” items available: pretzels, fruit, chips, churros, fruit snacks. Please speak to your

child about your expectations for the items they choose. If you are using the [Meal Pay Plus](#) online payment system, you can also track your child's purchase history. Your child can also PAY CASH if you prefer that option. Breakfast is also available to all students in the morning before school, starting as early as 7:45 am. Children can pay cash or use their Meal Pay Plus account as well.

24. Where can I get a supply list?

There will be a partial list available on the HSA website in August, but it is recommended that each student wait for his or her teacher to supply them with a more comprehensive list for the year. Teachers have very specific requests and it is cost effective to wait and see what they ask for instead of pre-purchasing supplies.

Many people want to know whether they should buy two binders (one for morning and one for afternoon classes), or just one big one for all classes. There are lots of opinions about this, but it ultimately depends on how your child organizes best for learning. Both organizational systems work--don't stress about which one is better. The most important thing is encouraging your child to build organizational habits that work for him or her.

25. How many times per day can my child visit his/her locker?

Students may visit their lockers in the morning before school begins at 8:15 am, before the 6th grade lunch period, and after school.

26. Is my child allowed to carry a bag during school?

Backpacks or large bags are not permitted in the hallways at SOMS during school hours. However, small purses are allowed.

27. Where can I purchase SOMS spirit wear?

Spirit wear (e.g., t-shirts, shorts, hats, and more!) is available for purchase [online](#) at our school store. We also sell merchandise at several events like the Ice Cream Social, Book Fair, and music concerts.

28. What do the SOMS HSA 6th Grade Coordinators do?

Our role is to work with the 6th Grade Team Leaders to help plan student events, sponsor field trips, send communications, and answer your questions (or at least know where to direct you!). Some of the events we typically do with the 6th graders are: an October "Monster Bash" dance party, a planetarium field trip, a student government-led event (e.g., dance, variety show), Field Day in the spring. We will ask for your help periodically to chaperone events, donate supplies, etc. But rest assured--there's a lot less to help with than in elementary school!

29. Who are the SOMS HSA 6th Grade Coordinators?

For the 2019-20 school year, your 6th Grade Coordinators are:

- Rhea Beck – rheakalabeck@gmail.com
- Jamie Ebright – jleighland@yahoo.com
- Leslie Kerner – lesliekerner@gmail.com

30. How can I get involved with the HSA?

We would love your help! We have a weekly e-Blast system that outlines volunteer opportunities during the upcoming weeks as well as school announcements. You can sign up to help us with the teacher appreciation luncheons, back-to-school events, the book fair, 6th grade Monster Bash, and many other events during the year. You can sign up on our HSA website in September (somshsa.net) or check forms that will be sent home during the week before school starts. Or just reach out to your 6th Grade Coordinators any time with your interests and we can direct you to the right person on the HSA Board.