

Letters of Intent

Use this tool to support children’s abilities to engage with big questions and to make connections between the known and the unknown.

Letters of Intent are letters teachers write to families at the beginning of the year that share the teachers’ beliefs about children’s capacities and identify the key concepts and content children will be learning and why they are important in today’s world. The letters help teachers to focus, think big, foster genuine connections between the children and the curriculum, and stay accountable to the school and the district without predetermining the pathways that will guide children’s exploration.

Step 1

Consider the following when creating your letter of intent (see sample letters). Generate ideas with your colleagues. Groups of 4-6 work well.

- **Values and guiding principles:**
What do you care deeply about? What are your commitments as a school community?
- **Goals and expectations:**
What outcomes are you striving for this year and what educational standards do you hope to address?
- **The personal, the local, and the global:**
 - Personal: Who are these children? What do you already know about them as individuals and as a group? What is going on for children developmentally at this age? What are their interests? What do they care about? What do they want to learn about?
 - Local: What resources, events, issues, or activities are likely to come up for this community this year (e.g., plays, art shows, or exhibits that offer inspiration or address a contemporary issue)? What is happening in your school community?
 - Global: What is going on in the world right now? What current events are the children likely to be aware of or affected by, or to care about? Where are the opportunities to “go big” and make an impact beyond the classroom or influence the thinking of others? What might children offer the world, and what can others learn from the children’s thinking and learning?

Step 2

Use the [Question Formulation Technique process](#) to expand and prioritize questions.

Step 3

Write a letter to the families in your learning community. Consider:

- Including your beliefs about children’s capacities
- Sharing your thinking about why the ideas in the letter are needed in the context of the world today
- Keeping your focus of inquiry wide enough to engage children’s unique perspectives throughout the learning process.

© 2019 President and Fellows of Harvard College and Opal School. This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International](#) license (CC BY-NC-SA). This license allows users to share this work with others, but it cannot be used commercially. To reference this work, please use the following: The Inspiring Inventiveness products were co-developed by Project Zero, a research center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Opal School.



Step 4

Share your letter with colleagues to get their feedback and revise accordingly.

Step 5

At regular intervals throughout the year, revisit the letter with your team. Use the letter as a conceptual anchor to create or strengthen connections between children's ongoing work and play and the guiding principles and ideas for the year.

For video examples and reflections on practices that inspire inventiveness, become an Opal School Online Sustaining Member at learning.opalschool.org.



Children thrive in learning environments that prioritize inventiveness and connect children’s activities to big ideas and questions.

Letters of Intent are tools for listening, reflecting, and decision-making in the classroom. The letters focus teachers’ attention on possible learning opportunities as children play with new ideas. The process of crafting the letters can become a powerful shared experience for teacher teams. Rather than mapping out specific curriculum for the year, the letters offer big ideas and questions to investigate as teachers and children play and learn. The letters invite connections between the personal (*why does this matter to me?*), the local (*why does this matter to the people around me?*), and the global (*why does this matter to the world?*).



Suggested Time Frame

Keep in mind that the *Letter of Intent* does not have to be written in one sitting. Set aside 3-4 hours over several sessions to confer with your colleagues as you draft and revise your letter. The letters provide a useful reference point to return to over the course of a year.

When and How

Before the school year begins, or at a major transition point in the year, identify and articulate the big curricular ideas and guiding questions that will support your planning and decision-making.

Tips and Variations

- Write and/or revise your letter with colleagues, if possible.
- Share the letter with children’s families at Back-to-School Night, and invite them to share connections, questions, and resources.
- Reread the letter as a way to support curriculum planning or when you are feeling stuck with project work. What are the children energized by? How might this be connected (or not) to your letter of intent and the big questions it identifies?
- See the [Project Zero “3 Ys” thinking routine](#) to support connections among the personal, the local, and the global.



Sample Letter of Intent #1

Dear Intermediate (grades 3-5) Community families,

At Opal School, we see all children as competent citizens with rights. We see them driven to connect and eager to empathize and be understood. We know that the arts are powerful pathways to develop understandings of ourselves, each other, and complex ideas. We value increasing proficiency with the conventions of communication and the academic disciplines.

This year, the Opal School Intermediate Team is particularly curious about relationships between play, the arts, empathy, and invention. Our work is intended to grow a new citizenry that has strong emotional intelligence, a real discomfort with certainty, and a deep sense of empathy and civic responsibility. How will children gain experience in seeing how their ways of thinking can increase justice and well-being? How will we connect the work in our classroom to the world outside?

We've begun school engulfed in smoke while our beloved Columbia Gorge burns, and the children, quickly approaching teenage-hood themselves, know that teenagers sparked that fire. They are seeing images of other places in our country under water or torn apart by storms. The power of nature and the power of humans are engaged in incredibly visible and visceral tension. What are our choices?

In light of our goals and expectations, guiding principles, and values, we wonder: How can we explore interdependencies and stories of the past in a way which inspires us to take action as mindful citizens?

As we explore our personal stories and stories from American history, we will use water as a vehicle for exploring interdependencies and multiple perspectives. Together we'll be asking: What does it take to care for something bigger than yourself? What does it mean to care? What do we care about? What does it mean to be an American? What happens when we view stories of history through multiple lenses? What is the danger of a single story and the role of the master narrative? Who decides which stories are told? How do stories connect to rights?

As we step into this new year, we – children and adults – are connected by Opal School's values. Together, we are exploring what it means to hold a strong image of children who are competent and capable, whose birthright of imagination and natural strategies of play lead to the discovery of inventions and ideas that the world needs now. Our work together develops essential life skills and habits of heart and mind, like critical and interdependent thinking, empathy, persistence, innovation, risk-taking, flexibility, collaboration, and perspective-taking. We're eager to step into this new year with a spirit of vulnerability and openness, inspired by the words of Carlina Rinaldi: "To be open to others means to have the courage to come into this room and say I hope to be different when I leave."

We can't wait to begin!

Warmly,

Hannah, Chris, Susan, Nicole, Mary Gage, and Mauren



Sample Letter of Intent #2

A child's most sought after goal is to recognize himself in others, and to find in others parts of himself.

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy

Dear Primary (grades K-2) Community families,

At Opal School, we see all children as competent, creative, curious, and courageous. We believe they come to school full of experience and wisdom, eager to make meaning of their lives and everything that surrounds them. This year, the Opal School Primary Community teachers are particularly curious about what it means to be an individual within a community. We believe that exploring the tension between our individual needs or desires and those of the community not only helps us know ourselves better – it also prepares us to engage with the most important questions facing our world.

One goal and expectation for Opal School students is to develop strategies that contribute to the quality of the community by collaborating with others to construct ideas and create new knowledge.

With this goal in mind, our work together this year will be framed around the big idea of “the we that I am.” Within this big idea, we wonder:

What does it mean to belong to a community that recognizes and values differences?

Inside of this big question live many smaller questions:

- *How might better understanding ourselves help us better understand others?*
- *What are our rights and responsibilities as members of a community? What is the relationship between rights and responsibilities?*
- *How might considering our different perspectives invite us to grow our collective understanding of ourselves, each other, and the world?*
- *How can listening and awareness of our impact on others inform our actions?*
- *What becomes possible when we are curious about difference? How might curiosity about difference support empathy?*

The above is a snapshot of our intentions for the year and a sneak peek into some of our thinking and the possibilities we're imagining. We look forward to sharing many windows into the children and teachers' learning experiences and the evolving theories of identity and community that we will construct together.

Warmly,

Heather, Lauren, Kerry, Sarah, and Katharine

