



Great River School

Enriching intellect. shaping character. building community.

GREAT RIVER UPPER ELEMENTARY 2025-26

Welcome to Upper Elementary at Great River! We are excited to partner with your family to help your child grow as a learner and community member. This letter is intended to provide background information on key Upper Elementary practices and events, giving you a sense of how your student's classroom functions. Please refer to the [Great River Student Handbook](#) for school-wide policies and procedures that is approved by the School Board each August. You are welcome to contact us with any questions you may have. We look forward to working with you!

Upper Elementary Contact information:

Elementary Program Director

Eileen McElrath

emcelrath@greatriverschool.org

651-305-2780 x25

Classroom Name	Guide	Assistant	E-mail
Blue Earth River	Anne Schuerger (co-guide)	Mary Sollito (co-guide)	blueearth@greatriverschool.org
Crow Wing River	Matty Brossart	Kristin Brennan	crowwing@greatriverschool.org
Little Elk River	Thomas Hardy (co-guide)	Tracey Fluegel (co-guide)	littleelk@greatriverschool.org
Swan River	Meggie Exner	Rhona Wilson	swan@greatriverschool.org
Otter Tail River	Bailey Taylor	Chris Bock	ottertail@greatriverschool.org
Shingobee River	Amanda O'Dowd	Ashley Toavs	shingobee@greatriverschool.org

Upper Elementary Special Education Staff:	David Johnson - <i>Special Education Guide</i> , djohnson@greatriverschool.org Caleb Mullenneaux - <i>Special Education Guide</i> , cmullenneaux@greatriverschool.org Greg Nelson - <i>Special Education Guide</i> , gnelson@greatriverschool.org Adam Egerdahl - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Anna Sverclova - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Sam Pallo - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Salvatore DiVita - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Jocelene Caballero - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Sandra Stuart - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Ian Bromander - <i>Educational Assistant</i> Sarah Hedrick - <i>Educational Assistant</i>
Upper Elementary Support Staff:	Erik Akre - <i>Academic Interventionist</i> Nicole Anderson - <i>Academic Interventionist</i> Angela Gaitas - <i>Social Worker</i> Alexis Jackson & Derek Damron - <i>Deans of Students</i>

	Amanda Erickson - <i>Elementary Program Assistant</i>
Upper Elementary Workshop Guides:	Vatina McLauren - <i>Art</i> Dar Regan - <i>Outdoor Education</i> Delany Breitbach - <i>Health & Wellness</i> Rey Atha - <i>Music Guide</i>

Procedures and Logistics

Drop Off:

The school day begins at 9:00am. Students should be dropped off on Energy Lane by the West Campus (Elementary) building. Students arriving before arrival starts should go to the main south GRS entrance (cafe doors) for Big Canoe Club. ***Please do not release your child until the big green flag is flying outside our entrance!*** Members of our team will be outside to welcome students daily starting at 8:50 am. At 9:10 a purple flag will be raised indicating that students will be marked tardy. **At 9:10 doors close and lock.** Students arriving after 9:10 should check in at the main office, which can be accessed through the Energy Park Drive entrance where Staff/Visitor parking is noted on the map, to receive a pass.



- Designated Drop Off / Pick Up Area
- ← Traffic Flow
- X No Drop Off / Pick Up or Parking
- No Vehicle Entry

- PLEASE NOTE:**
- No vehicles should go into any neighboring parking lots for **any** reason -- all traffic needs to proceed west down Energy Lane to exit onto Energy Park Drive
 - All** Pick up/Drop off **must** be on the school side of Energy Lane
 - Staff will be outside assisting both students and drivers

THANK YOU!

Please visit <http://www.greatriverschool.org/traffic> for additional information about parking, drop off and pick up norms!*

Pick Up:

Elementary pickup is located on Energy Lane, same as morning drop off. Our team will supervise pickup daily, and will be outside with your children between 3:50 and 4:10pm. **Please make a sign (½ sheet of paper) for your vehicle window that boldly shows your students name and classroom so we can call them for pick up.** Students that remain at school later than 4:10 will be checked in at Big Canoe Club and families may be charged \$30 for Big Canoe if students have repeated unscheduled attendance.

***NOTE:** We encourage families to explore walking, biking, school bussing, public transportation, etc. as alternatives to driving to GRS. Our morning and afternoon car line can be long for both students and caregivers. See the [Transportation webpage](#) for more information. Please reach out to amanda.erickson@greatriverschool.org with any questions about drop off or pick up.*

Attendance:

We use a student absence reporting system called **SafeArrival**. This system helps reduce the time it takes to verify student attendance, make it easy for you to report your child's absence, and easy for staff to respond to unexplained student absences.

With **SafeArrival**, you are asked to report your child's absence in advance using any of these 3 convenient methods:

1. Using the **SM Home App** (can be downloaded from Apple App Store or Google Play Store)
Detailed Instructions with Screenshots Below
2. Using the **Safe Arrival Website**: home.schoolmessenger.com
3. Call the **toll-free number** 888-256-8288 to report an absence using the automated phone system.
**You have to call from the phone number that is in our system tied to your student.

These options are available 24 hours/day, 7 days a week. Future absences can be reported at any time.

In addition, we will use the **SchoolMessenger Communicate** automated notification system to contact parents whose child is absent when the absence was not reported in advance. The automated notification system will attempt to contact parents at multiple contact points until a reason is submitted for the absence. If our system is unable to reach the designated contacts, office staff will follow up.

If you report your child's absence in advance using the **SafeArrival** toll-free number, website or mobile app, you will NOT receive these notifications. For more information about setting up School Messenger and Safe Arrival [click this link](#).

For general questions about attendance, email attendance@greatriverschool.org.

Contacting Faculty & Staff:

During school hours, we strive to give our full attention to students. Email is the best way to reach us. Please call the main office for anything time sensitive during the school day. We can respond to emails and calls between 8:30am and 4:30pm during our planning times, and will do our best to do so within 48 hours of receiving a message. Please use school email and phone numbers, rather than texting or calling personal faculty cell phones regarding GRS business.

- **Urgent Communications:** If you have an urgent need to communicate, please call or email the front office at office@greatriverschool.org or 651-305-2780 (for emergencies, press *).
- **Transportation Changes:**
Please use this link: <https://forms.gle/TX47xR6QoACMYhxU8> or scan this QR Code
----->with your phone to be linked to our Early Departure/Transportation Changes Form. This form is also available on the GRS website. To pick up early, caregivers should come to the main GRS office on Energy Park Drive and sign in at the main office. A staff member will bring your child up to the office for early departure. **All changes must be finalized no later than 2:45pm.** After this time, staff are attending to students for end-of-day procedures and are unavailable to deliver messages to students and guides. Any permanent or recurring changes should be sent to attendance@greatriverschool.org.
- **Thursday Office Hours:** Every Thursday between 4:00 and 4:30pm classroom guides will have Elementary office hours. We will be available if you wish to visit the classroom, ask questions, or discuss concerns. Please contact your child's guide by email beforehand to schedule a meeting during this office hours time.



What to Bring to School:	What to leave at home:
☐ Appropriate weather gear (Each child has their own hook and hall space for personal belongings. It is helpful to label your child's belongings.) ☐ Outdoor shoes ☐ Indoor shoes (Comfortable, hard-soled shoes left at school throughout the week.) ☐ Handwork/ book from home ☐ Water Bottle ☐ Snack (See details in Food section) ☐ Self Contained Lunch (unless participating in school lunch) - <i>Lunch from home should be in a container that will keep them fresh until lunchtime as we do not have refrigerator space for student lunches. Please include silverware and napkins.</i> ☐ One backpack	☐ Personal technology including cell phones and smart watches (if technology visible, students must place in their backpack) ☐ Money ☐ Toys ☐ Games ☐ Candy ☐ Other personal belongings. ☐ Slippers (Indoor Shoes should be hard soled not slippers) **We encourage indoor shoes and lunch boxes etc to be character free.

School Supplies:

Great River provides all classroom materials (pencils, markers, glue sticks, and more). By purchasing in bulk, we save money and time for families.

- We ask each family for a **\$75 yearly contribution per child** to cover these supplies.
- Contributions are **tax deductible**.
- Caregivers will receive an emailed invoice to make the payment.
- If \$75 is not possible, please contribute what you can and connect with us for support.

Your contribution helps ensure students have high quality materials and supports our community approach. Thank you!

Your child should bring the following items.

- **1 pair of hard-soled indoor shoes** to be kept at school (Note: Please make sure shoes are very plain and undecorated. Fancy shoes, especially, can be quite a distraction.)
- **1 water bottle** (labeled with your child's name)

Recess:

Elementary students go out each day for recess where students have time to explore their environment, satisfy their natural curiosity, and build social relationships through freedom and responsibility. **We go out to recess in most weather.** Please support your student in dressing for the weather each day. Even on very cold or rainy days, we try to get outside for short periods of play time. We provide play equipment and ask that students leave personal toys or equipment at home.

Winter weather norms: If the windchill dips is between 0° and -10°F, recess may be shortened. If windchill dips below -10° recess will be exclusively held indoors. 32° "Feels Like" or below requires a coat, hat/hood, gloves. If students get hot running around, they can take them off but need to be available outside.

Air quality: We follow the [Minnesota Department of Health's guidelines](#) for determining our use of outdoor space during periods of poor air quality.

Philosophy and Curriculum

The Nature of Upper Elementary:

Upper Elementary is an exciting time in a child's development. Nine to twelve year olds consolidate foundational academic skills and learn to apply them in the outside world. Students explore mathematics, language, and cultural subjects at greater levels of abstraction, deepening their understanding of familiar materials from lower elementary. As they continue to develop their sense of justice, they look for ways to serve their many communities. We support all this big work through challenging projects and opportunities for trips outside the classroom. Our key experiences at Wolf Ridge and Widjiwagan (see additional information below) help children further establish their independence while building a stronger classroom community.

At school, we guide students in setting goals for worthy work. Children are generally free to choose appropriate work during our 3-hour independent work cycles; however, we also help them learn to prioritize and gain time management skills through assigned follow-up, projects, some deadlines, and homework. For children new to our elementary program, this can sometimes feel daunting. Frequent individual conferences and observations help us communicate with children about their work, so that they balance freedom with responsibility.

Our goal is to prepare a learning environment that nurtures children holistically. We know that many children struggle academically, personally, or socially at times in their Upper Elementary experience. We work to build trust and perseverance, to support facilitative struggles for children, and to solve problems when that struggle is no longer leading to growth. Your child may find work challenging, may shift their close friendships, and may feel frustrated with themselves or others. Know that these struggles are a normal part of development.

Please keep communication open with us, and help your child see when they are able to overcome difficulties and grow more resilient as a result.

Subjects:

The Montessori curriculum is rich in interdisciplinary studies. Across academic subject areas, students engage in concrete exploration with materials before working abstractly with paper and pencil. Guides offer regular lessons in arithmetic, geometry, spelling, writing (including grammar and conventions), reading, science, history, and geography. Children also pursue independent or small-group projects to extend their learning. The pace of instruction and lesson groups are flexible to meet individual needs: some lessons are taught by grade level, while others are taught in mixed-age groups.

Social-emotional learning, community building, and practical life are integral parts of the Montessori Upper Elementary experience. We work with students on how to collaborate effectively and address conflicts respectfully. We also help them build competence in arts, crafts, and technical skills.

Homework:

Upper Elementary classrooms will have homework, but it will not start until after we return from our fall key experiences. Students will have a homework folder and will be given a hard copy of any assignment. We will discuss homework on Caregiver Orientation Night, September 12th.

The purpose of homework is to help students develop time management skills and independence. We ask that you support your child to schedule time and space to complete their work. It is our intention to make homework meaningful. Many assignments will focus on getting students out in the community or reflecting on experiences. Sometimes we will ask a student to summarize a reading, complete a real world math activity, brush up on rusty computation skills, or conduct an interview. We will try to vary the work, playing to different strengths and needs in the room. If you find your family struggling with homework, please reach out and we will adapt to your needs.

Celebrations:

We dedicate time to celebrate each individual member of our classroom. We make an effort to align child celebrations with birthdays, but this is not always possible.

Celebrations in Upper Elementary focus on building community through food and activities. We work hard to accommodate the diversity of dietary needs in our community, and teach students to practice grace and courtesy through preparing and sharing food. We will send details about special traditions and events throughout the year.

Key Experience Trip

Oct. 6-10: Widjiwagan (Ottertail, Shingobee, Swan)

Oct. 20-24: Widjiwagan (Little Elk, Crow Wing, Blue Earth)

Each year, students in grades 3–12 take part in multi-night Key Experience trips. These journeys are a cornerstone of our Montessori program, giving students opportunities to grow, connect, and explore in meaningful ways.

The cost of these trips ranges from \$172–\$330 per student. To sustain this tradition, we invite families to make a contribution toward their child's trip.

- Families will receive an invoice through QuickBooks for the suggested amount
- Contributions help us cover actual costs and keep trips available to all students
- Discounts and waivers are available—no student is ever excluded for financial reasons

Your support makes these unforgettable experiences possible for every child. Thank you for helping us carry on this important tradition.

All Upper Elementary classrooms will be going to Camp Widjiwagan this year! Each group will have a recovery day the Monday following their trip. Widji is a YMCA camp outside Ely, MN and is located on Burntside Lake. We will participate in a variety of small and large group outdoor learning activities intended to cultivate independence, awareness and knowledge of Minnesota's ecology, the "leave no trace" philosophy of outdoor experience, and cooperative learning. The camp staff is highly knowledgeable, compassionate, and skilled, and we are so excited to be able to go so early in our school year. We've found that going to Widji really helps build our classroom community. You can see the Widji [packing list here](#). More information about Widji, including a slide presentation, can be found on the [GRS website under Key Experiences](#).

All Upper Elementary students need the following forms completed prior to the Widji Key Experience.

- Widji [health form](#) (Required by camp Widjiwagan)
- Recommended [Non-Prescription Form](#) filled out and signed by the caregiver AND a doctor. This form is for vitamins, supplements and any other Non-Prescription medications. *We highly recommend sending this form for EVERY student as we cannot predict when students may need these - for example, a bug bite may require*

benadryl. We do have a small selection of over-the-counter medications that we keep on hand as needed for students on key experiences, but cannot administer these over-the-counter medications without a completed Non-Prescription Form.

- [Medication Form](#) for any medications filled out and signed by the caregiver AND a doctor.

Please return forms to your child's guide by Wednesday, September 24th. Translated medical forms can be found on the [GRS Health Office webpage](#).

Note that no electronics are allowed on the trip at all. Your child may bring a disposable camera, but we strongly recommend that you send a disposable (film) camera. We'll be in bogs, playing by the lake, and walking miles of woods - there will be many opportunities for expensive things to be lost or damaged. – Students may have snacks for the bus ride, but will not have access to food in cabins. The Widji kitchen staff makes food from scratch and works hard to accommodate our many and varied dietary needs, and their food is excellent. We also recommend that you help your child choose a variety of activities for the 4 hour bus ride. Knitting, crochet, card games, mad libs, sudoku, books, and other hand work or small games work well. For more information about Widji visit their website [here](#).

Food

Breakfast:

Children can either eat breakfast prior to arriving at school or sign up for school breakfast. Breakfast is served until 9:15am each day and elementary students will be enjoying their breakfasts in the gym this school year! To support eating breakfast in the cafeteria, students eating breakfast will be greeted at the Elementary door and then be guided to the south main doors nearest the cafeteria to eat breakfast before entering their classroom. The breakfast menu will be posted on the Great River nutrition website once it is available.

Lunch:

Students may **bring their own lunch** or eat a **free school lunch**. Great River participates in the **National School Lunch Program**, providing free breakfast and lunch for all students.

Application for Educational Benefits

- All families must submit this form - [Application for Educational Benefits](#) to the front office (email records@greatriverschool or in person).
- It helps the school receive state and federal funding and ensures meals are billed correctly.
- Students must take the **entire meal** offered to qualify for reimbursement. Partial meals may incur charges.

Special Dietary Needs

- For medical dietary needs, a [Special Diet Statement Form](#) must be completed by a licensed provider.
- Lactose-free milk does **not** require a physician's note.
- Students may always bring food from home that meets their needs.

Program Tools and Information

- We use **School Cafe** to view menus and pay for meals.
- Updated menus and program details are available at [Great River Nutrition](#) or via lunch@greatriverschool.org.

Other Nutrition Notes

- Free and reduced-cost lunches are available for qualifying families.
- Milk can be ordered; water is always available.
- Sugary drinks and candy should not come to school.

We ask that families consider the following when packing lunches:

- *Please remember that we are candy free and ask all parents to not send peanut products with their children.*
- We strongly recommend that warm food be sent in a thermos since microwaves will not be available for student use at lunch time.
- Consider involving your child in packing their lunch.
- **Please do not send lunch boxes, napkins, or placemats with characters, video games, or advertisements on them.**

Snack:

Suggestions for Healthy, No-Prep, and No Clean-Up Snacks
Edamame / Carrot sticks / Clementines / Hummus & veggies / Green beans / Cheese sticks Yogurt drink / Granola bar / Crackers / Hard boiled egg (peeled) / Apple slices & sunbutter -- (Students may also eat an item from their lunch boxes at the snack table if they are hungry.)
Examples of Not Healthy or Hard to Clean-up After Snacks
Potato chips / Cookies / Popcorn / Jello / Pudding

Welcome to Great River
Upper Elementary!

With gratitude,
The Upper Elementary Team