While some Mesopotamian boys — and perhaps some girls — learned to read and write from their fathers, others went to the “house where the tablets are distributed,” in other words, school. Students first learned how to make a tablet and use a writing stylus, then how to write signs, words, names, and proverbs. In addition to scribal practices, texts used in school tell us about school life in Mesopotamia and the values that were taught to children. The Sumerian tale on this Old Babylonian tablet (2004–1595 BC; A30217), excavated by Ol archaeologists at the site of Nippur in southern Iraq, recounts two days in the life of a young schoolboy — days filled with tedious work and harsh punishment.

“Schoolboy, where did you go from earliest days?”
“I went to school.”
“What did you do in school?”
“I read my tablet, ate my lunch, prepared my tablet, wrote it, finished it... Upon the school’s dismissal, I went home, entered the house, there was my father sitting.”
He who was in charge of drawing said, “Why when I was not here did you stand up?”
(and) caned me.
He who was in charge of the gate said, “Why when I was not here, did you go out?”
(and) caned me.
He who was in charge of the Sumerian said: “You spoke Akkadian!”
(and) caned me.

Students still made mistakes, which have been preserved for us to see today. A5443, on display in the Edgar and Deborah Jannotta Mesopotamian Gallery, for example, is a mathematical text which was published by R. M. Whiting, “More Evidence for Sexagesimal Calculations in the Third Millennium B.C.” Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie 74 (1984): 59-66. The text represents a student’s unsuccessful attempt to determine the area of a square:

1. 33,33 nindan l nikas is the side of a square.
2. (Its area) 1,0,0 (bur) + 10,0 (bur) + 1,0 (bur) + 20 (bur) + 7 (bur) + 65 (iku) + 5sar -l-3 gin + 45 gin(tur)
3. is found.
The area given here is therefore 35,43,39,10;33,45 sar but should in fact be 18,45,52,55;33,45 sar