

Multi-Grade Classrooms Information for Parents



Combined Classes: A Primer for Parents

Perhaps you have arrived at school this year to find your child assigned to a combined classroom. This document will help answer some of the questions you may have about combined classrooms at the Grande Prairie Public School District. The last several decades have seen dramatic changes in the Alberta Program of Studies, instructional methods used by teachers, and in our understanding of learners and learning. Today, teachers recognize and respond to the fact that individual educational development is unique to each individual and not tied to their chronological age or grade placement. Teachers develop programs according to the needs of their individual students who achieve prescribed outcomes at different times and in different ways.

FAQ

What is a combined or multi-grade classroom?

A combined or multi-grade class is one that includes students from two or more consecutive grades who work in one classroom setting. In the past the term 'split class' was sometimes used, which implied a division of instruction between two groups in class, which is no longer the normal approach. **A combined class, like most classrooms today, includes a variety of instructional groupings and combinations depending on the students, the learning objectives, and the resources utilized.** Most school systems around the world employ combined classes and one-fifth of Canadian students are enrolled in classes with students from more than one grade.

Why do we have combined classes at my child's school?

Combined classes may be the result of school choice or school demographics. Some schools employ multi-age grouping because of the benefits associated with such classes. At other schools, combined classes are the result of an imbalance in the number of students enrolled in each grade. Combined grades are a way for schools to utilize their staff more effectively to meet student needs. Class make-up is very carefully planned by school staff. Individual needs are also balanced with class dynamics and the needs and compatibility of the group. Some of the other factors taken into consideration are the teacher, classroom size, gender, work habits, emotional development, special education needs, English language development, grade being taught, etc.

Why is my child in a combined classroom?

The selection of students for classes is a serious task involving multiple staff members who consider a wide variety of factors. Beginning with the number of students and the physical layout of the school itself, staff must consider individual students' needs, interests, social skills, learning styles, work habits, emotional development, and independence as well as the teaching styles of their staff when creating classes.

Will my child get enough attention?

Parents are sometimes concerned that their child will not get adequate attention in a combined class. Many factors affect the amount of time paid to individual students and these factors are considered when classes are created. Schools allocate human resources with the goal of providing every student with the attention that they require.

How can the teacher teach more than one grade at a time?

Just as in a single-grade class, teachers in a combined grade class use a wide variety of teaching strategies and differentiate their lessons to meet the key curriculum outcomes. These may include:

- A common topic studied as a large group followed by a grade specific activity
- Alternating teacher guided activities and independent grade activities
- Project based learning activities

Combined grade classes offer a creative learning community where dedicated staff guide and encourage academic excellence. Teachers foster a respect for individual learning styles and recognize that all students have unique learning needs and support each student by developing tailored learning strategies.

What are the potential benefits?

There have been many studies done over the last several decades on the effects of combined classes. The majority of them have found that students in these classes perform as well as students in single grade classes academically with many of these studies concluding that there are other benefits for students in multi-grade classes.

One of the greatest benefits of combined classes is the expanded opportunities they provide for peer interaction. Students have the opportunity to show leadership and reinforce their own understanding by collaborating with their classmates. This ability to work outside their grade cohort expands students' understanding of their learning and the learning environment.

This expanded peer interaction leads to co-constructing knowledge and skills. These interactions lead to greater development of social skills, as students develop a sense of comfort and security and gain a more positive self-concept. In these more diversified classes, students become more resourceful and develop skills of independent learning. Teachers find creative ways to combine outcomes, which provide students with a richer academic experience.

Age mixing also provides students with a more diverse range of peers in their class that can lead to opportunities to find others with similar interests, aptitudes and abilities. The range of social relationships that students build in a combined classroom more closely reflects the reality they will encounter in communities, families and the workplace.

How will being in a combined classroom affect my child?

At Grande Prairie Public School District, we understand that you want the best for your child. We strive to provide exceptional educational opportunities for all of our students. Every child is a unique learner and our teachers are equipped with the skills and resources needed to provide each one with a program suited to their place on the learning continuum. The use of combined classes is supported by educational research and we have found that for most students these classes have been a positive part of their educational journey. We encourage parents to stay in close communication with their child's teacher and discuss any concerns you may have as soon as possible.

What is the curriculum?

The curriculum for Alberta students is outlined in legal documents from Alberta Education called "programs of study". Each curriculum document outlines the basic principles of how students are to achieve the required knowledge, skills and attitudes. School authorities use the programs of study to ensure that students meet provincial standards; however, they have the flexibility to decide how to provide students with the best possible learning opportunities. The curriculum is not a collection of information to be memorized but rather a set of learning experiences aimed at accommodating diverse learners in meeting specific outcomes. You can find this information on the Alberta Education website at <https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/mychildslearning/>.

Conclusion

Education is changing and there are new challenges and opportunities facing students, parents, teachers, and districts. The focus of education today is on the development of skills, processes, attitudes and concepts needed to be an engaged educated citizen in Alberta and the world. Because of the rapid pace of change, it is most important for our students to learn how to access, evaluate, transfer and apply knowledge. Students need to 'learn how to learn' because the knowledge that may be most important to them in the future has not even been discovered yet.

Today, teachers focus on providing opportunities for students that help them set personal goals, assess their own learning and provide feedback to their peers. Students are asked to reflect on their learning and to show personal initiative in their inquiries. This emphasis on students' individual needs and place on the learning continuum is characteristic of 21st century teaching practices and is as easily attained in a combined class as a single-grade classroom. The latest research and best practices promoted and supported in the educational community completely support the use of combined classes.