

Information on Combined Classes

A combined class is a cohort of students from two or more grade levels. Combined classes are a common way to organize grade levels.

The FAQ below is meant to address some of the questions schools have received regarding combined classes and support families with their understanding of what a combined class is.

What is a 'combined class'?

A combined class is a cohort of students from two or more grade levels. Grades group children according to their chronological age. Such organization stems from the belief that patterns of development are tightly bound to a child's age. However, in reality, all classrooms – whether single-grade or combined – include students with a range of developmental levels. Teachers are skilled at student-centred learning and teaching to each student's ability, which includes meeting students where they are at in their learning.

Why do we use the term 'combined'?

Combined grade classrooms have many names, including split grades, multi-age, family grouping, etc. The term *split grade* sometimes becomes negatively associated with teachers splitting their time and attention between two distinct groups. The term *combined class* reflects a more holistic approach to learning that emphasizes whole group instruction, as well as opportunities for flexible groupings to meet students' learning styles and needs.

How are students selected for a 'combined class' placement?

A common myth associated with combined grades is that they are built solely around academic level (e.g., high 3s with low 4s in a grade 3/4 Classroom). In reality, many factors are considered when selecting students for any class placement. School teams look at social and emotional skills, work habits, friendships, leadership skills, self-motivation, learning styles, and academics (to name a few). These characteristics are considered holistically in order to create balanced classes throughout the school community.

How will being in a combined class impact my child?

Studies have shown that academic achievement **is not impacted** by being in a combined class versus a straight-grade class. In other words, there is no academic detriment to combined grades groupings.¹ In fact, many studies have concluded there are social-emotional benefits for students in combined classes, including greater leadership skills, increased self-esteem, increased social responsibility, and more positive peer interactions.²

Will a student miss or repeat curriculum material?

In today's classrooms, the focus has shifted away from memorizing facts and learning content knowledge. Instead, there is an increased emphasis on the development of skills and understanding concepts and processes, in addition to developing the attitudes and mindset of a lifelong learner. With rapid changes in science and technology, it is essential students learn how to access information, evaluate ideas, make judgments, collaborate with others, and transfer knowledge in novel ways.

Teachers of combined classes create learning engagements that meet the needs of all learners, often incorporating learning outcomes from both grades into holistic, theme-based units of study. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework helps teachers design curriculum to meet individual student needs while recognizing student strengths. Using this framework helps all teachers, whether single-grade or combined, succeed in creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

How can families support their children?

Regardless of their child's class placement, families are encouraged to stay positive and interested in their child's learning. Families can demonstrate support by encouraging open-mindedness, risk-taking, and principled learning. Families are also encouraged to monitor schoolwork and to communicate openly with the teacher around their child's strengths, stretches, and learning goals.

Reference

1 – Veenman S. Cognitive and Noncognitive Effects of Multigrade and Multi-Age Classes: A Best-Evidence Synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*. 1995;65(4):319-381.

2 – Naylor, C. (2000, January). Split-Grade and Multi-Age Classes: A Review of the Research and a Consideration of the B.C. Context. BCTF Research Report