

Combined Classes: How and Why They Work

What does it mean when your child is in a combined class?

A combined class is when students in more than one grade level are being taught by the same teacher, in the same classroom. Students in a combined grade follow expectations for their specific grade. As in single-grade classrooms, teachers, use a variety of strategies to ensure that the grade appropriate curriculum expectations are covered.

As in every classroom, single-grade or combined, teachers are supporting learners at varying levels. For example, if you take any subject, you may have some students who are working at grade level, others who are working towards grade level, and some who are working above grade level. The teacher provides individual support to all learners to meet the grade level outcomes.

Teachers and principals spend a great deal of time determining each classroom's composition: it's all about balance. They look at each student's learning style to ensure there is a mix in every classroom; they also consider how students interact with one another, gender balance and group dynamics. Combined classes are rich and diverse learning environments that create opportunities for students to work with a wide-range of individuals with different strengths, lived experiences and backgrounds.

The reasons for combining grades into one class are varied. Legislation requires that Primary to Grade two classes are capped at 20 (+2) students and that Grades three to six classes are capped at 25 (+2) whenever possible. Grades seven to nine, classes will be capped at 28 (+2) and for Grades ten to 12, classes will be capped at 30 (+2).

Small schools will often have combined classes because there are too few students per grade. In larger schools, there are often too many students for one class, but too few for two classes. The reason for creating combined classes is different for every school.

What does a combined classroom look like?

Combined classrooms look like any other classroom. You'll see flexible seating, work stations and activity centres. There are conference areas, reading spaces and group gathering areas. Teachers create engaging learning spaces that work best for the students.

In terms of everyday lessons, as in any classroom, the teacher may have the whole class participate in a common activity, and then begin working individually or in a small group on grade-specific curriculum expectations. Teachers of both single and combined grades assess the skills, abilities, knowledge, and interests of their students. They share with students the

curriculum expectations for their grade. Using differentiated instruction, teachers design whole and small group activities to address varying student strengths, needs, and interests. As in any classroom, the main focus continues to be supporting the learning needs of all students.

Differentiated instruction is a key component of any classroom. Teachers work to meet each student where they are on their learning journey, and help move them along in the way they learn best, regardless of their grade level. Teachers have an amazing ability to find creative ways to teach to every level. The teacher will use a variety of assessment strategies to help your child learn the curriculum and to ensure each child's learning needs are met.

What's most interesting is the social and emotional skills students learn in a multi-level class. Many teachers have observed that older students in a combined class often make good decisions knowing they are role models for younger students – and as a result, the older students naturally develop leadership skills. Some teachers often find that the younger students tend to develop greater confidence simply by working with older students on a regular basis. All of this builds a strong sense of community in the classroom and school grounds.

Every classroom, combined or straight-grade, is comprised of brilliant students who are experimenting, exploring, discovering and being nurtured and supported by teachers.

If you have questions about combined classes, never hesitate to contact your child's principal. Learn more about how and why combined classes work in this video:

https://youtu.be/CqtQ_zUBPjI