



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, usually in elementary school. This year, however, combined classes may be used in junior and senior high as a means to lower class sizes. Even though students in the same class are required to meet different outcomes, it's not as complicated as it may sound. In fact, there are many benefits to children of different ages learning together.

The most important thing to remember is that in every classroom, straight-grade or combined, learners are working at varying levels of math, reading and writing. For example, if you take any Grade two class, you may have some students who are reading *below* grade level, others who are reading *at* grade level, and some who are reading *above* grade level. The majority of students fall somewhere in between.

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. New this year, are class caps for junior high and senior high schools. In Grades seven to nine, classes will be capped at 28 (+2) and for Grades ten to 12, classes will be capped at 30 (+2). Caps must be in place for all grades by September 30 each year. Classes over cap will occur only in exceptional circumstances, after all other options are explored.

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. It's up to each teacher to create the space that works best for the class.

In terms of daily lessons, teachers in combined classes often teach a mini-lesson to the whole group, and then assess individual students based on grade level expectations. It's not unusual to see students up and moving about in the classroom while teachers make the rounds and engage with each student to see how they're demonstrating their understanding. Teachers are finding that the new streamlined curriculum in elementary lends itself well to combined classes; students are working on the same topic, using the same skills, but at different levels.

Differentiated instruction is a key component of combined classrooms. That means that 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.

In a combined classroom, the way students demonstrate their knowledge will look different depending on their grade level. Teachers have many assessment strategies to choose from when collecting evidence of learning. They can include observations, conferencing and writing samples.

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, in the halls and even spills out on to the playground.

Every classroom, combined or straight-grade, is comprised of brilliant students who are experimenting, exploring, discovering and being nurtured and supported by teachers. What's most important is that they are having fun while learning!

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