



Thoughts on Combined (split) classes...

What is a combined class?

A combined or split class refers to a class that is made up of students from two or more grades. Combined classes occur most frequently in elementary schools and within subject areas at the secondary level and are the combination of students in two different grade levels with one teacher teaching both curricula. For example, a school might have a grade 2/3 class combination or there might be a French 11/12 class at the secondary school.

It is important to know that students in combined classes are not held back to the level of the younger children nor are the children in the lower grade expected to do work beyond their abilities. The prescribed learning outcomes are grade appropriate for all students, whether they are in a combined class.

Why do Schools create combined classes?

There are several reasons why schools create these classes. When school staff organize their students into grades, that is, place the students in their classes with teachers, they have to balance the educational needs of their students with the staffing they receive from the School District as well as with legislated contractual considerations.

Each year the school Principal is provided with an allocation for divisions for grade configuration. This is dependent upon school enrolment and class size limitations. Once the school has been provided its initial division allocation then the Principal, working with the school staff, begins the process of constructing classes. In many instances, combined classes result. Students are placed in divisions based on these factors and the educational needs of each student. Sometimes we find the number of students at a given grade will fill one class with a few students left over. Rather than have a very small number of students in one split class, a school may choose to have two split classes to optimize the learning environment for all students. Sometimes split classes are necessary to ensure that there is a balance of student needs in both classes rather than an imbalance in student needs in one class.

How do Schools decide which students to place in combined classes?

In an effort to ensure all students are placed in appropriately balanced classrooms, school staff (teachers, and Principal) use such criteria as age, range of ability, special learning needs, gender, social groupings, and support staff recommendations.

Also, just as they do when allocating students to non-combined classes, the Principal works with the classroom teachers to best match the learning styles and needs of the students.

Where special circumstances exist, parents often submit their requests for consideration. All these factors are considered before allocating classes for students. When there are competing factors at play, the educational recommendations of staff will determine ultimate student placement.

There may be a perception by some that the more academically capable students in the lower grade are placed with the less academically capable students in the higher grade. This will not be the case when creating classes at Auguston Traditional Elementary. All classes, whether they are straight or combined, will be heterogeneous groupings of student abilities. The children in all classes will represent a wide range of abilities and will be at different levels in their growth and learning and their teachers will be providing instruction and curriculum reflective of their needs.

Will the teacher teach the entire curriculum to both grades?

The B.C. curricula has been evolving over recent years from a focus on completing isolated skills and end products to an emphasis on process and upon differentiation of curriculum reflective of specific student needs. There is an ever increasing emphasis on teaching critical thinking, creative problem solving, self-assessment using specific content, often within a theme, from either grade's curricula. There is less emphasis on teaching students about a specific country or science concept at a specific grade than on teaching students the scientific process or how to compare and contrast, or to categorize or analyze information in a given topic. This shift allows teachers to work with students along a continuum, taking them from where they started to as far as they can go by June. Research demonstrates that this type of deep contextual learning fosters the development of engaged, self-regulated learners.

What are the challenges for teachers?

Teachers need to be familiar with the curriculum for both grades and the variety of resources available in the school and in the district. Teachers of students in combined classes, like those in single-grade classes, employ their skills and strategies so that each student is challenged at the level at which he/she can succeed. For example, a teacher might use a thematic approach to teach a unit. Additionally, teachers of combined classes are aware of the continuum of skills presented within the curricula in both grades and develop instructional themes that allow students to use those processes and skills to direct and reflect their learning. This approach enables the teacher to address processes and skills requiring continuous development. This requires a sophisticated approach to integrating knowledge and skills but it can be done in ways that do not repeat or "miss out" prescribed curriculum. Auguston Traditional Elementary teachers are skilled, experienced teachers who are aptly able to meet the challenges of teaching within a combined classroom setting.

Will my child do well in a combined class and will she/he be ready to move onto the next grade?

Detailed studies like John Goodlad's in 1987 (The non-graded Elementary school) have shown that on average a five-year span of development is typically found in a single grade group and six years in a combined class. Additionally, the results of a study published in 1999 by Dr. Joel Gajadharsingh (University of Saskatchewan) found that, using standardized tests, students did as well or better in combined classrooms in Math, Language, Science and Social Studies.