
FACT SHEET – COMBINED GRADES

What are Combined Grades?

It is the practice of creating classrooms made up of two different grades of students. For example grades 2 and 3. They are sometimes called 'split grades' or 'multi-age classes' (though often the multi-age classroom is made up of more than two different grades).

Are they new?

No – students have been in Combined Grades in Ontario since at least the early 1950's. They were thought to simply echo the origins of the One Room Schoolhouse where all students from Grades 1 to 8 were in a single class.

Why do they exist?

Principals organize Combined Grades in their schools when the numbers of students don't match the numbers of the teachers and to provide additional placement opportunities. For example, there may be 29 Grade 3's and 11 Grade 4's. School staffing committees facing these lopsided numbers may use Combined Grades to balance out and meet class size restrictions and to have more than a single placement opportunity for each grade of students. Class make-up is very carefully thought out by school staff. Even though schools have to work within certain restrictions, each and every child is placed with consideration to the whole child. Likewise, 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.

Is it really possible to teach two different grades?

Just as in same-grade classes, teachers in combined grades use a wide range of teaching strategies to make sure they cover all of the curriculum expectations. Students in a Combined Grade follow expectations for their specific grade. Children in a Combined Grade spend time learning as a whole class, in small groups and individually. Sometimes they will be grouped based on a specific task and other times the teacher will group them based on their learning needs. Here are some examples of how a teacher of a Combined Grade class might cover the curriculum for two grades.

Many parts of the overall expectations of the Ontario curriculum do not change from one grade to the next; rather, skills are developed to a more complex level. In a Combined Grade 3/4 class, all of the students would learn about Science and Technology. Grade 3 students, might investigate how a variety of plants adapt to their environments, and/or react to changes in their environments. As a writing assignment, the grade 3s would be expected to use joining words to combine simple sentences. Grade 4 students working on the Science unit would learn to explain habitats as areas where plants and animals meet their needs (e.g., for food, water, air, space, and light). In their writing assignment, the grade 4s would be required to use sentences of different lengths and complexity. Teachers would assess and evaluate the work differently to reflect the slight variation in curriculum expectations from one grade to the next.

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. For example, in a Combined Grade 1/2 class, when teaching the life systems strand of science, the teacher might start by showing a video about a specific animal. The grade 1 students would do a follow-up activity to identify the characteristics and needs of living things, while the grade 2 students would find and describe characteristics that are similar among a variety of animals and focus on growth and change in animals.

But my child is in the older grade...will they be challenged?

Yes! Your child will be challenged at their own academic level. It is both the teacher's and principal's responsibility as educators to provide your child with a challenging, yet not frustrating program. While some of the topics your child studies may vary from other children in the school at one time or another, all students will receive the full and complete grade program. Along with the academic studies, your child will also learn to work with younger children, reinforcing their confidence, their independence and their leadership skills. In fact, researchers have found these are the most important advantages.

But wait a minute...**My child is in the younger grade...will they be confused/overwhelmed/overlooked?**

No! There is a wide variety of emotional, physical, and academic traits in any group of children. The younger children in a Combined Grade class have many people they can ask for help and older children whose emotional maturity, leadership and academic skills they can model.

How to help your child succeed in a Combined Grade class

You're important to your child's success—in a Combined Grade or Same Grade classroom. The more information you have about your child and their education, the more you will be able to support and help your child succeed.

Here are some ways you can support your child's learning:

- Read information that comes from your child's teacher and school and may be available on a school website. These sources will provide you with knowledge of what is happening in school and will make it easier for you to talk with your child about the school day.
- Find out how the program has been tailored to meet the needs of the children in the class as a whole, and each child's individual needs.
- Talk to your child regularly about their school experience and about schoolwork that is brought home. Become familiar with the curriculum for your child's grade. It is on the Ministry of Education website at www.edu.gov.on.ca or in your school library.
- Communicate with your child's teacher about individual learning needs. If you have questions or concerns talk to the teacher about the strategies that they are using to cover the Split Grade curriculum.
- Be a part of the school. Attend parent information nights and other school events. Volunteer at the school if you have the time. Attend a school council meeting.

Research on Combined Grades: Do Combined Grades really work?

Dr. Joel Gajadharsingh (Professor Emeritus, University of Saskatchewan) has been a leader in North American research in combined grades. In 1991, the Canadian Education Association summarized his extensive findings and concluded the following:

1. Children in combined classes get an education that is just as good or better as in single grade classes.
2. Children in classes where there is more than one level learn to become more independent, responsible learners and develop a greater degree of social responsibility. They also develop better study habits and a more positive attitude towards school.
3. 85% of teachers considered the achievements of students in multi-grades to be equal or superior to the achievement of students in single grades in language arts, mathematics, sciences and social studies.

Miller reviewed 13 experimental studies assessing academic achievement in single-grade and multi-grade classrooms. He concluded that there were no significant differences between them (ERIC Digest, No. ED 335 178).

Goodland (1987) in a detailed study found that on average, there was a five year span of development typically found in a single grade group. In combined classes, representing two or three grade levels, the span was about six years of difference in the various aspect of pupil development.

Veenman (1995) reviewed 56 studies from twelve countries, including four from Canada. Forty eight multi- grade classes were studied. Thirty eight of the fifty six studies looked at overall achievement in math, reading and language. Of the thirty eight studies, twenty eight found no overall effects on achievement. In four other studies, significant and positive effects were found favouring multi-age classes and six favoured single-grade classes.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Ontario Ministry of Education has developed:

For parents: [Information for Parents](#).

For teachers: [Monograph: Combined Grade Classrooms: Research into Practice](#)

[Combined Grades: Strategies to Reach a Range of Learners K to Grade 6](#) as well as a number of Lesson Plans for teachers.

Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner provides over 150 online [Elementary Curriculum Units – many for Split Grades](#)

TDSB: Provides training and mentoring opportunities to enable teachers to have the necessary support they require teaching a Split Grade (or other teaching experience)

TVO: 3 short videos for parents on the [Pros and Cons of Split Grades and How to Help Your Child](#).

Other resources and information

- Ontario College of Teachers: have added a Qualification Course in Teaching Combined Grades.
- Faculties of Education have also mounted courses on Combined Grade Teaching.

[Review of Literature on Combined and Multi-Age Grouping from Surrey, BC School District](#)