



Combined Grade Classes: Introduction

Parents and guardians often have questions when their child is placed in a combined grade classroom at the CBE. You may wonder how a combined classroom will support your child's well being and learning needs.

The last several decades have seen dramatic changes in the Alberta Curriculum/Programs of Study, instructional methods used by teachers, and in our understanding of learners and learning. Teachers recognize and understand that educational development is unique to each individual and not always tied to chronological age and/or grade placement. Teachers develop learning plans to meet each student's needs, whether they have a single or combined grade classroom.

What is a combined grade classroom?

A combined grade class refers to a student centred classroom where two or more consecutive grades learn in a single space. A combined grade class, like most classrooms, includes a variety of instructional groupings and combinations depending on the students, the learning objectives and the resources available. Many CBE schools, as well as school boards across Canada and around the world, employ combined grade class configurations.

What are the potential benefits of a combined grade classroom?

Studies have been done over the past two decades that indicate students in combined grade classrooms perform just as well as students in single grade classes. These same studies have identified other benefits to students in combined grade classes, including:

- Creating opportunities for students to show leadership and reinforce their own understanding by collaborating with classmates from other grades.
- Promoting inclusivity by encouraging positive interactions among peers from different grades.
- Providing students with a diverse range of peers leading to opportunities to collaborate with others who share similar interests, aptitudes and abilities.
- Diversifying the range of social relationships that students build in a combined grade class more closely reflects the reality they will encounter in communities, families, and in the workplace.
- Employing combined classes to ensure that class sizes as a whole are more consistent across the school, and there is increased flexibility in class placements as new students register throughout the school year.

Why do we have combined grade classes at my child's school?

Combined classes may be used as a choice for various teaching and learning benefits and/or to meet a school's demographic needs, such as an imbalance in the number of students enrolled in each grade. Combined grades are a way for schools to make the best use of their resources to effectively meet student needs. Class make-up is carefully planned by school staff. Individual student 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, work habits, emotional development, special education needs, English language development, and grade or subject being taught.

How can the teacher teach more than one grade at a time?

Many parts of the Alberta Curriculum/Programs of Study progress from one grade to the next as knowledge, understanding, skills, and procedures (KUSPs) are developed to a more complex level. Teachers assess and evaluate the work differently to reflect the variation in curriculum expectations from one grade to the next. When progressive skill outcomes or common concepts are the focus of instruction, all students in the class work together, but at other times, tasks and/or resources may need to be specific to the topics/outcomes associated with each grade-level in order to ensure students have access to a fulsome programs of study/curriculum within a single school year.

My child is in the later grade...will they be challenged?

Your child will be challenged the same way they would be in a single grade class. All students receive the full and complete grade Alberta curriculum/programs of study, including any enrichment that they require. Along with academic studies, your child will also have opportunities to work with peers of differing ages, reinforcing confidence, independence and leadership skills.

My child is in the earlier grade...will they be confused/overwhelmed/overlooked?

There are a wide variety of emotional, physical, and academic traits in any group of children. The younger children in a combined grade class continue to receive instruction of grade level curriculum/programs of study, and are supported by their teacher, support staff and their peers in the same way they would be in a single grade configuration. Additionally, younger students in combined grades have ready access to older students who may be models of emotional maturity, leadership and academic skills.

How are students assessed?

In combined grade classes, students learn curricular content appropriate for their grade level in all subject areas. They are assessed based on the Alberta Curriculum/ Programs of Study for their specific grade. Teachers may use similar tasks to teach concepts across different grades, but they tailor their approach and assessments to suit each grade's expectations or individual student program plan. Assessment information is communicated with students and families through ongoing communication, PowerSchool, and the report card, which reflects progress and achievement related to grade-level curricular outcomes.

How are teachers supported in this work?

CBE is committed to supporting teachers and administrators with combined grade classrooms. Teachers and leaders are provided with professional learning that highlights research-based instructional and assessment practices for use with combined grades.

Conclusion

Education is changing and evolving, which presents new opportunities for students, parents/guardians, teachers, and schools. These changes to education highlight that it is important for students to learn how to access, evaluate, transfer and apply knowledge. Combined grade classrooms are supportive of this evolution, emphasizing students' individual needs through teaching practices like flexible groupings, interdisciplinary instruction, project or concept-based learning, strategic whole-class, small-group, and independent instruction. All classrooms provide the opportunity to develop the skills, processes and attitudes needed to be an engaged citizen.