

Principal Bulletin
September 17, 2010



Mixed Grade Classes

This year due to enrollment numbers, as well as "by design" we have several mixed grade level classes. We have four K/1st classes and a 2nd/3rd class. We are not unique, all of the K-4 schools in San Carlos have combination classes either by program design or due to the number of students at different grade levels. In fact this is a common practice throughout the state of California as well as the rest of the country.

There have been several questions and even some concerns about mixed grade classes, and I was asked to write about combination classes to the entire school community as we will continue to have mixed grade level classrooms in the future, and it is important for all of us to understand that these classes are carefully constructed and staffed to fully meet the needs of the students placed in the class, as all of our classes are.

Heather School has valued multiage classes for a long time. Three years ago, by design, we developed our K/1st multiage program. Prior to my arrival at Heather there were, by design, several multiage classrooms at a variety of grade levels, including 2nd/3rd because the district believed in the positive possibilities of multiage classes. At Heather, when we refer to mixed grade level classes as "multi-age" we are referring to the program where the students remain with the same teacher for two years, which is called "looping", but not all of our mixed grade classes are "looped" for two years.

I understand that a combination class might make parents feel a bit uneasy, as these mixed grade classrooms are unfamiliar and haven't been the norm. I also understand and expect that parents of the "older" grade, i.e. the third grade parents of the 2nd/3rd or the first grade parents of a K/1st might have more trouble feeling confident that their child is going to be adequately challenged.

A major misconception is that combination classes are developed with higher performing younger children with lower performing older children and that is simply not the case, nor desired for a number of reasons. A successful multiage class is built with a range of achievement levels. Strategic student groupings within the class will assist not only with intellectual growth, but also social and emotional growth for everyone.

It is a common belief that multiage classrooms benefit the younger age group, but short-change the older students. This couldn't be further from the truth. It is the older age group that often benefits the most in a multiage class. They have the benefit of developing leadership positions within the class community and reflecting on their own academic progress as they observe their younger

classmates learning more basic concepts. It is also well understood amongst educators that learning deepens when students are given an opportunity to teach or tutor others. A skilled teacher learns to provide a balance of challenge and success for all students.

All Heather teachers differentiate their instruction, both in whole class lessons and in small groups, to meet the needs all students; a multiage or mixed grade classroom is very conducive to the instructional strategies that support differentiation. It is our belief that a child's placement in a combination classroom can be a very enriching and positive experience.

I've been asked how students are selected for the combination classes. Every spring teachers and I work very diligently in building classes for the coming year. I work closely with the teachers who best know your children and which students, for a number of reasons, might be a good fit for the class. There are many factors that go into building a well-balanced class. We strive to mix up students who need to be separated from one year to the next, we take into consideration gender, age, performance levels, special needs including special education, English language learners, and social and emotional behavior needs. One important criteria was to place capable and motivated students in the combination classes.

So I ask that all parents trust the professional decisions of the Heather staff, and if your child is placed in a mixed grade level class, to enter the school year with an open mind. Attend our "Back to School Nights" and meet the assigned teacher and learn about his or her plans for the year.

It has been our experience that once families give the class a chance that they have been pleasantly surprised and I have received positive feedback both from the teacher and the parents as the program gets underway.

I would appreciate hearing back from parents with children in these classes as the year progresses. The teachers assigned to the combination classes are very experienced and skilled teachers. They work very collaboratively with their grade level counterparts and we all work together to make a successful year for all of our students.

And please keep an open mind as we go through this year and move into the next, which is bound to have other mixed grade classes as well.