



In a combo class?

Mixing grade levels may help students.

BY AMY BENTLEY Published: December, 2008

Moms and teachers would likely agree that it would be much more convenient if students enrolled in schools in neat, age-specific packages of 20 or 30 students per grade, so that each class would have the exact number of students required. But it rarely works out that way, making it necessary for public schools to create mixed-grade combination classes.

Many parents, when initially told that their child is in a combination class, have little knowledge about such mixed-grade classes and often react negatively. The idea of having first- and second-graders being taught together, or third- and fourth-graders in the same room, has sent many parents running to the principal's office, asking that their child be moved to another class.

While such classes pose a challenge for the teacher, educators in Orange County say combination classes work well for everyone, because they have an experienced teacher at the helm and extra support from the district and other teachers; and they're purposely filled with academically strong students. Researchers have found that students perform at the same level in mixed-grade classrooms as their peers in single-grade classrooms, because of the presence of a strong teacher and high-performing students.

Combo classes are common

Our earliest classrooms were combination classes, with one teacher providing instruction in a one-room schoolhouse for a wide range of skill levels.

Public schools have to use combination classes because class sizes can't go over a specific limit, and it's not cost-effective to hire an extra teacher for a few children. Scores of schools have these classrooms in which students are only one grade apart. Combination classes vary by district and grade level, and mostly depend on enrollment. This year, for example, the Irvine Unified

School District (USD), which boasts 22 elementary schools, has 14 combination classes across the district, including the English-learner classes. Combination classes are rarely used in middle school or high school, where it's possible to just add another period to accommodate students.

"If parents are open to it and have a positive view of the teacher, and have trust that they are going to get the curriculum and everything they need, it really works very well. Students perform quite well. The kids hold each other to a higher standard of accountability," says Lauren Sipelis, director of Elementary Education for the Irvine USD and a former teacher who has taught grades 2-3 and grades 3-4 combination classes.

"There is a misperception that this is a negative, but it can be great," Sipelis says. "The one negative is it is a lot of work for teachers in terms of planning. They need to be well-organized in covering the entire curriculum. This is why districts assign only experienced teachers to such classes."

The combo class advantage

Educators point out that there is a distinct advantage for first-graders in a combination class with kindergartners: Most kindergarten classes last a half-day, so once the kindergartners go home, the first-graders receive more teacher time for the rest of the day.

In Irvine, the schools try to prepare these mixed-grade classes for success. Only experienced teachers teach them, and strong students are purposely placed in these classes.

"We take great care when we do make a combination class that we select the students carefully. We seek students who are independent learners, can work in small groups and can work independently. We have found that the best thing is to make sure you reduce the number of behavior-challenged children. You're looking for students at or above grade level," Sipelis says.

There are certain teaching strategies, too. Teachers look for overlap in the two grades' curriculum and often have students work in small groups. One group will work independently while the teacher focuses on the other group, says Sipelis. "That's a pro, because you'll have a lot of reduced-class-size instruction," she says.

In addition, teachers at several schools in Orange County said students go to a different classroom with their grade-level peers for science and social studies, where the grade-level curriculum is very different.

While not the sole reason one would want their child placed in a combination

classroom, experts do point out that mentoring and peer-to-peer instruction is another advantage for students. Both the student who mentors and the student being mentored benefit from the exchange. Also, teaching younger students helps reinforce concepts for the older student.

Some research also notes that combo classrooms may lead to better self-esteem, as younger students associate regularly with their older classmates and have been shown to experience less friction than students in a single-grade setting. n

Parent tip list:

- > Give the class a chance before you complain.
- > Get to know the teacher. Attend Back-to-School Night, and ask questions about assignments and expectations for your child. Reinforce those expectations at home by checking homework.
- > Volunteer in your child's class. Most teachers welcome parent volunteers.
- > Talk to other parents who have had a child in a combo class.
- > Communicate with your child's teacher about any concerns you have and ways you can help your child at home.

Amy Bentley is a contributing writer to OC Family magazine.