Frequently Asked Questions About Multiage

Q What is multiage?

A Multiage classrooms include groups of students that have an age span greater than one year. In a classroom termed "non-graded," students do not receive a grade level distinction. However, our "multiage" classrooms include grade level distinctions. They contain students in two grade levels. The difference between a multiage classroom and a "split" classroom is one of philosophy and implementation.

Q What is the goal of multiage education?

A The goal of multiage classrooms is to maximize the benefits and interaction among students of various ages. The teacher encourages students to help each other and to learn together. The classroom is child-centered and theme-based, with integrated curricula. Hands-on projects and experiences help to meet objectives.

Teachers guide students to maintain portfolios for authentic assessment. Teachers use flexible, temporary groups to give instruction to students, regardless of age, who need the same kind of instruction for specific skills.

Q Why do we have multiage classrooms?

A A multiage classroom offers many opportunities for students to develop skills intellectually, socially and emotionally. Students work in a collaborative environment, paralleling the workplace. Students design and produce projects that are authentic assessments of a theme- or problem-based curriculum. Students collaborate on these projects much as teams in an office assemble a presentation. Social interaction is imperative within these teams. Practice within the educational setting prepares students for the contemporary work force.

A multiage classroom offers all students a chance to assume leadership roles in the areas in which they excel, regardless of age.

Q How is it to be determined who is going to be in what class?

A Our classroom teachers and our child study team work closely with the principal, Peter Hannigan, to ensure appropriate placement. Parents are invited to consider characteristics related to their child as a learner and to indicate how they feel this relates to classroom placement.

Q Why do students remain with their teachers for two years?

A A two-year multiage classroom allows the younger children to be the older children the following year. Some of these students would never have the opportunity to assume a leadership role in a single-age classroom.

Valuable teaching time also is gained at the beginning of the second year. The teacher, student and parents are familiar with each other. Continuous progress from the previous year can be made without spending time getting to know each other and assessing current levels of functioning.

Q Why can't integrated curriculum and team teaching be used in single-grade classrooms instead of in multiage?

A Most of the techniques that are part of our multiage program are used in many District 54 classrooms. However, many of the benefits of multiage education come from mixing age groups. In research on mixed-age grouping, Dr. Lillian Katz and others have found that:

1. Older children exhibit leadership behavior;
2. Friendship occurs between children of different ages;
3. Mixed-age groups enhance the responsibility of the older children;
4. Children play as freely as in same-age groups; and
5. Students' self regulation and discipline improves.

Since our objective in school is to educate the whole child, a multiage setting that capitalizes on social benefits and academic benefits is preferable to an individualized setting, in which students would excel in an academic realm only.

Q Why would a teacher want to teach a multiage class?

A Teaching in a multiage classroom means developing a child-centered room. Teachers consider individual learning styles, needs and interests.

Q What are the driving forces behind multiage practices?

A Critics of the graded classroom structure say schools should focus on the needs of children. They say the graded structure forces too many children to be something they are not. Children must read books that are too easy or too difficult for them because reading the book is the expectation for "that grade level."

Jim Grant, a prominent researcher in the field of multiage practices, notes that having defined grade levels based on a normal curve means that some students must be "below grade level." Critics of the graded structure are concerned about what the label of being below grade level does to students' self-esteem and motivation.

Q Will the school district save money?

A Multiage classrooms cost the school district as much money as single-grade classrooms. The decision to implement multiage classrooms was made to provide the best learning environment possible for Dirksen students.

Q What is meant by continuous progress practices?

A Continuous progress refers to a student's progress from the time they enter school until they leave. Students are challenged according to their ability to master intellectual, physical, emotional and social tasks at progressively more difficult levels. This means that students should neither spend time on what they have mastered, nor proceed to more difficult tasks if they have not yet learned materials or acquired skills essential to that new level of knowledge.

Q Will there be any ability grouping in multiage classrooms?

A Yes, grouping can occur in a multiage classroom. These groupings are flexible and based on tasks or learning objectives. Students can move in and out of these groups as their needs are met. Groups can be based on the student's level of achievement on a specific concept or skill. They can also be formed based on interests, social needs or other criteria.

Q Will the older and gifted students be challenged in a multiage classroom?

A Yes. A multiage classroom can be a more challenging environment with greater opportunities for advanced students. The multiage setting has a higher ceiling on the curriculum to reflect the needs of the wide range of abilities. There are also opportunities for the more knowledgeable students to teach others. Students who teach others often retain as much as 90 percent of the material taught.

On an interpersonal level, the older, more knowledgeable students, who may be socially or emotionally young, have an opportunity to socialize with younger class members. Multiage students get the chance to be the oldest members of a group every two years. Some students in single-graded classes may go through childhood without ever being in a leadership role.

Q How will you measure how well the staff and the children are doing?

A The staff evaluation plan is a part of the negotiated contract with employee unions. A specific evaluation system is in place for each employee group, as well as for tenured and non-tenured teachers. The principal is responsible for supervising and evaluating all staff.

Evaluation of student progress continues in much the same way it is done in all District 54 schools, through standardized achievement tests and textbook-based assessments. You may expect to see more evaluation of student progress using authentic assessment techniques, such as observation of the student's learning style, portfolio assessment, curriculum-based assessment and rubrics for content-related material.

Q Will the teachers still teach or facilitate?

A The responsibility to teach will always be held by teachers. A teacher's role in any classroom varies between direct instruction, guided practice and group facilitation.

Q Why do students seem happier in a multiage class?

A Students are happier when they are successful in school. Multiage education emphasizes building upon strengths, which builds self-esteem.

Multiage classrooms develop into "family," with emphasis on caring, cooperation and collaboration. Children are learners and teachers, the older and more advanced children guiding and providing models for younger, less advanced learners.

The multiage classroom becomes a positive, nurturing and safe environment for its students. When this type of environment is provided, the result is happy children!