

SPLIT DECISIONS

THE REALITY OF
COMBINED-GRADES IN
ONTARIO IN 2001



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Preface

Thank you

In the fall of 2000, the Executive of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario formed a task force to study and report on the issues emerging from combined-grade classrooms in Ontario. Members of the Task Force were selected to represent a variety of perspectives within the ETFO membership. The report was presented to the Executive in May 2001. At that time, Executive members passed a motion to develop a position paper from the work of the Task Force on Combined Grades. ETFO wishes to thank the members of the Task Force for their contributions to this report and for their hard work and dedication to the teaching profession.

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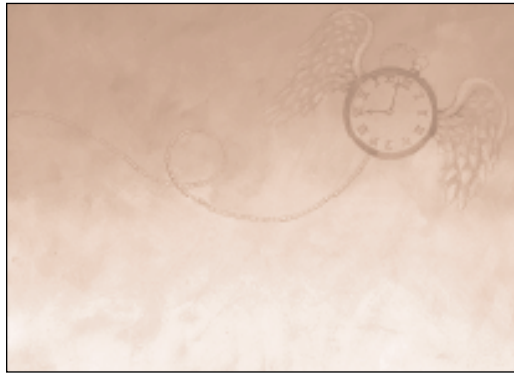
Professional Development Services

Introduction

Even the best teachers cannot make time stand still.

– Grade 2/3 Teacher

Time has always been a particular concern of teachers who must teach more than one grade in their classrooms. The title of the report, “Split Decisions”, is a reflection of the constant decisions teachers of split grades must make as they juggle their teaching



time. No matter how much teachers integrate curricula or how creatively they group students, the bottom line is that a teacher must combine two or more grades of curricular-based teaching within the same time frame as the colleague next door who teaches a single grade. Finding time to do the work has never been as much of a challenge as it is now because of the many learning expectations within the new Ontario curricula.

For that reason, time is a recurring theme in this position paper which has been developed by the members of the Task Force on Combined-Grades established by the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) in the fall of 2000.

In this position paper, ETFO provides an overview of the educational context for combined-grades in Ontario in 2001. The factors that make

the Ontario reality unique are then identified. Specifically, ETFO answers the question, “What is different about today’s combined-grade classrooms in Ontario, compared with the past and with other jurisdictions?” This paper identifies the key issues facing

students, parents, and teachers, and proposes some strategies that may be used to address these key issues. The conclusion summarizes ETFO’s position on this important topic.

The term “combined-grade classroom” is used to refer to those teaching situations in which a teacher must teach students in more than one grade in the same physical space and time frame. Historically, this method of organizing students for learning has been referred to as “split grades.” We will use both of these terms in this position paper. Combined-grades are not limited to two grades in one classroom. In some small, isolated schools there may be multiple grades in one classroom. In such situations, the issues identified in this paper increase exponentially.

Ontario 2001: Context for Combined-Grade Classrooms

The Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris, elected in 1995, promised to create a crisis in education in Ontario. It has succeeded. Through the Ministry of Education, the current government has mandated fundamental changes to Ontario's education system. Each change has had a specific focus – the curriculum, the report card, and so on. Unfortunately, due to the narrow focus of these changes, which were undertaken without regard to the consequences in the larger context, a number of unanticipated consequences were bound to emerge. Some of these unanticipated consequences are highlighted in the section which describes the current context for combined-grade classrooms in Ontario and the key issues that have emerged as the implementation process has evolved.

Teaching two grade levels of expectations in the time designed for only one grade's ... is mission impossible.

Context beyond the individual combined-grade classroom

- Ontario's elementary teachers are among the most qualified in North America. They are being actively recruited for jobs across the continent and beyond.
- Elementary teachers are among the most knowledgeable professionals about child development and how learning takes place.
- Many elementary teachers welcome the clarity of the new Ontario curricula and assessment protocols. There are, however, some serious flaws that have become evident during the three years of implementation, particularly in combined-grade classrooms.
- Elementary teachers know what constitutes high-quality education and are deeply concerned when they are expected to provide less than that. For some, the reality of teaching the new curricula in a combined-grade classroom has hastened their path to retirement. As stated by one teacher, "I knew in my heart that the kids were not getting the full benefit of who I can be as a teacher and that bothered me the most."
- Teachers and parents share a growing belief that

the new Ontario curricula and assessment policies are setting up a significant number of students to fail. This is increasingly evident in combined-grade classrooms where, as one teacher stated, “Teaching two grade levels of expectations in the time designed for only one grade’s ... is dreaming ... it is mission impossible.”

- There is general agreement that combined-grade classrooms are here to stay, particularly in smaller, more isolated communities. Ministry data show that from 1996 to 1999 the number of combined-grade classrooms decreased from 30.7 percent to 27.3 percent. Similarly, the number of students in these classrooms dropped from 31.1 percent to 27.2 percent. However, this latter number still represents approximately 373,856 students. Also of interest is their distribution. In 1999, 34.1 percent of these students were in the north, 29.2 percent in the southeast, 30.1 percent in the southwest, and 25.2 percent in the GTA.⁽¹⁾ ETFO’s school-based survey has also recorded a drop in the number of combined-grade classrooms, with 25 percent of schools in 2000-2001 reporting five or more combined-



grade classrooms, down from 29 percent in 1999-2000.⁽²⁾ Members of the Task Force suspect that these numbers will remain fairly stable with current conditions in district school boards.

- To date, both the Ministry of Education and most district school boards have done little to address the serious issues facing teachers and students in combined-grade classrooms. Actions that have been taken, such as the development of lesson plans for combined-grade classrooms and the delivery of workshops to help teachers deal with the challenges, ignore the fundamental issues that need to be addressed. Lesson plans and workshops assume that the task of teaching all of the mandated curricula in a combined-grade setting can be done when, in fact, it is impossible, as will become evident in this report. Also, by providing lesson plans and workshops, the message is sent that teachers are the problem, that they do not know how to do it, and so “we need to help them.” This “blame the victim” strategy is popular with this current government.

Ontario's Combined-Grade Classrooms are Unique: Listen to the Voices

Listen

Moving from the larger context into the actual reality of a combined-grade classroom, we find a teaching and learning environment that is unique to Ontario in 2001. Unfortunately, when issues associated with these unique teaching and learning environments are raised with Ministry of Education staff and some decision-makers in district school boards, we frequently hear about what has worked

In the past, combined-grade classrooms have worked well for many students and teachers.

well in the past. There is evidence that, historically, teachers and students have experienced quality education in these settings.⁽³⁾ Today's reality is different. We will show that comparisons to Ontario's past and references to research studies done in other jurisdictions which demonstrate that quality education can be experienced in combined-grade classrooms are not at all helpful.⁽⁴⁾ These comparisons muddy the waters of the debate. Hence, we need to be very clear about how and why today's combined-grade classrooms in Ontario are so different.

To date, there is no in-depth research conducted by respected researchers on the unique issues facing students, parents, and teachers in today's combined-grade classrooms in Ontario. How do we know that serious issues exist? ETFO staff and members of the Task Force on Combined-Grades

asked questions and listened to the responses. In this position paper, we share with you the voices of the people - students, parents, and teachers - who live the daily reality of combined-grade classrooms.

Listen to the voices of the students as they talk about life in a combined-grade classroom. Listen to the voices of the parents as they attempt to cope with their children's school experiences. Listen to the voices of the teachers who are trying to make an impossible situation work with the result that some are falling ill and many are moving out.

What is different about today's combined-grade classrooms compared with the past and with other jurisdictions?

In the past, combined-grade classrooms have worked well for many students and teachers.⁽⁵⁾ This has been due to four key factors. First, teachers had flexibility in how students were grouped at any one time. The grade level and age of the students were less important than their learning profiles. Second, the curriculum was sufficiently open-ended that teachers could readily shape it to meet the unique needs of their individual students. Teachers were more involved in curriculum planning and had the freedom to develop common curriculum themes across the grades so that all students in the class-

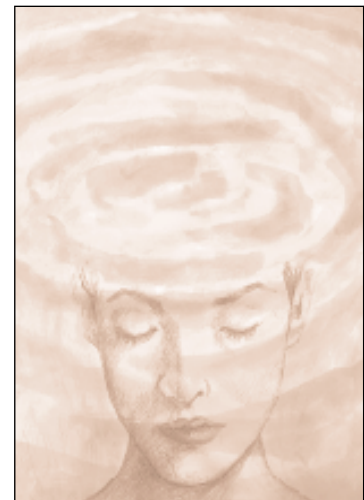
room would be involved in some aspect of a common topic. Third, teachers had more control over what was taught, when, and to whom. They were able to vary the pace of learning to suit the needs of individual students. Fourth, there was a stronger focus on what students were able to achieve at the end of a division as opposed to the end of a grade. This longer time span allowed for the broad range of human development that has clearly been documented in many research studies on normative child development.⁽⁶⁾ In the words of one teacher, “We had the flexibility to build a slope of learning for students to climb instead of the current ladder which has some missing rungs!”

What is happening in combined-grade classrooms in Ontario in 2001?

Today’s reality for combined-grade classrooms is quite different from the situations described above. The new Ontario curricula have presented teachers with new challenges that previous teachers and those in other jurisdictions have not had to deal with. Although teachers welcome the clarity of the new curricula, *the curriculum policy documents are not perfect*:

- Each curriculum developed within the new Ontario curricula was **written in isolation**. The writing teams were carefully managed so that each curriculum had **few common themes** with other subjects in the same grade. One example is science and technology, which could have had a number of common themes with the health curriculum. Similarly, each subject, for example mathematics, has been written in such a way that there are few common themes across grade levels. This approach is referred to as the “silo development” of curriculum. Silo development

is favoured by some subject specialists who tend not to value curricular integration as a teaching-learning strategy. Teachers of combined-grade classrooms have reacted to this model for designing curriculum by saying: “The documents are designed for single grades;” “the quality of teaching and learning suffers;” “it is a fractured approach to teaching and learning.” Silo development ignores how a young human brain learns. Integrated learning builds the complexities of the cognitive map.⁽⁷⁾ The result of this silo design of curricula is that teachers in combined-grade classrooms, who historically have depended heavily on common themes as a vehicle to integrate various subjects, are now facing the challenges of teaching parallel classes in the same physical space for a significant part of the school day. The degree to which this is necessary varies with the specific grade and the subject being taught, but it is substantially different from what has been possible in the past.



In addition, silo development of learning expectations limits a teacher’s flexibility to teach outside the mandated curriculum, which is having a negative impact on many students who are above or below grade level expectations. This is a highly unfortunate outcome, perhaps another unanticipated consequence, of a hurried curriculum renewal initiative that was undertaken without sufficient planning, field-testing and input from the stakeholder groups. The Ontario Ministry of Education, with assistance from

other levels of government, established the timelines and procedures for the entire educational reform plan, and **the Ministry of Education must be held accountable for these reforms.**

- Silo development of curricula means that flexible grouping across the grades is limited. Historically, the teacher decided the learning sequence and had the grouping flexibility to meet the needs of all students in the class. In today's combined-grade classrooms, this has become problematic. The focus, which used to be on similarities, has shifted to differences. The Grades 2 and 3 students may be studying social

To an unprecedented degree, teachers are being told what to teach and when.

studies, but they are focusing on different countries and cultures. They are, in essence, in different worlds. The result is a **dramatic reduction in the frequency of student-teacher interactions** because the teacher, who cannot be in two places at the same time, is working with the other grade. At the

heart of this is the sad reality that some key professional decisions have been taken away from teachers and are now being dictated by others who know nothing about the reality of the unique context within which the teacher is teaching and the student is learning. This is a significant step towards the “de-professionalization” of teaching.

- Another key difference in teaching the new curricula is a product of the Provincial Report Card reporting process. The requirement that there be three reporting periods, one as early as the fall of the school year, and that subject

strands within each curriculum be reported to parents, means that teachers have far less flexibility. To an unprecedented degree, teachers are being told what to teach and when. Furthermore, **students are being controlled as to what they learn and when, whether they are developmentally ready or not.** The fall report card is particularly problematic for teachers and students in combined-grade classrooms because they simply do not have enough time to cover the learning expectations in the curricular strands that must be reported to parents.

- This rigid reporting template has created another unanticipated consequence – that of failing to provide developmental learning linkages across the subject strands. The requirement to report on the individual strands in each reporting period means that sometimes the teacher has to move up and down the different strands to ensure that students are taught what they need to know in order to progress upwards. Teachers speak of this in terms of “back-tracking”. Back-tracking is a time consuming activity particularly in a combined-grade setting. The need to go “back” is a function of the silo development of strands within the curriculum design process and reflects a lack of understanding of how students learn. Back-tracking is neither a reflection of the teacher's expertise nor the student's capabilities.
- As a result of the hurry to download curriculum to eliminate Grade 13, content has been pushed down the grades with no consideration as to whether students have the capability to learn the new concepts. There is growing evidence to show that some parts of the new curricula are not age-appropriate for the assigned grade. Teachers report that a significant number of students are

experiencing difficulties with certain parts of each curriculum. One example is the Grade 5 social studies curriculum, which requires students to demonstrate an understanding of the nature of government and class structures. **The development of age-inappropriate curricula is a direct outcome of the failure of the Ministry of Education to conduct comprehensive field tests.** Only the science and technology curriculum has been field-tested and that was done in a piecemeal fashion. The many students who are experiencing difficulties with the “tough new curricula” need more teacher time and assistance. This is particularly problematic in a combined-grade classroom.

- The pace of learning has accelerated dramatically. **Teachers and students must master hundreds of learning expectations, all of which are given equal weight by the Ministry of Education.** Teachers in combined-grade classrooms, who must address many more learning expectations, are in a constant rush as they attempt to “cover the curriculum,” while an increasing number of students, who are unable to keep up with the fast pace, are being left behind.

These are the major differences in today’s Ontario classrooms compared with the past and with other jurisdictions. These differences represent major changes when placed within the context of a combined-grade classroom. The bottom line is that Ontario’s education reform initiatives are having a severely negative impact on many students and teachers in combined-grade classrooms.

The following section lists the key issues that have emerged from the major differences identified and discussed above. These key issues are framed by the perspectives of those who live the daily reality of combined-grade classrooms.

What are the key issues in today’s combined-grade classrooms?

KEY ISSUES FOR STUDENTS

The overreaching issue for students in combined-grade classrooms is that their learning experience is experientially and, frequently, qualitatively different from their peers in regular classrooms. At the heart of this difference is a fundamental lack of fairness and equity that no one wants to address. Key issues that demonstrate this unfairness include:

- Access to the teacher is far more limited. There is no access while the teacher teaches the other grade(s) for those large parts of the curricula that cannot be integrated. Students requiring the teacher’s assistance have to wait until the teacher returns to their grade grouping. In the voice of one student, “I don’t like having a split grade because when you need the teacher she is probably teaching the Grade 2’s”. This highlights the need for selecting only those students who are independent learners for placement in these classrooms. Unfortunately, in small schools, this is not always possible. Overall, individual students receive much less one-on-one attention from the teacher in a combined-grade classroom. For some students, this can be devastating.

Ontario’s education reform initiatives are having a severely negative impact on many students and teachers in combined-grade classrooms.

- Fewer opportunities exist for remedial work. The teacher simply does not have the time to address individual remedial needs in a combined-grade classroom.
- The pace of learning is faster and often hurried in a combined-grade classroom. Slower learners frequently have difficulty keeping up. The teacher is less likely to go into depth on essential learning because the Ministry of Education has mandated that the focus be on the scope and quantity of the learning expectations. In a combined-grade classroom, there are many more learning expectations to teach, and these expectations must be reported to parents during the three formal reporting sessions with the standardized Provincial Report Card.
- Students who are not independent learners have real difficulties in combined-grade learning environments.
- There is much more homework and the nature of the homework has changed. In the words of one teacher of a combined Grade 2/3, “We have extended the instructional day into the home.”
- Teachers report that some students exhibit a reduced self-concept and a sense of personal failure; others view the curriculum as “threatening.”
- Students report that they feel crowded in combined-grade classrooms. Due to two or more grades being taught in the same classroom, there is a greater diversity of equipment, resources, and learning materials in the room. Storage becomes a problem and student freedom of movement is, in many cases, more restricted. This problem is exacerbated when special needs students who require and are entitled to an educational assistant and/or physical supports such as a wheelchair, are in the classroom.
- Combined-grade classrooms are frequently quite noisy. The noise is distracting for some learners. In the voice of one student, “I don’t like that when I am doing my work I have to hear you teach Grade 2’s”.
- The student-teacher rapport is not as strong in many combined-grade classrooms. One student expresses it this way, “I don’t like being in a split class because one class sometimes gets ignored and the other class always gets to work”.
- Teachers report that students who spend several years in such classrooms are more likely to become bored because they feel they have “heard it all before.” This can lead to discipline problems and to lower achievement.

Parents are becoming vocal in their demands to have their children in single-grade classrooms.

- For too many students in a combined-grade classroom, learning is very difficult and not much fun.

KEY ISSUES FOR PARENTS

- Some parents report that their children are more stressed in combined-grade classrooms. The pressure of more homework, a faster pace of learning, and reduced access to assistance and remediation when it is needed, are key factors contributing to the rising stress levels observed by parents.
- Parents are realizing that their children’s education is suffering from a lack of appropriate support personnel such as guidance counselors, teacher-librarians, and educational assistants. Their absence is felt even more in combined-grade situations.

- Some parents are concerned that newer teachers, some fresh from faculties of education, are being assigned to combined-grade classrooms.
- Children have much more homework to complete, both in terms of frequency and quantity. Some of the content is new to parents, who are voicing their concerns about not being able to help their children as much as they would like to. In the words of one parent, “I simply don’t understand some of the science questions. How can I help my child?”
- Parents of special needs students have voiced concerns about placements in combined-grade classrooms. The lack of support staff and the reduced teacher-student contact time are issues of deep concern.
- Parents have also expressed concerns over safety issues in combined-grade classrooms where students spend more time working on their own than in a regular setting. During parents’ night at one school, the following concern was shared: “I have talked to the teacher about safety in the classroom. My son is at that stumbling age. Some of the tools can be quite dangerous.”
- Parents report that they have noticed that achievement levels have dropped when their children have moved from a single into a combined-grade learning environment.
- Some children have asked their parents to remove them from combined-grade classrooms. They are not enjoying school as much as they used to.
- Parents are becoming vocal in their demands to have their children in single-grade classrooms. They worry about the quality of education received in combined-grade classrooms, particularly if students continue in that mode

over several years. What is the cumulative deficit in learning from such an experience? We do not know.

KEY ISSUES FOR TEACHERS

- Teachers worry, some agonize, over the impossible task of “covering” all of the learning expectations, twice as many in combined-grade classrooms. They feel they are letting their students down. Teachers report feeling rushed, pushed to cover “content” rather than to focus on the larger picture of student needs and higher-level learning. The shift from student-centered learning to content coverage, a reality that secondary teachers have had to deal with for some time, is deeply disturbing to many elementary educators. They view it as covert de-professionalization.
- Teachers of combined-grade classrooms report higher levels of stress, anxiety and burnout. As one teacher stated, **“My sense of competency and satisfaction in the work I am doing is suffering horribly”**. There is no time to meet with colleagues. Younger teachers are leaving the profession; older teachers are retiring. Few appear to want to stay in the role of a teacher of a combined-grade classroom.
- In this third year of implementation, many more teachers are recognizing that some of the concepts they are required to teach are beyond the capabilities of their students. This is particularly evident in combined-grade classrooms



where teachers have much less time to help students with difficulties.

- Teachers report a degree of dissonance between and among certain subject strands. There appear to be design errors in relation to the developmental learning continuum. Some necessary scaffolding to support learning is either missing or in the wrong place.
- Teachers of combined-grade classrooms need more preparation time because of their increased workload.
- Teachers deeply miss the support of curriculum and assessment specialists as they attempt to implement the new curricula. At a time when supports were most needed, these supports were removed or reduced in many district school

The entire process was a magnificent disaster, a stellar example of mismanagement.

boards due to the rigid and myopic funding formula. This has significantly slowed the change process and has helped to create a highly fractured implementation front. Teachers in combined-grade classrooms express concern about the limited assistance available from the shrinking pool of curriculum specialists.

Teachers need ongoing assistance in dealing with the complex challenges they and their students face.

- Teachers in combined-grade classrooms in particular need access to curriculum consultants, ESL specialists, teacher-librarians, guidance counselors, special education specialists, educational assistants, and other support personnel.
- Teachers in combined-grade classrooms are asking for greater support from their colleagues and mentors, as well as access to relevant workshops and resources. They are also seeking strategies,

such as chat rooms and e-learning programs, to overcome their isolation.

- Tensions are growing between combined-grade teachers and those in single-grade classrooms over the issue of workload fairness.
- Teachers of combined-grade classrooms are asking for smaller groups of students so they can spend more time with needy learners. Teachers cite the increasing frequency of students acting out, exhibiting high anxiety and illness, resulting for some in poor attendance. These student behaviours appear to be more evident in combined-grade classrooms. As one teacher stated, “I feel that in all fairness to students today, a split grade does not work. With this rigorous curriculum the students need their teacher’s constant attention even more than before.”
- Teachers expected to have inadequate and insufficient resources to implement the new curricula in the beginning of this huge, unplanned, instant implementation initiative. Text selection, however, when it did occur, was highly contrived and hurried. Teachers had access to a limited selection of books for which insufficient information was provided. Selection was further limited because there was a very short time to acquire the books. Teachers’ manuals were not available. Access to equipment was an afterthought. The entire process was a magnificent disaster, a stellar example of mismanagement. “Rush to get it done and be damned with the consequences” seemed to be the order of the day. In retrospect, the fact that this actually happened is hard to believe. It is equally astounding that the problems caused by this bungling of what should have been a straightforward process continue in the third year of implementation. This situation is untenable. Teachers report that the “forced-selection

textbooks” contain major errors; some are disguised American texts; others are poorly written, and quite a few are not closely linked to the curriculum. We continue to hear of texts in which the contents disappear or fade when friction is applied to the ink. Millions of scarce dollars were inappropriately spent on flawed resources which teachers and students are now forced to work with. This adds to the burdens teachers already carry, burdens that are magnified in combined-grade classrooms. Existing resources do not address the needs of students and teachers in these learning environments. Hence, constant adjustments must be made. Teachers report that this is highly frustrating and time-consuming.

- Teachers are asking for units and lesson plans that will help them with the more challenging aspects of the curriculum in a combined-grade setting. In reality, however, such units and lesson plans cannot overcome the fundamental errors in curriculum design.
- Combined-grade classrooms that cross divisions, for example, Grades 3 and 4, often result in twice as many staff meetings. This takes time that teachers of combined-grade classrooms do not have. Workable schedules become a real challenge as noted by this teacher who said, “I taught a Grade 6/7 French Immersion class ... I found it to be the most difficult and least successful year in my 13-year teaching career. It was difficult to juggle the schedules when the two curricula are so different and there is a cross in divisions”.
- The inclusion of Grades 3 and 6 in combined-grade classrooms creates further inequities within the learning environment in classrooms and across the school. EQAO testing in Grades 3 and 6, a time-intensive activity the value of which

needs to be seriously analyzed, significantly adds to an already heavy workload. In the words of one teacher, “My next ‘hurdle’ is the EQAO testing in May. I will have to do the testing of my 3’s but that means my 2’s will need to have a different arrangement ... that will put me behind with the Grade 2’s”.

- Teachers in combined-grade classrooms are identifying serious safety concerns. How does a teacher supervise an experiment in one grade while the other grade needs to be outdoors studying the environment? **Cramped learning environments and reduced, direct supervision can lead to some potentially dangerous situations.**
- Teachers want and need ongoing access to high-quality, relevant professional development that will assist them to implement the new curricula effectively. Teachers in combined-grade classrooms are asking for professional growth opportunities that specifically address their realities. To date, very little has been available. What little help is available usually avoids the problematic parts of the curricula.



Overall, teachers in combined-grade classrooms feel that they have been handed an impossible workload, while at the same time, they are being held totally responsible for student achievement. They feel tired, frustrated, and guilty because they know they cannot help every student as much as they would like to. **The ultimate losers in all of**

this are the students. Not just today, but for all the tomorrows to come. History will not forget the role of this government in creating this crisis.

What can be done to address the key issues?

The Ministry of Education, district school boards and federations have already tried to address some of the key issues, but their solutions have only scratched the surface of the problem. At ETFO, for example, we have produced curriculum resources for combined-grades and provided professional development opportunities for teachers to hone their knowledge and skills to deal with the challenges of combined-grade classrooms.

Surface solutions are not going to make a significant difference in the daily reality facing students and teachers in combined-grade classrooms. Fundamental changes are needed. Only the Ministry of Education can make these fundamental changes.

THE ONTARIO MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
MUST TAKE ACTION

Fundamental Changes

1. The Ministry of Education must provide teachers with greater flexibility regarding which learning expectations are taught by identifying which expectations are core learning and which ones are ancillary. Not all learning is of equal importance

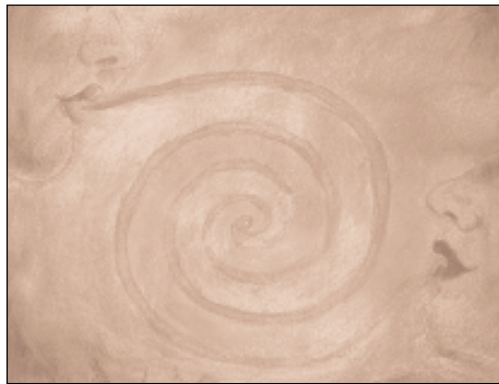
and this needs official recognition. Core learning should be enduring, essential learning that every child should know. These need to be stated as main ideas and concepts. The identification of core and ancillary learning expectations is a no-cost policy change. Making this change would assist all students and teachers, particularly those in combined-grade classrooms.

2. The Ministry of Education must support research studies, conducted by recognized researchers, to determine the age-appropriateness of the new curricula. Such research should include an analysis of ethno-cultural and gender bias, and

the degree to which societal diversities are included and how they are valued. The results of this research should be used to redesign the curricula in consultation with the stakeholders.

The Ministry of Education must support research studies

designed to analyze student learning in combined-grade settings to determine if the quality of learning is equal to that of students in single-grade classrooms. Special emphasis should be focused on students in smaller schools where it is not possible to select who should be in the combined-grade classroom. Such research also needs to focus on student stress, the role of homework, and the real social and academic impact of student learning in a combined-grade setting. In addition, researchers should gather data on best classroom management practices, effective guidelines for student placement, and a comparison of teacher workload.



3. The Ministry of Education must study each strand within each curriculum and ensure that appropriate scaffolding is in place to support developmental learning across the strands. This will save teaching time and reduce the frustration level of teachers in combined-grade classrooms.

4. The Ministry of Education must study the curricula as a total package, the way generalist elementary teachers must do, and redesign each curriculum to provide opportunities for authentic, comprehensive integration. The focus of the study should be across the grades and the curricula. The research must include a variety of integration strategies including common themes. This will be particularly useful to teachers of combined-grade classrooms as they try to find the time to address the individual needs of their students.

5. The Ministry of Education must develop greater flexibility in reporting to parents using the Provincial Report Card. Remove the fall formal reporting requirement; a teacher-parent conference is more realistic. Undertake a thorough review of the report card and reporting process to determine how they can better meet the needs of students, parents, and teachers in combined-grade classrooms. Now is the time for the Ministry of Education to undertake such a review.

6. The Ministry of Education must review the funding formula, particularly from the perspective of the needs of students and teachers in combined-grade classrooms. New monies are needed to reduce the number of combined-grade classrooms where feasible. When it is not feasible, new monies should be directed towards lowering class sizes,

providing more preparation time, and ensuring that adequate resources and equipment are provided. New monies are also needed to provide support staff and focused professional development programs. Money so allocated must be tracked to ensure that it is spent appropriately. An in-depth review of the funding formula is not only timely but an absolute necessity. In this review, the Ministry should consider raising the per pupil grant in elementary to equal that in secondary. This would greatly assist in reducing the number of combined-grade classrooms in Ontario.

7. The Ministry of Education's formula stating that every elementary student requires 100 square feet of learning space needs to be brought into the twenty-first century. Children are bigger than they were in the past. Younger children are active learners and need space to explore their learning environments. Also, today's classrooms contain more learning materials than those in past decades. This is particularly true in combined-grade classrooms. The elementary and secondary space formula should be the same, that is, 125 square feet per student.

8. The Ministry of Education must develop a simple, user-friendly curriculum planner for teachers of combined-grade classrooms that is adaptable to a wide range of hardware and software, and manages information for use in the Provincial Report Card.

An in-depth review of the funding formula is not only timely but an absolute necessity.

DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARDS MUST TAKE ACTION

District school boards can implement a number of policies and procedures that would benefit students, parents, and teachers in combined-grade classrooms. A fundamental policy should be that, to the extent possible, combined-grades be eliminated. Where this is not feasible, then every effort should be made to provide the best learning environment possible for all students. The following considerations should be addressed in policies and procedures:

- Administrators should avoid including Grades 3 and 6 in a combined-grade classroom.
- Administrators should ensure that the assignment of teachers, preferably the most experienced, to combined-grade classrooms is a school-wide decision.
- Administrators should avoid crossing the divisions, primary-junior-intermediate, as this adds to the number of meetings teachers must attend.
- Administrators must carefully select students who are mature, independent learners for combined classroom settings while maintaining open communication with parents.
- Administrators, to the degree possible, should avoid placing the same student in a combined-grade setting for more than one consecutive year.
- Administrators should schedule primary and junior grade teachers to teach most subjects. A partial or full rotary system, being used in some schools to deal with the issue of combined-grades, is not appropriate for this age group of students.
- Administrators should provide teachers in combined-grade classrooms with more preparation time.
- Administrators should provide teachers in combined-grade classrooms with smaller class sizes.

- Administrators must develop appropriate support systems for students, parents, and teachers in combined-grade classrooms. One important strategy is to provide opportunities for professional networking and sharing.
- Administrators must give teachers permission to do what they, as professionals, know should be done to help all students be successful. The focus should be on teachers planning, implementing, assessing and reporting on the “big picture” of student learning rather than on lists of specific skill and knowledge lists.

FEDERATIONS AND OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS MUST TAKE ACTION

- We must develop a comprehensive plan to provide appropriate professional development programs and services to teachers in combined-grade classrooms.
- We must develop a selection of lesson plans and other curriculum resources for teachers and students in combined-grade classrooms. Such resources must be appropriately field-tested to include key variables such as geography, school size, a variety of class configurations and sizes, as well as a diversity of student profiles.
- We must provide opportunities for collegial networking and sharing.
- We must educate parents and the public about the realities of combined-grade classrooms in today’s schools in Ontario.
- We must work with faculties of education to ensure that they provide student teachers with more opportunities to take their practicum in combined-grade classrooms.
- We must work with faculties of education to ensure that they prepare student teachers for the realities of teaching in today’s combined-grade classrooms.

Conclusions

VOICES

Ontario's elementary teachers are among the most qualified educational professionals in North America. We welcome changes that further enhance the quality of education for our students. However, when change leads to increased student stress and seriously disadvantages certain groups of students, teachers become concerned, frustrated, and angry. When change leads to an exorbitant workload and impossible expectations, teachers become disheartened and their health and self-concept begin to suffer. After three years of trying to implement the new Ontario curricula and assessment policies in combined-grade classrooms, students, parents, and teachers are experiencing these teaching and learning realities.

This report, "Split Decisions", attempts to capture the realities of life in today's combined-grade classrooms across Ontario. The voices of students, parents, and teachers portray what many believe to be the unanticipated consequences of major changes that have been imposed from above, implemented far too rapidly and without adequate consultation and field-testing.

In this report, we have attempted to identify the key issues and suggest actions that would provide

students and teachers with the flexibility to employ those historical teaching and learning strategies that have worked well for many in combined-grade classrooms.

The Ontario Ministry of Education holds the key to solving the crisis we have identified with regards to combined-grade classrooms. It is directly due to the mismanagement of their major education reforms in the elementary schools of Ontario that the key issues identified in this report exist. We have identified eight fundamental changes, seven of them policy-level decisions, which the Ministry of Education needs to address immediately.

The Ministry of Education, district school boards, federations, and key stakeholder groups need to act quickly with substantial collaboration to improve the learning and teaching environments in combined-grade classrooms in Ontario in 2001.

The Ontario Ministry of Education holds the key to solving the crisis we have identified with regards to combined-grade classrooms.

ETFO Positions on Combined-Grade Classrooms

- The Ontario Ministry of Education must commit to making the following seven fundamental policy changes to address the untenable learning and teaching conditions in today's combined-grade classrooms:
 1. Identify core and ancillary learning expectations in each elementary curriculum.
 2. Support quality research to determine the age-appropriateness of each elementary curriculum and include analysis of ethno-cultural and gender bias, inclusion of diversities, and valuing of our pluralistic society. Results of the research should be used to shape a major cycle of curriculum review and renewal in consultation with the major stakeholders. Research is also needed to determine additional actions that need to be taken to enhance the quality of education in combined-grade classrooms.
 3. Undertake a study of curricular strands to ensure appropriate scaffolding to support developmental learning across the strands.
 4. Redesign each curriculum to provide opportunities for authentic, comprehensive integration between grades and across the curricula.
 5. Review the Provincial Report Card from the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers who are living the realities of today's combined-grades classrooms. Remove the need for a formal reporting session in the fall of the school year.
 6. Review and revise the funding formula from the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers who are living the realities of today's combined-grade classrooms. Address areas of need, which include but are not limited to: class size, preparation time, support staff, resources, equipment, professional development, and fewer combined-grade classrooms. New monies allocated to supporting learning in combined-grades should be monitored to ensure that they are allocated appropriately. A simple overall solution however, is to fund elementary students at the same level as secondary. This historically discriminatory funding philosophy must be abandoned.
 7. Amend the space formula so that elementary students are provided with the same amount of learning space as secondary students (125 square feet per student.)
- The Ontario Ministry of Education should develop a simple, user-friendly curriculum planner for teachers in combined-grade classrooms that is adaptable to a wide range of hardware and software, and is linked to the Provincial Report Card.
- District school boards should take action on

issues associated with combined-grade classrooms starting with eliminating as many combined-grade classrooms as possible. Where this is not feasible, the following actions should be implemented:

- Avoid placing Grade 3 and 6 students in combined-grade classrooms.
- Select experienced teachers to teach in combined-grade classrooms.
- Avoid crossing divisions in a combined-grade classroom.
- Select mature, independent learners for combined-grade classrooms.
- Avoid placing students in combined-grade classrooms for consecutive years of schooling.
- Avoid rotary systems in the primary and junior divisions.
- Provide teachers in combined-grade classrooms with smaller class sizes, more preparation time, and adequate support staff.
- Provide teachers in combined-grade classrooms with opportunities to network and share.
- Inform and support all teachers with the message that their professional judgment is to be trusted. Teachers do know what is best for their

students. The focus should be on the “big picture” of student learning, not on lists of skills and knowledge.

- Federations and other key stakeholder groups should take action. ETFO recommends the following actions:
 - Provide diverse opportunities for teachers in combined-grade classrooms to access high-quality, relevant, professional development programs and services.
 - Develop and disseminate a broad selection of curriculum resources for teachers and students in combined-grade classrooms. Ensure that resources are appropriately field-tested.
 - Provide opportunities for collegial networking and sharing.
 - Educate parents about the key issues of concern regarding combined-grade classrooms.
 - Encourage faculties of education to provide student teachers with opportunities to take practicums in combined-grade settings. Course work should address the teaching and learning realities in today’s combined-grade classrooms in Ontario.

Endnotes

Endnotes

- (1) Ontario Ministry of Education, Information Management Branch, "Summary Statistical Report on Combined Grades," *Elementary School September Reports, 1996-1999*, October 2000.
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- (3) W.C. Kasten and B.K. Clarke, *The Multi-age Classroom: A Family of Learners*, Katonah, New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, 1993.
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- (5) K. Gutloff, *Multi-age Classrooms*, National Education Association of the United States: NEA Teacher-to-Teacher Books, 1995.
- (6) A.M. Hallion, "Strategies for Developing Multi-age Classrooms", paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Elementary School Principals' Association, Orlando, Florida, March 4-9, 1994.
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Notes