

# Combined Grade Strategies



## Introduction

In a single grade classroom, teachers often teach in groups in order to address the varying needs of their students. Combined grades formalize this practice. Sometimes FSL classes are combined, resulting in a split-level class. In a combined grade class, students must work towards the achievement of their grade specific curriculum expectations. While this can be more difficult in a program with a restricted number of minutes per day such as Core French, grouping students is an approach that all teachers must take to meet the needs of their students.

## Benefits of Combined Grades

Research shows that instruction in classes of combined grades can provide students with increased opportunities for social and emotional growth. For FSL learners, the social interaction between students with varying levels of proficiency in French provides them with the opportunity to increase their own levels of proficiency.

*The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers* suggests that there are many benefits to a combined grade FSL classroom, both for the students and for the teachers:

- enhanced social development;
- more opportunities to work at different levels;
- more time to internalize previous learning;
- revisiting major concepts and topics provides more practice;
- exploring topics in greater depth or from other perspectives.

*[FSL and Combined Classrooms. Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers. Status of Language Teachers and their Programs – 2003/2004](#)*

Careful planning is key to the success of students and teachers in the combined grade classroom. Coordinating units of study so that both grades will work together for the majority of the period. It is important to build a sense of community and foster productive interpersonal relationships. Community building projects include: buddy system, class flag, wall of fame, class books. Common whole class activities include: word problem of the week, journal writing, and buddy reading. Here are some specific suggestions:

- **Integrate subjects** – Look for connections to save time and make use of previous learning in L1. Consult with classroom teacher using social studies or science topics already taught according to the grade level. Develop vocabulary list and review big ideas or key concepts through reading, video viewing, poster development.
- **Organize learning centres** – Allow students to work independently in high interest areas while teacher works with small groups or different grade levels.
- **Blending topics** – For teachers using commercial produced resources to fulfill curriculum expectations, look for commonalities in elements to be blended under a new topic heading
- **Combining like concepts** – Look for areas that have overlap from one grade level to the next. Combining like-concepts facilitates the whole group instruction because students are able to work together on a variety of activities.

- **Focus on skill development** – Instruction around skill development such as communicating, researching, designing, problem solving, emphasizes attention on the “actions” or process of learning. Review the research process with the whole group, collaboratively develop timelines for subtasks, and allow students to explore ideas at a level that builds on their prior knowledge and prompts continued growth. Monitor student progress regularly through small group conferences.
- **Authentic task-based approach** – Develop tasks that have differentiated levels of complexity within a common theme. Locating information, note making, preparing presentations, mapping are examples of authentic activities that can be adapted to individual student abilities.
- establishing a seating area for whole-class discussion of diverse solutions and strategies at the main black/white board;
- organizing the classroom space so that students can independently access learning materials that are organized and labelled in bins in designated areas;
- providing students with routines for selecting and distributing learning materials, so that the teacher can focus on student learning rather than on classroom organization logistics. For example, organize the students in same-grade learning groups and have each group alternate responsibility for distributing and collecting journals, manipulatives, handouts and assignments on a weekly rotation. Post responsibilities of the “group of the week” daily so that all members know their task.



### Establishing the Learning Environment for a Classroom with Combined Grades

Effective learning environments are intellectually challenging, developmentally appropriate for all students and organized for particular purposes. Establishing such an environment in a combined grade allows teachers to offer an engaging learning environment to all the students in the classroom by:

- using a variety of seating arrangements to support student interaction and learning at different times, such as same-grade group seating to enable same-grade interaction;
- creating a grade-specific meeting area near a black/white board at the side of the classroom for discussing grade-specific instructions or displaying grade-specific solutions and strategies;

Adapted from [Combined Grades, strategies to reach a range of Learners in Kindergarten to Grade 6, 2007](#) (pgs.13–16)

Depending on board policies, combined grades may look different in various classrooms. Teachers should consult their own board policy for more detailed direction on each of the possible options and teacher responsibilities.

For example:

- **Option 1** - both grades remain in class for all subjects;
- **Option 2** - one of the grades leaves the classroom with another teacher responsible for a subject such as Core French, Math, Religion, Native Language or other;
- **Option 3** - both grades remain and receive instruction however one group may only be evaluated in one strand such as oral communication;
- **Option 4** - both grades remain but group not taking Core French completes work assigned by classroom teacher.

### Curriculum And Combined Grades

[The Ontario Curriculum: French as a Second Language: Core French, Grades 4-8; Extended French, Grades 4-8; French Immersion, Grades 1-8, \(revised\) 2013](#) and [The Ontario Curriculum: French as a Second](#)

[Language: Core French, Extended French and French Immersion, Grades 9-12, \(revised\) 2014](#), hereafter referred to as the Revised 2013-2014 FSL Curricula provide opportunities for teaching language in classes of combined grades by emphasizing similarities between grades. The overall expectations in each program remain constant from Grades 1 to 12 and specific expectations develop along a continuum. Helping students achieve success remains the focus of instruction in language and literacy in either single-grade classes or combined grade classes. As with other revised curriculum such as Mathematics, Social Studies, and Arts, The Revised FSL Curricula, 2013-2014 provides opportunities for teachers to match common elements in the different grades-strands, content, skills, strategies, resources and big ideas. In planning for combined grades, teachers should consider chunking similar grade expectations and big ideas. This allows students from both grades to collaborate when appropriate. However, assessment, evaluation and reporting must be based on the overall expectations of the discipline and grade.

### Teaching Strategies in Combined Grades

In the Literacy Numeracy Secretariat monograph [What Works? Research into Practice - Combined Grade Classroom, 2007](#), three key strategies are explored and more clearly defined as being effective when teaching combined grades.

The three key strategies are:

- **Explicit instruction:** builds skills that are key to learning through practice and follow-up with modelling, guided practice and independent practice;
- **Co-operative learning:** helps to build the classroom as a learning community where students share responsibility for one another's development;
- **Subject integration:** requires knowledge of expectations and targeted content and can be achieved on two levels. Vertical integration refers to the integration of expectations and content and horizontal integration involves more than one subject within grade levels.



More information on instructional strategies may be found in the [Instructional Strategies](#) module.

## Resources

**Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (2003). FSL and Combined Classrooms. Status of Language Teachers and their Programs – 2003/2004**

[https://www.caslt.org/docs/FSL\\_Combined\\_Classrooms.doc](https://www.caslt.org/docs/FSL_Combined_Classrooms.doc)

**Curriculum Services Canada (2012 - present). Transforming FSL: Connecting, Engaging, Learning Together**

<http://www.curriculum.org/projects/professional-learning-for-french-as-a-second-language>

**Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2009). Learning Together: Successful Teaching in Combined Grades, Curriculum Insert**

<http://www.etfo.ca/Resources/ForTeachers/Documents/Learning%20Together%20-%20Successful%20Teaching%20in%20Combined%20Grades.pdf>

**Ontario Ministry of Education (2013). The Ontario Curriculum: French as a Second Language: Core, Grades 4–8; Extended, Grades 4–8; Immersion, Grades 1–8, (revised)**

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/fsl.html>

**Ontario Ministry of Education, The Ontario Curriculum: French as a Second Language: Core French, Extended French and French Immersion, Grades 9-12, (revised) 2014**

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/fsl.html>

**Ontario Ministry of Education (2007). Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Combined Grades: Strategies to Reach a Range of Learners in Kindergarten to Grade 6**

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/combined.pdf>

**Ontario Ministry of Education (2009). Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, What Works? Research into Practice Series, Combined Grade Classrooms, Monograph #9**

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/demore.pdf>

