

Grading the WELS' Private School System

While keeping in mind that “standardized tests are a quantitative rather than a qualitative assessment” we note that our WELS schools typically perform above the national average in all subject areas.¹²

The 2003 Achievement Tests (MAT 7) for students in the third grade attending our WELS schools are reported below. These are the combined results from all sizes of schools. The median of this spread resulted as follows:

~For reading: WELS-schooled third graders tested at the 5th grade level.

~For math: WELS-schooled third graders tested at the 4.5 grade level.

~For language: WELS-schooled third graders tested at the 4.3 grade level.

The Terra Nova test (1st ed.) results for 2005 for students in the fourth grade attending a multi-grade classroom in the WELS are reported below. Test results are shown in Percentile Rank. (A percentile rank of 65, for example, means that students did as well as or better than 65% of all the students in the nationwide norm group; 50 % would represent average performance.)

~Reading percentile of WELS-schooled fourth graders: 82

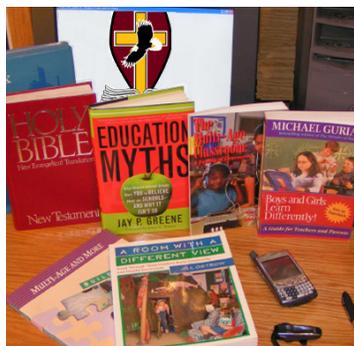
~Language percentile of WELS-schooled fourth graders: 72

~Mathematics percentile of WELS-schooled fourth graders: 79

~Science percentile of WELS-schooled fourth graders: 80

~Social Studies percentile of WELS-schooled fourth graders: 79

The Advantages of a Multi-grade Classroom



Many of us today are accustomed to a classroom of students who are all in the same grade. This is called a single-grade classroom. When a teacher teaches a

classroom of students of different ages and grade levels, this is called a multi-grade classroom. St. John's has a long history of offering multi-grade classrooms in our upper grades. As enrollment numbers vary, some lower-grade classrooms may also become multi-grade.

When some hear that we are offering multi-grade classrooms, this may catch them off-guard. But it ought to win their keen attention because a multi-grade classroom can offer benefits not easily replicated in a single-grade classroom. To explain these benefits is the purpose of this brochure.

The Shift In Classroom Structure— This May Surprise You!

Which nation boasts the highest literacy rate in the world? It's New Zealand, a nation where multi-grade classrooms are common today, just as they once were in America.¹

“Rural America has its own history of multi-age one- or two-room schoolhouse. The one-room schoolhouse offered certain attributes that were very sound educationally. First of all, children remained with the same teacher and primarily the

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same class of students for multiple years. School was a stable, reliable environment for the children... Second, the mix of ages and abilities provided optimum opportunities for student collaboration [as] older students served as role models... There was no apparent ceiling on the content taught, discussed, or overheard with the room, which benefited older students by design and younger students more incidentally.”¹

If multi-grade classrooms are so beneficial, why the shift to single-grade classrooms? The answer may shock you: mass production. The concept of single-graded classrooms actually began in 1848 in industrialized Massachusetts as a way to “educate more children for less money.”² In other words, the students' welfare was not the foremost reason when an “assembly-line concept” of education entered the classroom. “The practice of our present system [of single-graded classrooms] did not evolve from any research base... but it evolved and became a deeply ingrained tradition more by accident and economics.”²

Economic concerns affecting classrooms in the 1850's are still weighing on classrooms today. “One major reason people find it plausible that schools are inadequately funded is that they know many schools aren't performing well.... There are factors besides spending that contribute to school performance.... [The sooner] Americans realize that schools...would not perform substantially better if they had more money... the sooner we can have a productive debate on how to make the system work better.”³

This productive debate is best supported by research. Modern research into how students learn has exponentially multiplied in recent years. “Now that we have the scientific knowledge and empirical evidence to document the major differences in anatomical structure, neurological development, and the chemical and hormonal climate in developing boys and girls, we can innovate and sustain [the] educational techniques that bring the greatest benefit to all our children...”⁴

Interestingly, this modern research is leading educators to employ teaching methodology that is inherent to a multi-grade classroom. “The more we



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learned [about multi-grade classrooms], the more we realized that grouping children like a family is a more logical and humane way to raise children, educationally speaking... And frankly, we are highly impressed with the effect the family-grouped classroom had

upon our at-risk learners, our gifted learners...our late bloomers and everyone in between. Does that sound too good to be true? Think, for a minute. Isn't family the oldest, most time tested, most successful model within the realm of human existence? Families are the children's first and foremost learning area, are they not?”⁵ And as a Bible-believing people, we know what the LORD has taught us about the important role family has in time and eternity.⁶



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Why Is the Family Environment Beneficial?

The Biblical concept of a family learning environment is applauded by secular research. Consider these endorsements:

- “Multi-age classes are sometimes called family groupings. Just as family gains strength from the range of talents and interests of its members, the multiage class is enriched.”⁷
- “Multi-aged classrooms, especially those like mine that span four years, demonstrate what children are able to do. They also break down

barriers of age and gender. (First-grade girls actually invite third-grade boys to their birthday parties, not a usual occurrence in a straight grade). The children learn to respect each other as individuals, not according to age or grade level.”⁸

- “When it comes to student affect [i.e. social relationships and attitudes] the case for multi-grade organization appears much stronger. Of the 21 separate measures used to assess student affect in the studies reviewed, 81

percent favored the multi-grade classrooms?”⁹ (emphasis added)

- Studies indicate that younger children actively use older children to develop skills and to acquire knowledge while older children actively assert responsibility for younger ones and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of that responsibility. Age mixing provides opportunities for children to find others of matching abilities.¹⁰

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What About Academic Benefits?

When children are excelling socially in a classroom, the environment has been created for academic achievement. Consider these endorsements for the multi-age classroom.

- The US Government reports: “Research evidence indicates that multi-grade instruction has a significant positive impact on student attitudes, and tends to enhance achievement outcomes under positive implementation conditions.”¹¹
- “Collective reports [on the multi-grade classroom] show a recognizable pattern. Studies show that children in multi-age or family-grouped models score either similarly or better academically than their comparison peers in traditionally grouped classes. For example, some reports showed that multi-aged grouped children scored more favorably, at least at some age levels, than did other children... Within some of the reports, children in the family-grouped models scored better in certain verbal skills,

whether these skills were reading, vocabulary, or other language-related skills.”¹² (emphasis added)

A word of caution is probably wise at this point. “It should be noted that standardized tests are a quantitative rather

than a qualitative assessment. This is not to say they are not valuable, only that the value should be tempered with the tests’ inherent limitations”¹² (emphasis added). In other words, the above, glowing results are not provided here as an attempt to prove that a multi-grade classroom

WELS teachers are graduated uniquely equipped to teach in multi-grade classrooms.

magically produces higher achievers than a single-graded classroom.

Rather this information is provided to demonstrate that students in a multi-grade classroom are not at a disadvantage— an unfounded fear often felt by parents not familiar with multi-grade classrooms.

When the many aspects of a multi-grade classroom are weighed as a whole, researchers observe a beneficial pattern. This has prompted one researcher to ask: “If this is the case, why then do we not have more schools organized into multi-grade classrooms?”¹³

This author answers his own question by pointing out that it is because “most teachers have been trained to work in single-grade classrooms... [so that the] ...skills needed to be effective [are] simply not part of their prior training and experience.”¹³

However, this is where the WELS is different. Because our WELS Synod has a long experience in graduating teachers equipped to teach in multi-grade classrooms, our WELS teachers can maximize the advantages of a multi-grade classroom.

What About Academic Benefits?

The WELS private school system (i.e. parochial, or church operated schools) is the fourth largest private school system in America, operating more than 350 schools nationwide. We have been blessed with experience: WELS congregations have operated elementary schools for over 150 years. In addition, the WELS has developed and maintains a strong support system for WELS schools and teachers. Since our teachers may be



called to serve in a wide variety of settings, from large schools in the city to small schools operated by a rural congregation, WELS teachers are graduated uniquely equipped to teach in multigrade classrooms. We are humbly proud in our Savior Jesus to be able to offer a great education in multi-grade classrooms. Please feel free to speak to our staff about any questions you may have about our school.

WELS teachers can maximize the advantages of a multi-grade classroom.

End notes

¹Wendy C Kasten and Barbara K Clark, The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners (New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, 1993) p. 5

²Kasten and Clark, p. 6

³Jay P. Greene, Education Myths (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005) p. 9 & 19

⁴Michael Gurian, Boys and Girls Learn Differently! (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2001) p. 314

⁵Kastens and Clark, p. vii

⁶Refer to Bible passages such as Genesis 2:18-24, Psalm 78, Proverbs 1:3,5,8,9, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:20.

⁷Colleen Politano and Anne Davies, Multi-Age and More (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1994) p. 4

⁸Jill Ostrow, A Room with a Different View (Stenhouse Publishers, 1995) p. 4

⁹Bruce Miller, Teaching and Learning In the Multigrade Classroom: Student Performance and Instructional Routines (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse of Rural Education and Small Schools, 1991) accessed at www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178.html (6/15/2006).

¹⁰J Feldman and P Gray, Some Educational Benefits of Freely Chosen Age Mixing Among Children and Adolescents. Phi Delta Kappa Vol. 80, No. 7, 507-512 (1999). as quoted by Charlie Naylor, Split-Grade and Multi-Age Classes: A Review of the Research and a Consideration of the B. C. Context (January 2000) accessed at www.bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports/2000ei02/report.html (6/15/2006).

¹¹Improving Multigrade Classroom Instruction in Small, Rural Schools, A Series of Workshops for Educators Interested in Multigraded Classroom Instruction, Tried and True: September 1997 publication, accessed at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/triedandtrue/improve.html> (6/15/2006).

¹²Kasten and Clark, p.15-16

¹³Miller, www.thememoryhole.org/edu/eric/ed335178