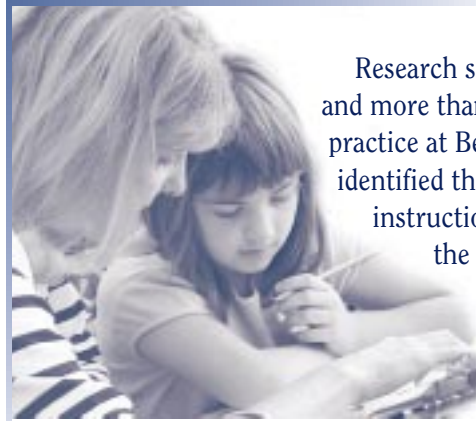


Far from being the latest fad in education, multiage learning has been around since the one-room schoolhouse.



Research since the mid-19th century and more than a quarter century of practice at Bethlehem Central have identified this approach to learning and instruction as a viable alternative to the more traditional grade-specific classroom. Multiage learning is grounded in the philosophy that all children can learn — and that they learn best at their own pace.

There is no evidence to show that a group of children who are all within a twelve-month age range can be expected to learn the same things, in the same way, on the same day, at the same time.

Within a single grade level, students very close in age can be at very different developmental stages. When we assign expectations to a child according to his or her age or grade-level, rather than his or her stage of development, it can lead to a sense of failure in the child who does not yet meet those expectations. Accordingly, teachers offer instruction that is developmentally appropriate for each child.

In a multiage classroom, it is no different. In this environment, developmental differences among children — both academic and social — become a matter of diversity, rather than a source of competition or pressure to conform to a “norm,” precisely because their different ages and grades prevent identical expectations.

Multiage Is ...



Heterogeneous mix of children that allows for flexible grouping patterns based on the needs of the class.



Developmentally appropriate instruction focused on the understanding of major concepts and integrated curriculum.



Teacher-directed, child-centered learning, with teacher as facilitator.



Varied instructional strategies that encourage active, cooperative student learning.

Multiage classes are an essential part of the district's educational program. In a typical school year, as many as one-quarter of our elementary classrooms are multiage. Even in an era of grade-specific state testing, multiage classes can work. New York State's standards in any discipline are not grade specific. Students in all grades are expected to master the same concepts and higher-level skills; it's how we expect them to demonstrate mastery that differs according to their grade. A social studies unit on local government teaches all students about interdependence, economics and culture, even if fourth-graders glean that information from studying historical documents while third-graders interview school and community leaders for their own understanding of these important concepts.

But just putting children in mixed-grade classes does not create a multiage classroom.

Changes in organization, instructional strategies and assessment are key to the success of the program. It also requires:

- Committed teachers. When teachers are enthusiastically on board and believe in the philosophy of multiage learning, its benefits can outweigh those of the traditional classroom approach.
- The right balance of students. In other words, sometimes the

Multiage Is Not ...

Ability grouping.

Two separate curricula being taught simultaneously or consecutively.

Teacher as “keeper and dispenser of knowledge.”

Instruction focused solely on one method or learning style.

numbers do matter. Keeping class sizes equitable and reasonable is a priority at Bethlehem. Given the number of students in each grade level in a given year, there are times when one approach — multiage classes or straight grade-level classes — may work better than another in balancing class sizes.

