

January 11, 2010

TO: Board of Education

FR: Michael Tebbano

RE: Report from the Multiage Committee

CC: Jody Monroe
Judith Kehoe
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Introduction:

At the beginning of this school year, a committee was formed at the request of the Board of Education to report on the multiage organization of classrooms in the Bethlehem Central School District. The committee was made up of teachers, parents and administrators from each elementary school, Jody Monroe and myself. Research studies and survey information from parents and faculty were reviewed. The purpose of this report is to summarize the information reviewed and discussed in the committee's meetings, and to offer the committee's perspective for the Board of Education to consider in meeting its continuing goal of developing a suitable and balanced plan for sections and staffing of elementary (K-5) schools.

Committee Members:

Clarksville: Dorothy McDonald, Bonnie O'Shea, Laura Stevens

Eagle: Colleen Piccolino

Elsmere: Kate Kloss, Robin Reed, Jeanne Bianchine

Glenmont: Laura Heffernan, Jean O'Donnell, Grace Bennett, Melissa Nettleton,

Hamagrael: Mary Szczech, Becky Lane

Slingerlands: Heidi Bonacquist, Lauda Thompson,

Jody Monroe and Michael Tebbano

Purpose of the Committee:

The committee was created to study the use of the multiage concept at Bethlehem Central; how it was designed; how it had changed since its inception about 20 years ago; and, finally, to offer its perspective for the future of multiage education in the district. As a part of the analysis we performed a review of related research and data procured from models of multiage learning that exist today, including those that are most effective. Parents and faculty members from around the District were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the multiage format. This information was used to create a picture of

practice and sentiment regarding the program. What follows is a summation of our discussion and review.

Definition of Terms:

The committee believes it is important to provide a brief explanation of the following terms for the purpose of clarity surrounding the context of discussions of multiage learning. The misuse of terms often leads to confusion about what is expected and takes place in the educational setting.

1. **Multiage Class:** a single classroom group where students of different grade levels are treated as one entity or class for the purpose of experiencing a more developmentally educational experience with all subjects and learning.
2. **Combination Classes:** a class made up of two grade levels that is balanced as to total class size and accommodating a fiscal budgeting situation.
3. **Looping:** a scheduling process where students have the same teacher for 1-2 years providing a supportive and nurturing educational environment, rather than a new teacher each year and the transition issues that accompany this format. Additionally, looping is also used to describe situations where students spend two years in a similar multiage context, i.e. one year as the younger students in a classroom grouping and the next as the older students.

Background and Context

Throughout the history of public education, there has been combination classes. From one-room school houses to combination grades of primary and secondary classes, combining different grade levels is not a new approach to meeting both the instructional challenges of a school system or balancing the student population with available staff. The rationale for combining grade levels has most often focused on enrollment and size of the population at a range of grade levels or in a community. In terms of allowing an educational organization to meet budgetary challenges, combination classes allow for maximizing the available personnel and maintaining class size numbers within appropriate ranges. For example, after the grade level sections at grade 2 were filled there could be a small group of second grade students left. It would make sense to combine these students with another grade level saving the district from hiring another 1.0FTE teacher for the school. (This is assuming the numbers warranted combining with the other grade level).

Program development for such combination classes evolved into the current understanding for the “multi-age experience”, which was in use in the Bethlehem schools for quite awhile. Under this approach students were grouped across grade levels for the purpose of providing a cohesive and supportive instructional experience for the students, regardless of their chronological levels or readiness areas. Students were taught by one teacher who was trained to deliver the mixed level experience covering all core subjects and developmental concerns for the age levels. Whenever possible, the students were “looped” with the same teacher over the course of two years, transitioning them with support and assistance.

Teachers of the multi-age experience were provided with professional development, planning and preparation time in the summer, and attendance at conferences where they could meet others engaged in the multi-age approach. Often college and university level presenters worked with the teachers to help develop skills in this format, and grant money was available to foster training that would continue to support faculty members teaching multi-age. Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs did not offer training in this background, so professional development on the district's part was essential.

The teacher was trained to create and present curriculum that met the needs of the children in the class, whatever the grade levels. There was a strong community element to the learning environment; The looping allowed students to benefit from informal "mentoring" from the older students when they were the youngest group in the as well as an opportunity to gain, again informal, leadership and mentoring skills as the older group of students in the classroom. According to Anne Bingham(2000) "A multiage classroom is not two grades put together for convenience, nor is it a 'combined class' in which separate curricula continue. ...It is a permanent class grouping of planned developmental diversity where all learners are valued and supported equally."¹

Parent involvement in the multi-age experience was another reason for the success of the program. From the earliest days of the approach in Bethlehem, parents received communication and met with teachers to prepare for the school year. This home-school connection continued throughout the year. There was a shared, network of support provided by the school for the parents, and as students participated in the approach families became enthusiasts. The best community advocates for multiage actually came from the families. At times there was a waiting list of parents desiring to have their child in the program and looping sequence.

As the standards and assessment movement began to gain momentum, and the necessity of meeting state-mandated assessments by grade levels became evident, continuing multi-age became more of a challenge. In New York State, students in grades 3-8 take the ELA and Math assessments and score proficiency or greater, both for the district to meet its mandated objectives and for the students to be considered to have obtained the necessary skills for their grade level. The previously unified approach to the core subjects in a multi-age classroom became a challenge, as the annual testing for ELA and Math focused specifically on demonstrating grade-level achievement. To meet this goal, multiage classes within this grade 3-8 age range moved away from a unified instructional approach of core subject areas to teachers, in effect, feeling that it was necessary to teach to these mandated tests. Furthermore, as the NCLB initiatives began to expand to science and social studies, the funding stream for preparing teachers to work in this paradigm also started to diminish in favor of academic remediation services district-wide.

In short, instruction with the combination classes became a very serious challenge, since the teacher would have to work with different groups in a variety of learning situations. There could very well be two math grade level groups, as well as reading, social studies, and other offerings. Very little combined instruction with both groups occurred except for whatever projects and activities the teacher could create.

¹ Bingham, A. (2000). Exploring multiage the classroom. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

With the new format and focus on grade level testing, a true multi-age experience became a challenge for Bethlehem (like other districts) to support both financially and programmatically. In terms of personnel, it became difficult to find teachers willing to specialize in this approach and parents became equally resistant to having their children involved. What was initially a positive and much sought after elementary experience called “multiage” in essence became combination classes which bear little resemblance to the former instructional program.

Multi-age at Other Academic Levels

On other levels multi-age education exists, such as middle school houses and teams, special subject areas (music, art, technology), and at the high school it is typical to see many classes in all subject areas having a mix of students from grades 9-12. Bethlehem Central High School’s Lab School is the perfect example of a community of diverse learners and mixed grade levels. One could say the multiage experience is alive and well at the secondary level and will continue to be so as students move through their middle and high school experiences.

Parent Concerns and Continuing Challenges

The concerns offered by parents regarding the mixed grouping of elementary students in these formats are rarely supportive at the outset. There have been concerns that combining students in mixed groups would be a substandard education for children. This contention is usually offered by parents who are unfamiliar with this instructional approach. If the class is truly a multi-age program, in addition to an intensive instructional experience offered in a unified manner for all students, there is also a considerable component of parental involvement and education. The instruction and the resultant education of the child is anything but substandard. As mentioned previously, this is resource-intensive.

Another concern is, “How can a teacher work with two different groups at the same time?” As challenging as that sounds, all teachers are constantly trained to meet the ability levels of students on many different levels. In a single grouping class, a teacher may have many ability levels that are more challenging than considering a multi-age combination. In fact, the multi-age approach to unified core instruction may enhance the experience for the differing ability levels of students.

Lastly, the concern about managing testing for grade level assessments is a real issue that can cause us to consider the prospect of either “combination classes” or “multi-age learning” differently. As long as the demand for showing proficiency and mastery achievement of course content at grade level exists – whether perceived or mandated by the State – the ability to create a unified instructional approach of core subjects will be difficult.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to summarize the discussions of the Multi-age Committee. At the elementary level we are faced with two choices, group by single level grades or combine grade levels. The main challenges in continuing with the practice of grouping

differing grade levels in one classroom are: teacher preparation and the accompanying need for resources for essential professional development; communication with families involved in the approach; and the hurdle of a state testing regimen that makes unified instruction for students at different grade levels difficult. A strong commitment to overcoming these challenges and providing a true multiage experience will be necessary to continue the practice of combining grade levels. With this commitment will come the need for funding training and scheduling teachers to implement this approach effectively and successfully for students.