

Brackenagh West Primary School

Composite Class Policy

Purpose

This policy aims to ensure we have a consistent and transparent process for the establishment of composite classes in Brackenagh West Primary School.

Background Information

- A composite class is one where children from two or more-year groups are taught together.
- Many schools in Northern Ireland have composite classes as enrolment numbers often mean it is not possible to have 'straight classes' for individual year groups.
- Composite classes are formed to make efficient use of teaching staff.
- The number of teachers in a school is based upon the total school enrolment, not on the numbers in any single year group.
- It is the responsibility of the principal, overseen by the Board of Governors to decide on the optimum class structure based on the number of pupils on the school roll.
- All of our teachers are trained to work with mixed ability classes, whether in a single year group or a composite class. In all primary classes there are a wide range of abilities, and all children will learn in different ways, responding to a variety of methods and resources.
- There is some evidence to show that pupils in composite classes gain socially.
- There is no evidence to show that the performance of pupils in composite classes is either above or below that of pupils in single age classes.

Composite Class Policy: Principles and Procedures

The principles behind the policy are:

- Delivering the best educational experience for pupils is paramount.
- Whatever the composition of a class, it is the responsibility of the class teacher to encourage and support every child in reaching their full potential.
- The principal and vice-principal will work together on the make-up of composite classes, using all available standardised assessment data, and will consult class teachers for additional information, when necessary. In exceptional circumstances the principal will also have the flexibility to exercise discretion in placing children in different classes, where he is satisfied that this is in the best interests of the children concerned.
- There will usually be no composite classes in the P1, P2 or P3 year groups.
- When classes are in the upper end of the school no year group will ever be split for more than two years running, and in some cases it may only be for one year.

Decisions will be made following the priority order set out below:

1. We will establish classes based on the pupils' achievement levels, which will be primarily drawn from their results in standardised tests, namely Progress Test in English (PTE) and Progress Test in Maths (PTM). Children with a similar level of achievement will be grouped together. Teacher judgement is also a factor, based on work done in class throughout the year.
2. Composite classes will be balanced in terms of gender. For example if the number of pupils dictate that four children from an age group are to be moved to form part of a composite class, the group must have a fair balance of boys and girls. If this isn't feasible it should be made up of all girls or all boys.
3. We will aim to optimise the pupil/teacher ratio where possible, to enable teachers to maximise the time spent with children.

Parents

- Parents will be informed of the composite class structure and their child's/children's placement at the end of the summer term.
- It is not possible to change the class placement of a child due to the preference of a parent or a child.
- In very exceptional circumstances changes to classes may have to take place, and this will usually happen only when the school's enrolment number changes. If this is the case parents will be informed as soon as possible.
- When class lists are sent out it must not be assumed that one group has been "promoted" in some way, or that the other group has been "held back". This is **not** the case. Both groups will follow the same curriculum and be taught the same concepts.

The Wider Context

The Research and Information Service Briefing Paper 1 Paper 05/17 on composite classes, published on 11th January 2017 by Caroline Perry, Barbara Love and Keara McKay found that In 2015/16, more than half of primary schools (59%) in Northern Ireland had composite classes.

There was a total of 1,326 composite classes in primaries, of which the majority (87%) were made up of two-year groupings. As might be expected, most (89%) of the schools with composite classes comprising more than two-year groups are situated in rural areas, and these are widely spread geographically across Northern Ireland.

These findings show that Brackenagh West Primary School's composite class structure is common practice for rural primary schools in Northern Ireland.

Benefits

The report also highlighted the **benefits** in relation to educational outcomes to include:

- Gains for low-achieving children through factors such as continuity of education and smaller class sizes;
- Gains for younger children through exposure to more advanced materials;
- Gains for younger children through exposure to role models to emulate and through social support from older peers;
- Gains for older children through revising subject content, leadership skills and independent learning skills; and
- Gains for high-achieving children through more challenging, independent learning.

Teachers at Brackenagh West Primary School work hard to promote all of these benefits within our classrooms and throughout the school.

The nature of Brackenagh West Primary School as a small rural school with a child-centred ethos encourages all pupils to feel that they are part of a learning family. Pupils are encouraged to learn with and from each other.

Older pupils are given opportunities to assume the role of coach to develop their leadership and independent learning skills, whilst younger pupils are exposed regularly to higher level thinking and learning beyond their expected levels of attainment.

Challenges

The **challenges** highlighted by The Research and Information Service Briefing Paper 1 Paper 05/17 were reported as;

- Curriculum organisation: teachers can face challenges covering two or more areas of the curriculum.
- Ability range: providing high quality teaching for all, from low achievers within the younger age group to high achievers in the oldest age group. This why we group children according to achievement in standardised tests.
- Assessment: accommodating assessment for one or more of the age groups while continuing to teach the other children.
- Time: teachers can experience challenges finding sufficient time to work with each grade and individuals.
- Older and lower attaining students can sometimes lose out if proper planning isn't in place.
- An increased workload for teachers.

The Board of Governors and staff at Brackenagh West Primary School are fully committed to overcoming the challenges that may arise from our composite class structure. Our teaching staff team are highly experienced in developing learning within composite classes and with pupils of varying levels of attainment.

Our induction programme offers support and training for new members of staff and our transition programme ensures pupil's needs are shared and monitored as they move through the key stages.

Our teachers differentiate learning to match pupils' individual levels of attainment and provide challenges to ensure all pupils can extend their learning. Assessments of pupils understanding is continuous through observations, focus groups, self and peer assessment, as well as weekly tests. These allow teachers to track and review progress of all pupils regularly.

Any pupils who require intervention are identified and supported quickly. The speed of our ability to identify and support pupils is enhanced by the small class sizes in our school. Provision to support pupils may take the form of teachers adapting tasks, additional small group directed sessions or individualised support programmes.

Handling of Parental Concerns

While there is no formal right to appeal against a decision on a child's placement in a composite class, we are always happy to provide parents with the reasons for the school's rationale as to how pupils were allocated to a class.

If a parent feels the school has not adhered to this policy they should raise their concern, in writing, with the principal in the first instance. If they are still not satisfied after receiving a response from the principal, they should then contact the Chair of the Board of Governors.

Policy Monitoring and Review

The policy will be reviewed annually, and any changes ratified by the Board of Governors.