

Multiage Classrooms  
Elementary Teachers Investigate New Possibilities  
By Patty Morris, Elementary Principal

Multiage classrooms is a concept being studied by the elementary staff as a possibility for next year in Corning. The elementary staff and board members have been reading information about the benefits of multiage grouping. They also had a teacher visit with them about her experiences as a teacher in such a classroom. Next they embarked on visits to schools who already implement multiage classes.

What is multiage? There are many different ways to combine students in a multiage setting, but the Corning staff is looking at having three sections of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, three sections of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, and three sections of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Currently they operate two sections of each single grade level. Half of the class would stay with the teacher as half moves on up to the next grade. Once the cycle gets going, students would have the same teacher for two years.

Groups of teachers from Corning have visited both Urbandale, which operates a K/1 multiage approach, and Nevada, which has both the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> multiage classrooms. Their next scheduled visit is to a school in Omaha which has multiage up to 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>. The school newsletter introduced this concept as well and told of benefits of multiage. That article is available through a link on the school's website.

Nevada is a very large school district. There are 700 students in their building through 4<sup>th</sup> grade. They have four sections of 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grade classrooms, five 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, as well as several sections of each grade level separately. Those are known as the graded classrooms, which is what is currently in the Corning district. There is only one grade level in a classroom. This is Nevada's 16<sup>th</sup> year with multiage classrooms. It began for them with a group of teachers who studied the concepts and were so excited about the benefits they saw for children they began multiage in their district.

Their school board hired an outside agency to compare the two programs after 5 years of implementation. Students, parents, and teachers were interviewed and test scores were analyzed. The results showed no statistical differences between multiage and graded classrooms on academic knowledge.

The differences Corning staff has discovered involves the social realm for students. Multiage classrooms operate as a community with the students working together at tables in groups. At Nevada, while the teacher was working with an individual or small group, the other students worked in their groups to figure out any problems they had. While you are in the room you can not tell the difference between the older and younger students. They all just work together.

Nevada has students move into groups for a 45 minute reading period called "Just Right Reading" where the students are divided by reading level. The teachers evaluate the progress of the students monthly, and students move in and out of groups each month depending on their needs. They utilize their special education, Title, and TAG teachers to keep the groups small. They had another time for reading instruction in their classroom as well with the mixed group. The Urbandale school had flexible math groups and the students moved to different teachers depending on their needs. There are many different possibilities depending on the specific needs of the students and the district.

Consider this example of a 4<sup>th</sup> grader who has always been in a reading group by himself because there was no one else at his level in his single grade classroom. By having the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade together, he now had peers to be in a reading group. That child doesn't stand out and his self-esteem improves. The child is much happier to be

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with other students even if they are younger than to be singled out and have to be all alone. This is a real example of the benefits teachers of multiage classes notice.

Multiage classrooms mirror real life. When you think about your workplace, you see how many different ages and abilities are represented in that group. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. As adults we figure those things out and work together to be successful. Students in a multiage setting do that very same thing.

A misconception of multiage classes that many people have is that older students teach younger students. That is not how a multiage classroom operates. The teacher is still the teacher. Yes, the students may help each other out when the teacher is busy, but the teacher remains responsible for their education.

If you were not able to read the newsletter, you can download it from the school's website. It did give specific benefits of multiage grouping. The biggest hurdle in overcoming implementation of multiage classrooms is in the fact that it is a change and it is something new. It is human nature to be afraid of the unknown and things we don't understand. That is why it is important to get as much information out to the public as possible. The district is looking at ways to help students become prepared for the workplace and give them real-world experiences.

Although multiage classrooms are not near as common as graded classrooms, there are many in existence in Iowa and throughout the United States. Schools known to utilize multiage groupings in Iowa include Downtown Des Moines, Nevada, Urbandale, Wilton, Dows, and Stratford. This is by no means an all inclusive list as there are sure to be others as well. Some districts implement multiage classes because they are small and it is a way to survive. Other districts have them because they have learned of the benefits it gives students and choose to implement multiage classes. There are small districts and large districts.

Our research has shown schools in Casper, Wyoming; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Scarsborough, Maine; schools in Colorado, Illinois, and Wisconsin. The more you research, the more places you find them.

All who want to learn more about multiage education are invited to attend a public meeting that will be held on Monday evening, February 15<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 PM in the High School auditorium. Corning elementary staff members will be there to present information and answer questions.