

Agnor-Hurt Elementary to mix grades with multiage classrooms
written by Newpack Team | July 31, 2015



Students who attend Agnor-Hurt Elementary School next month will not only walk into a newly renovated building, some of those students will learn in classrooms comprised of children from grades kindergarten through five.

But the move—which will involve just over 100 of Agnor-Hurt’s approximately 500 students learning in multiage classrooms—hasn’t come without concern from parents.

“The first question I hear from parents is about if their child is going to learn the appropriate grade-level content, especially in the older grades, in a multiage classroom,” said Michele Castner, Agnor-Hurt’s principal.

According to Jan Vrhovac, a curriculum specialist at the school, the answer is ‘yes’ because elementary curriculum is repetitive—each year calling back to the previous year’s instruction—and because the school teaches content around common themes.

For example, Vrhovac said, the theme of what makes a good citizen is repeated in the social studies curriculum in all grades.

“And it’s not until third and fourth grade, for math specifically, that [the curriculum] becomes more challenging,” Castner added. “The teachers are repeating the same things year after year, especially around numbers and number sense.”

In fact, Castner said she thinks the model—especially since her team has had more than a year to plan curriculum and pacing—will accelerate learning.

“It actually creates a better flexibility for the students and the teachers because typically we’ll have about 10 percent of our kids operating on grade levels above, so rather than them being limited to just being in a room with their same age peers, they actually can easily move up in that setting,” Castner said.

Courtney Wood, who will be one of six teachers in the multiage program this year, agreed, and said her job will really be no different from before.

“I taught first grade for four years, and within that one first grade class we had anywhere from a pre-primer learner up to a fifth grade learner in reading, so I was differentiating to meet those needs,” Wood said. “I can honestly say that each child is going to have almost their own individual plan, so that we know that this child is working at this level, and this is the level where we want them to be.”



A conceptual image of a modernized reading and writing area slated for Agnor-Hurt Elementary School.

In addition to parent questions, Agnor-Hurt’s principal—who plans to add a new cohort of multiage teachers and learners at the school each year—said faculty buy-in is a pivotal element.

“As we proceed through the year, we’re going to make sure that we include very purposeful meeting times for the multiage classroom teachers to connect with the traditional classroom teachers because we want to create an atmosphere of constantly growing together,” Castner said.

Implementing multiage learning is the result of two factors, the first being a conversation Castner had with division leadership nearly two years ago about how learning space design impacts curriculum and instruction.

During that conversation, Castner said, it became clear that the school lacked the type of spaces the children needed to produce the hands-on, creative work Albemarle wants its students to perform.

“As we reflected, what we saw was when kids were doing this and creating cool things, they typically had to leave the classroom...just to have more space,” Castner said.

The second factor was the existing multiage learning programs that were already occurring, such as Book Buddies, collaborations with Albemarle High School students and other school wide projects.

“After seeing kids in the multiage environment, we were asking ourselves why we hadn’t been doing this all along,” Castner said.

Castner and her team say that the instructional model has its merits.

For example, according to the school’s multiage learning website for parents, students will be able to learn at a more individualized pace, they will form strong relationships with their teachers as a result of the three-year commitment families make to the model and the students will be able to teach to and

learn from each other.

“One of the best evidenced-based practices that we’re able to see is that if they are able to explain something to another student, and this environment will lend itself to the older students modeling for the younger students,” Castner said.

“It’s not that they’re going to become the teachers, but they’re going to become role models,” Castner said. “It’s a reflection of society and the modern day workplace.”

This new approach to education will take place in a new core instruction pavilion designed to promote flexibility and collaboration among students.

Castner did say, however, that all of the school’s students will utilize it, as well as the school’s renovated library and new art and music classrooms, as well as the international portal—a new classroom equipped with a large screen spanning much of a classroom wall that allows students to virtually travel around the world.

As for the building changes and new approach to instruction, Castner said they make her feel like a first year teacher again.

“I’ve never felt so invigorated as an educator as I do today, and I just finished my 21st year,” Castner said.

“And I have no worries about the children,” she added. “I think they’re going to thrive and that they’re going to love it, and I have a feeling that, as it unfolds, that the community is going to want more.”