

EXCITING & IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON MULTI-AGE CLASSROOM CHANGES FOR 2021 – May 24, 2021

Dear TPS Families,

One of the greatest benefits of being a chartered public school is that we get to make our own decisions about our curriculum, calendar, hiring, systems, and structures. One of our favorite experiences at the end of every year is thinking about how we can improve what we do for the next year. It is empowering, as educators, to think through how we can keep the things that we love because they are good for children, and simultaneously how we can change the things that we believe can be better. As we reflect on our current practices, our TPS teachers have been having an important conversation about future groupings in our multi-age classrooms.

Over the last weeks, we have democratically worked toward a decision that will result in new multi-age groupings, which we hope will create excitement for our students and families. The purpose of this letter is to share information that will help our community understand what our classroom combinations will be and the benefits we believe will come along with the new structure. These changes will begin in August 2021. **As always, all of our classrooms will continue to support every child to meet their individual needs to ensure their growth.**

While we know that we likely won't be able to answer all of your questions here, we hope that we can at least begin to build an understanding of what is to come. In addition to this letter, you can watch this video: [The One Where Ms. Cathy Explains Exciting Plans for 2021-2022](#). The video provides the big ideas of things that are changing. This same video will be shared with our students in 1st-8th grade in school today. We hope that between the letter and the video, you will understand what our classrooms will look like in August when we all come back to school.

As we all know, with most decisions and changes, there are things that are gained and other things that are lost. We recognize that these upcoming changes are no different and that they do, in fact, come with both gains and losses. We also know that this is true when we reflect upon our current grade level model. Our hope is to use what we have learned over our twelve years as a multi-age school to provide an even greater experience for our students and our families in the years to come.

If you want to know more about the plans than we could fit in the video (you hopefully just watched!), keep on reading!

Multi-age Configurations

A multi-age classroom is created by intentionally grouping children of different ages. The goal is for all children to reap many benefits from multi-age classrooms, including: children **progress and grow** without age restrictions; children **acknowledge** and accept differences in people; children **benefit** from remaining with the same group and teacher for more than one year; every child has a **time for leadership**; teachers have **increased sensitivity** to diversity; children can have **continuous progress** when they can pick up from where they left off the previous school year; the curriculum is determined based on what is **appropriate for individual** children; interests, age, and maturity provide children **opportunities** for natural groupings; children can fully **develop areas of strength**, and at the same time, receive support for the areas of need; children are placed in a **natural structure**. Where do adults spend time with people only their own age?

We have looked deeply at what we believe will be gained and lost in making these changes to our current multi-age structure, which has been in place since 2015 when our now 7th graders were in the former K-1 classroom. We have certainly learned many things from teaching in a pandemic, which has also played a role in our thinking. We have taken all of this learning into consideration and have created what we believe to be an exciting plan to support children and adults. We hope that sharing this information now will give our students and families the opportunity to both understand the changes and to ask questions before school is out for summer. As always, we are here to help.

The multi-age combinations in our classrooms beginning in August 2021 will be –

- K-2
- 3-5
- 6-8

While we see many benefits to these groupings, some of the main reasons we are making these changes include –

- After the initial movements of students that will need to occur for next year when placing them into groups, students will have the opportunity to then have a three-year relationship with a teacher. As believers in multi-age, we see this as a huge benefit!
- Students will spend three years in each classroom: a year as a rookie/newbie, a year developing while also sharing expertise as a second year community member, and then a year as a leader within the classroom. Turnover of students in each classroom will be only $\frac{1}{3}$ per year meaning more continuous learning will take place. When kids are new to a classroom, it takes a while for the teacher to get to know what they need socially, emotionally, and academically. This structure allows for the work to be more continuous from year to year because time isn't lost having to get to know so many new students.
- Every multi-age grouping will have four sections and four lead teachers. Having a consistent number of sections from group to group has the benefit for students of being able to remain together in groups when it makes sense, and it provides the opportunity to separate students when that makes more sense. Family input will be considered as we work toward keeping healthy and productive friendships together at school. Expect a survey for your input before the end of the school year!
- A three-grade span creates even more opportunities for teachers to see children as individuals on their own continuum of learning. Our model of schooling naturally differentiates to meet the needs of students exactly where they are on their individual learning continuum – it's one of our favorite aspects of the workshop model.
- With four lead teachers and others in various support roles on every team, it allows for greater collaboration between teachers because there are more creative minds working on the same grade level span. Instead of two or three teachers teaching a particular grade level, there will now be four. We truly believe that our focus on adult collaboration is what allows us to develop such creative curricula!
- When students are in their first year of a three-year classroom, they are welcomed and mentored by two-thirds of the class.
- K-5 and 6-8 naturally align with curricula such as the math textbooks that we use and the English/Language Arts standards.

Some specifics to the new grade-bands include –

- Our kinders will get to have a multi-age classroom for all of their time at TPS and will not have to transition to new teachers and classrooms after just one year with us.
- In the K-2 structure, we will also have space for more kindergarteners each year, allowing more students to begin their school experience with us.
- For our kinders, we have seen the power of a play-based curriculum and look forward to embedding these opportunities as one path to learning. We recognize how important this is for our five-year-olds, who will continue to have these opportunities built into their day.
- Students in the K-2 classrooms will all have the power of Guided Reading groups at their instructional level, providing all students with systematic instruction to develop as readers, regardless of their areas of strength and areas of struggle.
- As our students exit K-2, they will enter 3-5 with two years of mentors available to guide and support them. The majority of the older students will have been with them in K-2 as well, along for relationships to build over time.
- For grades 3-5, the curricular development is aligned beautifully. By 3rd grade, kids are digging in deeper into reading and writing, asking bigger questions, and are thirsty for even greater opportunities to make a

difference through our P3 curriculum. Working collaboratively with a three-year span broadens the power of the experience.

- The reality is that in every grade level, there is a wide variety of ability and maturity. In a three-year multi-age classroom, we are allowing for more potential partnerships for students on all parts of the learning continuum. As we studied NWEA test scores and anecdotal data of our students, the academic variability is nearly just as wide in the current two-year span as it will be with the three-year groupings.
- We are so excited that our fifth grade will serve as a year of leadership and culmination of the elementary experience, preparing our fifth graders to transition to middle school from this year of strength development.
- Our middle school will provide for a three-year experience to dig deep into global learning and big project work.
- The three-year middle school will allow for preparation for the high school experience over the 6th-8th grade years, scaffolding specific learning opportunities as students approach this important transition.

Staffing

While we are still in the process of hiring for this next school year – and while some of our teachers who are continuing with us will be taking on additional exciting roles that we will tell you about in communications to come – we do already know the spaces in which many of our current beloved teachers will be working:

K-2: Alanna, Em, Josie, and Doriet

3-5: Kandi, Heather BC, Foster, Heather Rock, Jen Ruff (new to TPS!), and Pam

6-8: Abbey, John, Tarrey, and Sierra

Arts: Chris and Sara

We know that one benefit of the new structure will be that, as we add new teachers to our teams, there will be multiple teachers on their same team to welcome them aboard and help to guide them into success as a TPS Teacher. Previously, when there were two teachers per grade span, if one departed then the majority of the responsibility to onboard a new teacher fell on the shoulders of the veteran. Now, there will be a team to help! Also, now no TPS teacher will be a solo teacher of any age or grade, meaning that no teacher will have to plan and work in isolation. This is a very exciting opportunity for all teachers.

We are incredibly fortunate that several of our amazing instructional assistants will be returning next year and we look forward to finalizing the best placements for each of them as we move ahead with our planning. We will continue to share additional information about staffing as it becomes available. As always, if you know of any truly outstanding educators for our heart-mind-voice classrooms, please direct them to our website for information on how to apply.

We are also sad to lose some of our outstanding TPS teachers – Ms. Liz (current Kindergarten) will be leaving to return to graduate school and devote more time to her family; Ms. Sarah Smith (current 3-4) will be returning to Michigan with the completion of her spouse's graduate program; Kalei (current 7-8) will be taking a leave of absence to move to Seattle for a teaching adventure of her own! We wish them all the very best and know that they will each take their TPS experience with them.

Multi-age Section Placements

Over the next few weeks, we will be thinking through placements for each of our students in terms of combinations of kiddos and placements with lead teachers. We will have the good fortune of having four great sections for each multi-age grouping, so regardless of the placement decisions everyone wins. That said, we know that this will involve some different thinking for some children and families. We will be thinking through many different elements in making this decision. Some of these include:

- social dynamics of students who benefit from being together or separate
- siblings who might be better served together or separate
- a balance of new students in age-bands where there are many new students due to expansion
- varying academic needs

During this time and the summer ahead, we will be thinking through times of day, such as lunch and recess, that will allow for friends who might not be in the same multi-age section to connect.

We are communicating these changes with all 1st-8th students today. We hope that creating the opportunity for everyone to hear the information from an adult on the same day will be helpful. Making the decision about how/by whom/when this information is shared is also tricky. We made the decisions we felt were best and hope that our thinking makes sense to our families.

Powerful Components to Continue

Arts – Our commitment to an arts infusion model has been an important focus of the work we do since our doors opened in 2009. This year we will be adding a third opportunity that will help to support our students' learning experiences connected to our whole-child educational model. We are still in the dreaming stage of what this additional component will be. We look forward to adding this partner to the current arts team and to the amazingness that the arts team will create with the three new multi-age groupings in the years to come.

Curricular Components – Reader's Workshop, Writer's Workshop, Math Workshop, Passions, P3 (problem-project-place based interdisciplinary work), and Responsive Classroom will all continue to be essential pieces to our classroom experience. We are excited to provide further differentiation to meet the needs of all students in our care.

Conferences – Since our school began, our staff has communicated about student progress through a balance of written reports and conferences. Since 2015, we have offered three conferences/year for each student. We will continue this face-to-face model where teachers first meet with families in the fall bringing a draft of strengths and goals, which will then be expanded and revised in the conference with families. There is an optional midyear conference for anyone who wants one in February. The year closes with a spring conference where families and teachers again sit together, this time with the focus of reflection and consideration of goals for the year to come. Working in partnership with our families is a hallmark of the work that we do, and we are proud to continue this model. We are excited that over time families and teachers will now have three-years to develop relationships that will allow them to support the learning and growth of the children in our shared care.

Social-Emotional Learning & Life Skills – We all recognize that next year will look different in many ways. We know that for many of our children the need for social-emotional learning as a part of what we do will continue to be critical. We also know that there will be a reality to the pandemic-based educational experiences and some of the learning challenges that will likely go along with this. In preparation for the needs of both returning and new students – in this coming year and also in the years to follow – we have recognized the urgency of expanding our SEL and Life Skills team. Through grant funding, we were able to build capacity this year. We are excited to have such a dedicated and talented team of professionals to support the social and emotional growth of every child in our care.

We look forward to taking what we have learned and what we are planning into an amazing 2021-2022 school year of heart-mind-voice learning, celebration, and growth. We are so grateful that we are all in this together.

With enthusiasm, hope and promise,
Ms. Cathy, School Leader

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