

New 3rd/4th Grade Questions & Answers

Introduction: A few months ago, a school improvement committee consisting of current, past, and future parents was put together to look for ways to improve and enhance our Catholic school. After lengthy discussion and some valuable research, the committee decided to invite current 2nd graders to be a part of a combined 3rd/4th grade class this fall.

Q: How were committee members chosen?

A: Fr. Dennis and the principal, Anne Hufnagel, personally invited a mixture of past, present and future parents to be on the committee. Moving forward, any parishioner who is committed to the future success of MHT School is welcome to join the committee.

Q: Why did the committee decide to offer a combined 3rd/4th grade classroom?

A: The school committee discussed ways to improve the school and to further connect it to the mission of both the Catholic Church and our parish. The mission of the school and parish centers on providing opportunities for people to form a relationship with God. The committee agreed that one way to do this was to offer a Catholic education to students at an earlier age.

The committee was also aware of the recent decline in enrollment at the school. Sean Costello, Assistant Superintendent of the Department of Education of the Lansing Diocese, suggested the school look into a multi-age classroom as an option. Further research and discussion supported the idea as a way to increase student learning and enrollment. The combined level classroom is not a new idea to our area. St. Joseph Catholic School in Pewamo currently does it as well as the continuous Kindergarten program at Waldron. After conducting a small sample survey of 2nd and 3rd grade parents, the committee determined there was enough interest to proceed with the idea for the 2011/12 school year.

Q: Will this decision affect tuition rates?

A: There will be no tuition changes other than those stated in the registration letter earlier this year. The tuition rate schedule for MHT School during the 2011/12 school year will be as follows:

1-student: \$1625

2-students: \$2740

3 or more students: \$3700

Q: Will the staff be adequately prepared for this type of classroom?

A: During the past month, Mrs. Hufnagel has been doing research and has visited a Catholic school in Alpena who uses this model throughout their K- 6 school. There are plans for the staff to attend workshops on multi-age classrooms to prepare us for the coming year. Every effort will be made to ensure that the staff is well-prepared for this

new opportunity, and there is no doubt that a great deal of learning on the job will take place.

Q: How will classes be taught in this classroom?

A: Here are a few examples of how the classrooms will operate:

The social studies curriculum will be taught in a two-year cycle. Next year all of the students will be studying the 4th grade subject matter, which will be taught at various levels appropriate for the students. Then the following year, the 3rd grade subject matter will be taught. When students enter 5th grade they will have learned both the 3rd and 4th grade curriculum. This looping model will be used in subject areas where research and experience show it works best.

Some subjects will be taught separately while some of the students are working independently. The focus will be to concentrate on students experiencing at least one year's worth of academic growth. This form of differentiated instruction, while challenging, will make a positive learning environment for our students. More information will be provided at a parent meeting in early June.

Q: How will students be graded?

A: We have permission from the Lansing Diocese to pilot a standards/objectives based report card for the 3rd/4th grade classroom. It will be developed and approved over the summer. There will not be A's, B's and C's but an indication of the level of mastery for each area being studied. This type of assessment will help both teachers and parents identify areas of strength and weakness for students, thus making it easier to concentrate our efforts where it is most needed. Upon successful completion of the pilot, the intent would be to expand this form of grading to other classrooms in future years.

Q: How many students will be allowed in the class?

A: We are anticipating anywhere from 16 to 20 students in this classroom. The maximum number before we would split it into two combined level classrooms is 25.

Q: Is there concern about siblings in different grades being in the same classroom?

A: Not at all. We will handle this just as we have handled twins in the past. We will continue to work with parents to help students recognize their unique, individual gifts and talents.

Q: Why the late notice?

A: After about two months of discussion and research, the committee made the decision on May 9th to move the school in this direction.

Q: Will this multi-age or combined level classroom be approved by the Diocese of Lansing?

A: The Diocese suggested this idea and has been a valuable source of information during our exploration of the concept.

Q: Will this affect how well our students do academically?

A: All of our research indicates that students in multi-age classrooms perform at the same rate as or higher than students in single grade classrooms. To help us monitor student progress, we will be utilizing a web-based program offered by Northwest Evaluation Association. NWEA (www.nwea.org) is a non-profit organization that works alongside member school districts to create a culture that values and uses data to improve instruction and student learning. It will provide valuable information to teachers, students, and parents and enable us to better serve our students in the areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies.