Background information on Multi Age Groups

The school district engages in ongoing student data reviews, check-ins with professional educational staff, consultations with global and provincial educational experts, and in the review of relevant research analysis related to all areas of educational planning, including best practices for instructional design, learning environments, student groupings, and more. While we have amazingly improving results, ranking us at the top of the province related to school completion rates, grade to grade transition rates, and precipitously declining suspension rates, we also know more from our students' reports of their social emotional wellness and their student and adult connections. We have recently updated our education plan, Pathways to Learning, to maintain the goal of designing for core competency development while including a more explicit focus on the areas of social emotional wellness and connections.

With respect to this emphasis, there is a growing body of empirical research which documents the benefits of heterogeneous groupings, including multi-age environments, for both social emotional learning and cognitive development. These include a student's ability to recognize, understand, and effectively respond to emotions, manage stress, and be optimistic. They also include showing concern for others, sustaining healthy relationships, and making effective personal and social decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovitch, & Gullota, 2015). One study on mixed-age classrooms reported that fewer children experienced social isolation and that students demonstrated fewer aggressive and negative behaviors than children in same-age classrooms (McClellan, Diane E.; Kinsey, Susan). Other studies suggest that social cognition may lay the foundation for improved cognition in general (Chance & Mead, 1953; Humphrey, 1976; Jolly, 1966; Tizard, 1986). Nye et al., (1995), suggest that students experience academic gains in mixed-age classrooms. Based on a research review, McClellan, Diane E. and Kinsey, Susan (1999), assert that mixed-age groups provide a student with a rich and complex social environment that contributes to both greater social facility and greater cognitive competence. They go on to report that this body of research supports the supposition that children's opportunities to interact with more advanced and less advanced peers strengthen their cognitive skills. Empirical research also shows that social emotional skills are a stronger predictor of enhanced educational attainment, labour market success, health, and decreased criminality, than IQ (Heckman & Kautz, 2014).

Multi-age classrooms also provide a diverse, vocabulary abundant environment for optimal language development. This would be true for any language development program, including French Immersion. French Immersion is intended to provide a French language rich environment much like planting a student in a place where only that language is spoken. It is not intended to be linear, sequential second language learning. Therefore, in a French Immersion program, the newly entered students would be steeped in high level language and time would be needed for them to acquire functional language skills and fluency. The focus would remain on personalized inquiry and the use of a comprehensive elaborate vocabulary

with grammatical development happening over time. The more experienced language learners in a multi-age setting would continue with their higher level language use and would further gain from the already well understood motivational and cognitive benefits related to practicing, modelling, applying, and evaluating their own learning. Collaborative dialogue, which occurs when learners encounter linguistic problems and attempt to solve them together, is a communicative and cognitive tool believed to be of particular significance for language learning (Swain, Briiks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002).

Language acquisition occurs at varying rates for all students, even for students in a same-age or same-grade group (Mahadi & Jafari, 2012). Other important factors for language acquisition include authenticity, context, competency integration, and student centered, personalized learning situations (Sieloff, Magnan, & Tochon, 2001). These factors exist independently of peer groupings and are experienced differently by all students. Of these factors, motivation, or the need or desire to learn the language, is the most significant in learning a second language (Mahadi & Jafari, 2012).

Understanding the benefits of multi-age groupings to social emotional and cognitive development, and peer and adult connections, the Spring Creek Community School staff have planned for a comprehensive approach to multi-age groupings for September 2019. The intended design is in keeping with current research and the district's education plan. One of the most powerful predictors of student achievement is the teacher's belief and prediction of a student's ability to learn (Hattie, 2018). Our teachers are designing for enriching learning environments with the belief that each of their students will benefit.

Parents can best support their child's learning by supporting the school and the teachers with a positive working and learning environment, and playing an active role in advocacy and feedback related to their own child's learning. The school and district can best support children and families by improving the way we share educational research and communicate about our education planning in order to be more proactive and inclusive of families in our design. We do look forward to working closely with our parents as partners as we advance our education planning for enhanced student learning.