

Composite Classes FAQs

Next year your child might be in a composite class at Ngaio School. While this is not a new concept in New Zealand schools, it is a structure that was reintroduced into Ngaio School in 2022 after a number of years. Next year the year groups being combined to make up composite classes is changing, so it's natural you might have some questions. We have collated the following information to help you understand more about composite classes.

What are composite classes?

By composite classes we mean putting two consecutive year groups together in one class. Composite classes are a common and practical class structure in many New Zealand schools, including in many of our neighbouring schools.

Why change to Year 2/3 and Year 4/5 in 2024?

The numbers of ākonga at each level do not allow for single class levels. The Ministry of Education staffing funding we receive does not take into account the varied numbers at each level, so would mean some very large class sizes with too many children, along with other much smaller classes, creating inequality.

Every year we investigate the best scenarios for class groupings and subsequently the Leadership Team decided that next year, like in 2023, there would be some combined year groups in composite classes. This allows for balanced and equitable student:teacher ratios to provide a more ideal learning environment and maintain quality teaching in every class.

A difference in 2024 is the change from curriculum levels to phases which would have resulted in composite year 3 and 4 classes working across two phases of the refreshed curriculum, Te Mātaiaho. Te Mātaiaho replaces curriculum levels and achievement objectives with five phases of learning: Years 1-3, Years 4-6, Years 7-8, Years 9-10 and Years 11-13.

In 2024, like many other schools, we have separated the common year 3/4 composites and created composite classes across years 2/3 and years 4/5.

Why are Year 1 and 6 children not in composite classes?

In 2022 and 2023 the numbers lent themselves to including a year 1/2 composite in the junior school. For 2024, the numbers of children in year 1 divided well into one year group with room for roll growth over the year.

The numbers of children in Years 4 - 6 was more conducive to composite classes of Year 4/5 leaving two straight Year 6 classes.

How will Ngaio School embed this new structure into our school?

We are fortunate to have highly skilled and talented teachers at Ngaio School. The teachers talk in their new teams each year about changes for the following year. They are excited to be working together in this new arrangement. Along with senior leaders they use educational research, collaborate regularly with our Kahui Ako ('Community of Learning') sharing their experiences and expertise, and participate in ongoing professional development learning about the refreshed Te Mataiaho | the refreshed NZ curriculum. This new structure supports the implementation of Te Mataiaho.

Our teachers have taught in composite classes and many have taught composite classes in other schools. Unlike other countries where whole-class teaching is often the norm, NZ teachers are trained to teach in groups. Straight classes require as much group teaching as composite classes because this is the hallmark of good teaching.

Will my child stay with their friends?

Friendships are always an important consideration when placing children into classes. We take friendship into account, along with learning needs and other considerations when making up the classes.

How do teachers cater for a range of abilities across year groups?

In composite classes younger children not being catered for and older children not being extended is a common misunderstanding. New Zealand primary teachers are expected and trained to teach multi-level classrooms and to cater for the range of abilities both in and across year levels.

Many New Zealand schools utilise composite groupings for their class arrangements. We aim to ensure that all children are given the best possible opportunity to learn in a happy and safe environment. The intellectual, social, emotional and physical development of each child is given careful consideration when students are placed in class groups. Ngaio School teachers use a range of effective groupings and teaching strategies to cater for the wide range of needs of children in their classes, and will continue to do so with the new class structure.

A useful analogy is comparing teaching a class to catering for a diverse range of guests at a dinner party. Caterers don't bat an eyelid at whipping up feasts for a broad range of food allergies, food preferences and fussy eaters. Similarly, teachers are trained to skillfully manage a broad range of needs so that individual needs are catered for.

How will teachers ensure curriculum content is not being repeated for two years in a composite class?

Whole school planning already considers learning content and opportunities so there is broad curriculum content and coverage offered. This takes into account previous curriculum content and abilities to ensure children are learning new and appropriate content and skills. This does not change with different composite arrangements. For literacy and mathematics, children will continue to be taught at the level they have reached, regardless of their year level. There is no 'syllabus' prescribing the content for each year level, rather a continuum of skills and knowledge developed over their time at school.

Will my child be disadvantaged? Will they fall behind?

No. The key to understanding composites is realising that growth is determined in stages and not by ages. Older children are not held back in composite classes. The fear that children will fall behind is unfounded, as is the idea that the teacher's attention will be split between the two years and students get less overall learning time with their teacher. It makes no difference to performance whether students are in a straight year group or in a composite class. *The most important factor in determining how well a student does is the quality of the teacher and their teaching.*

Both The New Zealand Curriculum (being phased out) and Te Mataiaho | Refreshed Curriculum do not set a level or phase per age group in New Zealand. Rather learning is set in developmental bands which range across 1-3 years of learning. It is not expected that all the students of the same age will be achieving at the same level at the same time. Teachers use a range of effective groupings and teaching strategies to cater for the wide range of needs of children in their classes.

Composite classes can provide significant benefits to both the younger and older students in the class and can actually enhance their development; students can become more confident and assertive, learning to operate as part of a wider group while also bolstering independent learning skills. Older students, while still being challenged and extended, can also benefit from helping younger students in cooperative learning situations. Younger students have the opportunity of enhanced learning experiences where they are ready for it. Role models and leaders can come from both the younger and older children; the children who excel at these traits do so irrespective of age. We explored our options thoroughly and because composite classes are a normal way of working we believe that children will not be disadvantaged in any way. Of interest, the facilitators working with us on mathematics professional development commented that prior to 2023 we were the only school of the many they worked with that didn't have composite classes.

Will there be streaming across classes?

We don't have streaming as such at Ngaio School. Children are grouped in a variety of ways to ensure their needs are met. Teachers use flexible forms of grouping instead of only grouping students by ability. Sometimes they group students socially, sometimes they have mixed ability groups and sometimes they group according to similar abilities. Teachers have high expectations, identifying students who need support

with particular skills, pulling them into a group for targeted teaching. What is different is that these groups are not fixed and may change on a daily basis.

Flexible grouping is designed to provide all students with high level learning opportunities that empower them to be successful. Student engagement in stimulating activities is critical for motivation, achievement, and progress. Teachers aim to extend children and provide support for all children to progress or accelerate their learning. Flexible forms of grouping = high level learning for all children.