

Class Placement Decisions: Fitting the Pieces Together

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It's an important time of year. Enrollment contracts have been offered, and parents are beginning to think about their children moving on to the next grade level for the 2011-12 academic year. It's a natural leap to the question, "Who might _____'s teacher be?" While parents may have fond memories of a teacher who taught their older child or have heard about other parents' impressions of teachers, our perspective as educators may be very different. Therefore, I think it's important for families to understand the complexities of class placement.

Imagine a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. Each of the many pieces is filled with bright colors and subtle shadings. Each individual piece has to be carefully analyzed as the puzzle is assembled. It needs to be placed in just the right position. When the puzzle is completed, the result is a beautiful abstract design that resembles those one sees in a kaleidoscope. Do you have an image in your mind's eye? Please hold it while you continue.

Each year, the teachers and I put together a puzzle that is just as challenging as the one mentioned above. We are fortunate to have several minds working together as we consider class placement for each child. The puzzle may change as we consider what is best for each child and then for the total group. The bright colors of the puzzle are each child's strengths. The subtle shadings represent temperament, areas of challenge, work habits and friendships. And then, when we think the sections of the puzzle are fitting together smoothly, things change. Children withdraw to go to another school, a family may move out of state, the teachers look at the initial placement decisions and see that some of the pieces don't fit together as well as they'd hoped. So we make adjustments.

We consider many factors as we make our decisions. The easiest is balancing the number of girls and boys in each class. Then we need to consider each child's academic strengths in the areas of math, reading and writing. Children inspire and learn from each other, and it won't do to have all the strongest math students in one class! We also try to balance the children as we take into consideration their specific areas of academic challenge, speech and language development, and their level and pacing of productivity and attention. Social and emotional factors also come into play: Self-awareness, motivation, perseverance, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Finally, there is the desire of the child or the parents that result in formal requests for a specific teacher.

When I first came to Holland Hall's Primary School in 2002, I was informed that parent requests for teachers took a high priority in the class placement process. In the last few years, we've tried to honor these requests while balancing all of these other important factors. The faculty and I have had varying levels of success, and we concluded a few years ago that we needed to change course. Our final version of the puzzle will be the best possible solution that we can develop for all of our students.

Therefore, the faculty and I will determine our placement decisions based on what is best for the child and his/her peers using these other criteria for placement as priorities. I understand a family's love and admiration for a particular teacher who might have also taught an older sibling or a child's particularly close friendship with a classmate, but these factors cannot and will not drive our decisions. If a parent still requests a specific teacher, we know that you now have a deeper understanding of our complicated process and realize that we will make the final decision based on what is best for everyone.