

Guided and Independent Small Groups

In Activities 2 and 3 you will see examples of guided and independent small groups. Teachers use small groups for a variety of purposes.

- Students often work cooperatively on one task in their daily lessons.
- Students make choices and work in pairs or groups during Math Workshop.
- Teachers form small groups based on common learning needs such as guided math groups for students who need extra help or students who are ready to extend a concept.

Independent Small Groups

It is important to set working group norms so that students are clear about expectations for when they work together.

Before the class begins the teacher and students review the directions and learning expectations (e.g., how to communicate and interact in small groups). She makes sure the tools and resources are accessible to the students. Some teachers display the directions, expectations and timeframe as well as sentence stems for students to refer to as they work together.



Once the students are working independently in a lesson, the teacher circulates to get a sense of what students are doing and saying – often with a clipboard to take notes about what she notices. She may

- pause at a group to listen to the students as they work. In this case, the teacher tries not to interfere with the students while they work.
- ask clarifying or probing questions to understand their thinking and how they are working together.
- select students to share their work with the whole class during the whole group discussion.
- meet briefly with one or two students to focus on their learning as the other students are working independently – alone, in pairs or small groups.

Each of these is an opportunity to assess what understanding and/or misunderstanding the student(s) may have.

Another example of independent groups occurs during Math Workshop. The students work in pairs or small groups on different tasks. Most of the stations are focused on the same math content. In order for students to work independently they need to understand the expectations and be familiar with each math station, Watch how the teacher introduces the math stations.

Teacher Guided Small Groups

Guided small groups provide the teacher and students a safe setting to engage in mathematics with a specific math focus. Students often participate more in whole group discussions once they gain confidence and have had a chance to practice communicating their ideas in a small group.



A small group session might occur at a separate time in the school day or during a math lesson. The session focus may be ...

- ... to provide additional practice to students who need it
- ... a time to meet with students who need a challenge and are ready to expand on math ideas from whole group lessons and discussions.
- ... an opportunity to check in with students who do not typically participate in a whole group.
- ... to model or review how to share math ideas while playing a game.
- ... to provide practice and review math ideas and skills that will be built upon in an upcoming unit. The students may have studied the concepts and ideas earlier in the school year or in a previous grade.



Some schools schedule time blocks for flexible math groups. The grade level team and perhaps other support teachers meet to discuss how their students are progressing. They target needs they can address through flexible grade level groups. The teachers form student groups and decide who will facilitate each small group. These groups are called flexible groups because students are not permanently placed in one group from each session. The group members change based on needs and participation. These sessions are typically 20 – 30 minutes. Flexible small groups are planned when there's an identifiable need across the grades. Teachers may block out time for flexible groups several times over a few weeks and then not again for a few months.