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Goodbye, Class. See You in the Fall.

By ALAN FINDER

ARDSLEY, N.Y. - Even though it was his last day of kindergarten, Zachary Gold, a bright, enthusiastic 6-year-old, said he wasn't scared about moving up to the rigors of first grade. Unlike most kindergartners at the Concord Road Elementary School in this Westchester County village, he already knew who his first-grade teacher would be.

In September, Zachary will come right back to room P8, his 18 classmates from kindergarten and his teacher, Leslie Cohen.

"I feel, like, not scared, because it's going to be the same," Zachary said. "Well, different work, but the same teacher. She's a nice teacher. I love Ms. Cohen."

Having a teacher stay with a class for more than a year - or looping, as it is known - is on the rise, according to many experts. As educational innovations go, it is remarkably simple. So are its benefits, proponents say. Teachers get to know their students, and the students' parents, extremely well. They know each child's strengths and weaknesses, and the children know the teachers' expectations and methods. This familiarity can save a lot of time at the beginning of the school year.

There is little hard data on the frequency or effectiveness of looping, but classes in hundreds, if not thousands of schools across the United States have adopted it.

"As schools try to improve their standardized test scores, this appears to be catching on," Arthur E. Levine, the president of Teachers College at Columbia University, said.

It is most common in elementary schools, though some middle schools do it, too. Schools in Colorado Springs have tried looping,

as have those in Attleboro, Mass., and Antioch, Ill. In New York City, hundreds of classes stay together for more than a year, most of them in the lower grades.

"In New York, it's a lot more prevalent than we think," said Carmen Fariña, the city's deputy chancellor for teaching and learning. "It's becoming more popular."

The decision on whether a teacher will loop with a class is left to principals, teachers and parents, said Ms. Fariña, who herself stayed with a class through third and fourth grades four times in her teaching career. "In the city, there are hundreds of classes doing it," she said. "In a lot of schools there are four or five classes looping."

The big payoff from looping appears to be in the fall, when teachers typically take time to assess each child, trying to figure out their skill levels and how each student learns. But when Ms. Cohen and her class return in September, she said, "we can basically pick up where we left off."

"I've always felt the first six to eight weeks of the school year are extremely chaotic for kids," Ms. Cohen said, "and not a whole lot of learning takes place."

Spending two years together as a class also reassures young children, she said. "Both at the end of the year and at the beginning of the year, there is a tremendous amount of anxiety in kids," she said. "And I think the anxiety makes it more difficult for them to learn."

The potential disadvantages of looping are also clear-cut. If parents think a teacher is inadequate, they would surely oppose having their child spend an additional year in his or her class.

Advocates of looping say options need to be built into any program, so that parents and teachers can decide to place a child in a different class if remaining with a teacher would be detrimental.

Research into looping suggests that it can pay substantial dividends. The school district in East Cleveland, Ohio, experimented with looping from 1993 to 1997. A class in each of four elementary schools stayed with their teachers for three years, generally from kindergarten through second grade. The teachers worked extensively with parents to reinforce lessons in school, and the classes also met for five weeks each summer.

After three years, students in the looped classes scored an average of 25 percentage points higher on standardized tests in reading, language arts and math than other students in the school district, said Frederick M. Hampton, an associate professor of education at Cleveland State University who oversaw the research project.

"Everything about the children's lives is pretty much in constant motion," said Professor Hampton, who described East Cleveland as poor and predominantly African-American.

"It had occurred to me over a number of years that children, particularly from inner-city areas, need a different model of school, a more family-oriented model, in order to be successful," he said, "something that would allow them to see familiar faces, familiar teachers."

Many educators think middle-class children also benefit from a more prolonged relationship with teachers. Daniel L. Burke, the superintendent of the Big Foot Union High School District in Walworth, Wis., became an advocate of looping after experiencing it during his first years as a teacher. Dr. Burke taught seventh-grade English in Alsip, Ill., in 1970; at the end of the school year, he and two other young teachers were told they would have the same classes the following year, because of scheduling problems caused by construction.

"Those kids came in the door the first day and they knew me and I knew them," he said. "I knew their parents and they knew me. They knew what my expectations were. It was just wonderful."

Twenty years later, when he was a district superintendent in Antioch, Ill., Dr. Burke convinced a first-grade teacher to try

looping. She liked it and word spread. By the time he left the district in 1999, he said, 85 percent of the elementary school teachers were staying with classes for at least two years.

Given the enthusiasm for looping in pockets of the country, many educators said they were surprised that it is not more popular and that it has not been studied more rigorously. The roots of looping trace back to the one-room rural schoolhouse and to educational innovations in Europe in the early 20th century.

The East Cleveland school district stopped looping once Professor Hampton's experiment ended in 1997, in part, he said, because the district was reorganized, with new schools opening and some old ones shutting down.

Professor Hampton said he thought the primary reason more schools have not adopted looping "is because most administrators have this one concept, this one paradigm of the word 'school.' And anything that does not fit into that, they don't bother with."

Some other educators said many teachers might be unwilling to stay with a class for a second year because it would involve learning the curriculum of a new grade.

That was not a problem for Ms. Cohen at the Concord Road School, because she had previously taught first and second grade, as well as kindergarten. Ms. Cohen said she liked the variety. She first suggested looping to her principal after an outside expert mentioned it in a talk given to Concord Road teachers two years ago, and the principal agreed to allow her to try it with her kindergarten class last year.

Would she loop with a class again? "I'll let you know," she said with a laugh. "Right now I love it. I love the connection I feel with the class. I think both for myself and for the parents, there's been a palpable sense of commitment. I'm really, really excited to start the school year again with them."

So are Zachary and many of his classmates. But not all of the children completely understand the arrangement. "I heard one of

them say to another, 'We're going to have her again next time,' " Ms. Cohen said. "And the other child said, 'What about high school?' "