



Teams of educators with distributed expertise

Elements brief

Introduction

The job of being a teacher is incredibly difficult. Being a lone teacher who is responsible for deepening and personalizing learning for ALL their students borders on impossible. For this reason, bringing a team of educators with distributed expertise around a group of students becomes a solution that not only improves outcomes for students, but also for educators.

Many current educators may say, “We already have teams.” To be sure, there are grade-level teams, subject-area departments, data teams, professional learning communities, and lots of other ways educators work together. In fact, anything that goes beyond the silo of the one-teacher-one-classroom model might feel like teaming. But check out this definition of educator teams:

...an arrangement in which two or more teachers and their assistants, taking advantage of their respective competencies, plan, instruct, and evaluate in one or more subject areas a group of elementary or secondary students equivalent in size to two or more conventional classes, using a variety of technical aids to teaching and learning through large group instruction, small group discussions, and independent study (Trump, 1968, pg. 318)

The idea of bringing teams of educators around groups of students is not a new one. In fact, educational historian Larry Cuban describes team teaching as an educational best practice that “flew across the educational sky in the 1960s and disappeared by the mid-1970s.” (Cuban, 2018).

We believe it is time to re-engage the idea of team teaching where educators with complementary expertise share ownership and responsibility for a larger group of students. Different from 50 years ago, we think that the conditions are right for systems-level changes that support fundamentally different ways of staffing schools. In doing so, we also bring education in line with other professions like medicine, law and business where team members with distributed expertise work together toward common goals in far better and more sustainable ways than working in isolation.

What do educator teams with distributed expertise look like in action?

Let’s start with the students. At this point, we’re not sure if there is an ideal number of students taught by an educator team. If forced, we’d guess the number to be between 50 and 150; and many factors likely influence the ideal number (e.g., student needs, student age, experience working in teams, type of curricular models already in place). Intuitively, the number of educators on the team will vary based on the number of students with whom they work. While the overall ratio of students to full-time educators may not differ all that much from traditional classrooms, working with a larger number of students allows greater flexibility in the ways those students can be arranged and the degree to which learning can truly be student-centered.

Larger groups of students taught by more educators raises the very real concern that kids may get lost and not forge connections with their teachers. First, with respect to connection, the same question could be asked of traditional staffing models. By increasing the number of educators around a group of students, the likelihood that

a student will connect with at least one of them increases. Second, we envision a “core team” of educators who are with the group of students every day and are specifically tasked with ensuring that all students have deep and personalized learning experiences.

To achieve deeper and personalized learning for all students, the core group of educators should have complementary expertise — whether at the elementary or secondary levels. For example, one educator may have passion for teaching particular ideas in mathematics and speak fluent Spanish, another might be an excellent writing instructor with a background in data science and a third may have been a former engineer with a deep skill in creating interdisciplinary units. We shouldn’t expect members of this core team to be equally good at all parts of the job; instead they should specialize and team-based staffing should reflect the respective strengths and interests of the individual educators.

Where the skills (or time) of the core educator team are insufficient to meet the needs of all students, other educators should join the team, as needed. These might be full-time, part-time or even volunteer educators. Para-professionals with areas of specialization, retired teachers working a few hours a week and experts from industry who bring their insight to a particular instructional unit all have potential roles in the Next Education Workforce. Any role should demand a level of training to serve students effectively, but not expect these educators to have the breadth of knowledge and skill that members of the core educator team possess.

To be successful, educator teams must have sufficient support and time. This means that the school and district leadership recognize the teams as functional units and provide them sufficient autonomy to operate in the service of their shared students. Practically, this might mean that teams have the ability to dynamically adjust their schedules, have more authority on matters of curriculum and have greater say in who is hired onto their team. Perhaps most importantly, teams need sufficient time to plan, analyze data and develop professionally, which includes intentional opportunities to build trust and respect for one another.

As schools move from traditional one-teacher-one-classroom models to team-based models, a number of shifts will be required. The chart below summarizes a few of those shifts.

Shifts: Traditional to Next Education Workforce models

	Traditional one-teacher-one-classroom models	Next Education Workforce team-based models
Number of educators	One teacher	Multiple educators (2-6+), to include full-time, part-time and volunteers
Need for expertise	Teachers strive to be proficient at every aspect of the job	Complementary areas of expertise and passion from each team member
Responsibility for students	One teacher is responsible for approximately 25 students at a time	A team shares responsibility for 50-150 students
Learning space	One classroom	One learning space with multiple learning zones
Collaboration among educators	Mostly outside of class with educators focused on their own class	Collaborative and interdisciplinary during and outside of class time
Instructional orientation	Teaching to the middle and trying to differentiate when possible	Teaching to deepen and personalize learning for all students

What evidence do we have that team-based models are associated with positive outcomes?

Most of the evidence on the effectiveness of team-based models, as we are defining them, is about 50 years old. With respect to academic outcomes for students, the results are neutral to positive (Zweibelson, Bahnbuller and Lyman, 1965; Gamsky, 1970, Georgiades and Bjelke, 1971). Early results from programs currently leveraging team-based approaches in middle school mathematics are promising. Students in New Classroom's team-based classrooms saw 23% more growth, on average, than students in a national reference group (Margolis, 2019).

While the academic outcomes were neutral to positive, researchers found much more positive associations with team-based models on other student outcomes. For example, students in team-based models reported significantly positive changes in attitude regarding school, attitudes toward teachers, and interest in the subject area (Zweibelson, Bahnbuller and Lyman, 1965; Gamsky, 1970). Additionally, Gamsky found similarly positive associations with students' sense of personal freedom and self-reliance — areas that are gaining traction today as schools are considering whole-child outcomes.

With respect to educator outcomes, the evidence is more contemporary. Johnson and colleagues (2012) find that educators who teach in favorable work environments — specifically school culture, administrative support and relationships with colleagues — report that they are more satisfied and less likely to transfer or leave the profession. Ingersoll and May (2012) found that for mathematics teachers, a lower degree of classroom autonomy had the strongest association with educator turnover.

It should be noted that in all of these cases, the data are either sufficiently dated or come from models that are related to, but different from, how we are defining fully-implemented team-based models. We are working with school partners and researchers to build a robust research agenda around the Next Education Workforce and the role of teams of educators with distributed expertise, specifically.

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