



Teams of educators with distributed expertise

Elements brief

Introduction

When it comes to organizing students, classrooms and schools, our thesis is pretty simple: We believe that teachers should work in teams and lean into their strengths. By doing this, we believe, schools will reap returns in the form of happier educators and better outcomes for students.

The idea of educator teaming 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). The conditions simply weren’t right for the systems-level change that would have been required for team teaching to take off.

Cuban’s statement requires some unpacking, as educator teams have not disappeared entirely. In traditional one-teacher, one-classroom schools, educators may count themselves as members of grade-level teams, subject area departments, data teams, professional learning communities and more. Cuban wasn’t referring to these kinds of teams, however. He was referring to the kind of teaming that turns the traditional model on its head, the kind described by J. Lloyd Trump and Delmas F. Miller in the 1968 book, “Secondary School Improvement: Proposal and Procedures.” There, Trump and Delmas describe teaming as:

...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).

We believe it is time to re-engage the incarnation of educator teams described by Trump and Miller (1968), the approach that Cuban observed to have disappeared 50 years ago. Because, unlike 50 years ago, we think that the conditions are right for the systems-level changes necessary to support fundamentally different ways of organizing schools—ways that better support student learning and better support educator satisfaction.

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

We tend to think of the educators serving students as members of either the core team or the extended team. Members of the core team typically work with the same shared roster of students for a sustained period of time. Often, this is a full year, but in some cases it may only be a semester, depending on the school’s schedule. Members of the core team also share responsibility for students’ academic and social-emotional growth. This group meets regularly—often daily—to co-plan, look at student work and discuss what changes are needed to the upcoming schedule to best meet learner needs. There is no magic number of full-time educators that makes the ideal core educator team. Rather, the number of educators on any given core team varies based on the number of students, student ages, student needs, educator experience, curricular models in place and additional context-specific considerations.

Core team: Members of the core team typically work with students for a sustained period of time; work with a single, larger roster of students and the educator team serving those students; and share accountability for students' academic and social-emotional growth.

Extended team: Members of the extended team provide additional support to the educators and students served by a core team; they may work across multiple teams or schools, and they may be full-time, part-time or volunteer team members.

To achieve deeper and personalized learning for all students, the core team of educators should have complementary strengths, or distributed expertise. For example, one core team member may be a certified special educator and speak fluent Spanish; another might be an excellent writing instructor skillful in creating multidisciplinary, project-based units; and a third might have expertise in the social sciences and a passion for trauma-informed pedagogy and restorative approaches. 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. These specializations will likely include content area expertise (e.g., mathematics, English Language Arts, music), but they should go beyond that, as well (e.g., data analysis, facilitation, culturally sustaining pedagogies).

When the skills (or time) of the core educator team are insufficient to meet the needs of all students, other educators, the extended team, should join to support. These extended team members may be elective teachers or specialists who work across multiple teams or schools, specialized paraeducators (e.g., lab facilitators, reading tutors) or community educators (e.g., retired teachers, industry experts). Their roles may be full-time, part-time or volunteer.

How two schools have organized their core and extended teams

	Core team	Extended team
Elementary school	Three certified teachers and one paraeducator	Several elective teachers, a media specialist, a Title 1 specialist and a special educator—all of whom work with multiple core teams at the school
High school	Biology teacher (who also serves as the lead teacher), a math teacher, an English teacher, a career and technical education teacher and a special educator	Four interns from the local teacher preparation program, remote math teachers (who supplement math instruction), an English Language Learner educator (shared across multiple teams), several elective teachers and community educators

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 with 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.

How might team-based models be catalysts for educational equity?

We borrow Elena Aguilar's definition of equity as it appears in Deeper Learning Means Educational Equity in Urban Schools (2013):

"Every child gets what they need in our schools—every child, regardless of where they come from, what they look like, who their parents are, what their temperament is, or what they show up knowing or not knowing. Every child gets what they need every day to develop the knowledge and skills to be ready for college or a career."

We believe that team-based models catalyze educational equity in a number of ways, including through racial identity match and building students' social capital.

Racial identity match

In The Effects of Teacher Match on Students' Academic Perceptions and Attitudes (2018), Anna J. Egalite and Brian Kisida found that when a teacher's race matched their students' race, those students reported feeling more cared for, more interested in their schoolwork and more confident in their teachers' abilities to communicate with them. In "A Teacher Like Me: A Review of the Effect of Student-Teacher Racial/Ethnic Matching on Teacher Perceptions of Students and Student Academic and Behavioral Outcomes," Christopher Redding writes that "The few studies that look at the overall relationship of having a teacher of the same race/ethnicity indicate a small, positive effect" (2019) on student achievement. In fact, we know from "The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers" (Gershenson et al, 2017) that exposure to a Black teacher in elementary school can reduce the high school dropout rate for low-income Black male students by 39 percent.

We also know, however, that while the educator workforce has become more diverse by race and ethnicity over the last three decades (Ingersoll et al., 2021), it still has a diversity problem:

"Despite the suggested benefits of having a diverse educator workforce, the elementary and secondary educator workforce is still overwhelmingly homogenous. The number of potential teachers of color decreases at multiple points in the teacher pipeline." (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 31).

The diversity problem in the educator workforce is a symptom of the many structural inequalities at work in the United States, and we ought not pretend that the Next Education Workforce is a panacea. But there are concrete ways team-based models can move us toward a more diverse workforce; most of which require a longer time horizon as we develop pipelines and build new pathways. In the meantime, as we work to implement these approaches, we might consider how moving to an educator teaming model will help to increase the reach of the educators of color who are currently in the educator workforce. In traditional one-teacher, one-classroom elementary contexts, an individual teacher may only work closely with a cohort of 20-30 students. When schools pivot to a team-based model, educators have the opportunity to expand their reach by working with a larger group of students. This means that a student of color who may, in the traditional model, have been assigned to work exclusively with a white teacher, might now have the opportunity to work with two or more educators, increasing the possibility of racial identity match.

Social capital

In *The Missing Metrics: Emerging Practices for Measuring Students' Relationships and Networks*, Mahnaz Charania and Julia Freedland Fisher define social capital as, “students’ access to, and ability to mobilize, relationships that help them further their potential and their goals,” (2020) and enumerate the many reasons why building students’ social capital is “an equity imperative.”

A team-based model increases both the quantity of relationships students might mobilize and the quality of those relationships—two of the four key metrics Charania and Freedland Fisher propose for measuring students’ social capital. Not only are there more teachers in the “room” in team-based models, but as we heard from Danielle Ashenbrenner, a kindergarten lead teacher at Mountain View School in Washington Elementary School District, taking a team-based approach allows educators to “slow down and get to know the students more.”

The inclusion of community educators as part of the educator team has the potential to provide students with “linking” social capital. In *Defining and Measuring Social Capital for Young People: A Practical Review of the Literature on Resource-full Relationships*, Peter Scales, Ashley Boat and Kent Pekel write, “Ultimately, social capital that helps historically marginalized youth succeed within a context of systemic exclusion, racism, sexism and discrimination has to also include ‘linking’ social capital, which World Bank researchers (Grootaert et al., 2004) saw as more ‘vertical’ connection, resources being realized through relationships between unequals in power and domination, particularly with people in positions of authority” (2020). Community educators provide capacity and insight in service of deepening and personalizing student learning. They enrich learning environments by forging authentic relationships, sharing expertise and expanding networks. While not all community educators may be seen as obvious “unequals in power,” some might be. The retired banker who invests time in giving feedback on students’ business plans, the elected official who coaches students on public speaking, the college admissions counselor who helps high school sophomores prepare their resumes—these are examples of community educators who have power and authority in financial, political and educational spheres respectively. The linking social capital they provide might indeed help “historically marginalized youth succeed within a context of systemic exclusion, racism, sexism, and discrimination,” (Grootaert et al., 2004).

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