

Sousa Elementary School: Multi-age team profile

November 2021

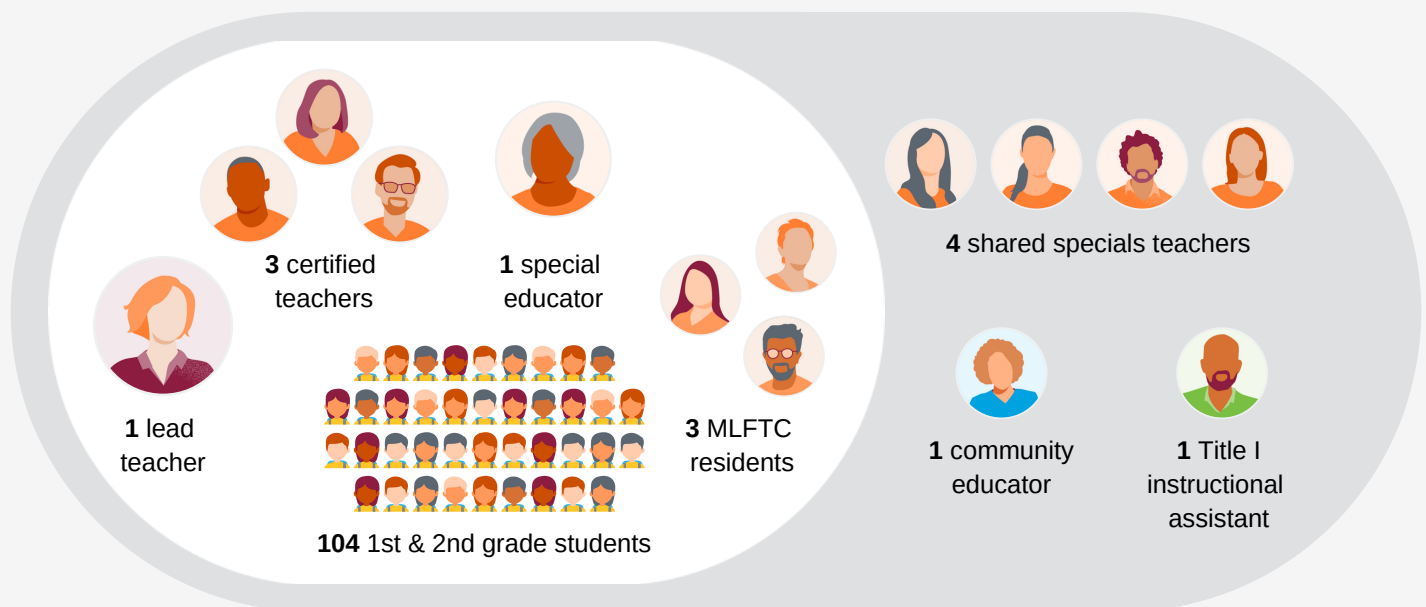
At Sousa Elementary School in Mesa, Arizona, an educator team consisting of one lead teacher, three certified teachers, one special educator and three MLFTC residents supports a multi-age group of 104 first and second graders. The team is also joined by four specials teachers, a retired teacher who assists with reading assessment and instruction, and a Title I instructional assistant who supports personalized literacy instruction.

Introduction

Sousa Elementary School is a Title I school serving approximately 420 students in Grades K–6. The first grade team was the school's first team to pilot a Next Education Workforce model during the 2020–21 school year. Importantly, this pilot occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, a significant portion of instruction was remote. This 2021–22 academic year, the team serves a mixed-grades cohort of first and second grade students, allowing for second grade students to loop back with the team of educators they had in the 2020-21 academic year.

Teams of educators with distributed expertise

Sousa's first and second grades core educator team comprises one lead teacher, three certified teachers, one special educator and three MLFTC residents (senior-year students immersed in rigorous, practice-embedded experience, teacher collaboration and family engagement). The team is supported by four specials teachers who work across grade levels: a music teacher, physical educator teacher, technology teacher and a media/library teacher. Additionally, a community educator (a retired teacher) joins the team two days a week with a focus on reading assessment, conferencing and skills instruction; and a Title I instructional assistant from Northern Arizona University joins the team during personalized literacy instruction time.



The team distributes expertise primarily through the design of the lead teacher role and through their planning processes.

- **The role of the lead teacher:** The team's lead teacher is responsible for facilitating team meetings, gathering student data for the team to analyze, and supporting residents with instructional planning, lesson implementation and student engagement.
- **Distributed expertise in planning:** The core educator team distributes expertise by planning in overlapping sub-teams across educators' areas of strengths. The lead teacher leads reading and planning for Explore Factory, the student-initiated, inquiry-based, multidisciplinary part of the day described in greater detail below. A certified teacher leads writing planning. Pairs of educators (one lead teacher or certified teacher paired with one resident) lead science, social studies and math planning.

Deeper and personalized learning

The team prioritizes students' deeper and personalized learning in several ways including:

- **Project-based learning:** The team takes a project-based learning approach to science and social studies units.
- **Inquiry learning in literacy:** The team takes an inquiry learning approach to teaching literacy through Reader's and Writer's workshop. Additionally, students receive personalized phonics instruction four times a week.
- **Explore Factory:** Students build agency in their own learning by brainstorming topics that interest them, asking a question about that topic, engaging in research and testing responses to their question, and presenting their findings to their peers.
- **STEAM choice boards:** Students choose from a selection of unit-aligned, multidisciplinary activities when they are unable to access the in-person learning environment and, optionally, as a way to continue exploring their interests outside of school.
- **Personalized literacy instruction time:** Students join one of nine groups for targeted literacy instruction.
- **Interdisciplinary learning time:** Students engage in interdisciplinary learning that incorporates reading, listening, speaking, art and one additional content area (i.e., science, social studies, math or social-emotional learning).
- **Social-emotional learning:** Students engage in social-emotional learning four out of five days of the week.

Learn more about each of these below.

Project-based learning

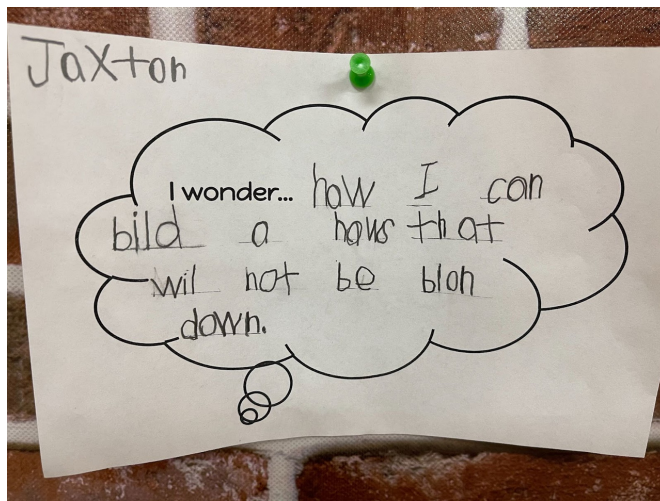
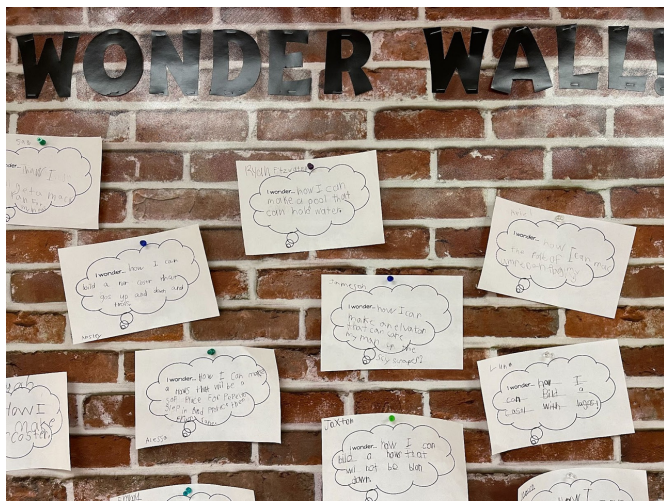
The team takes a project-based learning approach to science and social studies instruction, planning instruction in five-week units that scaffold from first to second grade standards. In one unit examining what it means to be a citizen of a community, students grappled with the question, "How do we, as good citizens, work together to solve a community problem?" Students brainstormed challenges facing their community (e.g., housing insecurity, overburdened animal shelters), selected the challenge they wanted to work toward solving and, in small groups, took action. Groups planned and organized food drives, collected blankets for the humane society, generated news reports and videos that would be shared out with the school community and more.

Inquiry learning in literacy

For literacy instruction, the team leverages materials from Lucy Calkins' [Units of Study](#). During Reader's Workshop, educators are working to shift how students view reading instruction by focusing on learners becoming readers and framing learning around skills that "good readers" use. Students select their own books that match both their interests and their reading levels, which helps to ensure decoding and fluency skills aren't barriers to reading comprehension. Writer's Workshop units are framed around overarching, authentic themes like crafting true stories or writing a non-fiction book to teach others about a topic of interest. During this time, educators take the complex task of writing and break it down into smaller skills so that students are able to build incrementally toward completion of a larger-scale writing project. Students are encouraged to take risks and express themselves through writing topics they choose. Importantly, across both Reader's and Writer's Workshops, educators monitor student progress, provide frequent feedback through conferencing and small-group instruction, and set clear goals that meet the needs of each student.

Explore Factory

Students complete an “I wonder...” statement (first graders) or pose a question (second graders), make a plan for what they will create or use to help answer their question, implement their plan, and then share their results during an oral presentation. To support students as they organize their questions and plan at the start of their Explore projects, educators provide a [planning checklist](#). Additionally, the educator team created a Wonder Wall to build a culture of inquiry: throughout the day, students post questions (“wonders”), and they use these questions to jumpstart their learning during Explore Factory.



STEAM choice boards

When engaging with STEAM choice boards, students select from a menu of possible activities aligned with their science or social studies learning. For example, a STEAM choice board aligned to a science unit on forces and motion invites students to engage in any three out of the following five activities:

- Explore how toys move (e.g., rolling, spinning or bouncing)
- Play [Oscar's Trash Launch Game](#) and record yourself explaining what you learned about force and motion in the process
- Create a homemade marble maze
- Explore “push” and “pull” forces while creating art with marbles and paint
- Record the height a ball bounces when dropped from varying heights

Personalized literacy instruction time

Four days a week, students join one of nine different groups for personalized literacy instruction time, with each group focusing on skills that meet students' individual needs (e.g., digraphs, letter names & sounds, beginning and ending blends). Students not in need of reading intervention join a group that engages with [Achieve3000 Literacy](#), an adaptive program focused on accelerating literacy growth. Groups are led by the lead teacher, three certified teachers, the special educator, three MLFTC residents and a Title I instructional assistant who pushes in to support this class period. Importantly, students are reassessed and regrouped every three weeks, ensuring instruction remains targeted and students are able to move at their own pace.

Interdisciplinary learning time

Once a week, the team uses morning meeting time to connect an idea from social studies, science, math or social-emotional development to a book and an art project. The team engages students with an idea or question at the beginning of this time. Then students listen to a story on the topic, with specific guiding questions connecting the story to the initial idea or question shared. Next, students discuss the story and make connections to their own lives and the focus idea or question. Finally, students engage in an art project to visualize the focus from this learning block.

Social emotional learning

The team teaches social-emotional learning lessons four days a week using the Harmony Social & Emotional Learning curriculum augmented by additional lessons developed by the team in response to student needs. The team's goal for social-emotional learning time is to create classroom environments that promote inclusivity, support social connection and help kids thrive. Some topics covered include diversity and inclusion, empathy and critical thinking, communication, problem-solving and peer relationships.

Specializations and advancement pathways

The team intentionally includes educators who, together, are better able to sustainably meet the needs of all students. It includes an educational leader, (the lead teacher), professional educators (e.g., three certified teachers), teachers who are on the pathway to becoming professional educators (e.g., MLFTC residents) and community educators (e.g., a retired educator who joins the team two days a week). Looking ahead, the team plans to work toward involving additional community experts, especially during science and social studies instruction.