

Whittier Elementary: School profile

April 2020

Starting in 2020–21, approximately 170 students in grades four through six will be part of multi-age learning communities called “houses.” Each house will include about 85 students and will be guided by an educator team comprising three certified teachers and two MLFTC teacher candidates.

Introduction

Whittier Elementary is a Title I school in Mesa, Arizona, that serves approximately 550 students in grades pre-K–6. Whittier is a member of the Arizona Personalized Learning Network, a group convened by the Center for the Future of Arizona in collaboration with KnowledgeWorks. Early in their journey toward building competency-based, student-centered environments, Whittier design team members identified educator teams as a foundation for successful deeper and personalized learning.

Teams of educators with distributed expertise

Each core educator team will include three certified teachers, one of whom is the lead teacher. Two MLFTC teacher candidates will also be part of each 2020–21 house team. The teams may each include one instructional assistant, funding permitting. Each educator team will share a roster of approximately 85 students in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

The core educator team for each house will work together to identify which team member leads planning in each content area. Delivery of instruction may be shared among a house’s team members or co-taught with two or more educators in the same space. The educator teams will collaborate within their own houses and also across houses, co-planning in the content areas and co-creating student resources. The two house teams will also work together to develop common guiding questions that cut across disciplines.

Each team will meet regularly to examine student data, adjust routines, discuss classroom management and craft student-centered learning experiences. To make this possible, house teams will engage in daily co-planning time made possible by adjustments to the master schedule. They will also have access to additional materials and curricular resources. The teams will be closely supported by a leadership team that includes the principal, an instructional coach and a Title I specialist.

As the learning community becomes established, the educator teams will work together to identify additional community educators who can help support the needs and interests of learners. These community educators will likely begin their engagement in a volunteer capacity; over time, however, the roles could evolve into part-time, compensated community educator roles.

Deeper and personalized learning

During the last two years, Whittier has successfully moved toward implementing inquiry-based instructional approaches, including readers' and writers' workshops. This strong focus on inquiry, a deeper learning component, is the foundation upon which the educator teams will build increasing personalization for learners.

Whittier educators embrace the shift described by John Spencer and A.J. Juliani in "Empower: What Happens When Students Own Their Learning" (2017). The learning environment design will move away from "... compliance (students must follow our rules) and engagement (getting kids excited about our chosen content, curriculum and activities) to empowerment ..." (p. xxix) that allows students to "... own their own learning" (p. 8).

Whittier's instructional planning approach to personalization will be built on the Universal Design for Learning framework, which will guide "the design of instructional goals, assessments, methods and materials that can be customized and adjusted to meet individual needs" (CAST, 2019). The educator teams will create learning progressions that cluster key standards and provide multiple options for students to access content and demonstrate their learning. Using the learning progressions, educators will make learning goals visible and empower students to progress based on mastery rather than seat time.

Learners will be grouped in varied combinations throughout the week, rotating through three learning sessions daily. In consultation with their house educator team, learners will create personalized learning profiles, reflect on their learning, set goals and use data to make decisions about next steps.

Learners will stay in the same house for three years, developing extended relationships with peers and educators. The core educator team will remain constant as much as possible to help ensure they deeply understand learners' backgrounds, strengths, interests and areas for growth. The three-year, multi-age structure will also promote peer-to-peer mentoring and strong ongoing collaboration between families and educators.

An additional way that house teams will support personalization for learners is through "deep dive" sessions two afternoons each week. Each deep dive is a themed, project-based learning unit, and learners will select the deep dive topics that interest them most. The two house teams will collaboratively build the deep dive offerings each quarter, thereby allowing learners to interact with a broader group of adults and peers. Community educators will support during existing sessions or by offering additional deep dive options. Each five- to eight-week unit will culminate with showcase presentations that learners share with the house, school and/or larger community.

Specializations and advancement pathways

One educator will serve as the lead teacher for each learning community house. This experienced educator will work directly with students, lead the team in curriculum design and help determine deployment of educators. Educators on each team will be able to develop professional expertise in a specific content area, and in the same way that house learners can build on their passions, educators will be able to leverage their interests and passions. Educators will also have opportunities to offer their unique strengths and passions to support the team.

As students' needs and interests emerge over the year, additional community educators may join the core team as volunteers or in part-time, paid positions. Community educators may leverage their industry expertise or passions to support deep dive learning experiences, serve as content area tutors, or fulfill other specialized roles (e.g., mindfulness coach, industry expert) within the learning communities.

Enrollment demographics, 2018-2019

	Whittier Elementary (n=560)
Percentage of families qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch	77%
Title 1 school status	Yes
Percentage of students with a disability	14.8%
Race	
Asian	0.1%
Black	3.9%
Hispanic	51.1%
Multiple races	5.2%
American Indian/Alaska Native	13.2%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1.4%
White	24.3%

Percentages may not total 100%.

Data is drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics district demographic dashboard and district directory information, 2018–19.

References

CAST. (2019, April 23). *About Universal Design for Learning*. Retrieved April 8, 2020, from <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl#.Xo4F38hKiF5>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Whittier Elementary School, 2018–19 school year*. Retrieved April 8, 2020, from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?Search=1&SchoolID=040497000421&ID=040497000421

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