

School spotlight:

Smith Junior High

Fall 2022

Introduction

Smith Junior High, founded in 2001, is currently in the process of adopting a whole-school Next Education Workforce model. Smith first piloted educator teams with distributed expertise in 2020–21, with one educator team supporting about 100 Grade 7 students. Educators found that teaming clarified the pathway to Mesa Public Schools' Portrait of a Graduate, supported a natural implementation of multi-tiered systems of support and was associated with an increase in family communication and family involvement.

The following year, the school expanded to two teams supporting students in both 7th and 8th grades. In the 2022–23 school year, 600 students are now supported by four teams of educators. In 2023–24, all 900 students will be placed on one of six educator teams, each serving about 150 students. Read on to find out how they're implementing a Next Education Workforce model.



Teaming vision:

Through agency and voice, our interdisciplinary teams will have autonomy to pool resources, interest, and expertise so that staff, students, and families are supported by strength and need.

Dynamic teams

At Smith, **core teams of educators** collectively support shared groups of 150 students. Each core team comprises four educators who specialize in a single content area: English language arts, math, science or social studies. One of these four educators also serves as the lead teacher for the team.



Lead teacher



Teachers with content specializations

Other educators — the **extended educator team** — support both the core educator team and the students. Their roles vary in size and duration and are filled by a combination of educational leaders, professional educators and community educators. Members of these extended teams may include:



Special education teachers



Electives teachers



MLFTC interns



Instructional coach



ELL specialist

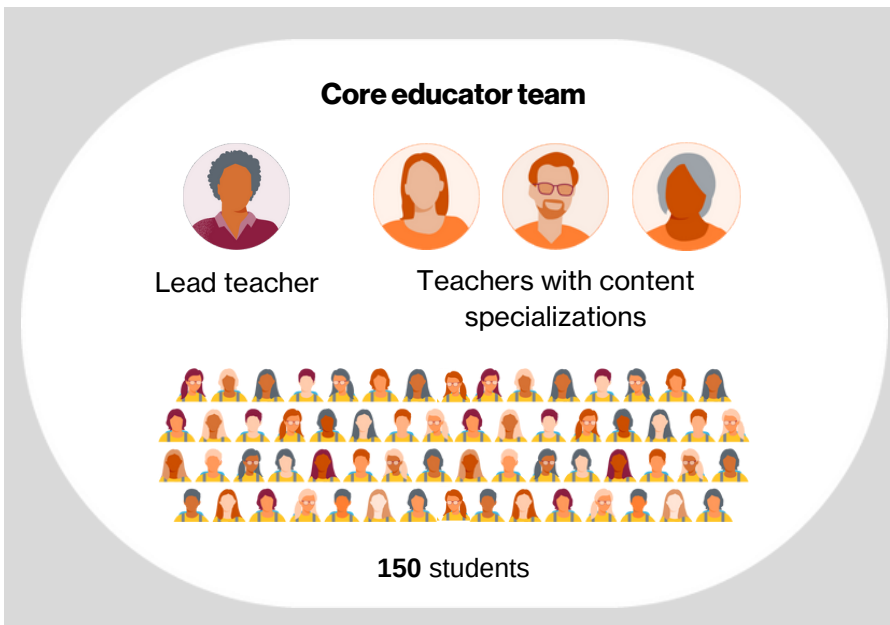


Educational technologist



Title I specialist

- **Special education teachers:** Two special education teachers — one with expertise in ELA and another with expertise in math — serve each grade level. They offer targeted push-in and pull-out services and co-teach and collaborate with core team educators. Because students with IEPs are distributed across all teams, special educators work with all team-based educators.
- **Electives teachers:** Electives teachers work across all student groups to provide instruction in engineering, performing arts, visual arts and more.
- **ELL specialist:** The school's ELL specialist meets regularly with core team educators to discuss students' strengths and needs and to share strategies core team educators can use to support students. In the future, she will also work directly with students to ensure all English Language learners receive the support they need.
- **Educational technologist:** Smith's educational technologist attends team planning meetings to provide expertise on intentionally leveraging technology in service of the team's inquiry units. He then pushes into learning spaces to support students directly during class time.
- **MLFTC interns:** Are typically juniors who support a team of educators one or two days per week and provide targeted small-group and one-on-one support to students.
- **Instructional coach:** The instructional coach supports educators' professional learning and co-plans and co-teaches with teams.
- **Title I specialist:** This person works with both educators and students, teaching, co-teaching and modeling.
- **Community educators:** Smith is currently in the process of developing their pipeline of community educators — trusted adults from the community who will help students discover and explore their passions.



Extended educator team



Self-improving teams

Although Smith teams tend to operate with fluidity in terms of scheduling, they have the equivalent of two periods daily to meet and plan. Typically, one of these two periods is devoted to multi-tiered systems of support: analyzing student data, running interventions and working with special educators and the ELL specialist to ensure all educator team members are equipped with the strategies necessary to support all learners.

The other period is a planning period, during which educators may plan upcoming lessons, reach out to families, or work together to prepare an upcoming unit. Educators elected to work with larger rosters of students in order to free up this additional planning time.



There's real synergy when teachers have kids at the center of their conversation. It's amazing. But they need the time to do the work. They need a team and a shared roster, and they have to know they have autonomy."

— Adam Unrein
Principal

Deeper and personalized learning

Smith teams that are new to Next Education Workforce models tend to focus on establishing strong team dynamics and getting to know students as individuals. Returning teams, meanwhile, are more likely to shift their focus to deepening and personalizing student learning through approaches like flexible space and scheduling; learner-centered, cross-curricular inquiry; and authentic assessment. Read about each approach below.

Flexible space and scheduling in support of project-based learning

Typically, all educator team members have neighboring rooms. This facilitates easy regrouping, flexible scheduling and real-time adjustment. However, Smith's entire campus is open to students and educators. Teams often use the library or auditorium when gathering large groups of students for the introduction of a new unit, cross-curricular work time or presentations of final projects.

At Smith, **students' learning needs drive the schedule.** Typically, math and science teachers meet in their neighboring rooms with a combined total of 75 students across a two-hour block. ELA and social studies teachers do the same. During this time, educators may group and regroup students in whatever way best supports students' needs and the learning goals of the unit, and students have the agency to seek out support from specific educators as they need it.

Learner-centered, cross-curricular inquiry approaches

At Smith, educators view learner-centered, cross-curricular inquiry as a platform for student agency. "We want kids to ask good questions, to contribute to the community, and to be problem-solvers," school leader Adam Unrein says. While students will, at times, engage with micro-lessons focused on a single concept in a single subject (e.g., calculating the probability of simple events, or identifying the narrative point of view), most of their learning is interdisciplinary. For example, 7th-graders engaged in a semester-long, interdisciplinary unit in which they collect, analyze and share data on a topic about which they are both passionate and curious.

The full educator team gathered all students in the library to launch the project and then began the process of working with small groups and conferring with students one-on-one as they honed in on topics for their investigations.

Once students identified their topics, they performed research; presented their intended investigations and received feedback from peers, educators and families as part of a share fair; and conducted their investigations, including collecting and analyzing data. Throughout, they regrouped in an effort to create research communities around a given discipline (e.g., arts, sciences) and to ensure they received any specific, skills-based support they might need (e.g., research skills). Finally, students presented their learning in the form of their choice (e.g., written product, podcast, visual representation) to an audience of their peers, educators and families.



Having an administration that says 'Here are our goals, mission, and vision' and then trusts you to make it happen... That's what it takes. Our educators aren't second-guessed. They have that trust, flexibility and permission to innovate."

— **Kim Elliott**
Title I specialist

Schedule at a glance

Electives

Lunch

**Cross-curricular inquiry
driven by students' learning needs**

Electives

**Cross-curricular inquiry
driven by students' learning needs**



Some students were quick to identify a topic they're curious about, but for others, it was more of a process, and the whole team has to be flexible, has to be ready to support that.

It was important that students ask questions they didn't know the answers to, and that can be uncomfortable depending on where you come from as a learner... They have to be vulnerable."

— **Julie Waugh**
instructional coach

Authentic assessment

At Smith, teams provide students with opportunities to demonstrate learning by producing original, authentic work connected to their identities. For example, in an interdisciplinary social studies/ELA unit on world governments, students had the opportunity to choose a country of interest, immerse themselves in learning about it and produce an original museum exhibit to share their knowledge. Students produced art and visual representations, poetry and stories, interpretive dances, stand-up comedy routines, puppet shows, podcasts and more. At the close of the unit, their work was displayed for an audience of classmates, peers from another grade level, educators and families. The exhibit even became the basis for other students' research projects and investigations.

Importantly, learners participate in creating assessment criteria and all rubrics are written in student-friendly language. This helps to ensure learners truly understand and are invested in creating work that meets a high standard and it equips them with the language necessary to give specific feedback to their peers.

Specializations and advancement pathways

Varied educator roles and just-right responsibilities

Teams intentionally include roles that vary based on students' needs and include a combination of educational leaders, professional educators and teachers who are on the pathway to becoming professional educators. Educators fill those roles that match their current level of knowledge and skill, and their responsibilities increase and differentiate as they grow and develop.

For example, lead teachers facilitate team meetings and ensure the educator team is effectively distributing expertise, while MLFTC interns typically work one-on-one or with small groups of students. Both novices and individuals on the pathway to becoming professional educators (e.g., MLFTC interns and residents) have abundant access to coaching and mentorship from their more seasoned team members and Unrein reports that these relationships tend to form organically.

Personalized educator professional learning

Each Wednesday following students' early dismissal, educator teams engage in professional learning, either district-led or school-based:

- On district-led days, educators may engage with professional learning supporting new curriculum or career and technical education programming.
- On school-based days, professional learning offerings are driven by educators' interests. For example, one Wednesday afternoon saw Smith educators electing into one of four professional learning offerings (e.g., a Socratic methods workshop facilitated by a social studies teacher, a collaborative study groups workshop facilitated by a math teacher), each of which was requested by and facilitated by teachers and educational leaders at the school.