

In 1 classroom, 4 teachers manage 135 kids—and love it

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A teacher-in-training darted among students, tallying how many needed his help with a history unit on Islam. A veteran math teacher hovered near a cluster of desks, coaching some 50 freshmen on a geometry assignment. A science teacher checked students' homework, while an English teacher spoke into a microphone at the front of the classroom, giving instruction, to keep students on track.

One hundred thirty-five students, four teachers, one giant classroom: This is what ninth grade looks like at Westwood High School, in Mesa, Arizona's largest [school](#) system. There, an innovative teaching model has taken hold, and is spreading to other schools in the district and beyond.

Five years ago, faced with [high teacher turnover](#) and [declining student enrollment](#), Westwood's leaders decided to try something different. Working with professors at Arizona State University's teachers college, they piloted a classroom model known as team teaching. It allows teachers to dissolve the walls that separate their classes across physical or grade divides.

The teachers share large groups of students—sometimes 100 or more—and rotate between group instruction, one-on-one interventions, small study groups or whatever the teachers as a team agree is a priority that day. What looks at times like chaos is in fact a carefully orchestrated plan: Each morning, the Westwood teams meet for two hours of the school day to hash out a personalized program for every [student](#), dictating the lessons, skills and assignments the team will focus

on that day.

By giving teachers more opportunity to collaborate and greater control over how and what they teach, Mesa's administrators hoped to fill staffing gaps and boost [teacher](#) morale and retention. Initial research suggests the gamble could pay off. This year, the district expanded the concept to a third of its 82 schools. The team-teaching strategy is also drawing interest from school leaders across the U.S., who are eager for new approaches at a time when the effects of the pandemic have dampened teacher morale and worsened staff shortages.

"The pandemic taught us two things: One is people want flexibility, and the other is people don't want to be isolated," said Carole Basile, dean of ASU's teachers college, who helped design the teaching model.

ASU and surrounding [school districts](#) started investigating team teaching about six years ago. Enrollment at teacher preparation programs around the country was plummeting as more young people sought out careers that offered better pay, more flexibility and less stress.

Team teaching, a concept first introduced in schools in the 1960s, appealed to ASU researchers because they felt it could help revitalize teachers. And it resonated with school district leaders, who'd come to believe the model of one teacher lecturing at the front of a classroom to many kids wasn't working.

"Teachers are doing fantastic things, but it's very rare a teacher walks into another room to see what's happening," said Andi Furlis, superintendent of Mesa Public Schools, one of 10 Arizona districts that have adopted the model. "Our profession is so slow to advance because we are working in isolation."

Of course, revamping teaching approaches can't fix some of the biggest

frustrations many teachers have about their profession, such as low pay. But early results from Mesa show team teaching may be helping to reverse low morale. In a survey of hundreds of the district's teachers last year, researchers from Johns Hopkins University found those who worked on teams reported greater job satisfaction, more frequent collaborations with colleagues and more positive interactions with students.

Early data from Westwood also show on-time course completion—a strong predictor of whether freshmen will graduate—improved after the high school started using the team approach for all ninth graders. ASU has found that students in team-based classrooms have better attendance, earn more credits toward graduation and post higher GPAs.

The model is not for everyone. Some teachers approached about volunteering for a team have said they prefer to work alone. Team teaching can also be a scheduling nightmare, especially at schools like Westwood where only some staff work in teams.

On a recent morning at Westwood High, the four teachers and 135 freshmen on the team settled into a boisterous routine.

They ignored the Halloween music that blared from the school speakers, marking a new period for the older students. As their peers in the higher grades shuffled to another 50-minute class, the freshmen continued into a second hour of their work. Most students busied themselves with the day's assignments, alone or in pairs, while others waited for a specific teacher's help.

The team regularly welcomes other educators into the classroom, for bilingual or special education services and other one-on-one support. But substitute teachers are rare, since teachers can plan their schedules to accommodate their teammates' absences.

Another benefit of teams, teachers say, is that they can help each other improve their instruction. During the planning session earlier that morning, English teacher Jeff Hall shared a critique with a science teacher: Her recent lecture, on something she called "the central dogma of biology," had befuddled him and their other teammates.

"If the science is too confusing for me, can you imagine the frustration you feel as kids?" Hall said. But the science teacher, he said, wouldn't have known about the confusion on her own.

Hall, who moonlights as an improv comic, had quit teaching right before COVID. He worked odd jobs and realized what they offered that teaching didn't: a chance to work alongside other adults and collaborate. The need for a steadier paycheck convinced Hall to return to the classroom last year, but he only applied for positions to teach on a team.

"Why don't we do this for every teacher?" Hall said. "Why was I—a student teacher with zero experience teaching English—handed the keys to an entire class of kids on day one? All alone? That doesn't work for anyone."

Proponents of the ASU model acknowledge it doesn't work perfectly. It presents thorny questions, for example, about how to evaluate four teachers on the performance of 135 [students](#). And teachers on the Westwood team argue they receive too little training on the model.

Students, however, have noticed a difference.

Quinton Rawls attended a middle school with no teams and not enough teachers. Two weeks into eighth grade, his science teacher quit—and was replaced by a series of subs. "I got away with everything," recalled the 14-year-old.

That's not the case in ninth grade, said Rawls. He said he appreciates the extra attention that comes with being in a class with so many teachers.

"There's four of them watching me all the time," he said. "I think that's a good thing. I'm not really wasting time."

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