

An Administrator's Guide to Co-Teaching

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Follow these five steps to support a vision of successful co-teaching in your school.

You've heard the message. Co-teaching is the newest initiative to be implemented by your school district. Students with special needs can no longer be simply physically "included" in general education classes. These students need and deserve authentic opportunities to access and participate in the curriculum. To accomplish this goal, co-teaching has been embraced as the panacea, the magic bullet, and the fairy dust all rolled into one. Teachers must now "co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess" (Murawski, 2003, p. 10). And guess what? You're the lucky one to help make it all happen! What do you do?

First, you breathe. Second, you realize that you have the resources and leadership ability to make co-teaching happen. Third, you take stock of your school's dynamics and create a plan of action that incorporates five important steps. In all honesty, some of these steps may be more difficult to implement than others, but our goal here is to provide practical strategies to make thoughtful implementation of co-teaching less difficult.

1. Provide professional development on inclusion, collaboration, and co-teaching.

This step cannot be emphasized enough. Co-teaching literature is replete with stories highlighting what can happen if teachers are thrown into a collaborative relationship without time to think about the process, plan for the implementation, or participate in training aimed at creating the conditions for success (Damore & Murray, 2009; Dieker & Murawski, 2003; Murawski, 2009; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013).

Co-teaching requires more than just learning to "play nicely" together. It requires a paradigm shift—from teaching in silos to teaching in tandem, from owning the front of the room to sharing space, from sending students with special needs out of the classroom to thoughtfully differentiating for diverse learners. Before working on collaboration and communication skills, educators need to embrace the mindset that inclusion is an issue of both equity and social justice. Then, teachers and administrators will be more prepared for and committed to co-teaching. What can you do to create the conditions for successful professional development? First, don't assume your administrators, faculty, staff, parents, or students understand what co-teaching is or how it will play out in classrooms. Adopt one schoolwide or districtwide definition of co-teaching and provide clear examples of what it should look like. Engage individuals in the school who have power, expertise, and experience in co-teaching to help bring others on board. Try to avoid having all those individuals be special education personnel; co-teaching shouldn't be seen as a "special education thing," but rather as a "best practices in education thing."

Next, create buy-in for inclusion and collaboration before introducing co-teaching itself. Without a collaborative culture in place, faculty are unlikely to want to share their classrooms (Murawski & Spencer, 2011). Use outside experts and facilitators if your internal experts are being ignored. Sometimes folks simply need to hear an "expert from afar" clarify that this isn't just another fly-by-night initiative.

Provide professional development to specific groups for specific purposes. Make sure your special educators can clearly articulate their areas of expertise and know how to provide specialized instruction while in the general education class without becoming a glorified aide (Murawski, 2009). Make sure paraprofessionals have training on their role in the inclusive classroom (Nevin, Villa, & Thousand, 2009). Don't assume that faculty from these two groups already know their roles or are experts in co-teaching and inclusive practices.

Finally, ensure that all teachers are familiar with the most common co-instructional approaches: One Teach–One Observe, One Teach–One Assist, Teaming, Station Teaching, Alternative Teaching, and Parallel Teaching. (See Marilyn Friend's article on page 16 of this issue for a description of these approaches.)

2. Establish scheduling strategies.

Everyone involved in the scheduling process needs to understand the key criteria for creating an authentic co-teaching environment. Too often, we hear horror stories of two teachers being asked to instruct 60 students together because someone thought combining two classes of 30 students constituted genuine co-teaching. Similarly problematic are classes labeled as "inclusive" but made up of 30 students with individualized education programs (IEPs) and four students without IEPs.

How can you create a suitable schedule? Most important, schedule students receiving special education into the master schedule first. This demonstrates your commitment to inclusion. Try to avoid having more than 30 percent of a general education class designated as having special needs (Murawski & Dieker, 2013). This includes students with disabilities, English language learners, students on 504 plans, and even students who are highly gifted. Each of these students is likely to require more attention than the typical learner; plus, the more students with special needs there are in the class, the more their needs begin to dominate classroom instruction and the less "inclusive" it truly becomes.

Be careful not to burn out your teachers or spread them too thin. The more specialists a general education teacher sees in one day, the less likely it is that the teacher will co-plan with any of them, so assign general educators only one special educator to co-teach with. Special educators can collaborate with multiple colleagues; but to truly co-teach, which entails co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing, they need to start with one or two partners. It's also important to limit the number of content areas and grade levels in which the special educator co-teaches. Build in planning time for co-teachers. The best way to do this is to create common planning periods. If your departments or grade-level teams have common planning time, ensure that the special educators working with those teams have a planning period at the same time so they can assist teams in creating universally designed lesson plans that incorporate opportunities for differentiation. Other options for scheduling planning time for teachers include using professional learning community time, having a substitute come in once a month, using banked time, organizing lunch meetings, and replacing lunch or recess duties with co-teaching planning time (Murawski, 2009). Choose what works for your school and teams.

Strategically schedule paraprofessionals in general education classes and provide them with professional development about their role in the inclusive class (Nevin et al., 2009). We suggest paraeducators be in classes that are not co-taught, thus maximizing the number of general education classes that have additional support. Try to assign paraeducators to classes in which students need minimal support or monitoring, as opposed to classes that need the more strategic support that a special education teacher would provide.

3. Partner the right teachers.

Research continues to find confusing and contradictory results related to co-teaching (Damore & Murray, 2009). The main reason for this is that co-teaching involves people with complex and dynamic personalities. Co-teaching is a relationship built on professionalism, collaboration, and a common goal of supporting student success. It is important to note, however, that these goals can be derailed by partnerships that simply do not work. Although there is no formula to finding the "right" pairs, there is research indicating how to improve the chances that co-teaching teams will gel.

As the school leader, what can you do to create successful co-teaching partnerships? Above all, don't throw teachers together and hope for the best!

After providing professional development on what co-teaching is and is not, start by asking teachers to consider finding their own partners and volunteering. Be sure to give them the parameters of what classes, grades, or subjects will need to be co-taught, and ask them to work within those parameters. Create a small pilot program of volunteers to try co-teaching so you can see how it works in your school. Provide resources to these teams to maximize their chances of success.

If you have to form the co-teaching pairs, try having faculty complete surveys on learning preferences, multiple intelligences, personal dispositions, and relationship dynamics. Dieker and Murawski's (2003) SHARE worksheet is a resource for helping potential partners communicate about their hopes, expectations, responsibilities, and pet peeves. Use this information as you think about your faculty; can you identify individuals with complementary personalities who you think would work well together? Ask each one individually about co-teaching with the other. Finally, set up fun ways for faculty members to meet and interact with one another, such as a pizza lunch or TGIF party. This will assist in the relationship-building process and will start to build natural partnerships. Remember, the more collaborative your school culture is, the easier it will be to create and maintain co-teaching teams.

4. Supervise and evaluate strategically.

Many education leaders have never had personal experience co-teaching, but they need to know what to look for, listen for, and ask for when observing, supervising, and evaluating co-teachers. A few resources are available to support this process (see, for example, Murawski & Dieker, 2013; Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Wilson, 2005). When evaluating co-teaching pairs, make sure you understand co-teaching principles and strategies in addition to what you already know about effective teaching practices. Because the most effective co-teaching teams use a variety of co-instructional approaches, you will need to observe pairs more frequently to get a deeper understanding of what is occurring in the classroom. Learn what to look, listen, and ask for that will demonstrate co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing. This might include an inability to tell the general educator from the special educator, differentiated assessments, the use of regrouping, and evidence that all students are actively included and all have access to the academic content (Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

Be sure to evaluate both teachers at once and not in separate observations. Otherwise, teams will typically allow the teacher being observed to "take the lead" in order to get the best evaluation, and you may not actually observe true co-teaching in action. Remember that there is no reason to take sides when evaluating co-teachers. Co-teaching is collaborative, so the supervision and evaluation process should be as well.

5. Improve, increase, and institutionalize co-teaching practices.

Congratulations! You've created a co-teaching program. Unfortunately, your work is not finished. What happens when more parents learn that your school offers co-taught classes? What happens when more of the IEPs written in feeder schools require co-teaching? What happens when you lose faculty who were trained in and committed to co-teaching?

What happens is that you are ready. You are ready to improve what you have, increase sections of successful co-teaching as needed, and institutionalize the process so that it's not dependent on you, specific teachers, or a particular curriculum. You've built a process that has become part of the culture of your school. If you're not quite there yet, you will be soon!

How can you successfully institutionalize co-teaching? First, thoughtfully support struggling co-teaching partnerships. You don't want to let frustrations or aggressions build between partners. Just because a team isn't effective doesn't mean that the teachers cannot co-teach; it may just mean they would be better paired with someone else.

Find ways to keep effective co-teaching partnerships together (Murawski & Dieker, 2013). It takes time and commitment to learn each other's content and ways; breaking up quality teams negatively impacts your forward movement. Celebrate these successes. These teams should be the models others look to emulate. Identify your stellar teams, and have other teams observe them.

Create capacity by adding more co-teaching teams based on instructional need. Do this slowly and methodically by putting the appropriate scheduling and planning times in place as well.

Finally, solicit feedback from students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other community stakeholders. Are they noticing any benefits from the co-teaching classes or relationships? If not, why not? Collect and share data about student success! After all, isn't student success why we're doing all this?

IN MY EXPERIENCE ...

Sometimes You Need Couples Therapy

The nice thing about teaching alone is that you have autonomy; you can make decisions without having to talk through everything. In co-teaching, you need to make room for shared discussion. It's like coming up with a future plan with a spouse or significant other—you have to take time, be patient, listen, and be willing to compromise. Part of the school leader's role is ensuring that co-teachers have time for that kind of shared communication. At my school, to give co-teachers time to plan together, we've had to spend a little bit more time and money to have someone else engage the co-teachers' students for a two-hour block each Wednesday afternoon.

Another part of leadership for co-teaching is making sure you have ways to mitigate problems when the partners need "couples therapy." Not all teachers are going to work well with all other teachers, even when everyone assumes that we all have the best of intent. Sometimes teachers have different beliefs about what's best for students. You need to be ready for that. If it happens, what is the leadership team's game plan going to be?

The leader needs to know how to structure a conversation without micromanaging it. At my school, we have two two-person teaching teams, a preschool team and a kindergarten team, in which both teachers have the same level of leadership and responsibility in the classroom. I meet frequently with them, even individually, before they go into the team-teaching situation. I ask, "What are you looking forward to? What are the strengths you think this person is going to bring to the classroom? What fears do you have? You've got another educator moving into your room who has their own fingerprint that they're going to add to your classroom. Are you going to be able to give up things that you care about?" Getting those feelings out in the open gives the teachers the space to reflect on their own practice so that they can be clear about their expectations. That helps ensure that the co-teachers form a strong team that can take risks together.

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