

Five Keys to Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms

BY WENDY W. MURAWSKI

One of the primary ways schools are addressing the need for accountability and individualization is through a technique known as co-teaching.

Co-teaching is considered a viable option for ensuring students have a “highly qualified” content teacher in the room, while also ensuring that all students’ individualized educational needs are met by an instructor who is highly qualified in differentiation strategies. Provided here are the five keys any administrator should know to create and maintain effective co-teaching in the inclusive classroom.

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► **KNOW WHAT CO-TEACHING IS AND WHEN IT IS NEEDED.** Co-teaching exists when two professionals co-plan, co-instruct and co-assess a diverse group of students. Both teachers provide substantive instruction to all students on a daily, consistent basis. Neither is considered the main teacher of the class; they are equals.

In most schools, however, there are not enough special education teachers to enable all classes to be co-taught. Special educators often are spread thin and cannot afford to be in one class daily for a committed period of time. In that case, in-class support may be warranted.

In-class support varies from co-teaching in that the co-planning and co-assessing components are absent, or at least are not as prevalent as they are during co-teaching. During in-class support, the role of the special education teacher is to provide on-the-spot accommodations, behavioral supports and proximity control. Naturally, these techniques do not carry as much impact as co-teaching because teachers are reactive, rather than pro-active.

► **RECOGNIZE THAT CO-TEACHING IS A MARRIAGE AND YOU ARE THE MATCHMAKER.** Co-teaching is often referred to as a “professional marriage.” As such, adminis-

trators who do not want their teachers to get divorced quickly need to recognize the importance of encouraging self-selection of partners.

Although obtaining volunteers for co-teaching is not always feasible, there are strategies that can increase the chances educators will step forward to participate. These include: (a) sending out a survey of teacher preferences (grade, subject, people with whom they wish to collaborate); (b) allowing teachers to choose their partners; (c) providing professional development; (d) assuring common planning times; and (e) allowing new co-teaching partners to be recused from other responsibilities (e.g., lunch duty). Being a good matchmaker now will ensure you don’t have to spend excessive time later as a marriage counselor.

► **MAKE SCHEDULING A PRIORITY.** Allowing computers to randomly populate classes for the master schedule is not the best approach to take when first establishing co-teaching at a school. In fact, students with disabilities should be put into the master schedule first (in some cases, this means hand-scheduling). One administrator in Alabama reported she simply had to get rid of everyone’s “sacred cows” and start fresh. They ended up recreating the schedule from six periods to eight in order to keep subjects, offer electives and ensure teachers had both team planning as well as individual planning times.

Another aspect of scheduling relates to the proportion of students with special needs to the typical learners in the class. While no magic number exists, experts recommend having natural proportions of students with disabilities in classes. The key: Avoid having more than 30 percent of the class with special needs. Though it may be convenient to cluster more students with disabilities into one class, the desired benefits can be negated by this action, leading to lower academics, decreased behaviors and increased teacher frustration.

► **PLANNING IS CRITICAL.** For the scheduling of common planning times to be accomplished, administrators and teachers must decide early on who will be co-teaching with whom. While this should be ideally determined based on individual student need, schools are usually able to detect a trend in which classes typically have the most students with significant needs (e.g., English or math classes). Insightful administrators will find a way to give prospective co-teachers time before the



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end of the school year and during the summer to meet and begin to pro-actively plan their instruction.

While common planning times are the most immediate way to ensure co-teachers plan consistently, other options include: (a) hiring a substitute, (b) using times when students are engaged elsewhere, (c) administrative or teacher coverage, (d) providing stipends and (e) banking instructional minutes so teachers can have additional planning time. Administrators also can purchase products that save time in co-planning, such as Lisa Dieker’s *Co-Teaching Lesson Plan* (available from www.cec.sped.org) or *Co-teaching Solutions System: Teacher’s Toolbox* (available from www.coteachsolutions.com).

► **MONITOR SUCCESS, GIVE FEEDBACK AND ENSURE EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE.** In order to effectively assess the impact of co-teaching, administrators need to monitor co-instruction and provide feedback. Not all observations of co-teachers should be evaluative in nature. Identifying mentors, peer observers and co-teaching coordinators is helpful. Administrators need to reinforce that both teachers are equally responsible for the co-taught class and must therefore be present and consistently engaged.

An excellent reference is a 2005 article “This Doesn’t Look Familiar: An Administrator’s Guide to Supervising Co-teaching” by Gloria Lodato Wilson in *Intervention in School and Clinic* (Vol. 40, No. 5). An excellent software program for observing co-teachers, collecting data on their progress and generating numerous comparative reports is the Co-Teaching Solutions System Observation System.

Wendy Murawski is an associate professor of special education at California State University, Northridge. E-mail: wendy.murawski@csun.edu