

A Co-Teaching Model: A Response to Students with Disabilities and Their Performance on NYS Assessments

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Driven by state and federal mandates to provide students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum, Weiss and Lloyd (2002) have noted how co-teaching has proliferated in many school districts. Friend (2000) describes effective co-teaching as a special educator and a general educator teaching together in the general education classroom during some portion of the instructional day to accommodate the needs of students with and without disabilities.

Cook and Friend (1996) also emphasize formats within the co-teaching model in which students learn within smaller groups (i.e., not whole class instruction). These researchers state how lowering the student-teacher ratio in co-taught classrooms will provide more intense and individual instruction to students with and without disabilities.

Although there is descriptive information about what co-teaching should look like in the classroom (Zigmond, 2001), there is a gap in the research on the process of how teachers become more collaborative. Weiss and Lloyd (2002) have indicated that the research has only begun to address the issues of implementation, instruction, and effectiveness. Here is how co-teaching came into being in the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda Union Free School District. . .

Looking at Student Performance at the Kenmore-Tonawanda Schools

The Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda Union Free School District carefully examined student performance results to determine which students were struggling to meet the standards. The results not only indicated that students with disabilities were performing significantly below their regular education peers, but also demonstrated deficits over time. Five-year trend data suggested that students with disabilities, who had fewer opportunities engaging in regular education curricula over time, performed significantly below their regular education peers.

It was obvious that the district needed to examine school processes, structures, and policies to determine effective strategies and implementation models in order to improve student learning and performance for students with disabilities. The hypothesis was that students with disabilities needed to have their specific needs met in a setting that supported those needs, with highly skilled instructors who provided many opportunities for student engagement in a rigorous regular education curriculum and an atmosphere that cultivated success and positive self-esteem. After much discussion among Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda staff, co-teaching was explored as an initiative that had promise.

The District Plan ...Defining the Process

In conjunction with faculty members from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Fredonia, the local Special Education Training and Resource Center (SETRC) staff, and the Kenmore-Tonawanda Teacher Center, administrators designed a comprehensive district-wide staff development plan to train a cohort of 132 co-teachers at all grade levels. Based on this collaborative effort, the concept of co-teaching was first introduced at the administrative level with the principals, followed by training with the teachers.

Implementing the Process

The spring before co-teaching was initiated, SUNY Fredonia faculty and SETRC staff conducted a half-day training for all district administrators, building principals, lead teachers, and mentors. Through the trainings, presenters provided a consistent explanation of the co-teaching model and its implementation at various grade levels within the district. This introductory training on co-teaching provided a critical foundation for establishing a common language of co-teaching, giving participants an opportunity to view a video on co-teaching, and observe how the model looked in a classroom where two teachers work together to provide instruction. The building principals were asked to seek out volunteer teachers to implement the co-teaching model for the following school year.

Next, volunteer general and special education teachers were trained as pairs for a full day. Elementary teachers were trained separately from secondary teachers since their instructional needs were different. The pairs of teachers received the same introduction to the co-teaching model as the administrators. However, an additional afternoon session on lesson planning was provided for the teachers. It was critical that the co-teachers were trained as a pair or a team.

During the next phase of the plan, the trained volunteer co-teachers were provided with summer planning time to prepare for the upcoming school year. The Kenmore-Tonawanda Teacher Center organized and sponsored these sessions. Once again, SUNY Fredonia faculty and SETRC staff

facilitated the planning sessions where teachers brought their curriculum materials. The focus of the sessions was on long-term curriculum planning and meeting the needs of all students, including students classified with disabilities. Facilitators gave the co-teachers various lesson plan formats and a calendar for the upcoming school year to help them concretely prepare for the new school year. In addition, each team of teachers came up with an action plan to help them identify the next steps in carrying out co-teaching in their classroom. Building principals were encouraged to visit these planning sessions and support the teachers in this process. Later, the teachers' action plans were shared with the principals. By providing co-teachers with staff development hours for these planning sessions, the teachers were able to plan for their collaborative instruction in the fall and anticipate potential roadblocks with the implementation. The teachers rated the summer sessions as very valuable for preparing them to co-teach.

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Assessing and Reviewing the Process

The essence of co-teaching is about building a professional relationship between the co-teachers, which is motivated by the drive to increase student performance. The first year of co-teaching together, either as a pair or a team, is often the most difficult. To assist the teachers through this transitional year, co-teachers received individual and/or small group coaching within their building from SUNY Fredonia faculty or SETRC staff. Discussions focused on how to more accurately employ co-teaching and increase student performance.

Principals were given feedback on teachers that were building strong partnerships and teachers that were struggling. The teachers' concerns mainly focused on planning lessons and accommodating the needs of students with varying abilities.

In early November, administrators were brought together and asked to identify “what was going well” with the co-teaching model and where their teachers needed further assistance. SUNY Fredonia faculty solicited feedback from the Kenmore-Tonawanda school administrators regarding the design of co-teaching quality indicators. This step was taken to provide all personnel with a clear understanding of what was expected in a co-taught classroom. After incorporating suggestions from the administrators and principals, the university faculty designed quality indicators for co-teaching observations, a guidebook for using the quality indicators, and an accompanying teacher survey for further explanation of the teachers’ instructional partnership.

Reflecting on the Process

Later in the school year, co-teaching teams were brought together once again for a “tune-up” session so teachers could share ideas on “what was working” and where they needed additional assistance. Teachers shared lesson plan formats, student grouping strategies, and scheduling ideas. Once again, sessions were designed so elementary teachers could meet separately from the secondary teachers in order to better meet the needs of all the co-teachers.

After incorporating suggestions from the administrators and principals, the university faculty designed quality indicators for co-teaching observations, a guidebook for using the quality indicators, and an accompanying teacher survey for further explanation of the teachers’ instructional partnership.

This session allowed teachers to hear about the success of other teams and later provided administrators with additional information on the supports that were needed. During these sessions, teachers often mentioned the need for more planning time and reconfiguring of instructional groups.

By supporting co-teachers throughout the school year, the teams were actually willing to take risks and more fully implement varied groupings in their classrooms for the benefit of students with and without disabilities. We found ongoing large group, small group, and individualized discussions with teachers to be helpful as the partnership evolved.

Through the identification of benchmarks for effective co-teaching, administrators and teachers have specific indicators of quality inclusive instruction. By collecting formative data on co-teaching, teachers can be supported in fine-tuning their collaborative skills, leading to improved student performance.

Lessons Learned

The following key components were essential for building effective co-teaching teams:

- ✓ **Initial Foundational Training for All District Administrators Involved in the Co-Teaching Process**
Administrators need to be trained first so they can provide a vision for co-teaching to the general and special education teachers implementing the model. This is a critical to helping teachers receive a consistent understanding of co-teaching at the building level.
- ✓ **Preparatory Teacher Training Before Implementation of Co-Teaching Model**
It is essential that teachers be trained as a pair or at the middle school level as a team, so the partnerships can begin forming quickly.
- ✓ **Follow-up Sessions with Building Principals and District Administrators**
Assessment of the co-teaching implementation by administrators is important to the overall process. Feedback from administrators needs to be concrete and specific about how the co-teaching model is working. Partnerships with university faculty or experts in the field should be considered to provide consultation, objective support, and staff development.
- ✓ **Reflection Time for Co-Teachers**
Co-teachers need to be provided with time to ask questions and reinforce their initial learning of the model in small group meetings at the building level. This gives teachers time to clarify their roles and to review their collaborative teaching in the classroom. Also, if teams are struggling with their instruction, it is critical for individual coaching sessions to be available.
- ✓ **Utilization of Quality Indicators and Measures of Co-Teaching**
Quality indicators provide benchmarks for administrators and co-teachers on the fidelity of the implementation of the co-teaching model. Gathering formative teacher data is critical before student performance data can be improved.

The Process Continues

Within one school year, Kenmore-Tonawanda's instructional culture had significantly shifted. Students with disabilities were learning the general education curriculum within typical classrooms. Co-teachers were encouraged to build their professional development plans around co-teaching and its implementation. The next steps within the district will be to support teachers to help them meet the quality indicators of co-teaching. By implementing the model effectively, administrators hope to increase student achievement. As the pairs of co-teachers remain together for the following school year, their effectiveness as co-teachers is expected to become more seamless and natural.

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