

Co-teaching to meet the needs of all students

Description: Co-taught classrooms utilize two teachers to meet the diverse needs of their shared students. Typically co-taught classrooms rely on a special education teacher and general education (Gen Ed) teacher to fully share instructional responsibilities, including lesson planning, instruction, grading, intervention, and communication with parents' families. Both teachers work with all students in their classroom and ensure that any necessary accommodations are provided to students with disabilities. Co-teachers may remain together for the full day, or a school may choose to push-in a special education teacher to a Gen Ed classroom to co-teach for a targeted portion of the day.

Rationale: Co-taught classrooms enable greater individual attention for all students because two teachers are available to reduce group size. Students with disabilities are able to access core content in the least restrictive environment, and higher expectations in these Gen Ed classrooms tends to foster higher performance. From a student's perspective, teachers make no distinction between students with or without disabilities. This heterogenous, inclusive setting can support the development of a positive school culture.

Co-teaching also offers benefits to participating teachers. Each teacher has a daily source of professional feedback, which can be used to strengthen his or her expertise. Deep collaboration on how to plan and adjust instruction may also result in more rigorous and engaging lessons.

Clarify purpose: Before making decisions about how to organize resources in support of co-teaching, clarify its purpose in your school.

-  *What are the main purposes of co-teaching? It may be part of an effort to increase collaboration and instructional expertise among a subset of your teachers, increase rigor for students with disabilities, and/or foster a more inclusive climate in your school's culture.*
-  *Which subjects and/or grade levels will be targeted for co-teaching? Typically a school's highest-priority areas are targeted for this type of investment.*

MAKING IT WORK: RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Implementing co-teaching will have implications for people, time, money, and potentially technology in your school. These implications are noted below, alongside specific questions to answer during the planning process.



PEOPLE

- **Assign teachers to co-taught classrooms:** The number of teachers assigned to co-taught classrooms will depend on the number of desired sections as well as desired class size. Creating the necessary number of co-taught classrooms may be achieved through any of the following:
 - Reallocate the special education teacher's time away from current pull-out or push-in services for students with disabilities to free time for co-teaching. This approach would have to be compatible with the accommodations and contact time required in students' IEPs.
 - Repurpose an existing Gen Ed teacher as a special education teacher if he/she has the necessary certification, or trade out a Gen Ed teaching position for a special education teaching position. Either of these approaches would result in higher class sizes in Gen Ed classrooms. Through co-teaching, however, group size could still be lowered at critical moments even in the context of a larger class size.
 - Invest in an additional teacher to take on a co-teaching assignment. This staff member may be a Gen Ed teacher, special education teacher, or someone in a coaching role who may co-teach for a portion of the day and dedicate the rest of his/her time to expert support.

? *Based on the desired number of sections and class sizes, how many special education and Gen Ed teachers will need to be assigned to co-taught classrooms and how will they be paired?*

? *If you plan on reassigning teachers or repurposing roles, what is the estimated impact on class and group sizes outside co-taught classrooms?*

? *If you plan on investing in additional staff, what is the desired FTE and position type?*

- **Assign support staff to co-taught classrooms:** Other special education support staff, such as speech/language pathologists and occupational therapists, may need to restructure when and how they provide services to students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms in order to ensure students' needs are met.

? *How will support staff members' schedules be structured to facilitate their push-in to co-taught classrooms?*

- **Create co-teaching partnerships:** Assignment of co-teachers should take into account how to partner special education and Gen Ed teachers. Based on the number of desired sections in prioritized grades and subject areas, a special education teacher may be partnered with a single Gen Ed teacher throughout the school day or with multiple Gen Ed teachers through staggered co-taught sections. Demands on that teacher's expertise and time for planning increase with the

number of distinct Gen Ed teachers he/she partners with, especially if these classrooms cover different grades and subject areas. Teachers new to co-teaching, therefore, may benefit from partnering with only one other teacher.

Personality differences between co-teachers are not necessarily a barrier, and in some ways can be highly complementary. The most important characteristics that co-teachers should share include an openness to feedback and willingness to share responsibility.

? *How will special education and Gen Ed teachers be partnered with each other to create the desired number of co-taught sections?*

- **Organize a shared-content teaching team:** In addition to working with each other, co-teachers should have an opportunity to collaborate with a broader teaching team whose members share the same grade and subject area. This team's work together should include developing common unit and lesson plans, as well as comparing results from common assessments to determine how to adjust instruction. Assigning a meeting facilitator and using clear meeting agendas and protocols will help ensure their time is used well.¹

? *Who needs to meet with co-teachers as part of a shared-content teaching team? Who are the people who need to collaborate on these core tasks?*

? *Who will act as meeting facilitator?*

- **Expert support:** During the transition to co-teaching, special education and Gen Ed co-teachers need intensive expert support during team meetings, as well as through classroom observations and debriefs. This support includes:
 - Determining and implementing classroom systems and routines that will work for both teachers and maximize the presence of two adults in the classroom.
 - Efficiently delegate instructional responsibilities, including lesson planning, grading, communication with families, and instructional delivery.
 - Effectively grouping students and differentiating instruction to small groups, ensuring IEP requirements are fulfilled.

Expert support may scale back after the first few months, or if one of the co-teachers is in a coaching role, become embedded as part of his or her work with the other co-teacher. Expert support is still always a requirement for successful collaborative planning time.

? *Who will provide expert support to co-teachers?*

1. See ERS' Best Practices Template on shared-content teaching teams for more information.



TIME

- **Redesign master schedule to support co-teaching:** There are two likely ways in which the master schedule will need to shift to support effective co-teaching:
 - If a special education teacher will be pushing-in to more than one Gen Ed teachers' classroom to co-teach, these sections will need to be staggered during the day to ensure the special education teacher's availability.
 - Single periods may need to be increased to double blocks to take full advantage of the flexible grouping and small-group instruction that co-teaching facilitates.

? *How will co-taught sections need to be sequenced in the master schedule to ensure both co-teachers are available at the same time?*

? *If current period length isn't long enough to maximize flexible grouping and small-group instruction, how will the schedule need to change to support longer blocks in targeted areas?*

- **Collaborative planning time:** Co-teachers should be members of a shared-content teaching team, and this type of team typically requires at least 90 uninterrupted minutes weekly to complete core tasks related to lesson planning and analysis of assessments. Time spent lesson planning in collaborative planning time, however, will likely reduce the time co-teachers need to set aside for this task during their shared individual planning time.

? *How frequently will co-teachers collaborate in a shared content teaching team to plan instruction and compare assessment results, and when will this time take place in the master schedule?*

- **Shared individual planning time:** Co-teachers require significant time during the school year to exchange feedback on lesson plans and instruction, as well as jointly determine what types of interventions are most needed for their students. Effective co-teachers typically collaborate between 10 to 45 minutes daily in a shared planning period or block. How teachers spend this time should complement the core tasks that take place during collaborative planning time in a shared-content team.

? *How will teachers' schedules be structured to ensure they share a daily planning block, and how long will this block be?*

? *What core tasks will take place during teachers' shared individual planning block to ensure their work complements, rather than duplicates, work during CPT with a broader teaching team?*

- **Review Individual Education Plans (IEPs):** Special education and Gen Ed teachers, as well as the school's psychologist, will need to review current IEPs to determine which students with disabilities may be served in co-taught classrooms. Many may be served in Gen Ed already, and the transition to a co-taught classroom may not necessarily impact the accommodations required in the IEP.

In some cases, however, a school inherits unnecessarily restrictive IEPs that compromise students' access to the least restrictive environment. If this appears to be the case, time will also be required before co-teaching is implemented to determine which students with disabilities may be effectively served in co-taught classrooms. It may take anywhere from several months to a full academic year to collect the information needed to determine if a student's needs can be met in a co-taught, Gen Ed environment and if an adjustment to the IEP is warranted. Students, parents, the school's psychologist, and both Gen Ed and special education teachers should be directly involved in this decision-making process. The outcome of this review will help determine the number of co-taught sections that are needed.

- ? *Over what span of time will staff review all IEPs, both to identify students who may be served in co-taught classrooms as well as students who may have IEPs that are unnecessarily restrictive? Who will share responsibility for this review?*
- ? *Over what span of time will additional information be collected to determine if adjustments to IEPs are warranted, and what process will be followed to make any adjustments?*
- ? *Based on the results of the IEP review, how many co-taught sections are needed? Typically the ratio of students with disabilities to students without disabilities in co-taught classrooms hovers around 1:4, but a school's unique context and students' needs should ultimately determine how students are assigned and the number of sections that result. Note that updating the number of co-taught sections will have implications for the number of co-teachers your school needs.*

- **Norm on expectations before the school year begins:** Both special education and Gen Ed teachers will require between six and eight hours of planning time in advance of the school year to norm on classroom expectations, systems and routines, as well as processes for completing lesson planning, grading, and family engagement. They may benefit from observing an effective pair of co-teachers in another school to see how instructional responsibilities can be shared. Ideally the teachers' coach or other expert will facilitate this process.

- ? *How much time will special education and Gen Ed teachers need to norm on the expectations that will govern their work together, and when will this occur prior to the start of the school year?*



MONEY

- **Professional development (PD):** If existing teachers have limited experience in co-taught classrooms and limited in-house expertise is available to support them, external PD may be needed to prepare special education and Gen Ed to work together effectively and coach them on an ongoing basis. Keep in mind that research shows episodic PD is ineffective if it is not sustained through job-embedded efforts that check and support mastery of new skills taught. One-time trainings should always be paired with school-based follow-up through teaming and observation/debrief structures, and aim to embed expertise in a school's staff over time.

? *If in-house expertise in co-teaching is not sufficient, from where will you contract professional development and at what cost?*

SUMMARY OF KEY QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE PLANNING PROCESS

Purpose

- What are the main purposes of co-teaching? It may be part of an effort to increase collaboration and instructional expertise among a subset of your teachers, increase rigor for students with disabilities, and/or foster a more inclusive climate in your school's culture.
- Which subjects and/or grade levels will be targeted for co-teaching? Typically a school's highest-priority areas are targeted for this type of investment.



PEOPLE

- Based on the desired number of sections and class sizes, how many special education and Gen Ed teachers will need to be assigned to co-taught classrooms, and how will they be paired?
- If you plan on reassigning teachers or repurposing roles, what is the estimated impact on class and group sizes outside co-taught classrooms?
- If you plan on investing in additional staff, what is the desired FTE and position type?
- How will support staff members' schedules be structured to facilitate their push-in to co-taught classrooms?
- How will special education and Gen Ed teachers be partnered to create the desired number of co-taught sections?
- Who needs to meet with co-teachers as part of a shared-content teaching team?

- Who will act as meeting facilitator?
- Who will provide expert support to co-teachers?



TIME

- How will co-taught sections need to be sequenced in the master schedule to ensure both co-teachers are available at the same time?
- If current period length isn't long enough to maximize flexible grouping and small-group instruction, how will the schedule need to change to support longer blocks in targeted areas?
- How frequently will co-teachers collaborate in a shared-content teaching team to plan instruction and compare assessment results, and when will this time take place in the master schedule?
- How will teachers' schedules be structured to ensure they share a daily planning block, and how long will this block be?
- What core tasks will take place during teachers' shared individual planning block to ensure their work complements, rather than duplicates, work during CPT with a broader teaching team?
- Over what span of time will staff review all IEPs, both to identify students who may be served in co-taught classrooms as well as students who may have IEPs that are unnecessarily restrictive? Who will share responsibility for this review?
- Over what span of time will additional information be collected to determine if adjustments to IEPs are warranted, and what process will be followed to make any adjustments?
- Based on the results of the IEP review, how many co-taught sections are needed?
- How much time will special education and Gen Ed teachers need to norm on the expectations that will govern their work together, and when will this occur prior to the start of the school year?



MONEY

- If in-house expertise in co-teaching is not sufficient, from where will you contract professional development and at what cost?

WATCH-OUTS/ CHALLENGES	IDEAS/TIPS
<p>Parents of students with disabilities may be hesitant to move their children into larger Gen Ed settings because they are concerned they won't get sufficient attention. Meanwhile, parents of students without disabilities may be concerned the entry of students with disabilities will lower instructional rigor.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefits of a new co-taught learning environment for students with and without disabilities should be communicated early to students' families, before students are assigned. This may include hosting a parents' night or discussing during students' IEP meetings. • Communication to parents should emphasize that although the instructional approach may look different with two teachers in the room, students will ultimately get more support through access to lower group sizes, as well as benefit from a more diverse learning environment. • After co-teaching is underway, teachers and/or administrators should follow up early with parents. Challenges or misunderstandings may be addressed more easily if they are caught early in the school year.
<p>Co-teaching requires more special education teachers than there currently are.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target any class size increases away from your highest-priority grades and subject areas. • Consider increasing teacher utilization to keep class size increases down. • If you must invest in additional staff to avoid class size increases, consider investing in a staff member who can take on multiple responsibilities, e.g., dedicate a portion of the day to co-teaching and a portion to providing expert support. • If more than one Gen Ed teacher will co-teach with a special education teacher, stagger the co-taught sections to enable the special education teacher to push in. • Target a limited number of co-teachers to the highest-priority grades and subject areas.

WATCH-OUTS/ CHALLENGES	IDEAS/TIPS
<p>Observing and evaluating co-teachers seems complicated because it will be hard to distinguish the effect of one teacher from another in the classroom.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because co-teachers share instructional responsibilities, an observer should be able to see both teachers provide direct instruction and small-group support during a class period. More than one class period may be needed to collect enough information on each teacher. • Regarding student growth, typically the state provides guidance around how student growth measures should be attributed across multiple teachers of record. Exactly how accountability will be shared should be communicated to any teachers interested in becoming co-teachers before they are officially assigned. • Explicit efforts to strengthen a professional adult culture, specifically shared accountability across teachers, is critical for co-teaching to be successful. Taking explicit efforts to develop a culture of shared accountability between co-teachers is critical.²
<p>Sharing control may be difficult for teachers who are used to making unilateral decisions about how classrooms are managed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pairing a special education teacher with the same Gen Ed teacher over the course of the day, including shared planning time, will facilitate the development of trust needed to fully share control. • Preparation time prior to the start of the school year, including observing other effective co-teachers in your school or elsewhere in the district, will help first-time co-teachers identify how they will structure a shared classroom and delegate responsibilities. Experts should support these discussions for first-time co-teachers. • If there are more than two co-teachers in the school, form a small team of co-teachers to collaborate around issues that arise when transitioning from a traditional, one-teacher classroom to one where instructional responsibilities are fully shared. Meetings could take place for 60 to 90 minutes once or twice a month depending on teachers' needs. Even if co-teaching pairs work in different subject matter, they may still benefit from this type of collaboration. • Administrators may need to dedicate time and resources to strengthening trust between teachers through focusing on professional adult culture.³

2. Learn more about how to develop professional adult culture through teaching teams in ERS' *School Designer* curriculum.

3. *Ibid*

Design Interactions

Strategic school designs have many interconnected components. Well-designed co-teaching should be integrated with the following power strategies:

- Teaching Teams
- School Culture and Personal Relationships

Research

- Baker, J. M., and Zigmond, N. (1995). "The Meaning and Practice of Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities: Themes and Implications from the Five Case Studies." *Journal of Special Education*, 29(2), 163-180. EJ 509 951.
- Mastropieri, M. A., and Scruggs, T. E. (2000). "The Inclusive Classroom: Strategies for Effective Instruction." Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Salend, S. J., and Duhaney, L. G. (1999). "The Impact of Inclusion on Students With and Without Disabilities and their Educators." *Remedial and Special Education*, 20(2), 114-127. EJ 585 702.
- Walther-Thomas, C. S., Bryant, M., and Land, S. (1996). "Planning for Effective Co-Teaching: The Key to Successful Inclusion." *Remedial and Special Education*, 17(4), 255-264. EJ 527 660.

Additional Resources

- The Inclusive Schools Network has developed a *Collaborative Teaching Observation Protocol* that can be used to help administrators, teachers, and other staff evaluate co-teaching practices and other in-class support: <http://inclusiveschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ISN-Co-Teaching-Observation-Protocol.pdf>.
- Learn more about what constitutes professional adult culture and how to strengthen it in ERS' *School Designer* curriculum.

Co-teaching at Revere High School

REVERE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, MA

“When we first started co-teaching workshops we found that only special education teachers were attending. So we said that both co-teachers need to attend, because we wanted to send the message that co-teaching is not a special ed thing, it’s a teaching thing. You need an equal commitment from both partners for effective co-teaching to flourish.”

— Wesley Pierce, Assistant Director for Special Education

Context: Revere High School serves roughly 1,700 students in the Greater Boston area. In 2011 it was designated a Level 3 school, placing it in the bottom 20 percent of schools in Massachusetts. By 2014 the school had made significant academic gains across the board, including among its students with disabilities. Integrating students with disabilities into co-taught, inclusive classrooms was a key part of the school’s effort to personalize learning and raise expectations for all students.

Most co-taught classrooms are targeted to students in Grade 9 as part of a comprehensive Freshman Academy. Half of the Freshman Academy’s ELA and math teachers are co-teachers, meaning that of the eight math teachers in Grade 9, four are spread across two co-taught classrooms. The special education and Gen Ed teachers in each classroom are partnered together for the entire school day.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS



PEOPLE

- **Repurposed teaching resources:** The average class size in a co-taught, inclusive classroom is 20 students, enabling a student teacher ratio of 10:1. Co-teachers share a load of approximately 60 students. This investment was targeted to Grade 9 to provide extra support to students during a transition year, and made possible through higher class sizes in Grades 10–12 that average around 30 students.
- **Teaching teams:** Co-teachers at Revere High School collaborate with each other as well as with a broader shared-content team. Out of the eight Grade 9 math teachers at Revere High School, four participate in a co-taught model. This team follows the same scope and sequence over the course of the school year and collaboratively analyzes the results of interim assessments to drive necessary adjustments to instruction.

- **Expert support:** A district-level staff member is dedicated to special education services at the secondary level and is located at Revere High School, which facilitates informal observations and feedback. Revere High School's principal is the formal evaluator for both co-teachers in each classroom, and he also offers ongoing coaching through the evaluation system. Both the principal and district-level staff support co-teachers in advance of the school year in norming around shared expectations and how work should be delegated, which starts with aligning on common classroom routines.



TIME

- **Shared planning time:** Because Revere High School operates on a block schedule, co-teachers have a daily 80-minute planning period that they can use for individual planning and debrief with each other. Co-teachers have discretion over how they use the time, and they estimate that roughly half of each 80-minute planning block is spent working with each other.
- **Collaborative planning time:** Teachers have two 39-minute blocks available for collaborative planning time, which take place on Monday and Tuesday mornings before the official start of school. The administration guides how this time should be used, which includes work in shared-content teams as well as occasional work in vertical, cross-grade teams. Teacher leaders facilitate this time and provide expert support.



MONEY

- Revere High School's investment in co-teaching did not require additional staff positions. Low student-teacher ratios in co-taught, inclusive classrooms in Grade 9 were achieved through resource reallocations that raised average class sizes in Grades 10–12 to approximately 30 students per class.

LEARNING FROM IMPLEMENTATION

- **Co-teaching partnerships:** Previously a special education teacher was staggered across two to three Gen Ed teachers, but now one special education and one Gen Ed teacher are partnered together for the entire day in Grade 9 ELA and math courses. After a subset of co-teachers asked to be paired for the entire day, administrators found that matching teachers one to one strengthened professional working relationships and made it easier to schedule shared individual planning time.

- **Targeting Grade 9:** Targeting co-taught, inclusive classrooms to Grade 9 created a greater number of sections for students to access, which introduced more flexibility into student scheduling. This allowed students with disabilities to access both inclusive and substantially separate classes over the course of the day, depending on need. Targeting maximum support to this grade level, including a focus on developing academic independence, encourages student responsibility and autonomy. The level of support students require in subsequent grades is typically lower.

RESULTS

Currently over 60 percent of students with disabilities at Revere High School's Freshman Academy are in Gen Ed settings, including 43 percent in co-taught, inclusive classrooms. Between 2011 and 2014, the percentage of students with disabilities scoring at least proficient on the Grade 10 state-administered Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment of Skills (MCAS) in ELA increased from 27 to 37 percent, while proficiency rates in math increased from 12 to 20 percent. Furthermore, the adjusted cohort graduation rate among students with disabilities has jumped 21 points, from 63 to 84 percent.

These improvements have taken place alongside gains for students without disabilities: the percentage of all students who scored at least proficient on the Grade 10 MCAS increased from 76 to 85 percent in ELA and from 68 to 79 percent in math. Anecdotally, co-teachers at Revere High School report high levels of student collaboration and peer-to-peer learning across students with and without disabilities.

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