



Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

Co-Teaching

As educators strive to teach all students to reach grade-level standards and to meet the diverse needs of children in today's classrooms, more schools are considering co-teaching as an approach to achieving these goals.

Co-teaching is an instructional delivery approach in which two or more certified professionals with different knowledge, skills, and talents have joint responsibility, accountability, and mutual ownership for designing, delivering, monitoring, and evaluating instruction for a diverse group of learners.

Co-teaching merges general and special education instruction, providing a unified service delivery system for meeting the needs of students of varying abilities (Murawski, 2010). Co-teaching is supported by administrators and other professional staff involved in programming and scheduling.

To gain a better understanding of co-teaching, the concept is defined below in terms of what co-teaching "is" and what it "is not."

Co-teaching is:

- Sharing responsibility for planning, instructing, and evaluating the same group of students
- Determining and defining roles and responsibilities that focus on equality among professionals
- Determining how two professionals can maximize the learning experience for all students
- Promoting and modeling respectful interaction among students, between teachers and students, and between co-teachers
- Sharing ideas, strategies, and techniques for varied and effective instruction for all students
- Sharing mutual accountability for all students
- Using effective communication and problem-solving skills to overcome challenges

Co-teaching is not:

- One professional making all the decisions about instruction and assessment
- One professional predominantly assuming the instructional lead while the other professional is assisting and/or observing
- One professional teaching while the other is not actively instructing students (e.g., grading papers, sitting and watching, preparing tomorrow's lesson)
- A professional working only with the same group of students and/or consistently teaching the same content area
- Each professional teaching their students without regard to their co-teaching partner
- Each professional working in isolation and ignoring potential problem situations across the group
- Inclusion; it is one part of an effective inclusion program

Elements of Effective Partnerships

Communicating Proactively

- Get to know your co-teaching partner through discussions about each of your teaching approaches, grading practices, classroom management techniques, parent communication preferences, and daily classroom routines and procedures.
- Communicate with your co-teaching partner regarding how and when you will share planning, how the room will be arranged, and other logistical factors of sharing instruction.
- Proactively problem-solve to avoid potential issues around equality and communication.
- Discuss your philosophy about teaching students with disabilities in a general education classroom. How will Individualized Education Program (IEP) accommodations/modifications be implemented and monitored? Where will confidential information be kept?
- Develop a plan with teachers and administrators that will address communication with students and families about co-teaching partnerships.
- Plan for an open house or “back to school” night that involves both co-teaching partners.

Planning Collaboratively

Scheduled time for collaboration and shared instructional planning is critical to building and sustaining a successful co-teaching system. Administrators who provide scheduled instructional planning opportunities for co-teaching teams demonstrate commitment to this process. In addition, co-teaching partners should be encouraged to find ways to collaborate on their own.

There are many ways shared planning time can be embedded in the co-teaching process. Funding and staffing levels will affect the possibilities for (1) release time offered within the schedule of the building, (2) the use of substitutes, and (3) before or after school

compensation for planning. If these are not feasible or don't provide enough shared planning time, there are opportunities for additional planning on the fly, and in smaller chunks of time, that professionals can usually find in the course of the week. Teaching partners can use this collaborative time to share key decision making, then divide much of the labor of planning, and come back together to finalize their lesson plans. Co-teachers should consider the following questions:

“Co-teaching occurs when two or more professionals jointly deliver substantive instruction to a diverse, blended group of students in a single physical space.”

Friend and Cook, 2007

- How much time will we need?
- Where will we find the time we need?
- How do we maximize our shared time?
- What records can we keep to help us plan?

Establishing Equality

It is important to convey to students and parents that a teaching relationship is truly collaborative. Establishing equality in the classroom requires that both teachers discuss and decide:

- Who begins instruction?
- Who plans interventions to re-teach objectives?
- Who gives students permission to leave the classroom?
- Who grades students' work?
- Do both teachers have space for personal items in the classroom?
- Do both teachers' names appear on schedules, report cards, and class lists?
- How will answers to parent questions and concerns be handled?
- How will school initiated parent contact be handled?
- Does each teacher feel comfortable discussing classroom and personal teaching style differences?

Co-Teaching Approaches

Movement from one co-teaching approach to another should be fluid. You may use one approach for an entire lesson or you may move from one approach to another during a lesson. The lesson goals, purpose, and format, as well as formative assessment, will help you to determine the appropriate approach.

There are several experts who have written widely on co-teaching. As a result, there are different names for the different approaches, although the description of the approach may be quite similar. For the purpose of this publication, we will reference the six co-teaching approaches by Marilyn Friend (2007).

One Teach, One Observe/Assist

This approach is often used at the beginning of the co-teaching relationship because of the few demands it places on co-teaching team members. However, members may begin to feel unsatisfied in this relationship because:

- One teacher is primarily responsible for the design and delivery of the lesson, and
- The co-teacher observes and listens, and provides 1:1 tutorial as needed.

What does this approach look like?—

- Teacher 1 leads, planning and presenting the lesson content.
- Teacher 2 provides input and feedback for the lesson and assists with individual learning and/or behavioral needs.
- Teacher 2 circulates around the room, providing real-time support by answering questions, re-explaining key concepts, and dealing with inattentive behavior.

Strengths—

- Allows teachers to monitor students' learning needs
- Plays to each educator's expertise

Considerations—

- Should be used only periodically
- Should not be over used
- Both teachers need to have equal opportunity to collect data

Station Teaching

Based on the overall lesson plan, the content is divided and each teacher develops the content for his/her stations. Co-teachers jointly divide students into two groups. Students work at the stations with each teacher, rotating through stations over a period of time. A third group could work independently.

What does this approach look like?—

- Teacher 1 prepares and presents information regarding the stations, expectations, and student groupings.
- Teacher 2 prepares and presents lesson follow-up and whole group extension activities.
- Teachers 1 and 2 develop and present the content for their assigned stations.

Strengths—

- Allows for flexible grouping
- Enables teachers to monitor student learning
- Permits high levels of student engagement and opportunities to respond

Considerations—

- Each station must consist of activities that are interrelated, but are not sequential
- Noise level at each station may be distracting for some students
- Timing must be considered

Alternative (Differentiated) Teaching

Based on the varied levels of learners and progress monitoring data, this approach allows one teacher to teach a lesson to the whole group while the co-teacher is teaching the same information to a smaller group through a different approach.

What does this approach look like?—

- Co-teachers jointly plan instruction. Scaffolds for struggling learners are developed for each activity.
- The learning outcome is the same for both groups.
- Teacher 1 instructs the large group of students.
- Teacher 2 instructs the smaller group of students, using a more strategic approach to learning to teach the same content.

Strengths—

- Provides opportunity for pre-teaching concepts and skills, teaching learning strategies, providing reinforcement or remediation, adding enrichment activities, and monitoring learning
- Allows teachers to provide intense, small-group sessions within the context of the classroom, which ensures a creative, high-energy classroom where the needs of all students can be met

Considerations—

- The small group membership and instructors must vary
- The small group should not be seen as the equivalent of a pull-out class in the corner of the room

Parallel Teaching

In this approach, co-teachers teach the same content, in the same way, to different groups of students at identical times. Student groupings are heterogeneous and may be formed strategically based on student needs.

What does this approach look like?—

- Co-teachers jointly plan instruction.
- Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 teach all objectives to their own group.
- Teacher 1 provides an opportunity for students to participate in whole-class discussion after small-group instruction.
- Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 help to facilitate student engagement in whole-group discussion.

Strengths—

- Increases opportunities for participation
- Increases opportunities for a variety of questions using higher order thinking skills
- Increases instructional intensity
- Can be used with students who are at different skill levels
- Effective in situations where the goal is to help students understand multiple points-of-view
- Supports teacher equality

Considerations—

- Both teachers must be able to offer equivalent instruction
- Both teachers must be able to offer additional resources for the content area
- Teachers must learn to pace instruction to finish at the same time
- Noise levels can be high

Team Teaching

In this approach, both co-teachers share equally in the delivery and presentation of various components of the lesson. Each teacher's expertise is utilized. The planning and instruction for all students is done in a highly collaborative manner.

What does this approach look like?—

- Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 lead large-group instruction in front of the class and volley back and forth in a spontaneous manner, providing instruction to the whole group.
- Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 can divide the class into two groups based on students' needs for review, re-teaching, or enrichment of the concepts taught.
- Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 each instruct one of the groups of students.

Strengths—

- Can be energizing for teachers and engaging for students
- Both teachers are viewed as equals by the students
- Reduces discipline problems

Considerations—

- No instructional grouping of students is used
- Focus is not on the needs of individual students
- Requires flexibility on the part of both teachers, which may be best suited for experienced pairs of teachers

Lesson Plan Implementation

Regardless of the approach, implementation of the lesson requires that co-teachers address some issues:

Before the lesson

- Examine class make-up and the needs of students
- Identify/discuss individual strengths and areas of expertise
- Determine a timeline for working together
- Mutually agree on classroom procedures and how tough issues will be handled
- Discuss initial co-teaching roles and responsibilities
- Commit to a time to co-plan each week
- Determine what resources will be needed

During the lesson

- Tell students what you are doing and why
- Continue to plan on a regular basis
- Keep lines of communication open, plan time to talk and reflect
- Evaluate and modify your roles and responsibilities as needed
- Assess students for monitoring progress and planning instruction

“To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public and private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) sec. 612 (5) (A)

continued . . .

After the lesson

- Celebrate your successes with each other, the students, and their parents
- Revisit classroom practices and procedures, and redesign if necessary
- Keep talking and coaching each other
- Seek out other co-teaching partners
- Continue to build your capacity around researched-based practices and pedagogy

At the heart of laws like IDEA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is the goal of increasing the achievement of all students. Teachers and other school personnel need to work collaboratively to be effective in closing the achievement gap and

reaching high levels of success for all students. Co-teaching practices can facilitate achievement of these goals while meeting the diverse needs of the students in your classroom.

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Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro, Governor

