

6 Steps to Successful Co-Teaching

Helping Special and Regular Education Teachers Work Together

By Natalie Marston, elementary special educator, Charles County, Maryland

Are you wondering how you can co-teach effectively and make it a successful year for both teachers and students?

As co-teachers - a regular and a special education teacher - you will plan lessons and teach a subject together to a class of special and regular education students. Your co-teaching will support academic diversity in the regular classroom and provide all students with access to the county and state curriculum.

Co-teaching can be a wonderful experience when planning and communication are in place beginning day one. Here are six steps I've found very helpful when preparing for a co-teaching experience.

1. Establish rapport.

The first step that you (the regular classroom teacher and the special education teacher) need to take is to establish a relationship -- even before the students enter the building. Get to know each other on a personal level. After all you will be together the entire year. What things do you have in common? Are you married? Children? Hobbies? Where did you grow up?

When the two of you have a comfortable relationship and rapport with each other, the children feel more comfortable in the classroom. Students can sense tension as well as harmony within the learning environment. A positive relationship will help minimize misunderstandings and motivate you to resolve problems before they escalate.

2. Identify your teaching styles and use them to create a cohesive classroom.

Are you a hands-on teacher who loves doing experiments and using manipulatives, never to open a textbook? While your co-teacher needs to use the textbooks first and then supplement with experiments and manipulatives?

How do you manage behaviors? What are your discipline styles?

Instructional and discipline styles are just two factors you need to examine so that you can combine the best of both of your styles to create a cohesive classroom. You need to find a balance that makes everyone comfortable.

When you plan lessons together, you can use your two styles to complement one another and thus enhance the lessons and the delivery of instruction. You create a cohesive classroom with consistent expectations when both of you are on the same page with instruction and discipline styles.

3. Discuss strengths and weaknesses.

How can you utilize each instructor's strengths and weaknesses? A good way to do this is to have each of you make a list of strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. Then take the lists and compare them and highlight the strengths that are dominant for one teacher and allow that person to be the lead teacher in those areas. By using these strengths, you can differentiate your instruction to meet the needs of a larger group more frequently within the classroom as well as allowing for individualized instruction.

4. Discuss Individualized Education Plans and regular education goals.

To create Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), the special educator needs to involve the regular educator in the special education process. Students in special education belong to both educators, so the general educator must be informed about the IEP for each child. Otherwise, the two of you cannot effectively execute the plans. It's difficult to educate a child if you are unaware of his or her special needs. It is important to discuss the modifications and accommodations as well as the goals and objectives to ensure student success in the classroom. The special and regular education teacher can then work together in meeting the student's goals and ensuring adequate progress.

In the same way, the regular education teacher should discuss with the special education teacher his or her goals for the regular students, as the regular education students belong to the special education teacher as well. Both educators should be addressing the goals, objectives, and mandatory curriculum for that grade level.

5. Formulate a plan of action and act as a unified team.

You have to make decisions constantly throughout the year, so if you formulate a plan of action in the beginning of the year, disruptions will be minimal.

Consider the following items in your plan of action:

- Scheduling
- Expected classroom behaviors
- Classroom procedures, such as class work and homework policies, turning in work
- Consequences of not following rules and procedures
- Grading
- Communication between home and school

Talk about what you will tolerate as well as how you will respond to actions that are not acceptable. Be consistent when dealing with parents, and meet as a team for conferences with them. Determine your roles in advance so that you do not contradict each other or foster misunderstandings during the meeting.

6. Take risks and grow.

A wonderful aspect of co-teaching is that it allows you to take risks, learn from each other, and grow as professionals.

Co-teaching provides a safety net when you take risks in your instruction. When you try something new and it doesn't work, you have another teacher in the room who can step in with another technique or lesson that works, or point out the area of difficulty, or assist in redirecting the lesson. When you are the only teacher in the room and a lesson bombs, you often have to stop and move on and then analyze later why the lesson fell apart -- without the assistance of someone else in the room observing the lesson.

Enjoy!

Co-teaching is an experience that is as good as you allow it to be. You have the opportunity to work with another educator daily. Make the most of it. Enjoy!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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