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Eight Tips For Making the Most of Co-Teaching - Education Week Teacher



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3. Develop a productive co-planning flow. It's great to catch up a bit on life or debrief on the lesson when you sit down to meet with your co-teacher. However, I try to keep lesson debriefs and other items to about 10 minutes so that we use the time mainly for planning.

Here's how my co-teacher and I organize our planning time:

- **Before beginning a unit**, we meet to look at the "big picture," or the shape that the whole unit will take—the concepts, progression of skills, and how students will demonstrate their learning.
- **In Monday meetings**, we focus on planning the following week's worth of lessons, though not always in full detail. We also tie up loose ends for the current week.
- **In Friday meetings**, we debrief the week, fine tune the plans for next week, and create a skeleton for the following week.

4. Divide up to-do's. At the end of each meeting, it's best to identify and delegate the To Do's that arise from your plans. These include materials that must be created or student work requiring feedback by a particular date. Ideally, we do this in advance and run materials by each other before class.

5. It's "we," not "I". This is a detail that speaks volumes about your co-teaching partnership: Do you say "we" or "I" when introducing an assignment to students? If you want students to see you both as "their teachers," then, when addressing the class, you should say, "We want you to remember that..." and not "I want you to do it like this..." This can be a hard shift for teachers not used to co-teaching. But it sends an important message to students that both teachers have equal status and are on the same page.

6. Vary the way you group students. Though the special education teacher may take on a more active role in supporting the learning needs of our students with special needs, it's important in an inclusion class that *all* students feel like both teachers are "their teacher." One way to make this clear is by varying student groupings and which teacher leads each group. For example, if we tier groups for an activity based on reading levels then the special education teacher should not always go with the "lower-level" group. By mixing this up, we create a more inclusive classroom—and the opportunity to get to know all students equally.

7. Dialogue in front of students. Ongoing communication is necessary in co-teaching. Sometimes it's beneficial to have a dialogue with your co-teacher right in front of students.

Let's say my co-teacher tells students to put their books away at the end of a short activity. However, I actually want them to keep out their books because it worked better in my class last period. I have choices for how to respond.

I can:

- a) Let it go, and ask students to take their books out again later.
- b) Be visibly annoyed and say nothing.
- c) Address it aloud to my co-teacher in front of students.

A is often an appropriate response. B is not good, because it puts negativity out there for students and my co-teacher, and it doesn't solve anything. If I choose C, though, I can solve the practical problem, and I can model effective adult communication for my students.

For example, I might say in an even, enthusiastic tone, "You know what, Mr. K, what if students keep their books out, so they can refer to them later in the writing activity? What do you think? Would that be helpful?" Tone is important here.

If I'm sincere and not grabbing for power, Mr. K might respond, "That's a good idea! Yes, keep your books out, everyone." This way, I haven't contradicted my co-teacher's directions. I shared my thought and then left it to him to make the call—and we've modeled flexible collaboration for our students.

I also initiate dialogue with my co-teacher for other reasons. Maybe I'm unsure of how to respond to a student's question, so I say, "I'm not sure. What do you think, Mr. K?" Or, to share spontaneous decisionmaking, I say, "Mr. K, do you think we have time for students to talk with a partner before sharing out to the whole class?" Sometimes this kind of adjustment can be decided in a whisper, but all conversations do not need to be kept private. Sometimes it's more efficient and interesting to dialogue in front of the class.

8. Check in and have that conversation. At times, it's necessary to check in with your co-teacher on how the co-teaching dynamic itself is going.

Here are some general questions for a check-in conversation:

- Are there management items we should clarify, such as when are students allowed to go to the bathroom?
- Are we sharing airtime well?
- Are we dividing grading in an equitable way?
- Are there teaching formats that would better utilize the two of us in the classroom?

Change can be hard but necessary. Checking in makes an investment in the relationship and opens the door to change.

Every co-teaching partnership is different. Some work wonderfully with relatively little effort, as long as basic structures are in place. Others take great effort and progress slowly. (In some cases—and I think this is the rare exception—a co-teaching partnership will not work, despite anyone's best efforts. In such cases, seek administrative intervention.)

In every partnership, however, conflicts arise, and there may be a need to speak directly to the conflict, which is an adult skill most of us need to strengthen. Co-teaching will definitely test that strength!

My co-teaching relationships have been some of the most powerful sources of professional development in my career. Most importantly, a strong co-teaching dynamic can create an inclusion class that is a rich, challenging, and supportive learning environment for all students.

Ariel Sacks (@arielsacks) teaches eighth and ninth grade English Language Arts in New York City. She is the author of *Whole Novels for the Whole Class: A Student Centered Approach* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). She is a member of the **CTQ Collaboratory**, where she writes the blog *On the Shoulders of Giants*.

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