

The Educator's Handbook for Inclusive School Practices

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Collaborating with Others

Working within a Team



“I used to see it as my space. Now, I see the classroom as ours. My entire thought process has changed not only about the physical classroom environment, but also my thinking about students, designing curriculum from the onset to include all learners, options available to engage students in the learning process, and just everything . . . my ideas have improved drastically. When we all come together to think creatively and purposefully about students and what happens in the classroom . . . it’s like magic . . . we are unlimited in our ideas and what we make happen in the classroom!”

—Kelly (general education teacher)

“There was a change. All of a sudden, [the general education teacher] realized that I was value-added. Now, in eighth-grade social studies, he did not have to teach using a lecture format. He brought his expertise on the social studies content and Common Core State Standards. I contributed thoughts on universal design for learning, supplemental aids and services, and ways to facilitate authentic learning for a student who uses a communication device so this student could have full membership within the general education classroom.”

—Diane (special education teacher)

“We were just so lucky—[the school professionals] just seemed very vested. . . . They were very willing. Anything I brought in to discuss they would take a look at it, and I mean that was the attitude . . . it was openness to learn. It was just huge.”

—Sheree (parent of a student with disabilities who is educated in an inclusive classroom)

“We’ve each been invited to this present moment by design. Our lives are joined together like the tiles of a mosaic; none of us contributes the whole of the picture, but each of us is necessary for its completion.”

—Casey and Vanceburg (1996, p. 138)

All students in a classroom community can benefit from a team of professionals working together, which includes educators, related service providers, and paraprofessionals working together in ways that promote meaningful learning and a sense of belonging for all students. This collaboration between professionals on educating students with disabilities is a fundamental aspect of the federal IDEA 2004 legislation (§ 614 [d][1][B]; § 636 [a][1]; § 652 [b][1]; § 653 [b]; § 654 [a][1][C]). In an inclusive classroom, the professionals are like tiles of a mosaic. Each person is an important contributor to the larger picture. In today’s inclusive classrooms, it is quite common for educators to work alongside other educators, therapists, and paraprofessionals.

This chapter provides information and tools that will enable educators to engage in effective collaboration. To achieve this, the available resources are maximized to ensure all students’ participation, content learning, and meeting of IEP goals. In some cases, however, teachers, therapists, and paraprofessionals work in isolation during the planning or teaching stages. This type of structure creates many common problems. Special educators, who may have unclear roles in the classroom, can feel devalued or perceived as glorified teaching assistants when they provide push-in special education



services that are not meaningfully planned. A similar feeling can result for related service providers. Purposeful planning is needed to make the best use of each professional's expertise and to align curriculum standards, learning strategies, and teaching strategies to meet students' IEP goals.

This chapter is designed to help you to see your role as a member of the larger educational team and to address the roles and responsibilities of each team member. We propose general ways to communicate with the whole teaching team, outline co-teaching structures, and provide strategies for handling conflict. Finally, we address commonly asked questions about collaboration.

"I ask those that teach, is it your ideal to provide what you love to teach to all who desire to learn? If so, basic steps are to presume every person able and anxious to learn, and then to strengthen the supportive systems they need to do so and to always communicate and to collaborate to vitally feel the sense of success and freedom that being a true teacher can bring."

—Jamie (Syracuse University student who has autism)

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Roles and responsibilities of school professionals vary among schools, districts, and even states. Nonetheless, despite these variations, there are generally accepted roles and responsibilities that hold true from school to school. The next subsections provide some general guidelines for how school personnel can work effectively as a team to meet the needs of all students together.

Special Educators

A special educator is largely responsible for designing each student's IEP. Each year, a team of teachers, related service providers, the student, and the student's parents determines each student's goals and objectives, as well as the appropriate special education services. The special education teacher helps to ensure that the goals and objectives on each student's IEP are met. In collaboration with general education teachers, therapists, and other support staff, the special education teacher is responsible for helping to differentiate curricula and instruction and also for providing and recommending modifications and adaptations that would be appropriate for each student. Special education teachers are also responsible for solving problems that arise in the classroom, evaluating each student's services, and communicating student progress to the team.

General Educators

A general educator is expected to educate the students in his or her class. A general educator plans lessons, teaches those lessons, and assesses each student's skills. A



general educator is responsible not only for each student with an IEP but also for all of the students who do not have disabilities. Typically, a general educator is considered the content expert for the particular grade level and subject(s) being taught.

The Family

“Be open to the beauty of parent knowledge, vision and undying motivation for their child to be included. Help parents learn to advocate without angry fighting. Assist parents in understanding the beauty of their teachers and schools and to be able to hear the viewpoint of school confines and restriction. React to problems not with no’s and can’t, but with creativity! It’s a process and a long-term relationship.”

—Kim (parent of a student with disabilities who is educated in an inclusive classroom)

“I can handle the truth and I’m pretty good at finding solutions to hiccups in the program! I’m the most important person on this team, if you’re not honest we will never fully serve this child. Once that trust is lost it will be the hardest thing to repair.”

—Sue (parent of a student with disabilities who is educated in an inclusive classroom)

“Explain your plans ahead of time. Keep your promises. Share your thought process and give reasons for your decisions. Be patient. Treat us like partners, not pests.”

—Mary (parent of a student with disabilities who is educated in an inclusive classroom)

Family members are undoubtedly the most important people in a child’s life. With IDEA 2004, parents or guardians became equal members of students’ IEP teams. Parents or guardians are expected to be active members of their children’s education teams because they know their children better than anyone else. Therapists, teachers, and paraprofessionals can help parents play active roles by communicating all that happens in the school setting and, further, by listening closely to the wishes and concerns of family members.

Physical Therapists

Physical therapy is a related service and is provided by a qualified and licensed PT. PTs address areas such as gross motor development skills, orthopedic concerns, mobility, adaptive equipment, positioning needs, physical access to the school environment, and other functional skills that may interfere with students’ educational performance. A PT either works with individual students or leads small groups. PTs also consult with teachers, other therapists, and paraprofessionals. Examples of therapies include practice walking up and down stairs safely, body stretching for students who use a wheelchair, supporting access to school environments, or help performing other physical activities.



Physical Therapy Assistants

Some PTs have assistants who are responsible for carrying out therapy plans, supporting students in classrooms and the school environment, keeping track of data for the IEP goals, and supporting self-care needs. These assistants work under the direction of certified PTs.

Speech-Language Pathologists

SLPs help students with communication and with all of the skills required to communicate effectively. These skills include all issues related to language, the voice, articulation, swallowing, and fluency. Some students who work with SLPs have issues with stuttering. Others work on understanding and producing language. In schools, SLPs collaborate with teaching teams to support participation in classroom activities and effective communication.

Occupational Therapists

For a student who works with an OT, the student's disability necessitates support in daily life skills or functioning within the school. The therapist may evaluate the student's needs, provide therapy, modify classroom equipment, restructure environmental conditions, and generally help the student participate as fully as possible in school experiences and activities. A therapist may work with students individually or lead small groups. Therapists also may consult with teachers and paraprofessionals to help students meet their goals within the context of general education settings. Specific therapy strategies may include help with handwriting or computer work, fostering social play, and teaching life skills such as getting dressed or eating with utensils.

Occupational Therapy Assistants

Some OTs have assistants who are responsible for carrying out therapy plans, supporting students in classrooms and the school environment, keeping track of data for the IEP goals, and supporting self-care needs. These assistants work under the direction of certified OTs.

School Psychologists

The goal of school psychologists is to “help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally” (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). School psychologists work closely with teaching teams to build positive learning environments and to support connections between each student's home and school. Psychologists assess students and are often involved in standardized testing to determine whether a student qualifies as having a disability. Psychologists also work directly with others on teaching teams by helping to problem-solve and, at times, provide direct support services to students.



School Social Workers

Like psychologists, school social workers help provide links connecting each student's home, school, and community. The services provided by social workers are intended to help enable students and families to overcome problems that may impede learning. School social workers provide individual and group counseling, consult with teachers, and teach or encourage social skills. They collaborate with community agencies and provide service coordination for students who require many different agencies or services.

Vision Teachers

Vision teachers support students who have VI or are blind. Vision teachers typically work with classroom teachers to make modifications and adaptations to the curricula. They also help provide needed equipment (e.g., magnifiers and computer equipment) and needed materials (e.g., worksheets in braille).

Audiologists

Audiologists typically work with students who have hearing impairments, providing amplification systems and sign language interpreters for students who are deaf.

Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals are expected to perform many different tasks. Supporting students academically, socially, and behaviorally in the school community is essential. Paraprofessionals review and reinforce instruction under the direction of special education teachers or general education teachers. They might lead a station lesson, read aloud, or team-teach with other educators.

Students

Students themselves are crucial members of the team. It is essential to ask the student how he or she would like to be supported, what activities suit his or her learning style, how you can help make friend connections, and how the student wants you to intervene during challenging situations. You may also ask classmates and friends for their help in brainstorming creative ideas to support specific students.

HOW DO ALL THESE PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER?

"Coming together is a beginning; Keeping together is progress; Working together is success."

—Edward Everett Hale

Every school differs, but one thing is certain: All the adults on a teaching team must work together for the purpose of promoting student growth. One example of effective collaboration involves a seventh-grade team.



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This team involves all of the staff members who support Adam, a student with autism, VI, and sensory needs. The core team of people supporting Adam in English class includes the general education teacher, the special education teacher, the vision teacher, the OT, and a paraprofessional. This team meets monthly to discuss Adam's support in English class. Every week, the vision teacher and the English teacher meet with the paraprofessional to create enlarged materials for upcoming units of study. In addition, the special education teacher and the English teacher plan lessons together with Adam in mind so that each lesson is designed to meet his needs. For example, they planned a unit using a book from the Harry Potter series. In addition to having the paraprofessional enlarge the text in the packet of information, the special education teacher suggested having the entire class listen to an audio version of the book instead of reading silently. The educator and OT collaboratively set up a box of sensory tools with fidgets, pencil grips, a choice of writing utensils, an AlphaSmart keyboard, and gum. The OT joins the monthly meeting to problem-solve sensory-related issues in English class. Over the course of each meeting, the team sets plans outlining the anticipated type and level of support that Adam needs during each activity.

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Your team can fill out the grid in the reproducible form in Figure 5.1 to help determine the roles and responsibilities of all colleagues. Many teams have found it useful to determine who has primary, secondary, and shared responsibilities for each of the necessary tasks in inclusive classrooms. Then together, answer the questions provided in the following subsection to help the team make decisions about whether any roles should be changed or shared.

Guiding Questions for Teams to Discuss

Getting to know your teammates on a personal level is necessary for real and true collaboration to occur. Some questions that will help you as you sit down with other educators, therapists, or paraprofessionals are listed in this section. You may consider this list as some simple suggestions, or you may decide to go through each question with your team.

Work Styles

- Are you a morning or afternoon person?
- How direct are you?
- Do you like to do several things at once, or do you prefer doing one thing at a time?
- How do you prefer to give feedback to others on the team?
- What do you consider your strengths and weaknesses when working in a team situation?

Philosophy

- The goal of inclusive education should be . . .
- To me, *normalcy* means . . .
- To me, *advanced planning* means . . .