

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Bridging the Divide: Best Practice Ideas for the Resource/Inclusion Teacher

By Jodi Christopoulos

Abstract

Communication is a vital component to bridge the great divide between Special Education and General Education. This collaboration is essential to the success of our students with diverse learning needs. Resource and/or Inclusion Teachers must be prepared and organized from the very beginning of the year. Early preparation and consistency throughout the year using these best practice ideas will set high expectations for everyone that will impact the progress and achievement of the students on your caseload. This issue of NASET's Practical Teacher was written by Jodi Christopoulos. It will focus on best practice ideas for the resource room and inclusion teacher.

As a young special educator, tips for effective collaboration and communication with general education teachers were one of my most frequent internet searches. Surprisingly, there were not many articles directly related to my profession. I recently decided to survey a sampling of elementary teachers in my school district. The results showed that the common underlying issue preventing seamless collaboration between general education and special education teachers is communication. Effective, meaningful, and consistent communication could resolve many other "issues" that were listed as concerns of teachers in the survey.

What is effective communication between a general education teacher and a special education teacher? This encompasses a variety of aspects from understanding the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP), lesson planning, progress monitoring, deadlines for documentation, scheduling of services and even fully understanding the model of services agreed upon to provide the child access to the curriculum in their least restrictive environment (LRE).

Early communication from the start of the school year is the best way to be proactive and prevent any future mishaps such as misinterpretations and misunderstandings. This will take a substantial amount of preparation time for the Resource/ Inclusion Teacher and support for this practice must come from the school administration. Teachers want to see their 'shared' students with special needs succeed; however, each teacher does not always fully understand the roles and responsibilities of the other without communicating properly.

BEST PRACTICE #1 Communicate with and get the support of your school administration

First discussions should occur with your principal or administrator assigned to the special education department. You will want to walk through a sample folder you plan to present to the other teachers so that they can also add suggestions or offer their expectations.

Explain your communication plan and request in advance any assistance you may need. For example, if you do not have the same conference period as the teachers for your caseload, you may want to propose support in advance for coverage so you can meet with them on a monthly basis or coinciding with progress reports and report cards. A periodic conference is an excellent way to monitor your shared student's progress, lesson planning, and common curriculum language. Some teachers are happy to meet with you before and after school, so you will need to address that during your initial conference together.

Agree on the plan with input from your supervisors so that throughout the year they will know about your early and initial communications with your general education team and how you plan to proceed throughout the year.

BEST PRACTICE #2: Create an individual student folder for the General Education Teachers and take it to the Beginning of the Year Conference.

Provide a folder or binder of the same color to all the teachers in the school so that it is uniform and easy to locate. You may choose to use a bright color such as yellow or red to suggest importance.

Make sure you write the students name on the label, secure the profile sheet on inside cover, the list of comprehensive strategies on the back inside cover, and place the inspirational article about overcoming adversity or differences as the very first page in the folder. Try the story about the eagle living the life of a chicken.

DO NOT drop off the folder and leave. It will not hold value for them if you present it this way. You also do not know that they took the time to read it and if they understand what parts are important.

DO help the teacher understand that this folder can be an essential and valuable tool.

Explain how they will use the folder for reference, add work samples, update progress toward goals, and effectiveness of supports. It will help them organize their documentation (progress reports, report cards, parent contacts) for the student, and they can use it for parent conferences, and will have everything in one place when it is time to update goals, or they will be prepared with what they need to bring to the Admission Review Dismissal (ARD) meeting.

This folder should include:

- profile sheet
- inspirational Article
- eligibility classification,
- goals and objectives,
- accommodations and modifications for the classroom,
- behavior plan (if applicable),
- schedule of services,
- assessment information

- list of other helpful accommodations or strategies
- appropriate specified supplemental aids such as graphic organizers, multiplication charts, pictorial models of fractions, frequently misspelled word list etc.

*(It is helpful if you have/ or decide to make a chart for monitoring effectiveness of the supplemental aids, accommodations, and modifications. **REMEMBER:** The entire ARD Meeting paperwork may be hard for General Ed. Teachers to understand because it can be excessive. Give them what they need, and what they need is not more papers to file away! Your district may have online access to ARD paperwork for all teachers, if this is the case you will want to adapt your conference and folder accordingly.)*

BEST PRACTICE #3: Have a Beginning of the Year one on one conference with your General Education Teachers about the students that you share.

Do a substantial amount of preparation before this first meeting. You will need to read the IEP and familiarize yourself with the students on your caseload.

Prepare a folder for each student in each teacher's class. Be sure to include any special area classes like P.E., music, science, and library, although you may need to edit what you put in the folder and use only the items that would be useful for that class.

There are many items that should be on your agenda to discuss during your initial visit with your teachers from General Education. These include:

- The student: Discuss their name, age, & eligibility. You should also take time to talk about what you already know about who the student is an individual. Always bring up positive points and strengths first! If you do not know the student yet, look for any insight in the Special Education Folder, make a call to the former school, or call the parents. Highlight areas that will need special attention and that may be difficult for the teacher to understand.
- Go over the student folder and how to use the contents inside. Discuss goals and ask if they have questions about what the accommodations/modifications are or how to implement them.
- Point out the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for the student. If it is resource, you may want to discuss possible transitions issues in advance and ask for suggestions on how to help the student maximize instruction time upon their return. If the student has inclusion time, explain to them who will possibly be providing services (paraprofessional, teacher, often both) and discuss what the teacher would like to see when you come for services. Do they prefer that you stay back and support, take an active role, or be a part of small group arrangements? There are many different models and you may use many of them throughout the year.
- Explain your proposed communication plan and ask for their suggestions. Take notes and come to a common agreement. Common planning and common language used for teaching concepts are important. Will you email weekly, speak before or after school, or do you have a common conference period to get together?

- Discuss seating arrangements for the student. (This may be a specified accommodation) Scope out where the student is sitting in the class, and make a suggestion if the current location seems to be a concern. For example, a student with distractibility may need to face away from a window especially if traffic passes by that window`.`.
- Encourage a peer buddy.(This may be a specified accommodation) It should be a responsible and respectful student that can serve as a backup when the teacher is not immediately available and the student may have missed the directions, help locate materials, or can serve as a model when the student needs one or upon returning to class. You will need to make sure the teacher and student know that a peer buddy is not someone to copy from and it is a privilege. You may need to help train what it looks like.

You may not have a long time for the conference so be sure to know what needs to be discussed during your conference time.

BEST PRACTICE #4: Built rapport with the teachers and be consistent with your communication plan throughout the year.

If you stick to your end of the deal, chances are they will try to also. If you are inconsistent, they will be too. Show your team members that you are a knowledgeable, flexible, and dependable resource that they can easily work with, or come to with any questions/concerns.

Respect their knowledge, time, and responsibilities. If you can help in some way, even if it's not completely your responsibility, do it. It will come back to you at another time.

Set an email or phone reminder to send out correspondence emails for checking in on the students in your caseload.

Be specific and brief in your questions. Don't send a generic email that says, "How is ABC student doing?" You will get a generic reply that says, "Fine." Use a question like, "Did ABC student complete all assignments this week? If not, is there something I can help with?"

Create a communication journal to send back and forth between you. This will allow you to write down a question when you think of it and you can place it in their mailbox, send it with the student, or take it by their classroom.

Set up regular conferences, possibly with the help of administration to provide coverage, so that you may discuss the progress, planning, and needs of your shared student.

BEST PRACTICE #5: Communicate and build rapport with the parents of your students.

Make a personal call to every parent on your caseload at the beginning of the year to introduce yourself and explain how you will play a role in their child's education.

Send home a beginning of the year letter including your conference time, contact information, and possibly any goals and/or expectations for the school year.

Create a special education department newsletter. Keep parents informed about common special education acronyms, laws, and include items like parent tips for homework or upcoming parent involvement opportunities.

Consistent collaboration with the student's homeroom teacher will be important, so you can make sure the parent knows the school is implementing an effective and positive program for their child.

If they ask about something you are unaware of, let them know that you will look into it and give them a time and date you plan to follow up. If possible, always try to schedule any conferences together with the homeroom teacher so the parent knows you respect and consider their time valuable.

Invite the parent to come to help out in the classroom, go on field trips, or help with classroom celebrations.

Create a communication folder that will go home regularly. Inform the parents and the students on how to use it correctly, and have a small reward system for students who bring it back signed regardless of whether the communication was about positive or negative behaviors.

Send home a thank you letter, and have the students create a gift at the end of the year to show your appreciation for their support throughout the year.

Utilizing these best practice ideas will give you a great start to effective collaboration with your administration, teachers, and parents of your students with special needs. You can adapt it to the needs of your specific school situation. The goal is to provide each child with the best education possible in the least restrictive environment. A functional team is necessary for student progress and future success.

About the Author

Jodi Christopoulos is an elementary resource/inclusion educator, wife, and mother of two. She graduated from Colorado State University and holds certifications in the areas of Special Education, General Education, and English as a Second Language. She has experience educating students with a diverse range of eligibilities, language differences, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Jodi is an active member of the National Association of Special Education Teachers as well as the Council for Exceptional Children. She earned Teacher of the Year for the 2011-2012 school year at a title I elementary school within the Houston Independent School District where she taught for four years. Currently, she teaches in the Alvin Independent School District.