

Building Strong General Education and Special Education Partnerships

A Collaborative Guide for Improving Student Outcomes Through Shared Responsibility and Teamwork

Purpose & Overview

This guide supports educators in developing strong partnerships between general education and special education staff to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Successful inclusive education depends on collaboration, communication, and shared ownership of student success.

When general education and special education teachers work together effectively, students benefit from increased access to grade-level curriculum, stronger instructional supports, improved consistency, and a more inclusive learning environment. Conversely, when collaboration is limited, students may experience inconsistent support, communication gaps, and reduced opportunities for academic growth.

The purpose of this guide is to help educators establish collaborative practices that strengthen instructional planning, improve service delivery, and support meaningful inclusion.

Instructional Outcomes

Effective use of this guide helps educators:

- ✓ Strengthen collaboration between general and special education staff
 - ✓ Promote shared ownership of student success
 - ✓ Improve implementation of accommodations and supports
 - ✓ Increase consistency across instructional settings
 - ✓ Strengthen communication and problem-solving
 - ✓ Improve academic and behavioral outcomes for students
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Understanding Collaborative Partnerships

Supporting students with disabilities is a shared responsibility.

While special education teachers often provide expertise related to disabilities, accommodations, IEPs, and interventions, general education teachers provide expertise in curriculum, grade-level standards, instructional practices, and classroom expectations.

Effective partnerships occur when both educators contribute their knowledge and expertise to support student success.

Important Consideration

Students with disabilities are not solely the responsibility of the special education teacher.

Successful inclusion requires active participation and collaboration from all members of the educational team.

Characteristics of Effective Partnerships

Strong collaborative partnerships are built on:

Mutual Respect

Both educators recognize and value each other's expertise and contributions.

Shared Responsibility

Student success is viewed as a collective responsibility rather than the responsibility of one teacher.

Open Communication

Teachers communicate regularly about student progress, concerns, accommodations, and instructional needs.

Problem-Solving Mindset

Challenges are addressed collaboratively with a focus on finding solutions.

Student-Centered Decision Making

Decisions are based on student needs rather than adult preferences.

Common Barriers to Collaboration

<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Potential Impact</i>
<i>Limited Planning Time</i>	Reduced communication and coordination
<i>Unclear Roles and Responsibilities</i>	Confusion regarding support implementation
<i>Lack of Communication</i>	Inconsistent accommodations and interventions
<i>Misunderstanding of Disability Needs</i>	Reduced effectiveness of supports
<i>Competing Priorities</i>	Difficulty coordinating instructional efforts
<i>"Ownership" Mindset</i>	Students viewed as belonging to one teacher instead of the team

Recognizing these barriers helps teams proactively address challenges before they impact students.

High-Impact Collaboration Practices

Schedule Regular Check-Ins

Even brief conversations can improve collaboration.

Topics may include:

- Student progress
- Accommodation implementation
- Behavioral concerns
- Academic challenges
- Upcoming assessments

Regular communication helps prevent misunderstandings and promotes consistency.

Share Student Strengths and Needs

Both educators should understand:

- Student strengths

- Areas of need
- Learning preferences
- Accommodations
- Behavioral supports
- IEP goals

A shared understanding leads to more effective support.

Collaboratively Plan Instruction

When possible, teachers should discuss:

- Upcoming lessons
- Differentiation strategies
- Accommodation implementation
- Assessment supports
- Intervention opportunities

Collaborative planning improves access to instruction and increases student participation.

Focus on Solutions

When challenges arise, collaborative teams ask:

- What is working?
- What barriers exist?
- What additional supports may be needed?
- How can we adjust instruction to improve outcomes?

Collaboration Strategies in Practice

Strategy	What It Supports	Example in the Classroom
Weekly Check-Ins	Communication	Brief meeting to discuss student progress
Shared Accommodation Tracking	Consistency	Teachers monitor accommodation implementation together
Collaborative Lesson Planning	Inclusive instruction	Planning scaffolds before instruction begins
Joint Problem Solving	Intervention effectiveness	Teachers analyze barriers and develop solutions
Shared Progress Monitoring	Data-driven decisions	Reviewing student growth data together

Strength-Based Discussions	Student engagement	Identifying student strengths to guide instruction
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These strategies help create a unified support system for students.

Classroom Scenario

Situation

Mr. Williams, a general education science teacher, and Ms. Lopez, a special education teacher, share several students with IEPs. Initially, communication occurs only when problems arise, resulting in inconsistent accommodation implementation and frustration for both teachers.

Collaborative Response

The teachers establish a weekly 15-minute check-in and begin sharing information regarding:

- Upcoming lessons
- Student progress
- Accommodation implementation
- Areas of concern
- Successful instructional strategies

Together, they identify opportunities to proactively support students before challenges occur.

Outcome

Students receive more consistent supports, accommodations are implemented more effectively, and both teachers report stronger collaboration and improved student outcomes.

Teacher Implementation Reflection

When building collaborative partnerships, educators may consider:

- Do we communicate regularly about student needs?
- Are accommodations being implemented consistently?
- Do both teachers understand student strengths and challenges?

- Are instructional decisions made collaboratively?
- Are concerns addressed proactively?
- Is student success viewed as a shared responsibility?
- Are we utilizing each other's expertise effectively?

Ongoing reflection helps strengthen partnerships and improve support for students.

Building a Culture of Shared Responsibility

Over time, effective collaborative teams work toward:

- ✓ Shared ownership of student success
- ✓ Consistent implementation of accommodations
- ✓ Open and respectful communication
- ✓ Collaborative problem-solving
- ✓ Data-driven decision-making
- ✓ Inclusive instructional practices
- ✓ Strong relationships between educators

When collaboration becomes part of the school culture, students benefit from more cohesive and effective support systems.

Connection to IEP Implementation and Student Success

Strong general education and special education partnerships support:

- Accommodation implementation
- Progress monitoring
- Goal attainment
- Inclusion practices
- Behavioral supports

- Differentiated instruction
- Family communication
- Student achievement

Collaboration is often one of the strongest predictors of successful inclusive educational experiences.

Key Takeaway

Strong partnerships between general education and special education teachers are essential for creating inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments. By communicating regularly, sharing responsibility, collaborating on instruction, and focusing on student-centered solutions, educators can provide consistent supports that help students with disabilities thrive academically, behaviorally, and socially.