

# The Power of Co-Teaching and Inclusion in Special Education

## THE ISSUE

Today, 7.3 million students ages 3–21 receive special education or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the equivalent of 15% of all public school students.<sup>1</sup> With only 71% of special education students graduating on-time (compared to 87% for all students<sup>2</sup> and persistent under-performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) across all grades and subject areas,<sup>3</sup>) national experts are calling for more personalized instruction and prioritized goals for this vulnerable group.

All students deserve specially designed and personalized instruction—whether they are identified as autistic or neurotypical, deaf or hard of hearing, cognitively disabled or gifted. But with an ongoing stigma around ableism in our schools paired with worrying outcomes, there is special urgency for special education students. The inclusionary practices demanded by the U.S. Department of Education under the IDEA<sup>4</sup> create even greater urgency.

## WHY CO-TEACHING AS A SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL?

Co-teaching structures (typically involving a certified general education teacher and a certified special education teacher working together with groups of students) delivers inclusive and personalized special education instruction in the least restrictive environment. The teachers share the planning, organizing, delivery, and assessment of instruction as well as the physical space,<sup>5</sup> benefiting all students and teachers alike. While transitioning to co-teaching may at first seem overwhelming, the advantages are many.

*“Teachers in thriving co-teaching situations often describe it as their most valuable, transformational professional development.”*

—Shelley Taylor, Executive Director,  
Catalyst for Educational Change

### THE BENEFITS OF CO-TEACHING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS:

Access to the general education curriculum (as legally required)<sup>6</sup>

Tailored, specialized instructional supports that are co-designed with students’ specific learner-variability in mind<sup>7</sup>

Strengthened social connections with their peers<sup>8</sup>

Empowerment and independence, fostered through participation in regular classroom activities<sup>9</sup>

Increased opportunities for 1-on-1 interaction that strengthens student-teacher relationships, fostering the personalized connections that are especially beneficial for special education students<sup>10</sup>

A holistic educational experience that blends social-emotional learning with academics<sup>11</sup>

### THE BENEFITS OF CO-TEACHING FOR TEACHERS:

Teacher collaboration inspires creativity and experimentation<sup>14</sup>

Teacher collaboration identifies stronger instructional methods<sup>15</sup>

Teacher collaboration fosters growth in instructional skills and diverse strategies for supporting all students’ learning<sup>16</sup>

Teacher collaboration provides camaraderie and creates a supportive and efficient teaching environment through complementary strengths and teamwork<sup>17</sup>

### THE BENEFITS OF CO-TEACHING FOR NON-SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS:

Exposure to diverse perspectives and a more enriching and inclusive learning environment<sup>12</sup>

More creative lessons fostered through teacher collaboration<sup>13</sup>



## 5 BEST PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING SPECIAL EDUCATION INCLUSION

Through experience working on-the-ground with district partners implementing special education inclusion approaches, Catalyst for Educational Change (CEC) has identified the following best practices:

- **Vision and leadership quality.** All leaders and decision-makers need to have a shared understanding of the program and what makes it a high-quality approach (see “Let’s Get Started: 5 Questions” below).
- **Teacher quality, instructional quality, and leadership quality.** Before introducing co-teaching structures, districts must ensure they are recruiting, retaining, and supporting teachers and leaders who are able to be effective in any teaching arrangement.
- **Teacher training and supports.** All new co-teaching pairs need a minimum training on: (1) expectations for sharing instructional space, and (2) how to ensure active, specialized roles for both certified teachers.
- **Sectioning and class composition.** The co-taught class should represent a true mix of students, with roughly 30% students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 70% representation of the general school population. When the 70% general education population is comprised of largely non-IEP students with other identified learning needs (e.g., behavior, language acquisition, or gaps in learning) the class is no longer considered a “general education” placement.
- **Accountability in implementation.** Clear protocols for program oversight and quality assurances related to clarity of vision, instructional quality, training, and class composition must be established from the start to ensure smooth implementation.



## LET’S GET STARTED: 5 QUESTIONS

Below are 5 questions for IEP teams and district decision makers to begin the transition to making special education more inclusive.

- 1 PULL-OUT CLASSES.** Are any special education services provided outside of the general education class? If so, can the amount of time students spend in special education programming outside of general education be reduced? How can we better ensure students’ needs are met while reducing time spent outside of the general education classroom?
- 2 PEER INTERACTIONS.** Within general education classrooms, are appropriate supports available to help special education students be an equal member of the class? Could additional supports be offered? Are there any barriers that may unintentionally hinder special education students’ ability to interact with peers?
- 3 STUDENT FLEXIBILITY.** Are there flexible learning environments where students with and without disabilities may access instruction and supports (i.e., pod areas outside the classroom, small group breakout spaces, and individual instruction spaces for all students)?
- 4 FOSTERING INDEPENDENCE.** Are the supports provided to special education students in general education classrooms intentionally creating productive struggle that will support them in overcoming key challenge areas and becoming independent learners (e.g., are there assurances that if, for example, a student struggles with taking notes, they will be supported in learning to independently take notes in a general education classroom rather than moved to a more restrictive placement)?
- 5 MINIMIZING INTRUSION.** Are the supports provided for Special Education students in general education classrooms the least intrusive supports possible (e.g., are students being allowed to remain in general education classrooms, without teachers overcompensating in their attempts to support their special needs)?

*When done right, these practices can create a better working environment for teachers and more successful short- and long-term learning outcomes for students. CEC has worked with special education directors and district leadership to center these success differentiators in efforts to support special education inclusion. For districts just beginning to consider co-teaching, CEC can bring practical lessons to help generate sustainable, long-term change.*

*“When we focused on making special education more inclusive, we saw huge improvements on our team, increased alignment, and higher quality IEP goals.”*

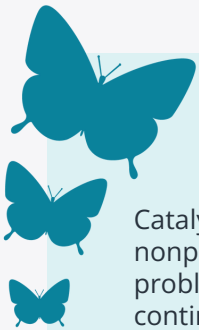
—Heather Yutzy, Principal,  
Chicago Public Schools

# CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**SHELLEY TAYLOR** is the Executive Director of CEC and a National Board-Certified Teacher (NBCT). A former teacher, instructional coach, union president, and district level administrator, Shelley serves Pre-K-12 settings with strong collaborative practices focused on continuous improvement and manages all programs, partnerships, and content for teacher evaluation, teacher mentoring and leadership, and inclusion practices, and oversees day-to-day operations of CEC's contracted services.

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## About Catalyst for Educational Change

Catalyst for Educational Change (CEC) is a nonprofit consulting agency solving complex problems in educational systems. CEC uses continuous improvement practices and deep collaboration to help educational systems build internal capacity, create better outcomes, communicate with leadership, and re-think our children's futures.

CEC begins each engagement by carefully assessing the district's or school's needs in the areas requested with an understanding that

even the most effective research-based practices cannot be implemented the same way in every district. CEC's tailored approach engages schools and districts in a process that identifies effective practices and areas for improvement, using methods that result in thoughtful guidance that sets the direction for the work in a district or school, including a scope and sequence for services that most effectively builds capacity for long-term improvement.

Learn more at [cecweb.org](http://cecweb.org).

## REFERENCES

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