The Coteaching

In classrooms filled with students with a variety of learning needs, two teachers can be better than one.

Marilyn Friend

Maria and Carol have been working with their 3rd graders on using adjectives in spoken and written language. One strategy they used was a fishbone diagram. Maria read a short story to the entire group. Then Carol asked the class to agree on a favorite character, and she wrote the character's name on the head of the fish. Together, the teachers coached the students to use adjectives to describe that character and wrote these words on the bones of the fish. For additional practice, the two teachers gave each student a fishbone diagram and divided the class into two groups. Carol read one story with her group while Maria read a different story with hers. Each student chose a character, filled in his or her diagram with adjectives, and then shared the results with a partner from the group. What the students did not realize is that Maria's group read a simpler story than Carol's group did.

During a unit on the Industrial Revolution and urbanization in their block-scheduled U.S. History class, coteachers Mark and Celeste divided their students into three groups. One group worked with Mark to explore the effects of late-19th-century inventions on American society. Celeste led her group in a discussion of *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. The third group of students watched a short video on the era, examined materials from the local historical society, and wrote questions they wanted the class to discuss about what life was like at that time. Each 25 minutes, the groups rotated so that all students participated in all the activities during the class period. The teachers spent the last few minutes of class leading a whole-class discussion of what students had learned. As the bell rang, one student eagerly asked, "What are we going to learn about tomorrow?"

Coteaching arrangements like these are one promising option for meeting the learning needs of the many students who once spent a large part of the school day with special educators in separate

Partnership

instructional responsibility for a diverse group of students that usually includes several with disabilities or other special needs.

Coteaching partnerships are unique for several reasons. First, unlike partnerships in which two educators blend two class groups—as when two 5th grade teachers open the movable wall between their classrooms—coteaching dramatically improves the student-teacher ratio. Instead of one teacher for 25 students or two teachers for 50, the ratio becomes two teachers for 25 (or possibly just a few more) students.

Second, the two professionals in co-taught classes bring unique areas of emphasis to the partnership (Dieker, 2001). The classroom teacher focuses on *content* and the curriculum. The special educator or specialist focuses on the learning *process*, helping students acquire, remember, and demonstrate knowledge and skills. When these two types of expertise are blended, students benefit (Murray, 2004).

Understanding the Challenges

If coteaching is so valuable, why isn't it an option in every school? Consider these comments from teachers in schools implementing coteaching:

■ The special educator I work with says she doesn't really know the curriculum and is uncomfortable participating in instruction. I'm not sure what she's supposed to do.

■ The classroom teacher told me that I shouldn't talk during instruction. He told me that after he finished, I could walk around to help "my" students. I feel like a teaching assistant.

■ We never have a chance to plan, so

it's not a really a partnership.

These comments illustrate why some school leaders are reluctant to establish coteaching programs and why some coteaching arrangements are unsuccessful. This complex means of reaching struggling learners relies on careful planning, implementation, and maintenance. But with the proper planning and support, coteaching can benefit teachers and students alike.

Coteaching in Context

Coteaching is most effective when it is an integral component of a school's efforts to provide all students with the education they are entitled to. Coteaching should be part of a school culture that encourages professionals to work together to achieve shared goals (Barth, 2006).

In addition, coteaching is a way to provide services to students within an inclusive school. Such a school welcomes all students, whatever their strengths and struggles, and commits to helping all students learn. All teachers, not just a few, contribute to an inclusive school culture. This dedication to student learning should translate into specific actions. For example, one high school principal decided to assign a co-taught class to any teacher assigned to an advanced placement class.

Professionals should keep in mind that coteaching is only one of several beneficial options for supporting students in an inclusive school. Some students with disabilities need the structure and intensity of small-group settings to raise achievement. Nothing about coteaching implies that schools should eliminate such approaches.

classrooms. First described in the 1970s (Warwick, 1971), classroom partnerships specifically designed to reach students with disabilities became more commonplace in the 1980s (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989). Today's mandates for inclusion have brought new appeal to this approach. In coteaching, two teachers of equivalent professional status, most often a classroom teacher and a special education teacher, share

Teacher and Administrator Fears and Expectations

Administrators often rely on volunteers who agree to coteach. Although it seems that nearly all teachers would welcome the opportunity for this type of collaboration, some are reluctant. Classroom teachers may fear that special educators will judge their teaching. Special educators may worry that others will question the value of their work, or even that their jobs might be eliminated.

After several years, participating teachers may desire a break from coteaching but find that no one is willing to take over. Potential new coteachers may be reluctant to volunteer for fear that they could not coteach as well as those with more experience. Principals can eliminate some of these recruitment problems by gradually but firmly establishing the expectation that any teacher in the school might be asked to partner with a specialist, although not necessarily every year. Ideally, coteaching becomes a standard for practice that is integral to a school's efforts to reach all students.

Professional Development and Preparation

Professional development is essential for creating and sustaining coteaching. All staff members should begin with a basic understanding of it, and partners should have the opportunity to learn about coteaching expectations and discuss essential topics. Teachers need to establish the roles and responsibilities each person will have in the cotaught classroom (Wasburn-Moses, 2005) by, for example, discussing how to ensure that they both assume active instructional roles that maximize each one's contribution to teaching and learning. If the special educator does not have extensive experience with the subject matter, as might happen in middle or high school, the partners should outline what the special educator's classroom role will be—and when

that teacher might comfortably lead instruction. For example, the special educator might lead the class in completing a review, give directions, and demonstrate real-world applications of concepts. Most important, the coteachers should discuss how to make sure that the instruction appears seamless to students and that

both teachers work with all students even while addressing individual needs.

Coteachers should also outline how they will address common classroom issues such as discipline and grading. They might discuss their priorities in terms of student behavior and clarify that both teachers will address any discipline problems they notice using their agreed-upon classroom expectations. For grading, the coteachers might begin by duplicating several students' assignments and grading them independently to check that their judgments are consistent; they can then share this classroom task. They also should discuss how they will make decisions about report card grades for students, keeping in mind accommodations on students' individualized education programs (IEPs).

Once they complete initial staff development, coteachers often benefit from visiting classrooms with model coteaching practices already in place or participating in peer observations to exchange feedback on their classroom practices. They also might create a professional

learning community so that they can periodically meet with other coteachers to discuss their accomplishments and challenges and to trade ideas. This ongoing support helps teachers reflect on coteaching, resolve problems, and experiment with new approaches.

The structure of coteaching provides excellent support to students with disabilities or other special needs—as well as to students who struggle but have never been identified as having special needs. However, teachers in cotaught classes must be sure that their academic content, instructional strategies, and behavior management plans are research based and effectively implemented. The strength of coteaching comes from the many opportunities to use innovative practices that would be far less practical in a classroom with just one teacher. See Leadership Tips for Coteaching Programs (p. 51) for more ways to create and sustain an effective coteaching program.

Logistical Concerns

When I ask teachers to list their concerns related to coteaching, the first item is almost always shared planning time. Most coteachers would like a planning session every day, or at least every week. If daily or weekly sessions aren't feasible, administrators need to find creative ways to make at least periodic planning a reality. Some administrators arrange for coteachers to receive continuing education credits for participating in after-school planning sessions. Others offer coteachers a small monthly stipend that acknowledges the additional planning inherent in this model. If substitute teachers can fill in so that teachers can be released from classroom duties, teachers can occasionally plan during the school day.

The second logistics matter concerns scheduling. First, principals should group students in such a way that quality coteaching is feasible. For example, several 4th grade students with special

needs might be placed in a single classroom instead of distributed across all 4th grade classrooms. Thus, more of these students will receive the support provided in a cotaught classroom. However, the number of students with special needs assigned to any single classroom should not be so high that the teachers find it impossible to maintain the pace and rigor of the required curriculum. If the percentage of students with disabilities is kept below one-quarter in elementary classes and one-third in middle and high school classes, coteachers can usually avoid serious problems. The belief that two teachers can handle an unlimited number of students with learning needs can undermine a coteaching program.

Teacher scheduling also is a consideration. Some special educators, especially at the elementary level, may spend the entire day with one classroom teacher. However, most specialists coteach with two, three, or even four colleagues. To avoid requiring too much of special educators, elementary schools might limit the number of grade levels any single special educator covers. In middle school, it is preferable for special educators to be assigned to just one team. In high school, special educators might coteach only in English classes instead of in math and science classes as well.

Some classroom teachers may find themselves working with more than one special educator. For example, students in an elementary classroom may not all be in the same specialist's caseload. Core high school courses such as 9th grade English may be served by several different special educators, and a classroom teacher may coteach with one person in a morning class and someone else in an afternoon class. Such scheduling problems may be unavoidable, but these arrangements should be the exception.

Measuring Results
In this era of accountability, program evaluation is a significant component of coteaching (Wilson, 2005). Because student achievement outcomes depend so

heavily on the quality of implementation, school leaders should establish criteria for judging the quality of the coteaching program (Salend, Gordon, & Lopez-Vona, 2002). Are both teachers actively engaged in the instructional process? Do both teachers contribute to discipline and classroom management? Are they grouping students in ways that will help them meet learning goals? Are they addressing student learning needs and making use of each teacher's strengths?

Consider how two hypothetical classes might tackle a particular lesson. In one class, students work in one of three groups: Two are led by teachers,

and one allows each student to work with a peer partner. The students rotate among the three stations during the class period so that all students participate in the three groups. In the other class, the classroom teacher leads large-group instruction while the special educator hovers toward the back of the classroom, only stepping in to help specific students for the final five minutes of the class period. Would the same student achievement results be likely from each of these arrangements?

Once the quality of implementation is established, leaders can measure outcomes. Student achievement scores are central to this effort; however, many principals and teachers find that after a single year of implementation, student achievement may be improving, but not rapidly enough to change the scores on high-stakes tests. For that reason, they should also use curriculum-based and other detailed measures of learning.
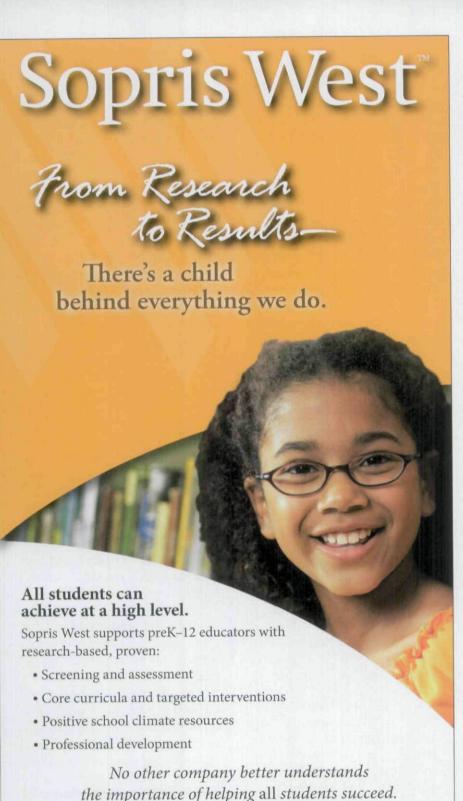
Student outcomes extend beyond achievement. School leaders can gather data on student discipline referrals, attendance, and similar outcomes. They can also interview students to gauge their reactions to two-teacher classrooms.

Other types of data can also contribute to evaluating coteaching (Mastropieri et al., 2005). For example, interviews of coteachers can explore their perceptions and observations. Parents of learners who struggle in school may offer their ideas about how coteaching is affecting their children, and parents of typical learners may report on their children's experiences.

Tapping All Students' Potential
We are only beginning to understand the potential of coteaching for accomplishing the goals of today's schools. These teachers' comments offer a glimpse of the possibilities coteaching offers:

■ I *knew* this wasn't going to work—after all, I don't have special education training. But I have to admit, it's the best thing we've ever done for our kids. I could never go back to the old system.

■ I never realized how much potential these students have. They're making more progress than I ever thought possible when I had them in my special education classroom.

■ Why didn't we do this years ago?

Most students with disabilities or other special needs can meet the high standards being set in today's schools, but professionals have to find ways to tap their potential. Coteaching is one way to do this while bringing out the best in teachers and providing them with ongoing collaborative support as they meet the many challenges of contemporary public education. **EL**

References

Barth, R. (2006). Improving relationships within the school house. *Educational Leadership, 63*(6), 8–13.

Bauwens, J., Hourcade, J. J., & Friend, M. (1989). Cooperative teaching: A model for general and special education integration. *Remedial and Special Education, 10*(2), 17–22.

Dieker, L. A. (2001). What are the characteristics of "effective" middle and high school co-taught teams for students with disabilities? *Preventing School Failure, 46*(1), 14–23.

Mastropieri, M. A., Scruggs, T. E., Graetz, J., Norland, J., Gardizi, W., & McDuffie, K. (2005). Case studies in co-teaching in the content areas: Successes, failures, and challenges. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 40,* 260–270.

Murray, C. (2004). Clarifying collaborative roles in urban high schools. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 36*(5), 44–51.

Salend, S. J., Gordon, J., & Lopez-Vona, K. (2002). Evaluating cooperative teaching teams. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 37,* 195–200.

Warwick, D. (1971). *Team teaching.* London: University of London.

Wasburn-Moses, L. (2005). Roles and responsibilities of secondary special education teachers in an age of reform. *Remedial and Special Education, 26,* 151–158.

Wilson, G. L. (2005). This doesn't look familiar: A supervisor's guide for observing co-teachers. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 40,* 271–275.

Marilyn Friend is Professor and Chair of the Department of Specialized Education Services, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; 336-256-0153; m_friend@uncg.edu.