

5 tips for creating an inclusive secondary school learning model



Team-based practice

Team-based practices leverage multiple adults to create deeper and personalized learning opportunities for students.

Leverage special educators' knowledge and skills to increase your team's effectiveness

Strategy:	Frequency and duration:	Practice adapted from:	Elements of the Next Education Workforce:
The core educator team, which includes a special educator, works together with intentionality to build culture, develop professionally, co-plan and co-teach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Initial meetings to plan team structureOngoing relationship building and professional learningWeekly planning meetings and daily co-teaching	<p><u>Westwood High School</u> in Mesa, Arizona</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Core educator team: One lead teacher, three content area teachers, one special educatorLearners: 150 Grade 9 grade students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Dynamic teamsDistributed expertiseLearner-centered instructionShared roster

Westwood High School's 9th-grade teams understood that their inclusion model **benefits both students with disabilities and students without disabilities**. They also knew that this model requires a systemic approach to their teaching methods; collaboration; and learning space structures, systems and schedules.

Find out how they prioritized team structure, building relationships, professional learning, instructional supports, co-planning and co-teaching to move toward their vision of creating a more equitable learning environment for all learners.



What is inclusion?

An inclusion model begins with the belief that all students belong in the general education classroom. Within this environment, the special education teacher works collaboratively with the general education teacher to ensure students with IEPs and 504s receive the necessary supports to be successful in the general education curriculum and meet their individual learning goals. When both teachers think strategically and collaboratively about classroom structure (e.g., seating arrangement, areas for small-group instruction), curriculum (e.g., scaffolded materials), and pedagogy (e.g., how to deliver instruction), there are benefits for both students with disabilities and their peers (Learn more: [Understood.org](https://www.asu.edu/understood)).

1

Start with team structure

Whenever possible, ensure special educators are members of core educator teams

Members of the core educator team work with students for a sustained period of time (e.g., a full year); work with a single, larger roster of students, and share accountability for students' academic and social-emotional growth. Whenever possible, special educators should be members of the core educator team, meaning they are working exclusively with that team and the students they serve. This team structure has the benefit of ensuring the special educator is able to embed deeply with the other educators on the team and the students they serve, attend all co-planning meetings, and plan co-teaching without cross-referencing multiple teams' schedules. While co-planning and co-teaching can certainly happen in settings where special educators straddle teams, this structure tends to present logistical challenges. When the budget, school enrollment and caseloads allow, ensure special educators are members of core educator teams.

2

Take the time to build relationships

Collaboration between teachers takes trust and vulnerability, particularly when co-planning and co-teaching are involved. Highly effective educator teams don't leave that to chance. Take time to get to know the adults you'll be working with. Build relationships with intentionality. Seek to understand, and actively cultivate an appreciation of the different strengths and styles you each bring to the table. That is the power of implementing a collaborative inclusion model.



Explore the [building educator team culture resource collection](#) for concrete resources intended to support your team in building trusting relationships.

3

Professionally develop around co-teaching principles and co-teaching models

Co-teaching is a valuable strategy for implementing effective inclusion models, and it can look like [one of six models](#) (i.e., team teaching, parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, one teach and one assist, and one teach and one observe).

To help your team build a clear, shared understanding of the vision, purpose and principles of co-teaching, it's important to start early with professional learning. Your special educator may already have experience with one or more of these models and may be able to lead professional learning on co-teaching for the team or, if time and resources allow, the team might register to attend a professional learning sequence on co-teaching together.

As the year goes on, continue to extend your learning together as a team. Read and discuss [videos](#), [articles](#) and books on co-teaching. Examine a single lesson plan together as a team and challenge yourselves to identify opportunities to improve the lesson through utilizing different co-teaching models. Schedule opportunities to observe each other as you try them out. The more you can see examples of co-teaching in practice, the more you'll understand what it can look like in your classroom and how it can benefit all students.

4

Identify instructional supports and strategies that might be useful across areas

As a team, determine what instructional supports (e.g., guided notes, graphic organizers) might benefit students across content areas. As with professional learning around co-teaching, some special educators may be eager to lead this professional learning opportunity for the team by sharing their deep knowledge of instructional supports with other team members. In other cases, other educators on the team, an instructional coach, or outside resources (e.g., articles, books, professional learning experiences) may be helpful. Ensure all educators on the core team grasp the purpose of each support, understand how to determine when and for whom it might be appropriate, and know how to implement it effectively.

Keep in mind: Consistency is helpful. If all educators on the team call the support by the same name and use it with frequency, students will adapt to it more rapidly. And the more practice students get with each support, the more independent they will become as they use it.

At Westwood, for example, the 9th-grade team committed to the use of a number of instructional supports and strategies including close reading bookmarks, Cornell notes and advance organizers. Each of these strategies and supports is useful across content areas, and the team worked together to ensure each member had an understanding of how and when to use each support. Students became familiar with all the instructional supports quickly because they learned about and practiced them across content areas.



What's the difference between instructional supports and accommodations?

An accommodation, in the context of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans, “changes how students access and learn the same material as their peers — without lowering the academic expectations” (Understood). Many instructional supports accomplish a similar goal, and indeed, plenty of the instructional supports Westwood educators implement in their learning spaces are also accommodations that appear in individual students’ IEPs or 504 plans.

So why not just call instructional supports “accommodations”? We use the phrase “instructional supports” purposefully to communicate that Westwood educators use these strategies both to support students with disabilities and to support students without disabilities. For example, while the use of advance organizers may be an accommodation listed in a given learner’s IEP or 504 plan, they can also be a useful strategy for addressing students’ knowledge gaps. A small group of learners working with an educator on a K-W-L chart may include some students for whom that advance organizer is indeed an accommodation and others for whom it is an instructional support intended to address a knowledge gap.

In an inclusion model, when students require accommodation as part of their IEP or 504 plan, the team of teachers can determine if that same accommodation would benefit all students and choose to apply that as an instructional strategy within the general education lesson. This is an example of Universal Design for Learning, and it can streamline service delivery and create more opportunities for all students to access helpful resources.

Additional reading:

- [Using accommodations and modifications in the classroom \(Understood.org\)](#)
- [Advance organizers and why they work \(Understood.org\)](#)
- [What is Universal Design? \(Understood.org\)](#)

5

Schedule regular, recurring time to co-plan as an educator team

Core educator team members must have adequate, recurring time to co-plan together. Co-planning meetings might include:

- Co-taught lesson reflection: Reflect on recent co-taught lessons, including what went well and what adjustments can be made for the future
- Analyze student learning data: Analyze student learning data, identify student needs and consider how educators’ expertise can best be distributed to support them
 - Determine if accommodations or modifications may be necessary to accurately assess all learners and norms around what this looks like within the context of the content and how students are demonstrating mastery
- Co-plan for future co-teaching: Co-generate upcoming plans including:
 - Discuss relevant instructional supports, accommodations and modifications
 - Agree on appropriate co-teaching models for upcoming lessons

Why educators and students love this practice

Westwood High School educators have reported increased satisfaction as a result of having another adult in the room with whom they collaborate. Additionally, educators indicate that they have gained new knowledge and skills as a result of their close collaboration with the special educator on their team. Finally, educators report that students are using instructional supports more consistently and effectively as a result of shared language and practice across content areas.

Westwood students indicate that they have had a positive experience learning in an inclusive model. Individuals with IEPs and 504 plans report feeling as though they belong in the classroom community when they are learning alongside their grade-level peers. Students without disabilities have likewise report that they benefit from having the support of the special educator during co-taught lessons and access to and consistent guidance in how best to use instructional supports.

Considerations for implementing this practice

Move toward shared ownership

In order to effectively co-teach, educators need to create a shared experience. Language like “mine” or “yours” that may have once been used to describe space, students, materials, etc. should now be replaced with “ours”. [This video](#) highlights how two teachers create a collaborative environment with shared ownership. When done well, students view all adults in the room as their teachers.

Transparency builds trust

Even with careful planning and proactive communication, last-minute changes can arise (e.g., an educator is pulled into an IEP meeting, a safety drill shifts when a lesson will be delivered), and these can negatively impact the co-teaching plan. Make sure these changes are communicated with everyone who needs to know so there is never a question about where someone is or why they're not in the classroom as expected.

Opportunities for growth

Be curious during the lesson. What strategies or tools is the other educator using that you might try out in the future? How can you grow as an educator through your experience co-teaching? Be mindful of the components of the lesson that are working well for students and adults and what you may wish to shift moving forward. Bring those ideas to the next planning meeting.

Ensure access to information

Consider how you might create a digital space where data, lessons, graphic organizers and more can be accessible at all times. Make sure everyone on the team is proficient in finding and accessing the information, and reliably provide materials within expected timelines so everyone has what they need to do their part.

Co-teaching with special educators is only one of many ways to co-teach

This resource has largely highlighted the ways in which special educators and secondary content educators can work together in a co-teaching partnership; however, the same benefits apply to secondary content educators working with other secondary content educators, educational leaders (e.g., lead teachers, instructional coaches), English language development educators, speech pathologists, librarians and more. And while most co-teaching models describe how two educators can partner to better support all learners, why stop there? Why not try three educators teaching or four educators parallel teaching? Consider how a larger team of educators might combine the various co-teaching models to best meet the needs of students.