

Practice Brief #1: - Co-Teaching

Practice Brief #1 - Co-Teaching: A Means to Creating Inclusive and Equitable General Education Classrooms

This practice brief draws upon the findings from a qualitative case study research project that describes the inclusive classroom structures, classroom practices, assessment strategies, and systems of support that contributed to positive outcomes for Black, and Latine, and multilingual students with disabilities. We use evidence from two case study schools, Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, DC (“Capital City”) and Crosstown High School in Memphis (“Crosstown”) to illustrate the benefits and promising practices for the successful implementation of co-teaching.

What is co-teaching?

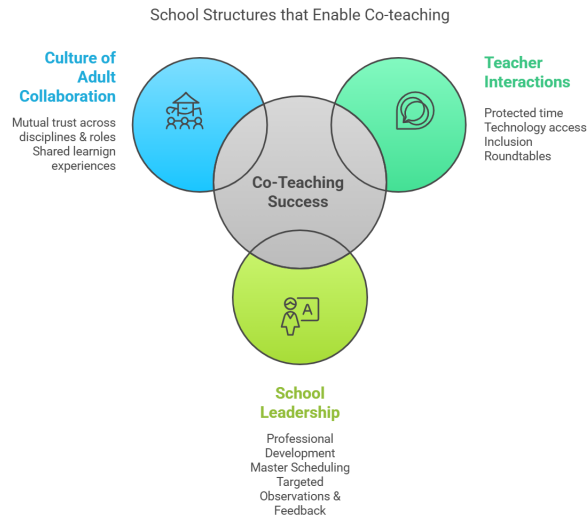
A hallmark practice of educating diverse students in inclusive schools is collaborative teaching, also known as co-teaching. This practice involves two or more professionals delivering instruction to a blended group of students in a single physical space (Cook & Friend, 1995). In the context of special education, co-teaching is a form of special education service; students with identified disabilities receive services in general education classes instead of being in segregated classrooms (Friend et al., 2010).

Benefits of Co-teaching

Co-teaching yields benefits for students and teachers alike. Students in co-taught classrooms receive more individualized supports and experience increases in academic achievement and feelings of self-efficacy (Brendle et al., 2017; Solis, et al., 2012). Teachers who co-teach have been found to report feelings of increased professional support and camaraderie (Cramer & Nevin, 2006).

School Structures for Co-Teaching

Walking through the case study classrooms at Crosstown and Capital City, it appears normal and expected that two adults working together in a classroom would run smoothly. However, it took months of culture-building, vision-setting and hours of collaborative planning before students experienced co-teaching in this way. Successful co-teaching rests on interconnected school structures: a culture of collaboration, leadership, and intentional teaching interactions.



Caption: Successful co-teaching requires the school structures of a culture of adult collaboration, leadership and teacher access to collaboration time (Image generated by Ilene Ivins using Napkin AI)

#1 - Foster a Culture of Adult Collaboration

Successful implementation of co-teaching relies on a culture of consistent adult collaboration, which is equally important to the “nuts & bolts” of co-teaching (Friend, 2010). Educators who hold respect for each others’ expertise tend to practice equity of voice in planning lessons and contribute to a culture of shared responsibility for the learning of all students with learning differences. Facilitating mutual respect for each other’s expertise is planned and intentional through cross-disciplinary professional development; at Capital City, general education teachers are encouraged to obtain special education certification through a local credentialing partner. Leaders at Crosstown set the tone with recurring staff-wide professional development on topics that engage staff of various disciplines—historical institutional oppression (facilitated by the organization Facing History, Facing Ourselves), restorative justice, and emotional resilience.

#2 Calendar Collaborative Planning

Calendered co-planning meetings are a starting point, and technology supports flexibility and accommodates teachers’ busy schedules. An inclusion teacher described the co-planning process with her general education co-teacher:

“I like how we do it. We share a planning tool together that lays out learning targets and the materials that we’ll use. So she’ll put that in [the shared tool] a few days or a week before class. I’ll look at the materials and the lesson for the day, and that’s when I start to make accommodations to the work. I’m thinking about the needs of the inclusion students, the abilities of the inclusion students, timing and the space that we have. Sometimes I decide to pull the [students with disabilities] into small groups. So that’s one of the big things that happens behind the scenes; adapting the work to make it more reachable for some of our students.”

Even when a regular, protected co-planning time is not available, a school that has a regular professional learning time (e.g., early release days) can promote cross-departmental interaction and sharing of instructional expertise and resources that inform lesson planning for inclusive classrooms.

#3 Predict and Plan for Behavior

Co-teachers and other dedicated staff in the school anticipate the behavioral needs of students with learning differences by getting to know students and their circumstances, understanding the root causes of their behaviors, engaging in ongoing communication, and taking collective responsibility for designing plans to support students. At Crosstown High School teachers serving students with IEPs are invited to quarterly Inclusion Roundtables, which presents an opportunity to collectively discuss and develop plans for specific students with learning differences. Teachers also use a messaging app, Slack, to informally communicate about specific students so that other teachers can meet students where they are. For example, if a student is having a rough day, the teacher may send a message to a group of colleagues to give a heads up about the student and provide suggestions or insights. These exchanges reflect a school culture that is committed to a collaborative problem-solving approach in which all teachers share responsibility for the learning of all students.

#4 Leverage Two Teachers with Station Teaching

Of the different [models](#) of co-teaching, **station teaching** offers promise as a sustainable inclusive practice for improving student engagement, improving retention of complex concepts, and enabling peer and teacher feedback (Conderman and Hedin, 2007).

At Capitol City, student desks are set up in small clusters, or “stations” where students are working on different versions of the same academic activity. For example, in a 9th grade Biology class, the students are divided into five groups; one group is writing up an analysis of a soil sample in Google docs on the computer. Another group at the next station is working with a teacher, who has created a graphic organizer that encourages students to identify salient features of each soil sample, to aid in the analysis process at a later time. A second teacher sits with a station across the classroom, where the students are self-assessing their analyses against a teacher-made rubric.



Caption: Students use technology and collaborative groupings in stations

Learning benefits are often recognized by students in co-taught classrooms. One student who receives special education remarked,

“I feel like [the special education teacher] is supporting me in academics, I feel like it's a crucial thing because a lot of assignments and math in particular are hard for me and the teacher is always there to try to push me and try to get me back on task.”

#5 Provide Ongoing, Continuous Feedback

Administration and instructional leaders hold pivotal roles in implementing and sustaining a high quality learning system that centers inclusive teaching. Through calendered **co-teaching walkthroughs**, school leaders can assess fidelity of implementation and get powerful information on how to support and develop educators. Guided by a framework by Friend, 2019, and supported through school professional development, school leaders at Capitol City developed an observation tool, [Co-Teaching Quality Indicators](#) to support the co-teachers at different stages of the collaboration process: instruction, planning and reflecting on student results. School leaders make note of observable student and teacher behaviors within the co-taught classroom.

#6 Communicate with Families

Parent education and clarity about the co-teaching model is essential to building their trust in the program. When families matriculate to a new school, they may not be familiar with the full inclusion model, while others may be initially skeptical of the full inclusion model. One parent shared at Capital City shared,

“I guess maybe I have an idea [that] [special education] should be a pullout...whereas [here] that means the special ed teachers are in the classroom with the regular teachers and they're going to do the work in there and help.”

To help families understand the model of special education, staff at Crosstown establish communication in the Spring semester before students enroll to describe how the special education program will look, and follow up with regular check-ins and student conferences throughout the school year.

Summary - Implementing Co-Teaching

Successful implementation of co-teaching and inclusive classrooms requires staffing, space, time and leadership. However, there are different ways to implement co-teaching in graduated ways with different levels of resource intensity. Below are three levels of implementation that require different levels of resource investment to support building a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for the learning of SWDs:

More resources \$\$\$\$	• Staffing so that each core class includes a special education co-teacher • Adding dedicated instructional aides to support co-teaching
Medium resources \$\$	• Staffing so that special education teachers are assigned to a subset of core classes (e.g., English language arts, math) • Creation of observation tools to monitor and provide feedback on the quality of co-teaching • Slating protected co-planning time for content and/or grade level teams
Minimal resources \$	• Quarterly meeting time for collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers that are not necessarily co-teachers to share instructional expertise • Inclusion roundtables for collective discussion and planning to support specific students or groups of students

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative lesson planning through shared online formats; a common team app that supports real-time teacher sharing |
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Additional Resources on Co-Teaching

- Math co-teach **lesson plans** from Virginia Dept. of Education
<https://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/k-12-standards-instruction/mathematics/instructional-resources/co-teaching-mathematics-instructional-plans-mips>
- Weekly **Lesson Plan template** (based on Friend's work)
https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/Co-teaching_Lesson_Plan_Template.pdf
- Successful Co-teaching: Keys to Team Development [Video]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5kxv69N-MY>

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Practice Brief #2 - UDL-CRT Context

Practice Brief #2 - Universal Design for Learning in a Culturally Responsive Context

This practice brief draws upon the findings from a qualitative case study research project that describes the inclusive classroom structures, classroom practices, assessment strategies, and systems of support that contributed to positive outcomes for Black, and Latine, and multilingual students with disabilities. We use evidence from two case study schools, Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, DC (“Capital City”) and Crosstown High School in Memphis (“Crosstown”) to illustrate the benefits and ways of implementing the school-wide practices of Universal Design for Learning.

What is the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework?

The UDL framework offers guidelines for designing instruction that is both flexible and rigorous, by encouraging educators to consider the various ways that learning happens in the brain through three primary networks: recognition, strategic, and affective. By tapping into multiple means of activating each network, educators utilize UDL to create options in how students are engaged, taught, and how students show what they know. The three domains, Engagement, Representation and Action/Expression, explored in depth in CAST.org’s [UDL Graphic Organizer](#), provides suggestions for educators. With the overarching goal of cultivating learner agency that is purposeful and reflective, resourceful and authentic, strategic and action-oriented, the framework highlights options for planning.

UDL and Culturally Responsive Teaching

In Summer 2024, CAST.org updated the UDL framework to consider how students from multiple-marginalized backgrounds experience the added barriers of cultural biases and structural historical oppression in schools. Enhancements to the UDL framework included more emphasis on culturally responsive and sustaining practices, linguistic diversity and student belonging.

Engagement Options (“the how of learning”)	Representation Options (“the what of learning”)	Action & Expression Options (“the why of learning”)
• Welcoming Student Interests & Identities • Sustaining Effort & Persistence • Emotional Capacity	• Perception • Language & Symbols • Building Knowledge	• Interaction • Expression & Communication • Strategy Development

Updates to the UDL Framework in 2024 to integrate Culturally Responsive Teaching		
• Centering, affirming, and sustaining learners’ interests and identities • Emphasizing the role of belonging in teaching and learning • Promoting the role of joy and play for learners and educators alike • Cultivating empathy and repairing harm with restorative	• Authentically representing a diversity of identities, perspectives, and narratives as they relate to learners • Considering perceptions of people, cultures, and languages • Valuing multiple ways of knowing and making meaning	• Honoring and valuing a wide variety of forms of communication • Centering and valuing forms of expression that have been overlooked or ignored by addressing biases • Challenging exclusionary practices to build more accessible, inclusive spaces and systems

practices		
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The updates to the UDL framework “builds upon previous iterations and emphasizes addressing barriers rooted in biases and systems of exclusion for learners with and without disabilities” (CAST, 2024) and acknowledge the extant research on the over-identification of Black and Latine students for special education ([Losen, Martinez & Shin, 2021](#)).

Benefits of UDL for Black and Latine Students with Disabilities

Consistent with the updates to UDL in Version 3.0, literature identifies that UDL and culturally responsive practices, when cross-pollinated ([Waitoller & King-Thorius, 2021](#); [Kieran & Anderson, 2019](#)), increase the potential for engagement and achievement among Black and Latino students in urban schools ([Howard, 2002](#); [Cholwela et al., 2012](#)).

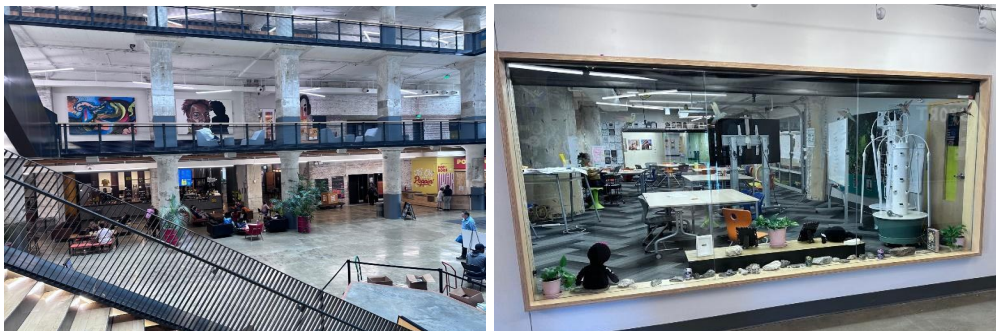
In this brief we illustrate both school-wide and classroom practices that support access and cultivate student agency.

#1 Create Physical Spaces that Foster Student Choice

The spatial design of schools and classrooms impacts students’ feelings of safety, which, in turn, can encourage student choice ([Evans, 2022](#)). At both Crosstown and Capital City, the physical layout of the school and classrooms rested on the belief that students should have options for the ways they physically experience learning.

Both case study schools offered a variety of seating options and work arrangements; students could stand at desks, sit in pods, work independently on comfortable couches or bean bags with ease during a given learning segment. These choices provide students opportunities for self-regulation and autonomy.

Crosstown’s layout includes a “commons” for students to move freely during and in between classes, and large garage-style doors allow teachers to close or open classroom spaces for project development, which fosters collaboration across heterogeneous student groups and between disciplines.



Caption: The Crosstown Concourse enables students the option to work in small groups both outside of classrooms. Large glass windows, “garage door” connecting walls and flexible seating allows teachers to create larger or smaller working spaces to adapt instructional groupings.

Classrooms at Capitol City included “calm corners” where students could opt into a quiet transition from recess or lunch into the structured time of the classroom. Students were provided the option of choosing to use desk dividers for more focused, independent work time.

#2 Leverage Technology

Both case study schools lean heavily on technology as a key tool that enables students to access content in different formats and supplementary materials. A 1:1 student-to-device ratio affords students the ability to submit, receive feedback from teachers/peers, and edit their work on assignments. Educators reported using technology to modify content and provide accommodations for students with learning differences. Learning platforms also provide a personalized, self-paced progression of lessons for students.

Schoolwide use of technology enables students to access multiple options for how they learn new content and demonstrate their learning, and to learn at their own pace. Students are given options for learning the same content, but in different formats (e.g., printed handouts of slides, audio versions of texts, videos of the same content). In one 10th grade classroom, a math teacher video-recorded lessons in advance, enabling students to watch (and re-watch) the lessons.

Curriculum choices that support UDL and Technology also expand options. [Desmos](#), an inquiry-based math program, used at Crosstown, offers personalized learning options; educators can create customized activities and scaffolds tailored to individual students' needs; extensions and review are embedded in the curriculum.

UDL in the classroom

School and classroom layout, technology access and curriculum facilitate student choice but aren't always an option for schools. Teachers can integrate UDL in ways that make lesson planning and instruction easier to plan and more accessible to all types of student learning profiles.

#3 Provide Multiple Options for Representation and Expression

UDL should never be seen as an “add-on” to a teacher’s workload, but rather as part of a teacher’s initial approach to planning, delivery and assessing learning. In inclusive classrooms, students are encouraged to make choices about how they want to learn, and how they want to express their knowledge. When a student experiences this act of choice multiple times per day, across disciplines and years, they start to identify which tools and formats are most accessible and best support their learning. Each time a student makes a choice about how they access content (e.g., printed slides vs. a video of their teacher presenting the slides), they become more self-aware, agentic learners.

In a UDL-focused, inclusive classroom, students can choose how to demonstrate their learning in various modes without compromising cognitive demand. In a 5th grade English language arts classroom at Capital City, students had the option to complete a graphic organizer or compose a multi-paragraph literary analysis essay to demonstrate their ability to analyze how an author used “show not tell” to develop a character. Providing such options are possible when educators pinpoint a common set of criteria for success that can be applied to students’ demonstrations of learning of varied formats. In this example, the teacher was more interested in the reading skill of literary analysis than writing skill.

Options for Language and Symbols

Classrooms are rich with language, which presents many options for language support and affirmation of language variation, including adding translations onto slide presentations for the whole class.

Distinct from translation, translanguaging acknowledges that multilingual people move fluidly between languages, activating idioms or phrases for different functional purposes ([Najaro, 2023](#); [Garcia et al., 2017](#)). Educators at Capital City supported students in using translation tools, gave activity directions in English and Spanish, and encouraged translanguaging to support peer collaboration.

Get Ready & Do Now

Get Ready

Grab your notebook and folder. Put your phones on the board!

YES CHROMEBOOK NEEDED TODAY.



"levantar un muro" (modismo) significa estar en guardia, distanciarse o no compartir cómo se siente con los demás.

Do Now:

In your journal, respond to the following prompt:

The idiom "to put up a wall" means to be guarded, to distance yourself, or to not share how you're feeling with others.

When have you "put up a wall" between yourself and others?

Why do people "put up a wall?"



[Jpg file]

Caption: The idiom, “put up a wall” translated into Spanish (LEFT), and a visual cue for agreeing with a peer, pictured and written out in English, Spanish, and American Sign Language (RIGHT)

In UDL classrooms, educators encourage and respect English language variation and cultural dialects. At Crosstown, teachers affirmed the validity of students’ language choices. A Black student with a disability, searching for academic language to describe an abolitionist’s political influence, suggested “menace to society” while telling the inclusion specialist that he wanted a peer to “sophisticate it” by using more academic language. The teacher encouraged him to use his own language, remarking “Use the words that you know and that counts. You don’t have to ‘sophisticate it’ for it to be quality work.” The educator affirmed that “the words you know” reflect accurate, quality thinking, cultivating a respect for the student’s linguistic choices and culture and reflecting an anti-racist linguistic pedagogy ([Baker-Bell, 2019](#))

UDL and Culturally Responsive Teaching

The 2024 updates to the UDL framework explicitly integrate culture, identity, and belonging to challenge exclusion and biases experienced by Black and Latine students. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices involve valuing students’ cultural and linguistic assets while developing their ability to critique and challenge exclusionary practices leading to racist systems. (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). Crosstown and Capital City staff consistently applied practices that married UDL and CRT.

For example, in an 11th grade English class at Capital City, co-teachers launched a unit of study on the play *Fences* through interactive stations in which the students learned about the social context of the play in the following stations: a) reading biographical information about August Wilson’s life, b) watching a preview of the recent film adaptation of the play, c) viewing a series of photos of different types of fences in the world; d) reading poems about border walls; and e) preparing for a homework assignment in which they would select or take a photo of a fence that had personal meaning for them.

Summary - Implementing School and Classroom UDL

Successful implementation of UDL and CRT to enhance inclusive classrooms requires tools, space, time and leadership. However, there are different ways to implement these practices in graduated ways with different levels of resource intensity. Below are three levels of

implementation that require different levels of resource investment to support building a schoolwide and classroom-wide approach to UDL:

More resources \$\$\$\$	• Designing physical spaces with flexible work spaces (open classrooms that can be subdivided as needed) • Training and professional development for all school staff on UDL, CRT, translanguage strategies • A school-wide subscription for personalized learning tech platforms (e.g., Demos, Lexia, IXL, Khan Academy) • 1:1 devices to facilitate electronic assignment submission, feedback, and revision
Medium resources \$\$	• Investing in furniture for flexible seating arrangements • Training and professional development on UDL, CRT, and translanguage for only those staff working with SWDs and MLLs • Providing additional planning time for teachers working with SWDs and MLLs to adapt curricula and identify a broader array content learning resources to provide more choices for students (e.g., multimedia resources)
Minimal resources \$	• Rearrange existing furniture, allocating spaces for group and individual work • Adorning school and classroom walls with culturally relevant images (e.g., Black and Latine thinkers and leaders) and accessible signage in multiple languages • Using existing professional learning time (e.g., early release days) for general education, special education, and English language development teachers to share expertise and resources related to UDL, CRT, and translanguage strategies

More Resources on UDL

- The UDL Guidelines: <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>
- Brief Family-Friendly Introduction to UDL: <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/universal-design-for-learning-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>
- UDL Blog (for teachers) by Dr. Katie Novak: <https://www.novakeducation.com/blog/tag/universal-design-for-learning>

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Practice Brief #3 - Relationships

Practice Brief #3 - An Inclusive, Culturally Responsive School Culture that Fosters Relationships

This practice brief draws upon the findings from a qualitative case study research project on inclusive classroom structures, classroom practices, assessment strategies, and systems of support that contributed to positive outcomes for Black, and Latine, and multilingual students with disabilities. We use evidence from two case study schools, Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, DC (“Capital City”) and Crosstown High School in Memphis (“Crosstown”) to illustrate the benefits and ways of implementing the school-wide practices that promote a culture of adult learning and collaboration.

School Structures that Leverage Relationships

Much has been written on the power of relationships to build a successful school culture and improve student outcomes ([Cornelius-White, 2007](#); [Hattie, 2009](#)). Close relationships between teachers and students with disabilities (SWDs) are linked to more positive overall experiences in school ([Al-Yangon, 2016](#)).

This brief illustrates inclusive practices and school structures that support relationships beneficial for students with learning differences. Inclusive schools operate with the belief that all members of a school community—students, staff members, and families—are leaders and that the exchange of ideas and voices contributes to a strong school culture ([Deal & Peterson, 2016](#)). We focus on three school-wide structures that support A) a cross-disciplinary problem solving team, B) relationships that foster students’ sense of belonging and agency, and C) partnerships with families.

The Impact of Relationships for Black and Latine Students with Disabilities

Studies indicate that collaboration across teaching and staff roles improve academic and social achievement for students with disabilities (SWDs) in general education classrooms ([Hunt et. al, 2004](#)). In addition, students of color who participate in their schools’ decision making have higher attendance and higher GPAs, suggesting that involving student voice contributes to a strong school culture ([Kayne et al., 2022](#)). Honoring the voices of Black and Latine SWDs means that educators ask students what they need and share power with students to make decisions about school structures and supports ([Fritzgerald, 2021](#)). Respect for and commitment to students as well as systematic, regular communication with caregivers are associated with positive family perceptions of schools ([Blue-Banning et al., 2004](#)). Below are examples from our two case study schools that illustrate these strategies.

#1 A Cross-Disciplinary Problem-Solving Team–Inclusion Roundtables

At Crosstown, inclusion roundtables are quarterly grade-level meetings where special education staff and general education teachers collaborate to generate ideas for how to support students who are experiencing behavioral or academic challenges. A key difference between an inclusion roundtable and a school-wide student support team (SST) is that the focus is on SWDs.

Crosstown staff prepare for the inclusion roundtable by completing a survey to identify students who may benefit from additional support. The 30-minute meetings focus on two students and follow a protocol that begins with a discussion of student strengths, growth areas, and then a brainstorm of support strategies. The student perspective is considered first, with staff responding to the prompt “The student says...” After participants in the roundtable mutually agree on next steps, the notes are summarized on a slide deck and shared with meeting participants and other teachers working with the students. The quarterly meeting yields a new

shared understanding of students' strengths, needs, and what supports will be provided during and outside of class. Inclusion roundtables support mutual respect for expertise between general education and inclusion teachers and centers the needs of SWDs in collaborative problem-solving.

#2 Relationships that Foster Students' Sense of Belonging and Agency

An inclusive school culture in which SWDs feel known and cared for by their peers and adults is critical for their sense of belonging, agency, and well being. Our case study schools found that a promising schoolwide structure for fostering relationships and belonging is [Crew](#), sometimes known as advisory in other contexts. Both a curriculum and a structure, Crew classes of 10-12 students meet throughout the week (4-5 times a week) with the same adult advisor to discuss topics around social emotional learning, academics, and cultural competence. At Capital City, Crew advisors were most often cited by both students and their caregivers as a source of support given their roles as the primary contact for families and the school staff member most responsible for students' well being.

To provide more time for building close relationships, trained Crew advisors stay with the same group of students for at least two years (grades 9-10, grades 11-12 at the high school). Crew advisors embody the school's whole-child approach to students' learning and well being; they serve as the main liaison between school and home, while keeping relevant teachers and staff up to date on what's happening with a student both academically and social-emotionally. One high school SWD shared,

"I have a lot of home stuff going on right now. So I have some teachers right now who are supporting me through this time, and I had teachers in the past buy me birthday presents because I built such a good relationship with them as a student and a teacher."

SWDs and their caregivers also identified specific general education and special education teachers, dedicated aides, coaches, internship mentors, school leaders, counselors and therapists as adults who provided care, academic supports, and mentorship. However the Crew model carves out consistent dedicated time, with the support of a curriculum toolkit, to build relationships with peers and a caring adult, which promotes students' sense of belonging, voice, and agency over their own learning ([Hernández and Darling-Hammond, 2022](#)).

An inclusive school culture also uplifts student voice and supports SWDs in developing a sense of agency. Student agency is typically defined as a student's capacity to exercise autonomy in the classroom and school. An increased sense of self-determination among SWDs has been linked to better post-secondary outcomes and improved quality of life after school ([Weymeyer et al., 2013](#)). At Crosstown and Capital City, students are able to develop their self-determination through opportunities to make choices during learning activities, such as where they are able to situate themselves in the classroom, freedom of movement, different seating options (e.g., wobbly chairs, beanbag chairs, the floor), use of headphones or other tools for self-regulation, and different ways to access content and demonstrate their learning. Crosstown students are able to propose and choose electives each year ("APEX" class) and engage in a passion project of their choice. Capital City seniors conduct a year-long inquiry project on a topic they choose ("senior expedition"). SWDs at both schools also expressed that their teachers respect their opinions. At Capital City, students' voices are also uplifted at grade-level and whole-school "meetings" where students are involved in discussing and problem-solving issues that affect their school community (e.g., vandalism, cyberbullying). When SWDs at Capital City were queried about their biggest areas of growth, several cited their ability to advocate for themselves and to ask for support, providing evidence of a school culture that respects and cultivates

student voice.

#3 Families as Partners

Inclusive schools that build relationships approach families and caregivers as partners in ensuring success for students. Inclusive schools build structures for listening to and honoring the expertise and knowledge of students' families. Leaders and staff know that practices such as systematic, timely communication, using accessible language, and reporting accurately and honestly when students struggle is more likely to support positive school-family partnerships ([Blue-Banning, et al., 2004](#)). In both of the case study schools, families and staff alike reported that frequent and respectful communication were the main reasons that families trusted the schools to provide an education that supports both academic progress and well-being for their SWDs.

However, family engagement should not be limited to when students are struggling or during IEP meetings. Both case study schools have bi-annual student presentations (known as "Celebrations of Learning" at Capital City and "Presentations of Learning" at Crosstown). These events typically happen after school hours and invite families to see what their child is working on. Students prepare a presentation to share what they learned and accomplished during a particular project, expedition, or field experience. Capital City also requires a family member to attend quarterly student-led conferences, and family members are invited to the 8th and 12th grade portfolio presentations at the end of the year. One parent of a SWD remarked,

"There are many opportunities for parents to come into the building outside of parent teacher conferences... You see what your child is working on. We have literacy night, we have math night. We have many opportunities to come. And even if you want to volunteer, this is like an open door policy. You can come in and do a morning meeting and see what that looks like. So I feel like nothing is hidden."

When SWDs are struggling, school staff reach out to caregivers to jointly discuss students' needs and contribute to a plan for intervention, outside of the cadence of annual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. School staff regularly communicate with caregivers using technology tools to quickly message back and forth if a student is having a tough day. Parent Square, used at Crosstown, has translation tools for multilingual families built into the platform.

Schools can avoid escalated behaviors or trauma responses that result in suspension and expulsion through practices such as [restorative justice circles](#). At Capital City, all staff members are trained in conducting restorative circles, which allow students, teachers, and caregivers to share their perspectives, heal from any harm done and contribute to solutions. Ongoing relationship building with students and their caregivers results in a tight-knit family-like culture where students report a sense of belonging and where they feel seen and heard.

Summary - Creating an inclusive, culturally responsive school culture that fosters relationships

An inclusive school culture, as described in this brief, relies on a school's ability to staff, train, and allocate time and resources for building student-teacher-family reciprocal relationships. There are different ways to implement these practices in graduated ways with different levels of resource intensity. Below are three levels of implementation that require different levels of resource investment for building a culture of strong positive relationships:

More resources \$\$\$\$	• Crew curriculum with professional development for Crew advisors • Including Crew advising as a core staff responsibility in addition to teaching or other responsibilities • Professional development on leading restorative justice circles for all teachers and relevant staff • Staffing to decrease teacher:student ratios in classes • Staffing for leadership of school culture and social-emotional learning • Subscription to tech tools for communication with families (e.g., Parent Square)
Medium resources \$\$	• Developing own Crew curriculum by drawing on commercially available resources or open education resources • Developing and delivering own professional development on Crew practices for Crew leaders, including restorative justice circles
Minimal resources \$	• Reorganizing school calendar to include days for quarterly student-led conferences or presentations of learning during the school day or evenings • Using regularly scheduled in-service professional development time (e.g., early release days) for Inclusion Roundables, to train Crew advisors, and learn how to conduct restorative justice circles • Including caregivers in restorative justice circles • Empowering students to have more voice and autonomy in their learning and in contributing to problem-solving issues in school

Additional Resources

1. **How Implementing Various Features of Strong Relationships Impact Effectiveness** [Graphic] <https://edtrust.org/rti/the-importance-of-strong-relationships/>
2. **Crew- A Structure for Support (Deeper Learning)** [Video] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3W3By_ZwTY
3. **Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Parent Perspectives on Partnering with Schools** [Videos] <https://www.pacer.org/cultural-diversity/parent-educator-perspectives.asp#ParentPerspectives>

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Practice Brief #4 - Competency-Based Learning

Practice Brief #4: Competency Based Learning and Assessment

This practice brief draws upon the findings from a qualitative case study research project that describes the inclusive classroom structures, classroom practices, assessment strategies, and systems of support that contributed to positive outcomes for Black, and Latine, and multilingual students with disabilities. We use evidence from two case study schools, Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, DC (“Capital City”) and Crosstown High School in Memphis (“Crosstown”), to illustrate the benefits of competency based grading and learning.

What is Competency Based Learning and Assessment?

Competency-based learning (sometimes also known as mastery-based learning) is a system of instruction, assessment, and grading practices that provides individual students with personalized pathways and timelines to learn and demonstrate their mastery of standards-based skills and content. The approach to learning is personalized and mastery is not dependent on seat-time, on-time homework completion, or earning a passing score on standardized tests. Instead, each competency may be learned and demonstrated by students at their own pace, using a variety of methods to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have learned (Levine & Patrick, 2019). Some schools also call this approach “standards-based grading.”

How do competency-based learning and assessment benefit students with learning differences and Black and Latine students with learning differences, specifically?

Traditional grading systems often penalize students for needing more time or differentiated options for assessment to demonstrate their learning. In contrast, competency-based learning allows students to progress at their own pace, receive targeted support, and demonstrate mastery in ways that are personalized and culturally responsive (Tahir, 2019). Competency-based assessment and grading focus on students’ demonstrations of targeted learning outcomes, reducing bias against students arising from the conflation of learning outcomes with behavioral compliance (Plotinsky, 2022; Feldman, 2024). This approach affirms a student-centered approach to learning, providing diverse pathways for students to learn and demonstrate their learning, building academic self-efficacy, and ultimately improving outcomes for historically marginalized students (Richardson et al., 2021; Kunnath & Sikkes, 2024). We illustrate these benefits further below.

What are some key components of competency-based learning and assessment? And how are they implemented in practice?

1. *Clear Learning Objectives:* In a competency-based grading and learning system, learning objectives are clearly defined, explicitly stated, and aligned with overarching competencies and desired learning outcomes. Both Capital City and Crosstown use four-level rubrics aligned to academic and cross-disciplinary learning expectations to communicate what students are expected to learn and demonstrate in their assignments. This clarity ensures that students understand what they are expected to learn, how their progress will be measured, and what mastery looks like at each stage of learning.

At Capital City, students self-assess and their work is scored using a four-level rubric aligned to state content standards, with Level 2 being the “passing” score. Students who receive

2. **Descriptive Feedback:** In competency-based assessment, descriptive feedback replaces traditional grades with specific, actionable insights that help students improve. Rather than just indicating success, failure, or a numerical/letter grade, it highlights strengths, areas for growth, and next steps toward mastery. Feedback is timely, personalized, and provided through written comments, discussions, peer reviews, and self-assessments. This approach fosters a growth mindset, encouraging students to revise their work and take ownership of their learning. By focusing on progress rather than grades, descriptive feedback turns assessment into a tool for continuous improvement. At Capital City, students have multiple opportunities to learn, revise, and resubmit their assessments after receiving teacher feedback, with as much time as they need within a marking period to demonstrate mastery.

Learning Target	4	3	2	1
SCI.COMM.03 I can clearly and accurately present scientific findings in multiple formats. 3.7 (discussion)	Student met the criteria for a 3 and ... ☒ Four or more substantive contributions. ☒ Prompted another student to contribute at an appropriate time.	☐ Made two meaningful contributions. ☒ Spoke audibly in and professional tone and shifted body to make eye contact with classmates. ☒ Stayed on topic when speaking.	☐ Made 1 meaningful contribution. ☐ Difficult to hear what the student says ☐ Stayed mostly on topic when speaking	☒ Did not contribute to discussion contributions is off topic. <i>Student was unfocused or off-task phone out</i>
I can apply concept of sustainability. 2.7	... makes the in a new way ☐ Student accurately applies the concept of the three pillars of sustainability with excellent reasoning	☒ Student accurately applies the concept of sustainability to real world contexts. ☒ Student accurately applies the concept of the three pillars of sustainability. <i>only 1 pillar</i>	☒ Student applies the concept of sustainability, but with some flaws ☒ Student shows that they partially understand the concept of the three pillars of sustainability	☐ Student does not apply the concept of sustainability to real world contexts ☐ Student does not show that they understand the concept of the three pillars of sustainability

Discussion Goal: Listen first and then when I have something to add to what the speaker was saying, I will say on what I had in mind.

Something I thought I could have done better was actually great at least type in the box. Overall I think the group did good. As a Latina the

Caption: An example of a four-level high school science scoring rubric that has been used to provide feedback to a student, who reflects at the bottom of the sheet. Level 4 signifies “exceeds the standard,” Level 3 is “meets the standard,” Level 2 is “approaches the standard,” and Level 1 is “below the standard.”

3. ***Mastery Based Progression:*** In a competency-based learning model, students advance only when they demonstrate a clear understanding and proficiency in a given skill or concept. This approach shifts the focus from seat time and traditional grading structures to individual mastery, ensuring that all students build a strong foundation before progressing.

At Capital City, to accommodate for varying achievement levels in a single class, teachers have adjusted their instruction and assessment practices to differentiate for students who learn and complete assignments at different paces. Organizing classes by stations, a strategic grouping and workshop approach, is one example of how teachers organize students for differentiated supports and time to finish. While more advanced students complete their work and move onto the next stage of their learning, SWDs, MLLs, and others who may need additional time or instructional support continue working on their assignments until they have completed them. The school fosters a culture of “everybody finishes,” ensuring that students who struggle or need more time are supported rather than

being left behind. In some cases, if a student does not have time to make up all of missing assignments within a marking period, the teachers will find alternate assignments that they can complete to demonstrate mastery of the standards. In this way, SWDs eventually can meet the learning standards for core academic courses and earn the course credits they need for graduation.

4. *Flexible Assessments*: In competency-based learning, students are given multiple ways to demonstrate their content understandings and mastery of skills. Rather than relying solely on traditional tests and quizzes, flexible assessment methods using various modalities (e.g., writing, speaking, graphic organizers/mind maps, multimedia products or presentations, performance-based tasks, portfolios, exhibitions) allow for a more comprehensive and personalized evaluation of student learning. Providing students with choice in the ways they demonstrate their learning also promotes the development of student agency and ownership of their learning and highlights students' strengths. In addition, real-world, authentic assessments help make learning more meaningful.

At Crosstown, students demonstrate their mastery of learning goals through projects, presentations, and reflections on transferable skills such as critical reading and quantitative thinking. As a project-based learning school, Crosstown values student-directed learning. In addition to classroom projects, students pursue their passions through self-designed electives (APEX classes) and long-term projects. One of the SWDs we interviewed at Crosstown, a tenth-grade student who has artistic talent, spoke about his involvement in an entrepreneurial club where he designs and sells sweatshirts and key chains to other students. The student's business became the central focus of a multi-week project in a math class ("Parabolas for Profit") and he was able to serve as an expert resource for his classmates. The school also incorporates competency-based assessments, annual Presentations of Learning (PoLs) before teachers and family members, and semi-annual exhibitions open to the community.



Caption: Crosstown High School students work collaboratively on a project.

Similarly, Capital City emphasizes authentic, project-based learning. Students engage in inquiry-based fieldwork, internships, arts programs, athletics, and passion projects like the Senior Expedition. These experiences not only enhance student engagement but also present meaningful academic challenges that prepare them for college, careers, and lifelong learning. All students, including SWDs and MLLs, are fully included in these authentic learning experiences.

5. *Separation of Academic Achievement and Behavior*: In competency-based learning and assessment, grades measure what students know and can do, independent of behaviors

such as attendance, participation, or effort. This approach ensures that academic achievement is assessed based on mastery of skills and knowledge rather than compliance with behavioral expectations. While behaviors such as effort, punctuality, and engagement are important for success, they are supported through feedback and other school supports rather than being factored into grades. This distinction promotes fairness and ensures that all students receive an accurate representation of their academic progress.

Summary - Implementing Competency-Based Learning and Assessment

Successful implementation of competency-based learning and assessment requires that school staff shift their assessment mindsets and practices, adopt more diverse and flexible modalities of assessment, and document students' learning progress in more analytic, qualitative ways than quiz or test scores. This can take significant resources to provide teachers with time to develop their capacity, plan, and implement consistently. Below are some graduated ways to implement competency-based learning and assessment with different levels of resource intensity.

More resources \$\$\$\$	• Professional Development & Training: Build capacity among all teachers in a school to use competency-based assessment and learning strategies in order to build a consistent school practice. Plan and implement competency-based approaches in all classes, including differentiated supports and timelines for learning and demonstrating achievement for SWDs, MLLs, and advanced students. • Technology & Learning Management System: Subscribe to a LMS that supports and organizes competency-based learning record keeping, and accessible data representation for tracking progress. • Assessment Design & Development: Develop high-quality performance-based assessments aligned to district/school competencies, including clear rubrics and teacher guidance.
Medium resources \$\$	• Professional Development & Training: Build capacity only among general education and special education teachers working with SWDs and MLLs to use competency-based learning and assessment strategies. Plan and implement station-teaching in inclusive classrooms with strategic grouping and differentiated supports and timelines for SWDs and MLLs to complete.. • Curriculum Evaluation & Selection: Conduct a thorough analysis of commercially available curriculum to select one that organizes learning and assessment by district/school-defined competencies and is compatible with a competency-based assessment approach. • Collaboration and Planning Time: Create structured opportunities for instructional staff working with SWDs and MLLs to calibrate on rubrics, tracking student progress on competencies. • Pilot Program: Implement a phased rollout, beginning with a specific grade level or subject area, to refine strategies and ensure effectiveness before full-scale adoption.

Minimal resources \$	● Foster a Competency-Based Culture: Engage all stakeholders in understanding and embracing the shift to competency-based learning. Build buy-in through ongoing discussions, professional learning communities, and clear, strategic communication with families and caregivers to ensure alignment and support. ● Maximizing Existing Tools for Learning and Monitoring Progress: Leverage free high quality instructional materials that elicit evidence of competencies. Use spreadsheets and other low cost digital tools to monitor learning progress toward defined competencies.
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Additional Resources

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