Marshall Street

Overview

OPENING DOORS TO COLLABORATION

A collection of research-to-impact practices developed with the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities

COLLECTION OVERVIEW

Opening Doors to Collaboration

Introduction

The Challenge

America's public schools fall short in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Schools across America struggle to meet the diverse needs of today's students, especially those furthest from opportunity. When marginalization intersects with disability, students often face low expectations, are systematically segregated, are denied access to college and career curricula, and do not receive sufficient support to obtain a high school diploma and pursue their dreams. In 2022, fourth and eighth grade students with disabilities were more than twice as likely as those without disabilities to score "below basic" in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress,[1] illustrating just how deeply schools are failing students with disabilities. For Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty, the challenges are even greater. Yet, **research shows that 85–90% of students with disabilities can achieve at grade level** when they receive high-quality instruction and appropriate accommodations.[2] Educators need better resources and more support to help students with disabilities achieve their full potential.

Siloed educator training and student services are root causes of the disparity.

Most teacher preparation programs continue to omit coursework focused on students with special needs,[3] leaving general educators feeling ill-equipped to support students with disabilities.[4] Further compounding the silo are schools' problematic placement structures for students with disabilities. Whereas 55% of white students with IEPs spend the majority[5] of class time in general education settings, only 33% of their Black peers do,[6] despite research that shows inclusive educational settings benefit all students.[7] The result for these students is two different tracks and approaches: one for students with disabilities and one for students without. This kind of segregation leaves all students at a

disadvantage. Students with IEPs lack access to grade-level content and peers, and students without IEPs lack an approach to instruction that enables accessibility. As a result, both groups miss crucial opportunities.

High turnover, particularly for special educators, leads to large numbers of inexperienced teachers.

The teacher staffing shortage in America's public schools further disadvantages students with disabilities.[8] Within the field of special education, shortages are even more pronounced. In the 10 years between 2006 and 2016, the number of special education teachers dropped by 17%.[9] In the 2017–18 school year, nearly 60% of first-year special education teachers in California were working without being fully credentialed.[10] As larger numbers of new teachers are filling roles, schools are presented with a special education workforce in need of tremendous support, both to ensure that they are equipped to meet students' needs and so that they feel effective and satisfied such that they continue to work in the field.[11] This support is not just related to how to support students best. Because special educators are asked to collaborate on a daily basis, specific training and support focused on effective collaboration, in addition to guidance on how to open access for all learners, is crucial to their success.

Exclusionary mindsets at all levels of a school inhibit collaboration.

While most educators enter the field with the desire or intention of supporting all students, the education system as a whole has been designed for students without disabilities. The siloing or "othering" of students with disabilities feeds into a pervasive teacher mindset that students with disabilities are "someone else's" responsibility, denying students access to general education content and teachers, which in turn limits students' educational opportunities.[12] At the highest levels of school leadership, special education is often set to the side, left out of key discussions and decisions. This same mentality negatively impacts general education teachers' perceptions of their special education colleagues, often causing them to view special education teachers as "assistants" or less qualified educators.[13] Together, these mindsets inhibit the collaboration between general and special educators and students that is necessary to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.[14]

Co-teaching is the gold standard of collaboration but can be difficult to do well.

Co-teaching is the practice of two certified teachers, traditionally a general educator and a special educator, sharing a classroom to open access to learning for diverse populations of students. Co-teaching is considered to be a best practice within the scope of collaboration between educators for a number of reasons, including that it halves the student-to-teacher ratio and that it allows teachers to share their different expertise with each other in the service of giving all students the support that they need. When done well, co-teaching includes a great deal of time outside of class dedicated to collaboration in the form of co-planning, data analysis, and receiving feedback through instructional coaching. Co-teaching also requires intentional staffing and scheduling to ensure that all special educators have time to meet their various compliance needs, in addition to teaching and collaborating. Because of this, many schools find themselves implementing less effective methods of co-teaching or looking for other ways to collaborate. For a thorough explanation of co-teaching and its challenges, see the ***Collaboration Literature Review***.

Our Approach

NIC participants embraced an "all means all" philosophy for their work to improve outcomes, experiences, and environments for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. As they did so, they acknowledged that existing structures and ways of working didn't include all students — or all staff. In response, the NIC endeavored to retrain mindsets and beliefs that othered students with disabilities and special educators; to revise the systems, structures, and routines that limited inclusion; and to offer models of excellence so that members could see exemplars of what is possible for inclusive and collaborative educational systems. Central to this work was strengthening, or in some cases establishing for the first time, collaboration between general and special educators to break down the silos leading to exclusion for our priority population. This was a focus of efforts at all levels of the education system — from classrooms to school leadership teams to district office decision-making bodies. Several guiding principles became the foundation for these efforts.

When general and special education collaboration improves, so do learning outcomes.

For the NIC charter networks featured in *Opening Doors to Collaboration*, it became clear that until collaboration and alignment between general and special education teams dramatically improved, results for students would suffer, a perspective supported by research from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD).[15] In the NIC, where collaboration improved, outcomes followed, and not only for students with disabilities. When teams became more aligned in their actions and decisions, they refined their operations and established teaching and coaching structures that centered on the needs of students with disabilities, for the benefit of all students. At every level, habits changed and mindsets shifted. These changes removed barriers that may have otherwise limited the achievement of students in vulnerable subgroups, particularly students with disabilities.

Indeed, in many cases, collaborative structures at both the school and district levels were revised to include special education expertise and perspectives on teams and in decision-making. Changes to routines, communication, and culture together built capacity at all levels of school organizations and reshaped how member schools met the diverse needs of all their students.

The value of a system-wide commitment to collaboration was further highlighted for NIC members during a March 2022 visit to **WISH Charter Schools** and **CHIME Institute** in California, two charter schools nationally renowned for their inclusive, collaborative approach to supporting students, particularly those with disabilities. School leaders described “micro and macro” systems that ensure that structures at every level of their schools — from prep schedules and case management loads, to co-planning agendas and curriculum sharing structures — are crafted in service of all educators and staff working together to meet all students’ needs. Following this NIC Learning Tour, participating organizations refined a diverse range of processes and routines to further develop educators and their support team members like coaches and school leaders to collaborate in service of meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students.

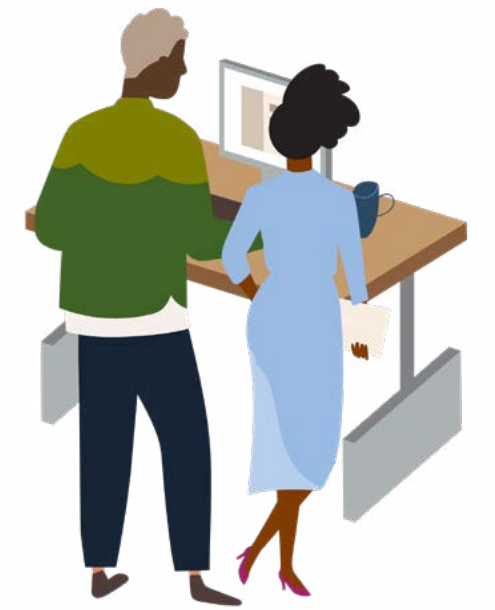
The quality of teacher collaboration determines learning outcome improvement.

Research on inclusive practices repeatedly cites collaboration time as the essential component of successful collaboration.[16] However, as they engaged in this work, NIC members came to realize that what happens *during* collaboration time is the deciding factor in the extent to which that collaboration will drive change. The key is not simply doing it, but the deeply challenging work of doing it well.[17] Consequently, NIC members examined models, designed tools, and implemented coaching structures to improve the quality of collaborative efforts — efforts that both protected time and adopted or adapted systems and routines to look at student data and plan aligned instruction across educators. Regardless of the specific collaborative teaming structure in place at each NIC school, NIC members worked toward more impactful forms of collaboration, building capacity for continued improvement.

Co-teaching with co-planning is the most direct approach to collaboration.

We considered co-teaching to be the gold standard for collaboration that improves outcomes for our priority population, and we aspired to establish or improve co-teaching wherever possible. Accordingly, some of the schools in the NIC implemented and refined co-teaching structures, focusing on effective co-planning time in order to optimize the presence of two adults sharing a classroom. For schools that choose to invest in co-teaching, intentional co-planning creates the conditions necessary for teachers to share their perspectives and ideas with each other, allowing all students greater access to the teachers' shared expertise.

For example, **KIPP Northern California** created protected co-planning blocks within their school schedule, giving teachers time to engage in effective collaboration. **Collegiate Academies** chose to implement data-driven co-planning cycles supported by intentional collaboration between special education leaders and school instructional leadership. Additionally, **Collegiate** and **Green Dot Public Schools** recognized that in order for their co-teachers to internalize and implement complicated co-teaching models effectively, they needed to use a gradual release model in their instructional coaching. By introducing a new co-teaching model only once the previous one was mastered, Collegiate and Green Dot coaches supported their teachers' success. Other schools supported co-teaching through instructional coaching as well. **STEM Preparatory Schools** introduced a tiered coaching model, varying levels of coaching support based on the needs of the team as opposed to the individual. They utilized a lead coach to support each collaborating pair. **Math and Science College Preparatory** doubled down on collaboration, with two coaches collaboratively coaching each co-teaching pair.

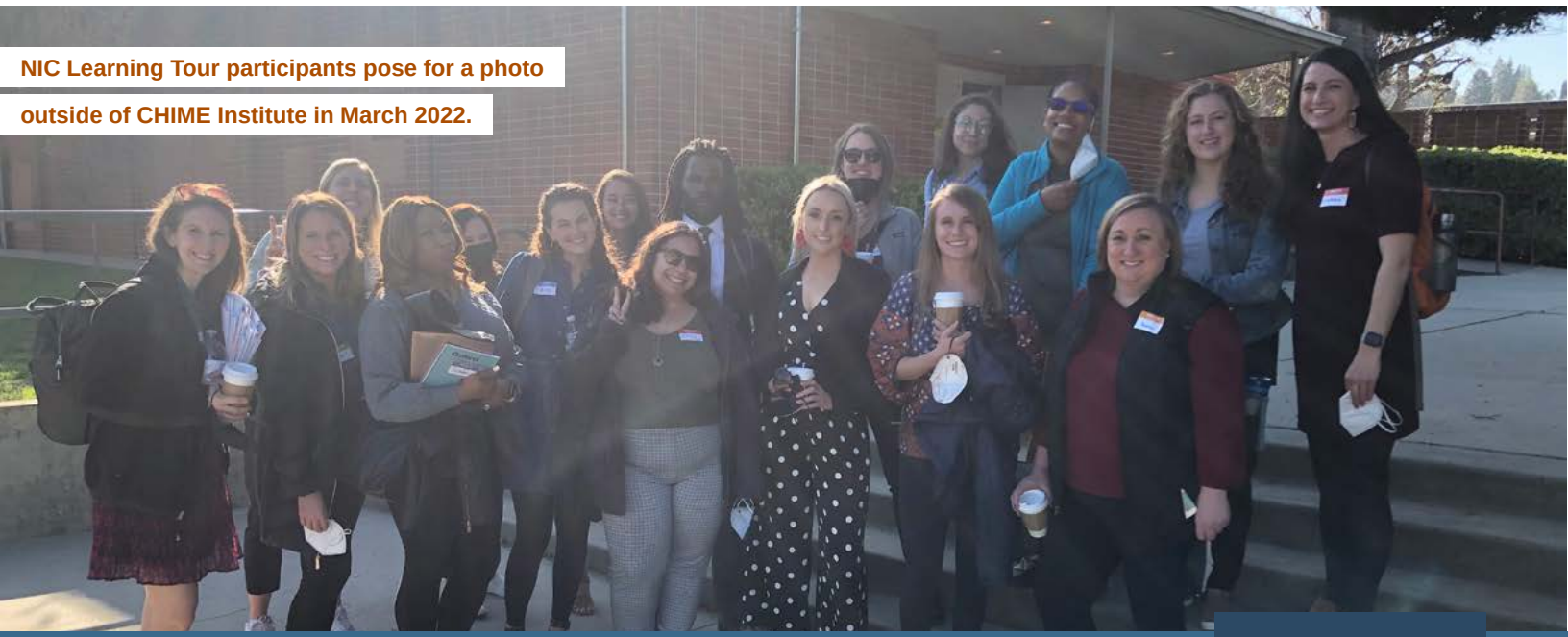


Schools must understand their own unique structures and needs and work to improve collaboration within those bounds.

NIC participants all joined the network with their own unique contexts. Some schools were determined to improve collaboration but recognized that given their context, current resources, or site readiness, co-teaching was either not feasible or not sustainable. Through the collaborative efforts of the NIC — including virtual professional learning communities, in-person learning tours, and the sharing of bright spots and related resources from partners across the community — these participants were able to identify best practices for collaboration and bring ideas back to their own contexts, where they looked for ways to adapt, refine, and apply the practices to existing systems. In other cases, teams piloted new ideas at a smaller scale. No matter their starting point, schools demonstrated a deep commitment to building and improving collaboration systems, routines, and mindsets, even when traditional co-teaching was not their model.

For example, at **Ednovate**, most special educators' caseloads make co-teaching full-time (for the entire class period, every time it meets) a challenge. To maximize their time spent supporting students with disabilities in their general education classes, special educators utilize a "partial co-teaching" model in which they either co-teach for a full period two to three days out of the week or co-teach for some portion of a course every day (e.g., the first 45 minutes for the introduction to new material and guided practice). At **Summit Atlas**, special educators primarily provide instruction in a separate classroom setting, yet they also regularly collaborate with their general education peers during co-planning sessions that are driven by the needs of a data-informed subset of students with IEPs. Focusing on that collaborative structure has dramatically improved the general education course outcomes for students with disabilities and built the capacity of general educators to design instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

Improving the ways in which general and special educators collaborate is *always* positively impactful for students.[18] Regardless of the service delivery models utilized within a school, there are myriad ways in which this work can occur, and each is worthy of time and resources.



NIC Learning Tour participants pose for a photo outside of CHIME Institute in March 2022.

Collaborative Teaming Structures

Schools within the NIC took various approaches to collaboration. Each approach defined specific structures and routines to allow educators to collaborate effectively, focusing intently on team membership, clear roles and responsibilities, and student-centered outcomes.

CO-TEACHING

Many of the NIC participants featured in this collection have heavily invested in co-teaching as a service delivery model for teachers to collaboratively plan for and execute instruction to meet the needs of all learners in a classroom. Co-teaching structures included regular time for planning, review of data, and instruction. The deep partnership that is possible for students and educators in a well-supported co-teaching model creates an exceptional environment for very high-level collaboration. If co-teaching is sustainable and appropriate for your school and students with disabilities, we encourage leaders to explore its implementation.

COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

This collection refers often to collaborating teachers, that is, general and special educators who share their expertise with one another to best support all students. Although not always in the same classroom, educators working together to improve the learning outcomes of a group of students can benefit from using the practices that have been tested and honed by the schools that participated in the NIC. If traditional co-teaching is not possible in your school's context, we encourage leaders to consider how these practices might be applied to collaborative teaching in some form across instructional settings where students are served.

SYSTEM-LEVEL COLLABORATION

Sometimes, especially at the early stages of collaboration efforts in a school or network, the most crucial adjustment happens when school leaders establish dedicated collaboration space between special education and general education curriculum leaders. Oftentimes, special education leaders are not included in decision-making processes but rather are informed of decisions after the fact. Improving collaboration at the leadership level sets an example for others while also strengthening the systems and structures required for system-wide collaboration.

When leaders and teachers invest in partnerships between their general and special education team members they often see students' experiences and academic results improve in exciting ways. Save for ***Chapter 3: Achieving High-Impact Co-Teaching: A Gradual Release Model***, every practice featured in this collection is applicable across a wide spectrum of collaborative partnerships. We encourage school leaders to engage expansively with the practices and guidance, identifying inroads for stronger collaboration that are manageable for them, in their contexts, at present, and building upon them as skills improve and relationships deepen.

Enabling Conditions

Each of the practices in this collection strengthens and leverages strong general and special education collaboration in service of improved experiences for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. The effective implementation of these practices was made possible because of three core enabling conditions that were in place in NIC members' schools: **dedicated time, strategic coaching,** and **strong professional relationships between educators.** Without these three conditions, the practices' impact is dramatically reduced.

Dedicated Time

Research shows that when asked what makes their work feasible, special educators in particular cite time to collaborate with their general education peers.[19] Dedicated collaboration time within the school schedule communicates to teachers that school leaders deeply value and prioritize staff collaboration, and its protection ensures that collaboration can occur.

Schools in the NIC prioritized building school-wide schedules around meeting times for collaborating teachers and other supporting team members. They included dedicated time for team formation, team development, and team coaching, as well as regular, protected planning time that eliminates conflicts, ideally during the school day. Because such scheduling is so crucial and can get quite complicated, administrators may want to seek assistance from an outside organization or expert who can guide them through the process of building that dedicated time into the school schedule.

Strategic Coaching

Collaborating teachers, particularly new teachers, need explicit guidance and training in how to plan instruction, analyze student work and data, and plan together across their instructional areas of expertise. Instructional coaching is proven to be beneficial,[20] and in the context of collaboration between general and special educators, coaching takes on a particularly important role. It is essential for effective collaboration between teachers because it offers the guidance, training, feedback, and modeling necessary for teachers to build their capacity and skill when it comes to collaboration. Coaches also provide skill development and accountability that relieves the special education teacher of needing to be the primary driver of collaboration, reducing teacher burnout and a "your students, my students" mentality. Furthermore, when general education and special education coaches combine their efforts, they build their expertise in the other's area, thus increasing their collective capacity to support the diverse needs of all students. For more, see ***How-To: Establish Coaching for Collaborative Teams***.

Strong Professional Relationships

While all three enabling conditions are critical to successful collaboration, time and coaching are moot in the absence of well-established, trusting relationships between collaborating educators.

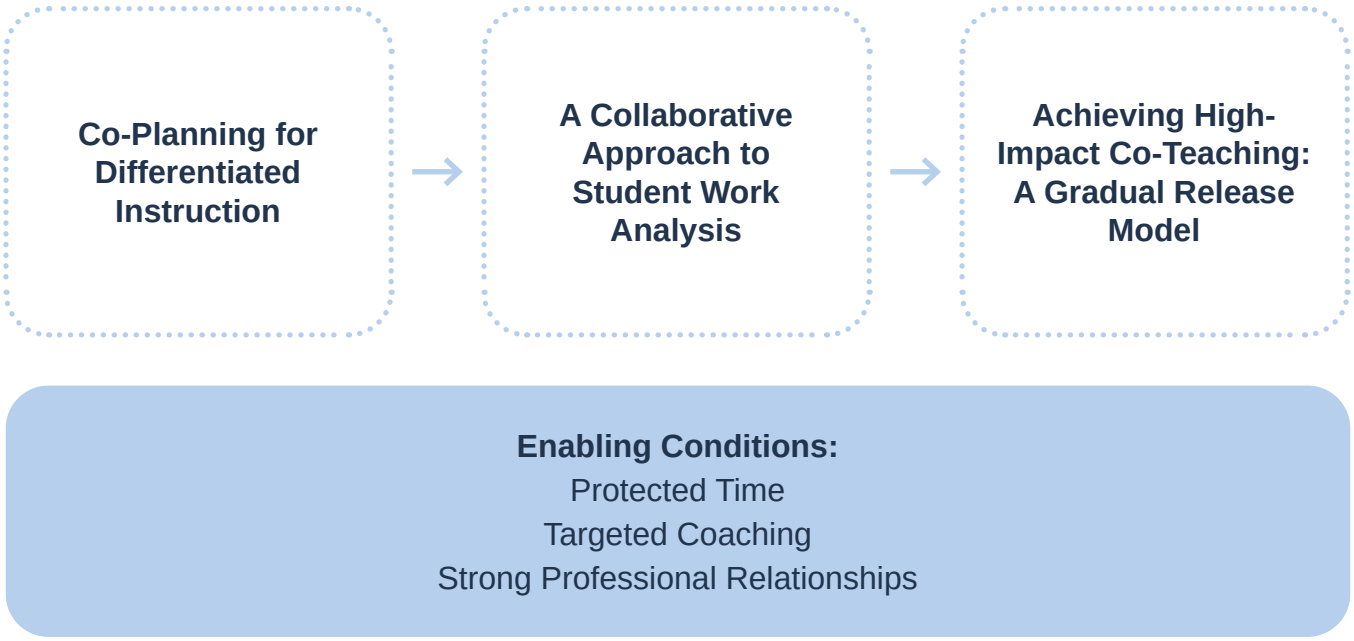
Trusting, productive relationships play a huge role in educators' ability to engage in the three layers of collaboration. Deep collaboration requires all collaborators to know each other and each other's ways

of working, to be open to exchanging ideas with one another, and to have an understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Trusting relationships do not simply happen but, rather, must be explicitly cultivated. Once developed, effective collaborating teachers in the NIC cited the relationship dynamic as one of the key contributors to their efficacy and satisfaction with their work. For more on building strong teams, see ***How-To: Launch Effective Collaborative Teams***.

The Collection

This Collection includes **three best practices** essential to the work of improving collaboration between general education and special education teachers to improve learning outcomes for all students, **a case study**, and **two guidance documents** on supporting collaborative teaming.

Each of the practices detailed in this book is an independently strong and valuable practice. However, when implemented layer by layer, each practice builds a foundation that enables the next to take root.



Chapter 1: Co-Planning for Differentiated Instruction

For collaborating teachers to have as much impact as possible, they must have dedicated co-planning time focused on ensuring that their upcoming lessons are both accessible and rigorous for all students, especially their students with disabilities. Teams at Summit Atlas and Collegiate Academies honed this work over time, identifying the core practices that make efficient and effective use of collaborating teachers' often limited time together. This chapter highlights the importance of each of the key components of co-planning, providing an understanding of the contributions from collaborating teachers that yield the strongest plans.

Chapter 2: A Collaborative Approach to Student Work Analysis

Once outcomes-driven co-planning is in place, teams are ready to analyze their students' work to identify strengths and make necessary instructional changes to benefit students. Collaborative student work analysis dramatically deepens both teachers' understanding of their students' performance and progress in course content. This second chapter walks readers through Green Dot's protocol, showing how both the generalist and the specialist contribute their unique vantage points and skills to deeply understand students' work and plan to proactively remove barriers to access, particularly for students with disabilities.

Chapter 3: Achieving High-Impact Co-Teaching: A Gradual Release Model

For schools utilizing co-teaching as a service delivery model, the final chapter focuses on how teachers can maximize their shared presence with students. Two educators can accomplish twice what one could on their own, but shifting to that level of practice is immensely challenging. For teachers to increasingly employ high-impact co-teaching models, they need targeted, supportive coaching that aids in their gradual adoption of new models based on students' needs. Collegiate and Green Dot's work provides a roadmap for how other schools and networks can enable their co-teachers to grow in similar role optimization.

Case Study: How Quarterly Professional Development Cycles Helped a Network Maximize Data-Driven Co-Planning for Co-Teachers: Green Dot Public Schools

In order to build the skill, mindset, and habits of collaborating teams, districts need to provide training and ongoing coaching in co-planning. This case study describes how Green Dot piloted and refined professional development days for co-teachers to step away from their classroom once a quarter for a day-long co-planning workshop. These sessions include a standardized student work analysis protocol for teachers to work through with their coach and choice-driven mini-professional development sessions on high-leverage models of co-teaching for ongoing capacity building.

Guidance Documents: Team Formation and Coaching

These guidance documents, written for school and network leadership, answer some of the most common questions leaders face when implementing collaborative practices. They draw on work done by the schools that participated in the NIC and elevate strong practices that can be used right away.

HOW-TO: LAUNCH EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

Pairing two teachers together in a classroom or in co-planning periods and assuming that their collaboration will be smooth has been shown to be ineffective.[21] This document addresses how to set collaborative teachers up for success.

HOW-TO: ESTABLISH COACHING FOR COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

Effective instructional coaching for collaborative teachers requires a different approach than coaching individual teachers. This document addresses the systems and strategies necessary to implement this coaching well.

How to Approach this Collection

We recommend readers begin with Chapter 1, as this chapter provides foundational guidance on how collaborating teacher teams can best use collaborative planning time to build accessible lesson plans. After Chapter 1, readers are encouraged to explore Chapters 2 and 3 for insights on building both the skill set of collaborating teachers to analyze student work to make data-informed decisions in their planning and the skill of teachers to effectively co-teach in one classroom.

Next, readers can explore an inspiring case study about how a network used a quarterly professional development structure to train educators and develop their skills for data analysis and instructional design.

Finally, readers looking to better support collaborative teaming structures can reference the two guidance documents that provide insights on coaching and team formation.

FURTHER READING

High Leverage Practices in Special Education, Collaboration: Research Syntheses from the Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center

Collaboration: Partnering With Colleagues, Families, and Caregivers to Promote Student Success from the National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood

Supporting Co-Teaching Teams in High Schools: Twenty Research-Based Practices by Gerry Nierengarten in *American Secondary Education*



Appendix

Notes

1 US Department of Education, *National Assessment of Educational Progress*

2 Quenemoen and Thurlow, *Students with Disabilities in Educational Policy*

3 Mader, “How Teacher Training Hinders Special-Needs Students”

4 Blanton, Pugach, and Florian, *Preparing General Education Teachers*

5 More than 80% of the school day

6 National Center for Learning Disabilities, *Significant Disproportionality*

7 Hehir et al., *A Summary of the Evidence*

8 Schmitt and deCourcy, *The Pandemic Has Exacerbated a Long-Standing National Shortage*

9 Samuels and Harwin, “Shortage of Special Educators”

10 Hawkins, “Yes, There’s a Shortage”

11 Teach Plus, *A Million Paper Cuts*

12 TNTP, *The Opportunity Myth*

13 Stolz, “Time for Critical Reimagining”

14 National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood, *Forward Together*

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Jones and Winters, “Are Two Teachers Better Than One?”

18 National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood, *Forward Together*

19 Ronfeldt et al., “Teacher Collaboration”

20 Kraft, Blazer, and Hogan, “The Effect of Teacher Coaching”

21 Aldabas, “Co-teaching in Classrooms”

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