Marshall Street

How-To:

Establishing Coaching for Collaborative Teams

OPENING DOORS TO COLLABORATION

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

How-To: Establish Coaching for Collaborative Teams

Guidance Document for School and Network Leadership

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Introduction

Collaboration between general and special educators has the ability to transform the experience and learning of both students and teachers.[1] However, collaborative work between these two historically siloed departments is neither intuitive nor easy to achieve. Teachers need specific knowledge and skills in order to effectively co-plan, co-assess, and for some, co-teach. When collaboration is not supported, research shows, promising practices fall by the wayside.[2] To meet the diverse needs of students, teams need coaching on their collaboration mindsets, systems, and routines.

Instructional coaching as a form of professional development for teachers has been proven to have a positive effect on both instruction and student achievement.[3] In order to complete the complex task of effective teaching, all educators, regardless of skill level or experience, need support. Coaching is one way to ensure the improvement in both instruction and achievement that leaders desire.

The priority population for the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities (NIC) — that is, Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty — often has significant learning gaps, and closing those gaps requires educators to leverage a wide variety of expertise. Leaders must vigilantly support collaborating teachers[4] to harness their shared talents so that students receive the academic rigor they deserve and the supportive instruction they need to fully access it. Significant time and resources are necessary for collaboration, and coaching ensures that those allocations yield better results.

Coaching was integral to the success of teachers' collaboration at schools across the NIC, including at Collegiate Academies, Green Dot Public Schools, STEM Preparatory Schools, Summit Public Schools, KIPP Northern California, and Ednovate. Teachers enjoyed working together and had time to do so, but they struggled to leverage their shared expertise. Once regular, targeted coaching was added to teachers' collaborative work, students' scores jumped dramatically.

This guide addresses some of the most common questions leaders face when setting up effective coaching of collaborative teams, which we define *as supporting general and special education teachers in their collaborative practices to ensure that their partnership results in excellent outcomes for all students, particularly those with disabilities*. Leaders are encouraged to identify and read the most relevant sections or to read straight through like a step-by-step guide. The suggestions and resources in this guide have been used by NIC school teams to effectively keep their students with disabilities at the forefront when planning and teaching.

How do collaborating teachers and co-teachers compare? For whom is coaching useful?

- **Collaborating teachers** are one general educator and one special educator who share their expertise with one another in order to support all students, particularly those with disabilities.
- **Co-teachers** are collaborating teachers who plan and teach a course together. They are equally responsible for the class, whereas other collaborating teachers may support from separate spaces.
- **Coaching** is relevant and important for collaborating teachers regardless of the way instructional support is delivered. Aspects of coaching differ depending on whether the teachers are implementing co-teaching, push-in, pull-out, consultant teacher support, or a combination of these services.

Common Questions Leaders Face when Establishing Coaching for Collaborative Teams

How do we determine collaborative teams' needs for coaching?

The NIC found that all collaborating teacher pairs benefited from coaching on their collaboration mindsets, systems, and routines, yet there were different levels of need for this coaching. Most often, collaborating teachers newer to this work required more frequent coaching to teach skills and build routines for collaboration, while established partnerships needed less frequent coaching focused on higher-level skill development and strategic problem-solving.

Coaching for collaborative teams is different from one-on-one instructional coaching in its focus on building effective and efficient partnerships between educators. To define the needs for coaching, the following actions are essential:

ARTICULATE A CLEAR VISION FOR EXEMPLARY COLLABORATION.

School and network leaders generate a **vision for exemplary collaboration** between general and special educators. This vision defines one or more student-centered outcomes, as well as mindsets and behaviors for collaboration across the team.

GATHER DATA ON CURRENT PRACTICES.

School leaders use their vision for strong collaboration to guide **walkthroughs** and conversations with teachers to gather data on current practices and to identify teachers' strengths and needs. This data can inform what supports might be universal for all collaborating teachers, and what coaching supports or strategies might be targeted to specific teaching pairs or subgroups, such as content-area or grade-level partners.

ESTABLISH SPECIFIC GOALS AND OUTCOMES RELATED TO COLLABORATION.

In order for collaborative practices to receive the attention that they need in order to progress, it is important for leaders to be clear on what they want the focus of this coaching time and work to be, keeping in mind both the instructional growth they're hoping to see and the impact on student outcomes that they want the growth to lead to. Once this clarity is established, coaches can narrow in their collaboration-focused coaching on these goals and priorities. For example, a coach might lead a team toward dual goals of instructional growth and student achievement by focusing their time on the specific knowledge and skills needed to effectively communicate mid-lesson on shifts in the lesson design to meet the data-driven needs of learners.

TAKE STOCK OF COLLABORATING TEACHERS' NEED FOR COLLABORATION-FOCUSED COACHING.

It is important for leaders to be realistic when prioritizing which collaborating pairs receive coaching, how much collaboration-focused coaching pairs receive, and when the coaching will take place. School leaders should consider all of the following factors:

- **Teacher Content Experience Levels**
  How much experience does each teacher in the collaborating/co-teaching pair have with their content area and/or curriculum? If they are newer to either or both, more intensive coaching of co-planning will likely be beneficial.
- **Teacher Collaboration Experience Levels**
  How much experience does each person have working in close partnership with another teacher? For teachers who are very new to these practices, explicit coaching and facilitation can help educators work through critical team dynamics and challenges as they arise.
- **Course Types**
  Are there gateway courses for graduation that have been producing vastly different and lower results for students in our priority population than for students on average? These courses and their teachers may be excellent candidates for coaching.
- **Teacher Mindsets**
  When considering a teaching pair's priority level for coaching, consider their mindsets about collaboration. If either teacher has negative mindsets about general education and special education collaboration, it is important for leaders to think carefully about that **teacher's placement and readiness for this work** and/or their place at the school.
- **Teacher Efficacy**
  If a teacher struggles significantly with management, curriculum, and/or instruction, they may not yet be the ideal candidate for this level of intentional and targeted collaboration and coaching. Rather, they may need to develop their skills with a single coach for the current year and aim to be ready for a collaborative partnership the following.

PRIORITIZE THE CADENCE AND FOCUS OF COLLABORATION COACHING FOR EACH PARTNERSHIP.

Leaders determine which collaborating teachers are most in need of collaboration-focused coaching. This information is then paired, as described in the following section, with an understanding of coaches' capacity.

What is the right coaching structure to use?

NIC schools utilized a number of different coaching structures to support collaboration between educators, including single-coach and team-coaching models. Coaching structure decisions require intentional design that considers the strengths and needs of both the collaborating teachers and the coach or coaches supporting each team. Critical factors for consideration include the following:

THE COACHING CADENCE OF EACH COLLABORATING PAIR

After determining who is receiving what level of coaching, leaders must determine the cadence of that support. At STEM Preparatory Schools, leaders “tier” their coaching support based on what the coach is seeing from the co-teaching team. “Exploring” teachers engage in a cycle every one to two weeks; “developing” teachers, every two to three weeks; “experienced” teachers, every three weeks. Using this approach allows school leaders to differentiate the coaching that they provide to their collaborating teachers, guaranteeing that everyone receives coaching support tailored to their readiness and skill level.

THE DETERMINATION OF WHO WILL COACH

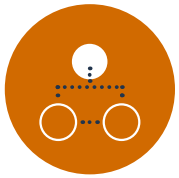
Because coaching for collaboration is often an additional layer of support, it is important for school leaders to be as expansive as possible in their thinking about who can provide that support. Consider who else may have valuable expertise that they can lend to this work to help manage the workload, for example:

- Special education department chairs
- Grade-level team leaders
- Department chairs (if they do not already coach)
- Deans (who have instructional backgrounds and/or significant expertise in special education)
- Curriculum team members or district content specialists

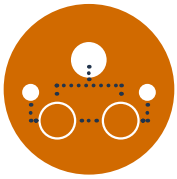
Once leaders are clear on who can coach, they can think more creatively about which coaching structure(s) they will employ.

THE COACHING STRUCTURE FOR EACH COLLABORATING TEAM RECEIVING COACHING

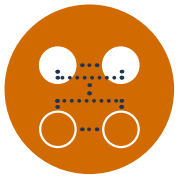
There are three primary coaching models that partner schools in the NIC have used with success:



ONE LEAD COACH
for a collaborating pair



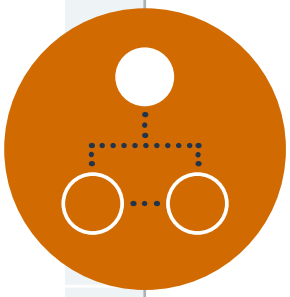
A SUPPLEMENTAL COACH
for a collaborating pair



TWO COACHES
collaboratively coaching a collaborating pair

We highly recommend that school leaders select the coaching structure before the school year begins, as each of the models requires different schedule considerations for coaching routines and will be dependent on staff capacity, coach expertise, and team member schedules. In some instances, these coaching models serve as the primary content coaching for the teaching team alongside coaching on collaboration. In other cases, educators have two types of coaching supports or systems in place that work together to develop content expertise and collaboration mindsets and routines.

ONE LEAD COACH for a collaborating pair



One coach supports both the general and special educator in a collaborating pair, serving as each person's primary content coach as well as their coach for collaborative work.

At STEM Prep School's Math and Science College Preparatory (MSCP) High School, the assistant principal coached a math co-teaching pair, providing individual coaching as well as coaching for the team.

Benefits

Consistent Messaging: Collaborating teachers receive feedback from the same person. The coach is simultaneously coaching the teaching pair on their individual roles and content expertise and on the mindsets and behaviors for meeting the needs of shared students. This model decreases the likelihood that teachers receive conflicting feedback.

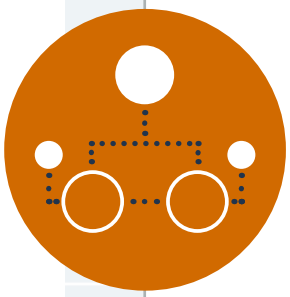
Staff Capacity: This model streamlines the coaching of teams, reducing the number of staff members required to coach the team and simplifying the number of schedules to coordinate for coaching.

Considerations

Coach's Confidence: The coach must feel confident in their ability to navigate the needs of both teachers and to coach across general education and special education content areas. Though MSCP's assistant principal did not have a math background, she was highly experienced with special education and co-teaching and regularly collaborated with STEM Prep's director of mathematics to support her teacher teams. Thus, she felt capable of leading the teachers who had each taught math for two years.

Collaboration Among Coaches: A culture of shared support and responsibility must exist with this model so the lead coach and collaborating teachers can supplement their coaching when needed. At MSCP, when the assistant principal recognizes a need from her team related to complex math content, she collaborates directly with STEM Prep School's director of mathematics or invites her to join a coaching conversation to provide support.

A SUPPLEMENTAL COACH for a collaborating pair



Each collaborating pair has a dedicated coach for their partnership in addition to their own individual coaches.

At Rosenwald Collegiate Academy, the school's director of scholar support coached the Geometry co-teaching team once a week on adapting instruction for their students with disabilities. She also met weekly with the special education teacher for an individual coaching session, as the school's director of curriculum and instruction did with the math teacher.

At Ednovate, a Blue Engine coach met with co-teaching pairs weekly. Each Ednovate teacher also had their own individual, school-based coach for instruction.

Benefits

Focus on Collaboration: Collaborating teachers are able to focus exclusively on their work together in service of students' needs. Coaching time is uniquely tailored to their work as a team and focused on team formation, data analysis, instructional planning, and when relevant, co-teaching.

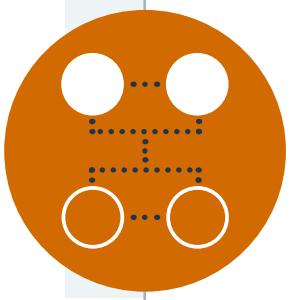
Staffing Flexibility: Because the coaching role can be performed by an external coach, this model provides flexibility for school leaders looking to incorporate expertise and support even if they do not have staff capacity.

Considerations

Scheduling: This model requires thoughtful scheduling. Leaders need to develop site-based schedules that protect time for teachers to engage in routine supplemental coaching focused on collaboration with their teaching partners.

Coach Communication: Coaches need clear lines of and systems for communication so that all staff supporting the two teachers are aligned on what is being discussed and worked on in individual and supplemental coaching sessions. Without this system for communication, teachers are likely to receive conflicting feedback on their instructional next steps and will struggle to prioritize their next moves.

TWO COACHES collaboratively supporting a collaborating pair



Two different coaches (one focused on special education, one focused on general education content) come together to co-coach a collaborating teaching pair.

At MSCP, the director of special education co-coached a math co-teaching pair with the director of mathematics. The two coaches conducted all observations and debriefs together and met together before and after coaching sessions to plan next steps.

Benefits

Building Capacity in Coaches: This model can be used to support the growth of a coach until they are confident in their ability to support outside of their own expertise. STEM Prep's director of mathematics cited her co-coaching with the director of special education as key to her ability to effectively coach special educators in future years in a one-lead-coach model.

Ensuring Deep, Aligned Support: In this model, everyone remains fully aware of and aligned on the work that is happening with both teachers. This allows coaches to identify trends and needs across pairs that can inform professional development areas of focus or guide the development of new or updated guidance to benefit educators in serving all students.

Considerations

Coaches' Relationships and Pairings: School administrators will need to invest time and energy in the formation of these coaching teams similar to their investment in the creation of teaching teams. It is important to plan proactively and strategically to develop and support these coaches to work together in service of their teaching pairs, and ultimately, the students they aim to serve.

Coach Communication: \Coaches need clear lines of communication and systems to ensure that all who are supporting the two teachers are aligned on what they are discussing and working on with teaching pairs. Coaching teams will want to develop norms and routines around communication and follow-up so they have clear roles and responsibilities that reinforce their collective goals for team development.

Staff Capacity: This model is resource-intensive. It requires significant amounts of coaches' time. Coaches' workloads, including the number of individuals and teams they coach, need to be planned thoughtfully so they have the time and capacity to reach their desired outcomes.

How do we create the necessary infrastructure for coaching (and collaboration between coaches)?

System infrastructure for coaching needs to be considered at the individual, teacher-team, and school levels and may also include infrastructure at the department or district level.

BUILD PROTECTED TIME INTO THE SCHOOL TRAINING AND TEACHING SCHEDULES.

This should include time for all of the following:

- Collaborating teachers to meet regularly. Ideally, teams will meet at least one period weekly if not more frequently.
- Collaborating coaches to meet regularly. If two coaches are collaboratively coaching a pair, their coaching schedules and other priorities need to support shared attendance at coaching activities and take into account the need for coaches to observe and debrief with co-teachers on a regular basis. For example, STEM Prep co-coaches held regular pre- and post-coaching huddles together to review data, establish priorities, and debrief their coaching meetings to reflect on improvements and coordinate next steps.
- Collaborating coaches and teachers to meet and launch their work together before the school year starts.

PROVIDE COACHES WITH THE RESOURCES NECESSARY TO ENGAGE IN STRONG, VISION-ALIGNED COACHING.

Providing resources like the examples below, which can be adapted to suit both co-teachers and other collaborating teachers, will improve coaching and help maintain a school's vision for teacher collaboration.

- **Clear roles and responsibilities for collaborating teachers**
- **Coaching agendas**
- Rubrics and criteria for exemplary **co-planning** and **co-teaching**
- Observation tools (like **Blue Engine's** and **Collegiate Academies'**)

What does it look like to launch a coaching relationship?

DISTINGUISH COLLABORATION COACHING FROM OTHER, ROLE-SPECIFIC COACHING.

It is the responsibility of coaches to let collaborating teachers know that their work together is specifically focused on the team's collaboration in service of meeting the needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities. Coaches have a responsibility to call attention to disparities in experiences and outcomes for subgroups of students like students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students experiencing homelessness, and to work with the teacher teams to identify ways in which they can lean on and use each other's presence and expertise to provide high-impact support.

The unique role of collaboration-focused coaching is to support general and special educators':

- establishing and upholding a strong and trusting relationship;
- utilizing student data to understand the needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities;
- leveraging each other's expertise to bolster their lessons and supports for all students;
- effective co-planning to ensure alignment, rigor, and accessibility; and
- for co-teachers, planning for and implementing high-impact co-teaching models that make optimal use of their shared presence in the classroom.

ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS AND STRUCTURES.

Teachers and coaches — particularly collaborating teachers who are working with multiple coaches — should proactively align on communication methods and expectations to ensure feedback is manageable and aligned across coaches for the team. Ideally, this happens before the start of the school year during summer professional development preservice and focuses on systematized methods of collaboration and communication across coaching domains (i.e., collaboration and content-area guidance) using **model resources** to establish norms. Such systems should consider how coaching feedback will be prioritized for teacher teams and how it will reinforce content and skill development in all domains.

How do we regularly check in on coaching relationships?

ENSURE COLLABORATING TEACHERS FEEL SUPPORTED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.

As the school year progresses and as collaborating teachers establish routines with each other and with their coach, it is important to step back from the day-to-day to monitor the progress of the coaching relationship. This can take place in a variety of ways, for example:

- Coaches or school leaders can have one-on-one meetings with teachers at the middle of the year to monitor their progress, ongoing capacity, and satisfaction with both coaching and their collaborating teacher.
- School leaders can administer a teacher survey to gather feedback on coaching relationships and use the data to make adjustments to how coaching is executed.

Summary

Instructional coaching has often focused on content expertise, not collaboration across educators serving the same students. Collaborating with colleagues around data and instructional planning isn't often covered in teacher preparation programs, and it's not necessarily intuitive for educators. As more collaboration across special education and general education occurs in classrooms, teaching teams need support to learn how to collaborate effectively to leverage their joint expertise and build their mindsets and skill to move their practice forward together. This document addresses some of the key components of effective coaching of collaborating teachers, which requires special attention to be paid to how co-teachers work together while teaching and planning. Regular, vision-aligned coaching of collaborating teachers is the key way to reinforce all aspects of good co-teaching and ensure every student has their needs met in the classroom.

Appendix

Notes

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

2 Solis et al., “Collaborative Models of Instruction”

3 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, “The Effect of Teaching Coaching”

4 We use the term *collaborating teachers* to mean a general and special educator working together to support a set of students.

References

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