

10 Tips for Using Co-Planning Time More Efficiently

Wendy W. Murawski

Ms. Sheldon looked down at her notes from the co-teaching workshop she had just attended and sighed. Yes, she learned a lot about strategies for co-teaching and yes, she believed in the benefits. But was she the only one in the group who heard the presenter say in one breath that “co-planning is the most important component of co-teaching,” followed by “finding time for co-planning is one of the most common barriers to effective co-teaching”? Ms. Sheldon thought, that was definitely her problem! She knew some great general education teachers who were willing and able to co-teach with her; the issue was little time to meet and co-plan with them. Was it even worth the attempt?

As Ms. Sheldon aptly noted, co-planning is both the most important and the most difficult component of co-teaching. Experts on co-teaching have repeatedly noted that without co-planning, teachers tend to teach without differentiation strategies and resort to a One Teach/One Support paradigm (Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Murawski, 2010; Weiss & Lloyd, 2003). The premise of co-teaching rests on the shared expertise that special educator and classroom teacher collaboration brings to the instruction, not merely on having two adults in the classroom. Combine a general educator’s knowledge of standards, curriculum, and content with a special educator’s knowledge of differentiation strategies, a Title I teacher’s knowledge of research-based reading strategies, or an English language specialist’s knowledge, and the result can

be impressive. Without time for sharing this expertise, teachers often teach a class the way they have always taught it and there is no “value added” by the second professional educator (Zigmond, 2006; Zigmond & Matta, 2004). Those teams are unable to answer the essential question of co-teaching: **How is what we are doing together substantively different, and better for students, than what one of us would do alone?**

This article provides 10 tips for how teachers can efficiently plan together, even with limited time. The more time teachers spend together, the better lessons can be, but unfortunately the reality is that few get that kind of time (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). In addition to general tips for planning, using a WHAT/HOW/WHO planning approach can help teachers maximize their planning time and still create a universally designed and differentiated lesson for an inclusive classroom.

#1: ESTABLISH A REGULAR TIME TO PLAN COLLABORATIVELY

Teachers never have enough time to do everything they need to do, and this includes planning for instruction. Having to meet with another teacher to plan is that much more complicated. For this reason, it is critical that co-teachers find a time that works for both of them and that they then hold that time sacrosanct for planning. Collaborating teachers must find at least a small amount of time (20 minutes minimum) once a week to meet. It’s important that this planning time be held regularly; if it is scheduled as a regular occurrence and viewed as important, teachers can respond to requests accounting for the time in their schedule.

#2: SELECT AN APPROPRIATE ENVIRONMENT WITHOUT DISTRACTIONS

Classrooms are the typical place for teachers to meet and plan, but they are full of distractions. If you are going to use a classroom for planning, be sure to shut the door with a sign saying “Unavailable,” turn off the phone, and sit together so you are not facing any other distracting elements. The school library, an open conference room, a testing office, the lunchroom or auditorium, or another teacher’s empty classroom—these are all good alternative meeting spaces. For meetings before or after school or on weekends, coffee shops, restaurants, local libraries, parks, and each other’s houses are all possibilities. Again, though, be aware of outside distractions such as noise, traffic, and interruptions.

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