

Collaboration:

Partnering With Colleagues, Families, and
Caregivers to Promote Student Success



What is Collaboration?

Collaboration is an effective tool that allows general educators, special educators, learning specialists, administrators, and other stakeholders to work together to meet the needs of students. Collaboration is particularly important to sustain inclusive settings. No single educator should be responsible for holding the expertise in the infinite presentations of learner variability. Further, students work with multiple adults within a school building. Collaboration creates safe conditions for students and educators to share knowledge and collectively problem-solve. **The primary purposes of collaboration include: identifying and sharing effective academic, behavior, and social-emotional instructional practices, ensuring that practices are consistent across all providers, and ensuring that the students benefit from those practices.**

Effective collaboration depends on good communication practices. Examples of high-impact collaboration practices include: collaborative lesson planning across providers (particularly in a multi-tiered system of supports), collaboration with parents and caregivers to extend the teaching and learning process “beyond the bell,” and collaboration with student support personnel like related-service providers and paraprofessionals.

Collaboration will be a key classroom practice when you return to in-person learning. We know that students will be returning to school with varying needs, including academic, behavioral, and social-emotional. To effectively meet these needs, collaboration with students' previous teachers and support staff will help ensure that students begin the school year

on the right foot. Consider implementing “hand-off” meetings – even quick ones – with your students’ previous teachers. Ask your students’ former teachers to identify students who did exceedingly well during the pandemic, as well as students for whom the last year was a challenge. Asking last year’s teachers about their successful strategies for instruction and engagement should be a high priority. This practice can inform how you approach relationship-building and differentiation of content.

Collaboration with families and caregivers will also be critical for this school year. Families and caregivers took an active role in their child’s education during the COVID-19 pandemic. They assisted with technology needs, supported their child’s learning of material, and provided social-emotional support.

Make a plan to learn from your students’ families and caregivers with similar “hand-off” meetings or empathy interviews. Seek to understand what did and didn’t work last year. You could even include students in these conversations, as they will have the most insight to share.

Early collaboration with families will help establish lines of communication and build positive relationships for the school year.

Collaboration supports all students – including the 1 in 5 with learning and attention issues. Several studies have shown that students with disabilities in schools with collaborative culture outperform similar students in schools without these structures.¹ Collaboration can bring together teachers with different perspectives and different knowledge to meet learner variability. For example, a general education teacher collaborating with a literacy specialist can efficiently identify strategies to support students with reading abilities that are above or below grade level. Similarly, collaboration can be a tool for creating consistent learning experiences. All students, and especially students with disabilities, benefit from consistent implementation of differentiation strategies, accommodations, and modifications to meet learners where they are in the classroom.

1 McLeskey, J., Barringer, M-D., Billingsley, B., et al. (2017, January). High-leverage practices in special education instruction. Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center.



Why Collaboration Meets the Needs of the Post-COVID-19 Classroom

This spring, NCLD and Boston University's CERES Institute surveyed over 2,400 teachers. We asked about their perceptions and feelings on the school year and how their students handled learning during the pandemic, particularly those with learning and attention challenges. We heard feedback on lessons learned throughout the pandemic, including what teachers want to keep for next year and what they hope would change.

One key finding was that collaboration was identified as a key strategy for meeting the needs of students with learning and attention challenges. Indeed, consistent and structured times to meet to analyze data (e.g., exit tickets, summative assessments, behavior logs) and collaborative problem-solving is important for teachers and for students. It can identify student assets, which can be applied across multiple settings. Collaborative times are also an opportunity to identify student needs and ensure that the right interventions are implemented.

Skills for Effective Collaboration

Effective collaboration goes beyond having the time and space to meet with colleagues. Think about how you'd set your students up for successful peer collaboration. You'd determine what's needed ahead of time, explicitly teaching those foundational skills with modeling and reinforcement. As professionals, we might not need that level of intensive support, but there are skills that we need to use to maximize collaborative time. Below are suggestions to improve your meeting facilitation and participation.

Skill	Go-To Moves
Preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify a facilitator. This person may be the team leader, or you may opt to rotate facilitation responsibilities.• Set an agenda ahead of time and identify meeting goals.• Communicate pre-work, ideally no more than 30 minutes' worth, to maximize collaboration.
Active Listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be present. Silence cell phones, close laptops, and focus only on the meeting agenda and goals.• Allow others to fully finish their thoughts.• Follow up with questions.
Summarizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As the meeting goes on, summarize what you're hearing (or think you're hearing!) from your colleagues.• As the meeting concludes, summarize next steps, ownership, and any deadlines for follow-through. Identify any unresolved topics for the next meeting. Don't forget to revisit these next steps during future meetings to ensure follow-through.
Questioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Approach colleagues with an inquiry mindset. Ask questions, particularly open-ended and clarifying ones.• Check your own understanding of your colleagues' views by paraphrasing.

Skill	Go-To Moves
Delivering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver ideas and solutions with evidence.
Integrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesize colleagues' ideas to arrive at an actionable solution. • Use input and feedback to strengthen initial ideas.
Empathizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume positive intent of others. • Ensure that everyone's voice is equally heard and that everyone is contributing.

Keep in mind that these practices also extend to working collaboratively with families and caregivers. Effective collaboration can help you leverage your families' assets – their background knowledge, interests, and culture. As we saw throughout the pandemic, families play a key role in supporting their children's education. We must partner with families to help their children and to ensure that all students achieve.

How will I integrate collaboration into my daily practice?

Collaboration and Effective Progress Monitoring

In schools implementing a multi-tiered system of supports, collaboration and progress monitoring go hand-in-hand. As we've noted, teachers should not work in isolation. It's important to distribute problem-solving opportunities among general educators, special educators, learning specialists, administrators, and other stakeholders to improve student outcomes.

As we look toward the new school year, we know students will return with varying needs. They will have had varying degrees of success with learning experiences during the pandemic. You should use the beginning of the school year to build relationships with students and to administer diagnostic assessments, like universal screeners. Having a baseline of student performance is critical for knowing if students are making adequate progress throughout the year — and for quickly identifying the students who have foundational skill gaps.

With this baseline data, you'll want to monitor students' progress in their response to your daily instruction and any interventions you implement. You can do this with exit tickets at the end of lessons or through weekly assessments. What's important is that you're collecting data and analyzing it to quickly adjust your instruction. For example, at the end of each lesson, give students a short formative assessment aligned to the objective. With just a few items, you can determine which students mastered the objective and which need additional time or even a different instructional approach. Depending on the responses, you might build in additional review at the top of your next lesson for your whole class, or create a small group lesson for a select group of students. This type of analysis is ripe for collaboration. Check in with your grade-level colleague to share ideas on adjusting instruction, or tap into your paraprofessional to support a small group. Collaboration can be quick conversations and still result in effective next steps.

If students are not making progress with this type of responsive instruction and collaboration, you'll want to use your school's collaborative structures, like a student support team, to get additional ideas for how to best support their needs. This step is crucial for intervening effectively and ensuring that students who require specially designed instruction get the right services.

Learn More

[High-Level Practices in Special Education: Collaboration \(Council for Exceptional Children\)](#)

Downloadable 15-page chapter from the CEC's larger publication. Provides research syntheses for special education teachers on:

- Collaborating with other professionals
- Organizing and facilitating effective meetings with professionals and families
- Collaborating with families

[Collaborating With Families \(IRIS Center\)](#)

Learning module designed to help teachers build positive relationships with families of students with learning issues. Multimedia resources and templates cover such topics as:

- Recognizing that all families are different
- Understanding the emotions exhibited by the parents of children with disabilities
- Showing respect to parents
- Treating parents as equal partners
- Providing parents with meaningful information about their child's and the school's performance

[Distance Learning Toolkit: Key Practices to Support Students Who Learn Differently \(Understood\)](#)

A toolkit to help educators meet the needs of all students during distance learning. It includes additional ideas for collaborating with colleagues, families, and caregivers.

A Note to School, District, and State Leaders

We heard from our surveys and educator focus groups that teachers want, and value, collaborative planning time. It's up to school and district leadership to create – and protect – this time. To accelerate the performance of the 1 in 5, we need to create more inclusive environments and promote inclusive instruction. This requires time, space, and support for effective collaboration. A best practice is to identify these collaborative times within your schedule first, and then plan around these times.²

We recommend strategic planning for ensuring that collaborative planning happens. Some districts opt to shorten one school day a week to ensure uninterrupted collaboration times.³ Other districts put more teacher work days into their calendars, including at the beginning and end of the school-year. Some districts use “early release days” for teacher collaboration. One of the positive outcomes of virtual learning during the pandemic is that teachers used collaborative platforms like Zoom to collaborate with teaching teams. As importantly, teachers reported that the use of remote collaboration methods like FaceTime significantly increased home-school collaboration. Teachers reported using these methods to demonstrate with parents effective academic, behavior and social emotional strategies “beyond the bell.”

For more ideas on implementing effective collaboration, check out [Forward Together: A School Leader's Guide to Creating Inclusive Schools](#) for a comprehensive guide on implementing this strategy, as well as others that will meet the needs of the 1 in 5, and all students. Additional school, district, and state-level policy recommendations to support educators can be found in [this resource](#).

2 Anderson, J. (2019, September 17). *The gift of teacher time*. Usable Knowledge. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/19/09/gift-teacher-time>

3 Saenz-Armstrong, P. (2021, June 10). A look at districts' planning and collaboration policies for their teachers. *National Council on Teacher Quality*. <https://www.nctq.org/blog/A-look-at-districts-planning-and-collaboration-policies-for-their-teachers>

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[NCLD](#) works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues – by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. We’re working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, at work, and in life.



[Understood](#) is dedicated to growing and shaping a world where everyone who learns and thinks differently feels supported at home, at school, and at work; a world where people with all types of disabilities have the opportunity to enjoy meaningful careers; a world where more communities embrace differences. Because differences make the world worth exploring. Differences define who we are. Differences are our greatest strength.

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