

**CO-TEACHING:**

## Transforming the Standard Classroom Experience

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By Sarah Gonser

Inside the tidy red-brick building of Gouverneur Elementary – built just three years ago to accommodate three local elementary schools merging into one new facility – classrooms are generously proportioned and walls of windows bring in abundant light. The library is amply stocked with books and collaboration-friendly desks configured into compact pods. Foam cube seats nestle together like puzzle pieces, encouraging students to hunker down for cozy reading. The building and its furniture, however, are just one part of what’s new at Gouverneur Elementary, which serves the surrounding Village of Gouverneur’s 4,000 residents and is about 30 miles from the Canadian border. In a development that’s been in the works for close to a decade, Gouverneur Elementary now offers a co-taught inclusion classroom at nearly each grade level.

“It was a lot of work; this definitely doesn’t happen overnight,” said Victoria Day, the school’s principal. “It took us a good eight to nine years of getting the practice in, changing the philosophy and thinking of our staff—and even my own philosophy—so that we all understand: this problem won’t go away unless we address it. Fundamentally, we had to really think about the special education continuum of moving scholars to the least restrictive environment so we could find a happy medium where all kids move up along that continuum, whether they have an IEP or not.”

For Gouverneur Elementary, which has 650 students enrolled in pre-K through fourth grade, the hard work is paying off. Where some students grew just one or two reading levels per year prior to the school adapting an inclusive co-teaching model, many are now advancing much more quickly. “I have several examples where kids are now growing between six and nine average reading levels because they’re finally getting more face time and guided skills practice work with two teachers in the room,” said the school’s co-principal, Charity Zawatski. “From the lens of achievement and growth, that’s unheard of.”

Collaborative team teaching, sometimes called co-teaching, involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together for the duration of the school day in one inclusion classroom. Though there are several co-teaching models, the gold standard is when both teachers share responsibilities and work as equals, their roles indistinguishable to their students. Co-teaching, when done well, allows more opportunities for one-on-one learning and small group work. For teachers, it encourages the type of close collaboration that, ideally, allows them to develop and deliver the strongest, most compelling lesson. Importantly, co-teaching is a way for schools to ensure that students who need special education services—children diagnosed with learning and attention issues, for example—are being taught in the least restrictive environment, an important component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The least

restrictive environment, for many students, often means an inclusion classroom, a practice that research shows has positive short- and long-term effects for students. Many schools have inclusive classrooms, which can be set up in a number of ways, and the main purpose is for students who receive special education services to learn alongside students who do not receive special education services. While some inclusive classrooms, like those at Gouverneur Elementary, use a co-teaching model, others have special education teachers push into the classroom during the school day to teach only specific parts of the curriculum.

While co-teaching can be adapted to all grade levels, the practice is somewhat more complicated in middle and high school due to the structure of secondary education where each subject is taught by a different teacher. This means general and special education teachers pair up by subject and never have the benefit of working together for the entire school day. While this makes developing a cohesive team-teaching approach more challenging, research shows that there are ways to strengthen the practice. “One of the best approaches an administrator can take is to promote co-teaching by providing substantive information about this collaborative arrangement and encouraging teachers to proactively prepare for this before they actually start the process,” wrote Wendy W. Murawski and Lisa A. Dieker in *Co-teaching at the Secondary Level: Unique Issues, Current Trends, and Suggestions for Success*. “As with most educational initiatives, schools differ in their awareness and readiness level for implementation, as do the individual faculty members within each school.”

At Gouverneur, the decision to develop the inclusive practice of co-teaching for each grade level (the kindergarten class is still in development), came out of a tangle of practices that the administration and staff felt weren’t serving students well. “Before any of this, we really had a haphazard mishmash model,” said Zawatski. “We were essentially doing the old version of consultant teaching—where the special education teacher pushes into

the classroom, and pullout resource room. But this only allowed us to support some students, not all students, and definitely not for the entire day.”

Underscoring these challenges was data that showed students were not progressing academically. “We were looking at kids growing maybe one, or possibly two, reading levels per year. That’s just not sufficient. Most kids need to grow between three and four reading levels on average each grade level,” recalled Zawatski. “For students receiving special education services, they might need to grow even more because they’re already behind the ball.”

At the same time, Gouverneur, a onetime boomtown known for its lace and silk mills, lumber and dairy industries, and thriving paper and pulp mills, was experiencing ongoing population decline as residents moved away to find jobs and escape local poverty. Schools, therefore, faced steeply declining enrollment.

Once the decision was made to collapse three local elementary schools into one new building, Day and Zawatski got to work. “We looked at the number of special education students that we had—there were some large numbers—and we knew this would create future serious numbers and balancing challenges for us,” Zawatski said. “As we collapsed buildings and got to create a new pre-K through [grade] four model, we watched the numbers and created a plan based on what we were going to need to support and balance classrooms with general education and special education that would be manageable for teachers.”

Alongside convincing the school district that a co-taught inclusion classroom for each elementary grade would make fiscal and educational sense, one of the toughest administrative tasks was finding the right mix of teachers to collaborate in a classroom. “As administrators, the biggest challenge we have is how can we get the special education teacher and the general education teacher to mesh,” said Day. “It takes two very special people to make this work for our kids.”

Some teachers compare collaborative teaching to a marriage. “You’re hoping you’re compatible with the person you’re paired with and it requires



getting used to not being the only adult making decisions in your classroom,” said Carrie Hartle, a third-grade teacher at Gouverneur Elementary who has been teaching for 17 years. “The first year, I’m not going to lie, it was rough. I love my co-teacher, she’s wonderful, but there was friction for both of us at first. But that’s normal. Now, we finish each other’s sentences and we’re best friends. It’s important for kids to see that kind of unity in their teachers.”

An essential ingredient for making the model work is investing in ongoing professional development. Over the last six years, Zawatski estimates Gouverneur Elementary spent \$40,000 on PD, including sending a team of teachers to Boston for a weeklong train-the-trainer workshop, and another team to Seattle for a train-the-trainer dive into differentiated instruction.

“That has made the difference in what we do,” said Zawatski. “Two teachers take time out of their summer

to go to Seattle, get the train-the-trainer experience, bring that back and each year not only lead summer PD but also run professional learning communities throughout the school year, supporting teachers at every level with differentiation. The value that we’ve invested in them has truly paid off. But you have to put the money up front and invest in the time and the people to have it keep paying dividends for you.”

While the Gouverneur administration worked to put the pieces in place for this model to work at its new elementary school, it became clear that not everyone—including other teachers at the school and parents of students—understood why this might be a good thing.

“Early in the school year, we realized that parents and our students didn’t understand that I was a certified teacher, with just as many certifications as my co-teacher. Everyone thought I was a paraprofessional,” said Arleen Escadero, a fourth-grade special education teacher at Gouverneur Elementary who has been teaching for four years. “So we created a pamphlet to send home to parents, welcoming them to our [integrated co-teaching] classroom, explaining the benefits of co-teaching, how we accomplish our mission. And how,

when it’s done well, you can’t tell who the special education and who the general education teacher is.”

At the same time, the push toward collaborative teaching wasn’t popular among some members of the school’s staff. “Even this many years in, teachers in our school who aren’t in a co-teaching pair still don’t understand and embrace integrated co-teaching,” said Zawatski. “We’ve done a lot of legwork educating our own professional staff members about what integrated co-teaching is, why it’s beneficial, and what the teaching in this classroom looks like compared to their own classroom.”

Ultimately, according to Day, successfully integrating the co-teaching practice at each grade level at Gouverneur Elementary required a rock-solid commitment that came from the top down. “The administrator is key: it’s your belief. If you believe in it, it will happen,” she said. “Is it easy? Absolutely not. Is it best for kids? Yes. So that’s why you need to work really hard to get buy-in from your staff and from your administration.”

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