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# IDEA 2004: Building collaborative partnerships and effective communication between administrators, special and general educators, and multi-disciplinary professionals

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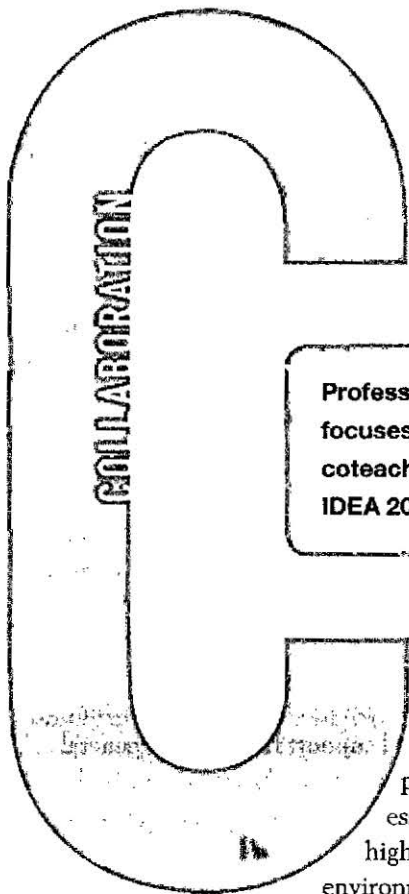
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Collaboration and coteaching are essential components of special education services.

Professional development that focuses on collaboration and coteaching is supported by IDEA 2004.

School leaders can facilitate collaborative relationships and provide needed support for coteaching teams.

Communication and professional dialogue are essential elements of a high-quality education environment in which all students can succeed. Such an environment is especially important for the success of students with special needs. Unfortunately, collaboration between special educators, general educators, and other professionals is often hindered by a lack of planning time (Bouck, 2007; Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Paulsen, 2008), as well as lack of personnel, lack of preservice teacher training in working with other professionals, resistance to change, and a lack of training about teacher roles in collaborative partnerships (Paulsen, 2008).

The regulations in IDEA 2004 reduce paperwork and promote professional development and support for special education teachers, helping schools create effective teamwork for special education teachers. It is important for principals to review the regulations that relate to the roles of various education professionals (e.g., administrators, school psychologists, and general and special education teachers) and plan ways to implement those regulations using best practices.

### Communication and Collaboration

Principals, administrators, and special education teachers typically lead and direct IEP meetings

(Martin et al., 2006). Because of time constraints, psychologists often perform their assessments independently and do not communicate the results or recommendations with the administrator, the special education teacher, and the other team members until the IEP meeting. This can contribute to inconsistencies and misunderstandings between the IEP team members. Other challenges to effective collaboration include differences between the IEP team members in personality, varying objectives for students, a lack of value for another's professional status, and inadequate resources and time (Hartas, 2004; Hemmingsson, Gustavsson, & Townsend, 2007).

Given the IDEA 2004 mandate for reducing paperwork and using optional three-year education planning, principals and administrators are pivotal players in the development of a cohesive team culture within a school setting. Principals can help alleviate some of the barriers to effective communication and collaboration between IEP team members by:

- Systematically scheduling common times for the psychologist, the teachers, and the specialists to meet and collaborate
- Facilitating meetings that foster the development of relationships among team members
- Scheduling and facilitating pre-IEP meetings that address misunderstandings and ensure consistent approaches for students by all team members



**The relationships cultivated between general educators and special educators are the foundation of the trust and rapport that will lead to effective coteaching.**

- ❑ Developing common goals among team members.

#### **ROLE PLAY AND PROBLEM SOLVING**

A principal can present various scenarios that may occur in an actual IEP meeting and ask team members to role play different sides of an issue. This activity can facilitate and promote positive communication among various IEP team members.

Scenarios include:

- ❑ Disagreements between administrators and special or general education teachers about the placement of a student
- ❑ A request from a parent for services that may not be possible for teachers to deliver
- ❑ A conflict between the special education teacher and another specialist, such as a transition counselor, about an upcoming placement of a student.

The following ground rules or group norms can be used to guide the process and help develop a collaborative culture:

- ❑ Participate by taking a turn in a role play, observing, using active listening skills, and adding ideas to the discussion
- ❑ Get focus by establishing common goals and staying on topic
- ❑ Maintain momentum by having each member monitor their frequency and quantity of speaking and by establishing an agenda, a time limit for each role play, an ending time for the meeting
- ❑ Reach closure through discussion and consensus.

The discussions following each role play can lead to the development of constructive ways to deal with disagreements and conflicts that arise during the IEP team process. Talking points of the discussion include opportunities to para-

phrase, clarify, question, and offer suggestions for improvement. Discussion is facilitated by the principal through such questions as, *What would it look like if...? What do you think would happen if...? How was it different (or like)...? What might you see happening if...? and What sort of an impact do you think it would make if...?* The next steps for the team should be determined through team consensus.

#### **Coteaching Models**

Professional development activities that involve team teaching and collaboration are also funded under IDEA 2004. The relationships cultivated between general educators and special educators are the foundation of the trust and rapport that will lead to effective coteaching, and administrative leadership and mentoring support are key to the successful implementation of coteaching.

Principals must be cognizant of collaborative teaching models and provide required support for both the general and the special education teachers so that they may build a positive team relationship. For example, a coteaching team needs common released time and opportunities for collaboration (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). In addition, school districts should encourage professional development that facilitates the selection of appropriate collaborative strategies (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007). Such technologies as online discussions (Greer & Hamill, 2003) and video conferencing (Rummel & Spada, 2005) can enable improved collaboration between general and special educators.

Friend and Bursuck (2009) describe five coteaching models.

**Lead and support.** One teacher leads and another offers assistance to individuals or small groups. Planning includes both teachers, but typically one teacher plans the lesson content, while the other does specific planning for students' individual learning or behavioral needs.

**Station teaching.** Students are divided into two heterogeneous groups and work at a classroom station with one teacher. At a designated time, students switch to the other station to work with the other teacher. In this model, both teachers individually develop the content of their stations, although they must coordinate with each other.

**Parallel teaching.** Teachers jointly plan instruction and deliver it individually to half the class or to small groups of students. This model requires joint planning time to ensure that as teachers work with their separate groups, they are delivering content in the same way.

**Alternative teaching.** One teacher works with a small group of students to preteach, reteach, supplement, or enrich instruction, while the other teacher instructs the large group. Planning time is needed to ensure that the logistics

of preteaching or reteaching can be completed.

**Team teaching.** Both teachers share the responsibility for planning and instructing students. Teachers need similar knowledge of the content, shared education philosophy, and commitment to all students in the class. This model takes time to develop and is most effective when teachers work together for a long time.

### Looking for Inspiration

Principals can arrange site visits for teachers at schools that have implemented successful collaborative coteaching models. The teachers would then have a repertoire of ideas that they could share with colleagues and apply to their own teaching. Before visiting other school sites, however, teachers must establish desired outcomes of the visits and set some goals; after the visit, they should follow up their observations with questions and discussions that help them apply what they observed.

### OBSERVATION GUIDE

Talking with visiting teachers about site visits will help them clarify their thinking, their objectives, and the lessons they take away from the visit.

- Before the site visit, determine the areas of focus and desired outcomes with the visiting teacher
  - After the site visit, ask the visiting teacher what he or she noticed and the main ideas he or she learned
  - Discuss with the visiting teacher how he or she will apply new ideas to the classroom
  - Find out if the teacher has any further questions.
- On a site visit, teachers should be reminded to look at:
- The classroom environment
  - Routines and procedures
  - Classroom management
  - Transitions, pacing, and use of time
  - Teaching and instructional strategies
  - Teacher questioning techniques
  - Roles of collaborative team members
  - Student engagement.

The discussion about collaboration on a school campus is critical for the successful development and implementation of an effective coteaching model. Principals can use the following activity as a guide to facilitate the conversation with their staff members.

### A VISION FOR COTEACHING

Successful coteaching and collaboration require a common vision statement and specific goals. The school leader can facilitate a discussion with teachers to formulate a shared vision of collaboration and coteaching using the following format:

For each of the five elements listed, discuss the current state, the desired state, and how to achieve the desired state:

- Planning time for general and special education teachers
- Similar levels of content knowledge for coteaching teams
- A shared philosophy of collaboration
- Common goals
- Trust and respect.

### Conclusion

The importance of building collaborative partnerships among administrators, general educators, special educators, and other professionals to assist a student with special needs is addressed extensively in IDEA 2004. Professional collaboration among IEP team members is an essential component for delivering the best possible IEP to a student. Furthermore, IDEA 2004 regulations specifically state that educational agencies should "carry out programs that...provide team teaching, reduced class schedules and case loads, and intensive professional development."

Principals and school administrators are indispensable in the successful implementation of those mandates. They play an essential role through their decision making and leadership in supporting educators in the development of collaborative relationships. Building a collaborative culture results in school personnel working interdependently and taking collective responsibility for the learning of all students (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). PL



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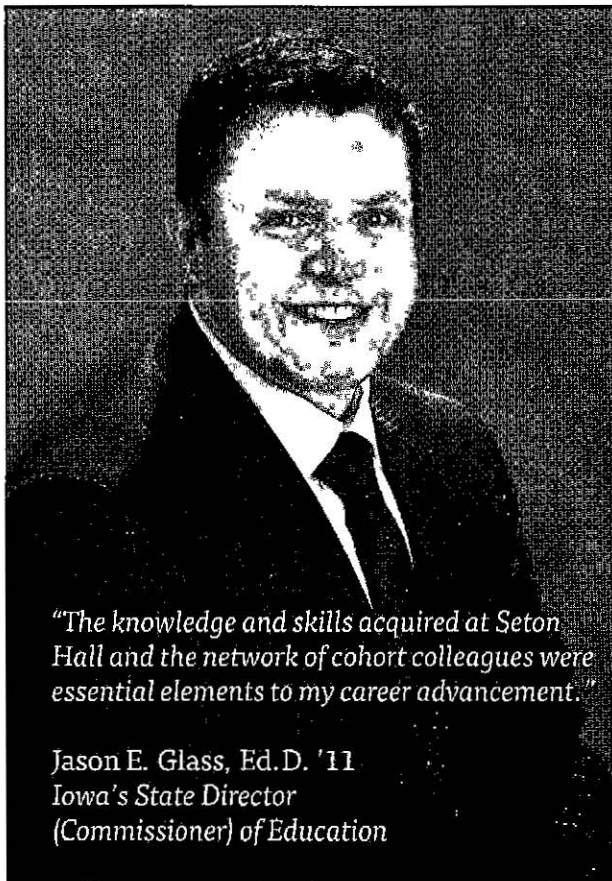
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