

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CO-TEACHING

---

Angela Peery, Ed.D.

Co-teaching situations are increasingly common as educators try to meet the wide range of student learning needs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 9.3 percent of students in the United States are English Language Learners ([nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96)) and 12.9 percent have specific learning disabilities ([nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=64](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=64)). Theoretically, about 20 percent of any classroom in America contains students with a wide variety of special needs. In urban locations, these numbers may be even higher.

The movement to include special education students (and later, students facing other conditions and circumstances) began in the late 1960s so that as many students as possible would have full access to a regular education program and would not experience segregation from their peers. This movement, initially driven by parents, resulted in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This act updates Public Law 94-142, which included two fundamentals: a free, appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

IDEA was first signed into law in 1975. It has been revised and expanded several times since. The most recent amendments came in 2004, with the final regulations for preschool and school-age children published in 2006 and those for infants and toddlers in 2011. The US Department of Education maintains a robust site about IDEA at [idea.ed.gov](https://idea.ed.gov).

Past efforts to meet the special needs of students went under the names “mainstreaming” and later, “inclusion.” Mainstreaming was the effort to mix special-needs students who were being served in separate classrooms back into general education classes. It was assumed that these students would be able to find success once mainstreamed, but without also having specialized assistance within the regular education classes, many students struggled.

Inclusion was the next wave of reform and, in its most ideal forms, approximated effective co-teaching. Students with special needs were placed in general education classes but were also supported by specialists. As inclusion evolved, the term “co-teaching” became more pervasive and accurate, as it more clearly denotes the relationship that the general ed teacher and the specialist must have so that all students perform well. In much of the research literature of recent years, the term “inclusive settings” is used to describe a school or system’s efforts to include all children in the regular education setting as much as possible during the school day. “Co-teaching” is used to describe the arrangement by which some of a school’s teachers instruct so that all learners can be successful.

The “pushing-in” of specialists to support students who have special needs continues to gain popularity not only because federal legislation has moved in that direction but also because it is now generally accepted that most students, regardless of learning disability or language fluency, deserve maximum access to the general curriculum and to interaction with their age-like peers.

## BENEFITS OF CO-TEACHING

Teachers often see academic and behavioral improvements as a result of co-teaching arrangements, but the hard data has been mixed (as summarized in Van Garderen, Stormont & Goel, 2012).

Some research studies report positive results. For example, students with disabilities served in inclusive settings showed improvement on standardized tests in addition to showing increased social and communication skills (Power-DeFur & Orelove, 1997). They enjoyed more frequent and higher quality interaction with peers and, by some measures, were better prepared for post-school academic and work experiences (Power-DeFur & Orelove, 1997).

Van Garderen and colleagues (2012) sum up the findings well when they say that there is a trend toward positive outcomes from inclusion or “push-in” models, but that even when outcomes seem mixed, we should not interpret this to mean that co-teaching is “bad.” They suggest that lesser outcomes simply mean that other practices, like “pull-out” services, may be just as effective in supporting some students.

The key idea from the mixed research is that co-teaching is one of several options that may work well in serving special-needs students. School leaders must determine when, why, and how co-teaching might work and for whom it might be best.

## REFERENCES

- Power-DeFur, L. A., and Orelove, F. P. (1997). *Inclusive education: Practical implementation of the least restrictive environment*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers.
- Van Garderen, D., Stormont, M. and Goel, N. (2012). Collaboration between general and special educators and student outcomes: A need for more research. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49(5). Retrieved January 17, 2017 from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pits.21610/full>