

A JOURNEY TAKE



A Massachusetts school
uses a co-teaching strategy
to produce newfound
growth among special
needs students

By Liz Garden


TOGETHER

As administrators, we are responsible for looking at data, processing data, and making changes so that we can show improvement. That seems easy enough, right? Let me take you on a journey of how we worked to change the data—and the humans behind it—in one school.

The Journey Begins

Zero percent was the data I inherited when I moved into a leadership role in a new school—meaning our students with special needs had achieved zero growth. That’s an uncomfortable data point, but it certainly offered a place to start. I wasn’t sure what the road ahead would look like, but I knew we weren’t going to stay in one place.

When you’re leading change, you can’t give directions without a destination. The first step was to decide where we wanted to go with our students with special needs. We certainly wanted them to demonstrate growth; zero was unacceptable. We also knew that in order to move forward and help students show growth, we needed to do things differently. We had been instructing students with special needs separately from their peers, so that was the first thing that had to change.



As long as we continue to move away from models and systems that hold kids back and have little or no impact, we are on the right path.

Packed and Ready

We had a starting point and a destination. When we stopped to evaluate ourselves as educators, though, we faced the hard truth that many of our teachers had stagnated due to their fixed mindsets. Before we could make changes in our delivery model and focus our attention on the students with zero growth, we had to first educate staff on what it meant to have a growth mindset.

By placing students in IEPs and determining what specialized instruction would look like, many of our teachers realized that they had already decided that these students would not—or worse, could not—reach certain academic goals.

Changing their mindsets was not an easy task. It reminded me of that cartoon image in which someone asks the question “Who wants change?” and all hands are raised. Then that person asks, “Who wants *to* change?” and nobody volunteers. People knew that changes needed to be made to move forward from that zero percent. But not everyone was on the same page about how to get there.

The First Step

Once we had the staff heading toward a growth mindset, it was time to figure out how we were going to change our instructional model. When you have zero percent growth with specialized instruction, clearly you need to try something different. We focused first on one grade and one subject.

I put a team of teachers in a room with some whiteboards and told them to think outside the box. I was present for part of the brainstorming session, but I stepped out for a little while. I wanted to see what they could come up with. I asked the team to forget about what had been implemented before—forget the routine and the established scheduling, planning, and placement. They came up with several ideas.

We settled on a version of co-teaching in one class during the math block. We had two willing teachers, and the rest were willing to hand off the responsibility of teaching math to a core group of students with IEPs. Students would leave the classroom to come into a space where two certified teachers would provide math instruction. There were a few bumps as we started down this new path, but it was a good first step.

The team started to catch the co-teaching bug. The brainstorming session left them with lots of ideas about how they could expand this model the following year. Linus Pauling once said, “The best way to get a good idea is to get lots of ideas,” and we had lots. We decided to expand co-teaching to a fourth-grade classroom.

Detours and Roadblocks

The first year of a full co-teaching model was one with many successes but also many challenges. Because the strategy was new and we didn’t have the budget for new staffing, we didn’t have the best initial design. The special education teacher had students in the co-taught room, as well as a caseload of students in other classrooms. She needed to leave her classroom for part of the time to support other students. We learned from that mistake and made changes the following year.

When you place two certified teachers in one classroom, you have to make sure to help support the relationship between those two adults. “Simply having two teachers in the same classroom is not enough,” says Wendy Murawski, author of *Collaborative Teaching in Elementary Schools: Making the Co-teaching Marriage Work!* “Co-teaching requires co-planning, co-instruction, and co-assessment. That may seem like a lot, but when done well, the benefits are clearly evident for kids with and without disabilities.”

I did everything from mediating “marriage counseling” sessions in my office to scheduling co-planning sessions with the two teachers. It was an emotional year, full of tears of frustration and joy. We made sure to stop to gather feedback on what was working, what was not working, and what we needed to adjust as we moved forward. Most importantly, what was the impact that this new model was having on the students?

Growth was happening all around, but it wasn’t just academic growth. We were seeing big

changes in the kids who had avoided work, disliked school, and had low self-esteem. These kids were happy! Parents contacted us saying they couldn’t believe the difference. The academic data at the end of our first year supported the decision to change to this model, but it was the stories behind the data—the growth of every kid in the classroom—that made us proud.


The Road Ahead

After a successful first year of a co-taught fourth-grade classroom, we began to make plans to add co-taught second-grade and third-grade classrooms, getting creative with budgeting. We took on a teaching fellow for one of our new co-taught classrooms to gain a certified teacher without adding a staff member, giving us a year to find the money to add a position the following year.

Seven years since beginning the program, we are still on a co-teaching journey. We started with zero percent growth, and as of last year, our school had achieved more than 50 percent growth for students with disabilities and was one of 50 schools in the state recognized for high academic achievement.

Again, academic growth was something to be proud of, but it really was the stories from the parents and the children themselves that made us glad that we started on this journey. Parents contacted us after their students moved on to middle school to tell us how much their children loved learning, how included the children felt, and how pleased they were to see their children happy at school. That kind of data can’t be found in a spreadsheet or presented in a bar graph.

We continue to ask the question that every parent dreads on a long car ride (“Are we there yet?”), and I know that the journey isn’t over. As long as we continue to move away from models and systems that hold kids back and have little or no impact, we are on the right path. As long as we challenge ourselves to make changes to traditional, familiar classroom structures, the road will stretch on indefinitely.

“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new,” Socrates said. There will always be new roads to pave for our kids. Enjoy the trip! 

Liz Garden is principal of Leroy E. Mayo School in Holden, Massachusetts.



Co-teaching is when “two or more professionals deliver quality instruction to individuals with or without disabilities in a classroom,” says *Collaborative Teaching in Elementary Schools: Making the Co-teaching Marriage Work!* Its benefits for students with and without special needs include:

- Enhanced academic performance;
- More attention from, and interaction with, teachers; and
- Improved self-confidence and social skills.