All for One and One for All

How to make inclusion work for students and staff

By Mary Grover and Jennifer Gondek

Our journey started with an inspiring conference, a moleskin journal of quotes, and a manila folder titled "inclusion" that held notes from parents and caregivers. And a commitment from staff, that at Caroline Elementary School, we can do hard things. What do all of these have in common? A pledge to students that they will not have to leave the classroom to learn.

Anytime there is change, there is also questioning, excitement, support, and fear. As we gathered staff to grow a common understanding of inclusion, we reflected on the history and culture of our building. While we worked to create a clear vision of inclusion as a community, ambitious educators in the building created hands-on, place-based, interdisciplinary units of studies. During these units, special education students experienced significant academic achievement. And that's noteworthy because when educators see their students succeeding with challenging material, they pause to ask why and replicate the lesson and interaction as much as possible. Here are three tips for leading inclusion in your school.

Tip 1: Mindset

"The minute you exclude one person, you don't have community."

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In our first professional learning community (PLC) of the year, we did an activity mentioned by Julie Causton, a professor at Syracuse University in the Inclusive and Special Education Program. On a sheet of paper, staff wrote the initials of all the students on one margin and all the services on the other. Their task was to draw an arrow from the student to the service every time the student left the room for support. The results were astounding, and staff concluded that many of them never had a point in the day when their whole class was together.

This exercise was followed by a folder of artifacts that included a thank-you note from a parent, quotes about inclusive practices, and a table featuring student achievement results from George Theoharis at Syracuse University. The three main takeaways were:

- All students see higher reading achievement when heterogeneously grouped.
- It is a social justice issue to deny students access to curriculum and not presume competence.
- Caregivers are grateful for the opportunities their students receive when integrated into general education settings.

Tip 2: Look for the Roadblocks

"A segregated childhood predicts a segregated adulthood. An inclusive childhood predicts an inclusive adulthood."

— Norman Kunz

Subsequent staff meetings uncovered fears and needs of practicing inclusion:

- What if kids are embarrassed?
- What if there isn't enough time to plan?
- How do we co-teach when our specialists have only 30 minutes with us?
- How can we possibly group kids to meet their needs?
- How can co-teaching really work?

In giving air time to fears and concerns, we were able to group them into three camps: mindset, instructional practice, and logistics. As we explored the roadblocks, one kept resurfacing: our schedule. This was profound, because we were the ones who created the schedule; therefore, we had the capacity to make significant change.

Mindset is harder to address. We started by inspiring and supporting the talented and well-intentioned educators in the room. At points, we also outlined clear expectations for what inclusion "was" and "was not." It meant saying, *At Caroline, students don't have to leave their classroom to learn.* This was not always the easiest and most comfortable way forward. It required professional development.

Professional development is ongoing for this work. It layers project-based learning, the importance of relational trust, models for co-teaching, universal design, and an understanding that behavior is communicating a need. The exploration of co-teaching models meant a redesign of some instructional spaces.

Rooms needed areas for station teaching, where multiple staff could work together with groups of children. Traditional items such as teacher desks were replaced with tables where students could gather.

Tip 3: Intentional Schedule In

"Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it."

— A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

From our conversations with teachers, we concluded that the biggest barriers to this work could be overcome by intentionally designing a schedule that addressed roadblocks. We

committed to prioritizing our special education services in the master schedule.

The first step was to look at each student's individualized education plan (IEP) and make a list of students by grade level who would be receiving special education and related services in the following school year. By each student's name we outlined strengths, areas of need, and service delivery recommendations. For example, Jane was very social and a strong decoder, and she received information and communication technologies (ICT) services in reading for 60 minutes daily and math for 60 minutes daily. Tara was on grade level in reading and math, and received speech and language services in the classroom for 30 minutes, twice a week.

Next, we grouped students by similar needs. This required a deeper look into each IEP to determine more specific student needs and the corresponding goals. In an attempt to maintain natural proportions whenever possible, we avoided clustering all students with disabilities in one classroom. Instead, we made smaller subgroups: students with reading services (decoding), students with math services and reading services (comprehension), and then students with only speech and language services. These groupings varied by grade level due to the diversity of our students.

Staff's greatest concern was the current scheduling of services. In classes that were previously co-taught, specialists were pushing into classrooms for 30 minutes at a time.

Everyone felt this created a revolving-door effect. Just as students began a task, one of the teachers had to leave and would not return for 45 minutes or more. The cycle continued throughout the day, from classroom to classroom. We were committed to keeping special educators banded (K–1, 2–3, 4–5) for consistency for students and a greater understanding of where children were going. So, we decided to craft the master schedule around the demands for our specialists' time in classrooms.

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Using the existing schedule as a starting point, we created four variations that would allow the specialists to be in the grade-level classroom for the designated amount of service delivery time, and the entire duration of a subject whenever possible. Additionally, we ensured that each special educator had planning time that overlapped with both grade-level teams.

The four draft schedules were shared with teams of teachers. Each grade-level team voted for its preferred schedule and provided feedback about each version. We were interested in hearing their rationale. *Which schedule did they like most? Which schedule did they like least? Why?* This feedback helped us learn a little more about the nuances of collaboration and implementation of true co-teaching. With a little shifting, we were able to combine the top two schedules to create one beautiful master schedule that set teams up for success. **P**

Mary Grover is principal of Caroline Elementary School in Ithaca, New York.

Jennifer Gondek is an instructional specialist for inclusion at Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga BOCES in Ithaca, New York.