In a standards-reform era demanding increased access to general education classrooms by students with disabilities, how can less restrictive instructional alternatives like co-teaching be expanded in light of special education teacher shortages and tighter budgets?

This article describes the challenges and benefits of new models of co-teaching that work in schools today.

Although concern has been expressed in the special education literature regarding the need for more research on the instructional benefits of cooperative teaching (Zigmund, 2001), new laws and regulations call for full access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities—with highly qualified teachers. In fact, this is a time to increase and not retreat from general education initiatives in our schools. Moreover, as school systems are significantly changing instructional programs in response to the standards-reform movement (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000), and at the same time experiencing an increasing shortage of certified special education teachers (Kozleski, Mainzer, & Deschler, 2000), we need to develop alternative and additional means to support students with disabilities to successfully access general education classrooms.

After reviewing the benefits of cooperative teaching in the public schools of Anne Arundel County, Maryland, on the basis of parent, teacher, and student surveys; academic outcome data; and classroom observations, we propose four alternative models for co-taught classrooms that rely on flexible teacher schedules and the use of paraprofessionals. We describe the advantages and challenges of each model based on classroom teacher comments and experience.

**Benefits of Cooperative Teaching**

Since cooperative teaching was first suggested as a “mainstreaming strategy” (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1991, p. 19) and “a practical merger between general and special education integration” (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989, p.17) that provides the direct and immediate support to students with disabilities accessing the general education classroom, many authors have written about best practices in co-teaching (Cook & Friend, 1995; Vaughn, 997; etc.).

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We propose four alternative models for co-taught classrooms that rely on flexible teacher schedules and the use of paraprofessionals.
Co-teaching is a moderately effective procedure for influencing student outcomes.

A more recent discovery of the benefits of co-teaching in Anne Arundel resulted from an analysis of classroom observation data comparing instructional indicators in co-taught classrooms with more restrictive special education classrooms. During the 2000-2001 school year, we conducted more than 100 classroom observations in Anne Arundel's secondary schools in an effort to assess the instructional strengths and weaknesses of special education teachers and to recommend needed staff development programs (Walsh & Conner, in press). Of 16 instructional indicators from classroom observation forms, two instructional areas show particular differences between co-taught and self-contained classrooms (Table 1). Teachers in co-taught classrooms (n = 39, 95%) were much more likely to provide "instruction reflecting the general education curriculum" than were teachers in self-contained classrooms (n = 64, 78%). Likewise, teachers (81%) in co-taught classrooms were more likely to provide instruction that involved students in the higher dimensions of learning needed for success on the critical thinking tasks of the Maryland Student Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP/DOL incorporated) than were teachers (58%) in self-contained classrooms. In light of the critical need to find effective ways to enable students with disabilities to truly and consistently access the general education curriculum, the results of these classroom observations provide additional support for efforts to expand opportunities for students with disabilities to receive instruction in co-taught settings.

Need for New Instructional Models

Since cooperative teaching was first described and recommended as a pragmatic means to foster a shared responsibility for students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Bauwens, et al., 1980), much has changed in general education. The standards reform movement alone has revolutionized what is being taught and assessed, as well as what students are expected to learn and do before graduation. The shift from minimum competency assessments in Maryland to rigorous end-of-course content assessments has significantly raised the stakes for all students seeking a high school diploma, none more than students with disabilities.

Schools have also changed how they are organized to provide instruction. The adoption of flexible block schedules and four-period days have increased and broadened the curricular offerings in schools. In addition, the growing implementation of small learning communities in large high schools across the United States, paralleling the shift to interdisciplinary teams in middle schools, has significantly increased the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Indicators</th>
<th>Performance Rating (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Contained (n = 64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction reflects general education curriculum</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSPAP/DOL incorporated</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each teacher was rated on a scale of 0 (not observed) to 3 (consistently observed) to determine the performance rating for a school. MSPAP/DOL = Maryland Student Performance Assessment Program, Dimensions of Learning.
number of general education settings that students with disabilities access. Because of these changes, many schools are developing more effective ways to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

The reality of limited school system budgets and availability of special education staff compounds the need to support students with disabilities required to learn general education content that is assessed for credit towards the diploma. Even when the county first proposed co-teaching as a practical way to support students with disabilities in the least-restrictive environment, schools did not have enough special education teachers to co-teach the range of general education offerings throughout the school day. The ability to co-teach all levels of English, math, science, and social studies classes from general to honors sections was impossible given the limitations of a typical special education department. Moreover, even if a school were fortunate enough to have the special education teacher positions needed to co-teach the necessary general education classes, there simply were not enough certified special education teachers available to fulfill this need. A recent analysis of the mounting shortage of special education teachers indicated that more than 30,000 special education positions in the United States were filled by noncredentialed teachers (Kozleski, et al., 2000).

**Models of Co-teaching**

**Traditional Co-teaching**

The traditional model of co-teaching involves the general education teacher and the special education teacher implementing a range of co-teaching options from "one lead teacher, one teacher teaching on purpose"; to two groups, "two teachers teach the same content"; to multiple groups, "two teachers monitor/teach varying content" (Vaughn, et al., 1997). In each of these models, both teachers remain in the classroom throughout the entire lesson. The obvious advantage to the traditional model of co-teaching is the availability of continual support for students with disabilities throughout the period, as well as providing an opportunity for the special educator to maintain ongoing continuity with the curriculum and instruction. In our own 2000-2001 observations of co-teachers, we noted problems with the traditional co-teaching model. First, special education department heads reported that the county did not have enough special educators to co-teach most general education classrooms, and, as a result, co-taught classrooms easily became disproportionately filled with students with disabilities. Another chronic problem was that during some period of the class, due to the nature of the whole-group instruction or the teaching style of the general education teachers, special education teachers

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**Figure 1. Collaborative Scheduling—A**

**Description:** Special educator splits class time between two different classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Period 1</th>
<th>Period 2</th>
<th>Period 3</th>
<th>Period 4</th>
<th>Period 5</th>
<th>Period 6</th>
<th>Period 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Co-Taught</td>
<td>Co-Taught</td>
<td>Co-Taught</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Co-Taught</td>
<td>Self-contained</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pros**

May provide a better ratio of students with IEPs to peers without disabilities.

Special educator is present only when needed for instruction.

Benefits of special educator may be realized by more students.

Access to a broader range of general education classes (AP, honors, etc.).

Accommodates student scheduling conflicts.

**Challenges**

Requires effective consultation skills.

Special educator may not be seen by students as equal with the general educator.

More difficult for the special educator to keep up with class activities.

Special educator moves in and out of classes during class time.

**Note:** IEP = individualized education program; AP = advanced placement. Checkmarks designate the unique pros and challenges of this schedule.
were often expected to function more like a teacher assistant than a teacher.

In response to these concerns about traditional co-teaching, Anne Arundel's special education teachers have experimented with adjusting teacher scheduling and using paraprofessionals to provide additional options for supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The advantages and challenges of each of these models based on teacher comments and reactions follow.

**Collaborative Scheduling-A**

In one form of collaborative scheduling of co-teachers, the special educator will divide teaching time between two different classes in one or more periods of the school day. This form of scheduling, identified as “Collaborative Scheduling-A,” (see Figure 1) enables students with disabilities to access a broader range of general education classrooms, including advanced placement and honors classes with limited numbers of special education teachers. This model ensures the availability of direct support from a special education teacher for critical parts of the instructional programs, although it does require careful planning by co-teachers. A critical advantage of this model is the improved ratio of students with disabilities to students without disabilities, resulting in positive academic and behavioral role models. In addition to accommodating student scheduling needs, both special and general educators in this model can plan their cooperative teaching to address the instructional needs of all students with a minimum of down time.

The challenge of any model requiring teachers to divide their time between two classrooms in the same period is the need for effective consulting skills on the part of the special educator. In addition, collaborative teachers report that there is a danger that the special education teacher will not be seen as equal to the general education teacher and it is difficult for the special education teacher to keep up with the class activities when he or she is missing part of the class. Moreover, the possibility for disruption to the class routine exists with the special education teacher moving in and out of the classroom during class time.

**Collaborative Scheduling-B**

This model, a second version of collaborative scheduling, also requires the special education teacher to divide time between two different classes; but the involvement of the special education teacher would vary by days of the week, not within classes in the same day (see Figure 2). As with Collaborative Scheduling-A, similar benefits and challenges result from this model but in addition, co-teachers report an ability to implement a full range of co-teaching models because of the planned involvement of both teachers in complete classes on certain days of the week. That is, on days when both teachers are in attendance for the full period, teachers can plan differentiated activities, led by both teachers, as well as team teaching strategies for the entire class period.

The successful implementation of Collaborative-Scheduling B requires

![Figure 2. Collaborative Scheduling—B](image)

**Description:**

Special educator splits time between two different classes on different days of the week. The schedule is modified on the basis of the needs of team members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Period 1</th>
<th>Period 2</th>
<th>Period 3</th>
<th>Period 4</th>
<th>Period 5</th>
<th>Period 6</th>
<th>Period 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Co-Taught Math</td>
<td>Co-Taught Language Arts</td>
<td>Co-Taught Social Studies (M, W, F)</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Co-Taught Social Studies (T, Th)</td>
<td>Self-Contained Math</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-Taught Science (T, Th)</td>
<td>Co-Taught Science (M, W, F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pros**

- May provide a better ratio of students with IEPs to peers without disabilities.
- Benefits of special educator may be realized by more students.
- Access to a broader range of general education classes (AP, honors, etc.).
- Can implement a full range of co-teaching models.
- Recognizes the responsibility of the general educator for all students.

**Challenges**

- Requires effective consultation skills.
- Special educator may not be seen by students as equal with the general educator.
- More difficult for the special educator to keep up with class activities.
- Students do not have the support of a special educator in every class every day.
- Danger of special education teacher burn-out.

Note: IEP = individualized education program; AP = advanced placement. Checkmarks designate the unique pros and challenges of this schedule.
effective consultation skills by the special education teacher, planning with two teachers who would surely prefer that the special education teacher be in all classes fulltime. Again, there are risks that the students will not see both teachers with equal status. In addition, teachers planning in this model have to be cognizant of the presence of two teachers on only certain days of the week. Students with specific support and accommodation requirements have to be well aligned with activities that provide varying degrees of support as the week unfolds. Special education teacher burnout is a real concern with this model because it requires a greater command of the general education curriculum by the special educator, and it relies on the ability of the general educator to implement individualized education program (IEP) requirements in the absence of the special education teacher. Supervisory judgment will be needed regarding which teachers can effectively plan and implement this model.

Collaborative Scheduling—C

A third variation of a collaborative scheduling model requires the greatest amount of flexibility and planning by an interdisciplinary team of teachers. This model, however, has the potential of being most instructionally beneficial for all students. In “Collaborative Scheduling—C” (see Figure 3), the special education teacher serves as a resource to the interdisciplinary team, and his or her schedule is established weekly on the basis of the instructional activities planned across the team. That is, the team of teachers identify the essential opportunities for IEP instruction and support throughout the school day and week, and a schedule is established accordingly. In this model, the special

**Special education teachers were often expected to function more like a teacher assistant than a teacher.**

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**Figure 3. Collaborative Scheduling—C**

**Description:**
Special educator’s schedule is set weekly on the basis of activities planned for each class. The special educator serves as a resource for the team and does not have a rigid schedule.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Period 1</th>
<th>Period 2</th>
<th>Period 3</th>
<th>Period 4</th>
<th>Period 5</th>
<th>Period 6</th>
<th>Period 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Co-Taught Math or Language Arts</td>
<td>Co-Taught Math or Language Arts</td>
<td>Co-Taught Social Studies or Science</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Co-Taught Social Studies (T, Th)</td>
<td>Self-contained Math</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pros**

- May provide a better ratio of students with IEPs to peers without disabilities.
- Benefits of special educator may be realized by more students.
- Team-based decision making.
- Special educator is present when most needed for instruction.
- Most responsive to student needs and schedules.

**Challenges**

- Requires effective consultation skills.
- Special educator may not be seen by students as equal with the general educator.
- More difficult for the special educator to keep up with class activities.
- Students do not have the support of a special educator in every class every day.
- Requires careful planning among a number of teachers.

*Note: IEP = individualized education program; AP = advanced placement. Checkmarks designate the unique pros and challenges of this schedule.*

The special educator is present when needed most for instructional support, according to a team decision. Instructional need dictates the cooperative teaching role, not the calendar or time of day, and thus, this model can be responsive to student needs and schedules. Collaborative Scheduling—C clearly requires the highest degree of planning and buy-in by a team of teachers.

**Collaborative Scheduling With a Teacher Assistant**

A final version of collaborative scheduling recognizes the reality of special education teacher shortages and takes advantage of the longstanding contribution to special education by paraprofessionals (Giampietro, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001). In this collaborative model, a teacher assistant teams with a special education teacher to support a caseload of students with disabilities (see Figure 4). The teacher assistant extends the support of the special education teacher to multiple general education settings, enabling increased access and success in these environments and decreasing the need to group students with disabilities disproportionately in the same co-taught classrooms. This model takes advantage of the avail-
Students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms reported that they enjoyed school more, learned more, and felt better about themselves in the general education classroom setting.

Pros

- Instruction can be differentiated to meet student needs.
- Students have the support of a paraprofessional or professional for most of their instructional time.
- Availability of human resources.
- Access to a broader range of general education classrooms with support.
- Less costly in a limited resource environment.

Challenges

- Teacher assistants are not as highly skilled as teachers.
- Teacher assistants have less time to plan with teachers.
- Students must work with a greater number of adults.
- Diminishes the role of the co-teacher.
- Requires IEP supervision by the professional special educator.
- Parent concerns.

Final Thoughts

Cooperative teaching has been a beneficial service delivery model in Anne Arundel County over the past 10 years. We have documented benefits in how students feel about themselves and school and have shown that co-taught settings can result in improved academic outcomes for all students. We have also seen how schools have changed organizationally during this period in response to the rigorous expectations established by standards-based reform. The remodeling of co-teaching described in this article was shaped by the comments of general and special education teachers with years of experience collaborating in the classroom. We hope that educators will use this information to expand their options for serving students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

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