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Collaboration Academy

Promoting teamwork between teachers
By JUSTIN J. GATES

Have you ever been in one of those big box stores and had a question but there never seemed to be anyone around to help you? Or, maybe you've been in a restaurant and you are ready to pay your bill but you haven't seen the waiter or waitress in eons?

Just as consumers may feel in a store or restaurant, one student might feel like they need help and there's nobody around to provide academic support. Another student might be bored with the lesson and would happily participate in an enrichment activity. This is why instruction must be differentiated and our teaching staff must work collaboratively to help meet all student needs.

Our city (Barberton, Ohio) is not much different than most in our area. It's a blue-collar town with compassionate residents who take great pride in the schools. From late August until early March you won't find many people on the streets on a Friday night as they are likely in a stadium or gym watching our high school football and basketball teams battle some of the finest competition in the area.

An urban community next to the fifth largest city in Ohio, our district serves approximately 4,000 students ranging in age from 3 to 22 years and is the third largest employer in town. The vast majority of our students (83.3 percent) are Caucasian, 13.2 percent are African American, 0.6 percent are Hispanic, 0.6 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.3 percent are multi-racial. More than half (51.2 percent) of our students are economically disadvantaged and 14.7 percent have disabilities.

To meet state standards and improve the performance of our elementary schools, our district formed what is known as the Collaboration Academy Cohort in 2006-07. This academy consists of 40 teachers, principals, school counselors, and school psychologists that represent four of our five elementary schools.

The goal was to have general education and special education teachers find better ways to communicate and collaborate, something that is essential in these schools, which were categorized by the state as "Continuous Improvement." Only one met Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

This professional development program has made a difference our schools' performance. Here is how we did it.

Planning and programming

Each building principal selected four to six teachers to participate in the program, with the only requirement being that both general and special education teachers must be included. The cohort had teachers with one to 34 years of experience.

Seven full-day sessions were held at the high school media center. We focused on instructional techniques such as a gallery walk, jigsaw, card sorts, personal teaching style inventory,

collaboration and competition (musical chairs), problem solving exercises, plus/delta, and 3-2-1 exit tickets (three things learned, two things willing to try, and one question/support/next step). Our goal was to help the staff shift from a teaching system to a learning system using standards-based education.

Each in-service date was scheduled before the school year started to allow presenters and participants adequate time in planning and scheduling possible conflicts.

By month, here was our schedule:

- **September:** Beliefs on students and learning, teaching style inventory, and teaching styles.
- **October:** Anne Beninghof, a national presenter, spoke on “Co-teaching that works.”
- **November:** Co-teaching framework and collaboration (teaming, models, meetings, problem solving).
- **January:** Classroom practices, delivery systems, and scheduling.
- **March:** Two sessions, the first of which required each building team to present a chapter from Carol Ann Tomlinson’s 2003 book, *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom*. Each group had to use research-proven effective instructional techniques taken from previous in-service sessions along with those gleaned from Tomlinson’s book. The second session, taught by our district’s superintendent (a former curriculum director), focused on unit design, vocabulary strategies, and team success factors.
- **May:** The final session covered the development of a continuous support plan for 2007-08. Participants wrote about their experiences during the initial year of the academy, discussed what supports they will need personally, in their classroom, and as a building for year 2.

Not a one-year program

From the onset, this initiative was not intended to be just a one-year program. Teachers and staff members working in various districts in Ohio’s northeast region told us about similar initiatives or directives that were relayed to staff on the first day of the new school year. Reactions varied from feelings of a “bad Chinese meal,” to “an arranged marriage,” and “a vegetarian married to a meat eater.” Our goal was to empower the teachers to identify what students needed.

This year, participants are being supported through full and half day in-service sessions, professional development at local and statewide meetings on continuous improvement, co-teaching, and differentiated instruction. We are focusing especially on strengthening collaboration and teamwork between general and special education teachers. In May 2008, we hope to gain more feedback so we can improve the program in the future.

This year, we expanded the initiative to include the remaining elementary building and our two middle schools. This second cohort of educators is participating in many of the same activities that our initial group did with slightly different caveats, allowing our middle schools and lone elementary building to work on age- and grade-specific activities as well as lesson and unit design.

The goal of this initiative was not to create a central office directive of inclusion for all special education students. We wanted to foster and develop a more collaborative atmosphere to help meet each student’s needs in the least restrictive environment.

We realize the least restrictive environment for some of our students may be the resource room. However, the resource room may not be where they spend their entire day, although it can provide students with the opportunity to learn at their own pace and at their instructional level.

On the flip side, in a number of situations the classroom is the least restrictive environment. By allowing students to learn in the same room as their peers, we are fostering a feeling of personal growth and accomplishment in our youth and empowering them to push themselves because they now think, "Yes, I can do it!"

Also, by exposing our students to the same content standards, indicators, and benchmarks that they are being tested upon, we are promoting access and progress in the general education curriculum as required by No Child Left Behind and IDEA 2004.

When we remove students from their classroom and place them in a resource room, we are taking away valuable opportunities to develop their thinking, grow their thoughts and stretch their own personal expectations. Every student is able to do something well. If educators are not careful, we will end up stifling our students' opportunities to develop their abilities. That is why it is so important for special and general education teachers to work together to foster the development of our students' abilities.

During its first year, the Collaboration Academy proved beneficial in changing how our teachers work together as well as how they think about their students. The outcomes we have seen so far prove this initiative as a valuable investment of time and resources. I have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and deepened respect for our participants who have put aside their inhibitions and opened their minds and classroom doors to the collaborative process.

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