

Inclusionary Practices and Systems:

COLLABORATION

WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

Collaboration is one of the many critical elements of inclusive education, as there are many people and groups that must work together to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for all children. Effective collaboration in inclusive education occurs simultaneously at many levels, including within and across school teams, school-family partnerships, and child-teacher partnerships as well as between co-teachers and teachers and specialists.

Regardless of who comprises the team, there are certain questions to consider to set the stage for effective collaboration:

- What is the team's mission or purpose?
- What are the team's core values?
- What are members' roles and responsibilities?
- What are the team's community agreements?
- What SMART-R* goals is the team working toward?
- What opportunities and protocols has the team created for reflection?

WHY IS COLLABORATION IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES?

Enacting inclusive education is inherently a collaborative practice. Inclusive education relies on the foundation of strong collaborative practices and relationships. Through collaboration, we are able to work together to break down the walls that have historically excluded the most marginalized students. All children undoubtedly benefit when they work together with teachers, specialists, and families throughout all stages of their educational journey. There will be barriers to collaboration along the way, but there are also many positive solutions and strategies to address them.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

Here are some critical questions to consider as you cultivate and sustain collaborative relationships to support inclusive education:

- Trust: How are we cultivating trustworthiness, accountability, and an openness to helping each other learn and grow?
- Cultural reciprocity: How are we partnering with families and mobilizing their expertise in our collaboration?
- Person-centered: How are our students' social, emotional, and academic strengths and needs at the center of our collaboration?
- Equity-focused: How is our collaboration leading toward more equitable schools?

* Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timely, and Reward

CASE STUDY: Toppenish School District

Toppenish School District believes that collaboration is what allows for inclusion to happen. This does not only involve collaboration at the building or school level, but also high level collaboration between district administrators and building educators. Toppenish's inclusion specialists, administrators and teachers all work together to improve access, instruction, and inclusivity. It can be messy but there is a concerted effort and dedication to ensure they are doing what's best for their students.

There are several structures and practices in place that allow for Toppenish's collaborative culture. It starts with everyone coming to the table. There is collaboration through grade level PLCs that include an interdisciplinary team of educators. In these PLCs exists a culture of open and honest communication between content area teachers and inclusion specialists to create, refine, and implement respectful tasks. This open communication relies on presuming positive intentions, giving input and listening to others' input (an open mind), data-based (how students are performing), follow-through, follow-up, and adjusting as needed based on student performance and teacher preferences.

Creating respectful tasks and building a strong PLC culture requires a change in mindset. In Toppenish this means special education participating in planned and purposeful general education professional development. It also means providing inclusion specialists with professional development

around curriculum modifications with technology to create respectful tasks. It also includes general education teachers being provided with professional learning around students with disabilities, accommodations, and modifications. Making these changes creates the shift from these students as "yours" or "mine" to these are "our" students.

Finally, Toppenish School District has strong family partnerships, as evidenced in their family partnerships handbook and the district and school-wide structures and systems they have in place to connect with all families. This includes home visits, personal phone calls, collaborative IEP meetings, and regularly scheduled parent education sessions that increase feelings of belonging and authentic partnerships. The ways their collaborative culture extends to student's families allows them to better realize the structures, systems, and supports required to create respectful tasks and engage a variety of learners through differentiated instruction.

To learn more about Toppenish School District, and to view artifacts, including their parent handbook, please visit the IPP Demo Sites website at ippdemosites.org. On the site you can find a deep-dive look into Toppenish Middle Schools collaborative culture and take a more in depth look at how collaboration has impacted their inclusive school and district culture.

RESOURCES

1. **Aguilar, E.** (2016). *The art of coaching teams: Building resilient communities that transform schools*. Jossey-Bass.
2. **Baglieri, S., & Shapiro, A. H.** (2017). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for embracing diversity in education*. Routledge.
3. **Chardin, M., & Novak, K.** (2021). *Equity by design*. Corwin.
4. **Dufour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T., & Mattos, M.** (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Solution Tree Press.
5. [SRI's Data Driven Dialogue protocol](#)
6. [TIES Center's 5-15-45 tool](#)
7. High Leverage Practices in Special Education