



## Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

# The Shared Responsibility of Educational Team Members

As a classroom teacher, you are one of many individuals who work together to support the growth and achievement of students in schools. This issue of *Teachers' Desk Reference* will focus on the roles and responsibilities of the various members of a student's educational team – that is, those who collaborate on a regular basis to ensure delivery of educational services and instruction to students.

In the past, teachers in the classroom worked mainly in isolation with sole responsibility for arranging the learning environment and determining which content to teach and how to teach it to the variety of students in a class. With an increase in inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes, increased attention to grade-level standards, greater diversity among students, the availability of ever-changing technologies to support instruction, and a better understanding of effective instructional practices in the content areas, it has become essential for teachers to collaborate across disciplines to design and deliver educational services that meet the needs of all students. An effective classroom teacher develops working relationships with others in

the school, based on a philosophy of shared responsibility for student learning and achievement.

### Group Versus Team

Team membership and the particular responsibilities of any team member are fluid and influenced by legal requirements, evidence-based best practices, and student needs. To build an effective educational team, it is important to distinguish where roles and responsibilities overlap and where they differ on a day-to-day basis. It is also helpful to have an understanding of the difference between a group and a team, as well as characteristics successful teams have in common.

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A group is a collection of people who come together to solve a problem or work on a particular project or event. Individual group members may work alone within their own parameters to achieve individual goals related to a project. Group members may share information, but might not seek feedback or suggestions from the group.

In comparison, a team is a collection of people who come together to work toward common goals they have actively helped define. A team

works within a set of defined norms with linked roles and responsibilities. There is more of a focus on “we” versus “I” and continual feedback on how the team and tasks are progressing towards achieving set goals.

In a group, the leadership role is usually handled by one person, while in a team leadership roles are shared and flexible. A team develops working relationships over time, whereas little or no time is spent on relationship building in a group.

### Characteristics of Successful Teams

- Successful teams are those in which members actually view themselves as a team. Team members must perceive themselves and each other as important to the team effort.
- Team members recognize that other members have valuable experience and knowledge to contribute to the team.
- Each team member must be committed to working collaboratively to share ideas, resources, and tasks.
- The team should set clear goals and expectations to direct their work. Together the team determines what needs to get done, by whom, and by when. The team also works together to set meeting agendas, ground rules for meetings, communication and problem-solving.
- The team should clarify the roles of various members, taking into consideration the expertise, preferences, and experiences of each person, as well as scheduling and time constraints.
- The team needs someone to take the role of leader. This role can be constant or can change or be shared depending on the team. In the case of an educational team it is generally the classroom teacher, special education teacher, or administrator who may take this role to ensure timely communication and follow-through with team roles and responsibilities.

### Collaboration

A key aspect of teaming is collaboration. Ideally, collaboration happens when educators come together to share responsibility for the design, delivery, and evaluation of instruction and supports for students within the general education class. Educators meet regularly to collaboratively problem-solve and design interventions or adjustments to programming in the general education class.

One example of a collaborative structure is co-teaching, where a team of two or more professionals deliver instruction to all students for varying amounts of time (1 class /day, ½ day, 1 class/week). Specialists offer ideas and help design specialized instruction and supports.

Collaboration occurs before, during, and after instruction with regularly-scheduled meetings to discuss progress and plan for adjustment of instruction. The key factor to the effectiveness of any collaborative structure is the extent to which educational team members actually come together to plan curriculum, instruction, assessment and supports. Each educational team should have the appropriate members to plan creatively and pro-actively for instruction and supports. Like any other educational endeavor, the more that is planned for and resolved ahead of time, the more likely the outcome will be successful for students.

### Shared Responsibility With the Members of Your Team

**General Education Teacher**—You may be the general educator on the team or you may co-teach with a special educator. General education teachers manage all activities within the learning environment and have primary daily responsibility for students’ education. The general education teacher brings extensive knowledge about the curriculum scope and sequence to the team. The general education teacher determines content priorities and how instruction will be delivered and assessed on a day-to-day basis. The general education teacher also must decide when it may be time to refer a student for specialized services. The general education teacher manages all of the different personnel that may visit the classroom on a daily or weekly basis and is usually the first line of communication with parents and families regarding all aspects of the educational process.

**Special Education Teacher**—You may be the special educator on the team or you may co-teach with a special educator. The special education teacher is often the professional who provides ideas for modifying or adapting instruction for students who need additional support to achieve academically, socially, or behaviorally. The special educator may co-teach in the general education classroom, provide ongoing consultation, and assist with data collection and analysis. The special education teacher collaborates with the general education teacher and other service providers to align services and communicate with families. The special education teacher usually takes the lead role in coordinating activities related to development and monitoring of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

**Paraprofessional**—As a teacher, you may have one or more paraprofessionals assisting you in your classroom. The role of the paraprofessional is to supplement the certified teacher for instructional duties. Paraprofessionals provide instructional support or implement instructional programs for one or more students as directed by teachers or other certified professionals. They may assist students with individual work, collect and maintain academic or behavioral data, complete clerical tasks, and assist with daily care tasks and behavior plans. Because paraprofessionals work closely with students, they may have vital information and insights to share with the educational team regarding student progress or concerns.

**School Administrator** (Building Principal, Special Education Director or Supervisor)—As a classroom teacher, you will work with your school administrator to direct the activities needed to deliver services to students. The administrator can clarify roles and responsibilities and activities that must be carried out in accordance with school and district policies as well as state and federal regulations. The administrator will provide feedback to you in resolving instructional or discipline issues. The administrator authorizes purchases or personnel to support instruction and provides guidance for the team through ongoing supervision of activities and personnel.

**School Psychologist**—School psychologists work with classroom teachers to identify and resolve academic barriers to learning, and to design and implement student progress monitoring systems and academic and behavioral interventions. School psychologists conduct formal assessments and make recommendations for placement and educational services. They may offer special services such as counseling or help the team access outside agencies as needed.

**Related Services Personnel** (e.g., Speech-Language Pathologist, Vision and Hearing Specialist, Behavior Specialist, Assistive Technology Specialist, Occupational and Physical Therapist)—Related services personnel assess, develop, implement, and modify treatment plans relevant to the specific educational needs of each student. As a teacher, you will consult with these various personnel to provide effective intervention services.

**Outside Agencies** (OVR, Mental Health)—Outside agencies may be pulled in as part of the educational team as needed to plan for services such as Career and Technical Education, mental health services, etc.

**Parent/Guardian**—Parents and families have the most comprehensive information to share about their children. They know essential information about a child's health history, development, educational history, interests, and strengths. The parent or guardian plays an essential role in communicating needs or concerns with the school, classroom teacher, and/or educational team. They are key members in ensuring the educational team implements programming that will be effective for their child.

**Student**—As much as possible, it is important to include the student as part of the educational team. The student can help determine what accommodations, or modifications work best to aid his or her learning. The student can be taught to use self-monitoring techniques to assist in building independence and reporting progress or needs to the team.

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Sharing responsibility with your colleagues for all of your students means developing collaborative relationships in which you communicate with each other to identify the potential interrelationships among disciplines to avoid unnecessary gaps, overlaps, and contradictions among

recommendations and activities. An effective classroom teacher will develop working relationships with others in the school to enable students to reach their maximum potential and receive the services and supports they need to achieve.

## Resources:

Bens, I. (2005). *Facilitating With Ease: Core Skills for Facilitators, Team Leaders and Members, Managers, Consultants and Trainers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

DeBoer, A., & Fister, S. (1995). *Working Together: Tools for Collaborative Teaching*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Sprick, R., Garrison, M., & Howard, L. (2000). *Parapro: Supporting the Instructional Process*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

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