

# Introduction

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## AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Collaboration. That means playing nicely with others, right? Essentially, yes. To be more technical, we're going to say that collaboration is when a few folks work together to accomplish a particular goal, but ultimately this book *is* about adults playing nicely together—specifically those involved in the education of children. Why do we need a whole book devoted to collaboration? Don't adults—especially those in education—already know how to do this? And if they don't, aren't they able to just shut themselves in their own classrooms and do whatever they want? The answer now is *no*, to both questions. As you might surmise from this first paragraph, this is a different kind of book. It's a book that talks to you directly and that addresses issues head-on. Our language is straightforward and our strategies for improving collaboration in schools are practical. That's not to say that we don't care about research or that we are writing off the cuff; both of your authors have their doctorates in education and both of us conduct research, publish in peer-reviewed journals, and are national consultants. However, we are also former teachers and currently teach teachers, so we know that the last thing a working educator wants to read is a boring, dry textbook full of citations and research and very little practical application. That's not our goal.

Our goal for this book is to focus on collaboration as a means toward improving student success in schools. When we say students, we mean *all* students—kids with and without disabilities, students who are on 504 plans, or children who are gifted or homeless or at risk or cheerleaders or English language learners or all of the above. You get the picture. In addition, when we are talking about success, we recognize that there are multiple ways to be successful in schools. First and foremost we want to help students in K–12 classes improve their academics; we believe that the collaboration among educators can help accomplish that task. We also write about how collaboration can improve social skills, self-esteem, and behavioral success. All of this is currently abstract, however. As you read the different chapters, you'll see how we link concepts with practical, concrete strategies that demonstrate how you can use collaboration as a tool to increase success in these various areas. Again, notice that we keep the focus on student learning and student outcomes—that's the reason we are in schools. It may be more fun to work with a colleague on a common goal; it may decrease our workload; it may even decrease teacher attrition. While these are fantastic outcomes for educators, we don't want to lose sight of the fact that we are all in education to help *students*. That must remain the focus of everything we do. If collaboration is not necessary to improve the education for students, we wouldn't suggest it. We do, however, believe it is often the lynchpin for whether or not a child, especially one with a disability, is able to achieve success in the inclusive classroom. We believe that so strongly, in fact, that we wrote a book about it.

Our belief system is not the only impetus for encouraging increased collaboration in schools. A little law known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), with its mandate

of more accountability for all children, including those with disabilities, and its emphasis on the need for “highly qualified” teachers, has greatly impacted the makeup of today’s typical classroom. In addition, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) continues the emphasis on least restrictive environment for students with disabilities while supporting the need for access to the general education curriculum for all students. These laws have led to a complete paradigm shift in the way students with disabilities are educated and, subsequently, how teachers in schools are utilized to meet those needs in an inclusive environment. What this means is that we have laws telling us to work together or else. We go into these laws and more in Chapter 1.

How should we work together to ensure we are addressing the requirements of NCLB and IDEA? One of the main ways that schools are addressing these needs is through collaboration. Teachers in both general and special education classrooms are being asked to step outside their comfort zones and work together to give all kids access to the general education curriculum. This is easier said than done. Think about it. This is a major paradigm shift for many teachers, who have spent years behind closed doors reigning as the kings and queens of their individual classrooms. Now we are asking those same teachers to not only work with others, but in many cases we are even asking them to allow other educators into their own classrooms to teach together. No wonder there is resistance! We address how to overcome some of that resistance, even if it is your own.

Despite the growing demand for collaborative situations and inclusive settings, teachers receive very little training in the skills critical to successful collaboration. Very little has been done in many districts to genuinely prepare teachers to collaborate with their colleagues. Educators are merely told to collaborate, consult, co-teach, or otherwise “include” kids with special needs. While there are textbooks that teach collaboration and communication skills, it is often in a lifeless, abstract, or theoretical context, with very little connection to the practicalities of everyday school life. The goal of this book is to take collaboration out of the abstract and apply it to the tasks that teachers perform every day. How do you collaborate with other professionals to teach math or English more effectively? How do you collaborate with office personnel to get your Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) done on time? What are the tips and tricks that can make collaboration reasonable, feasible, less onerous, and more effective given teachers’ resistance, time constraints, and control issues? This book answers those questions and more.

As we said in the first paragraph, since the subject is collaborating *in schools*, this book is centered around student learning. If the goal of all classrooms is to increase positive student outcomes, then the goal of collaboration in schools *must be to increase student learning*. This book takes the skills involved in collaboration and applies them to practical tasks such as planning instruction, working with families, and conducting student assessment, all with the goal of increasing the desired outcomes for all learners. While we hope you will read the book from cover to cover, devouring each page and frequently admiring the brilliance of the authors, we also recognize that you may have a need in a particular area or you may be consulting with someone who does. In those cases, you may want to select a particular chapter from the Table of Contents or section from the index and use those specific strategies to help you get through a sticky situation.

In order to be as practical and teacher-friendly as possible, there are a variety of special materials in this text. In fact, we purposefully avoided having a book that is so heavy on narration and theory that it screams university course textbook. As you may have noticed, we decided to adopt a conversational, informal tone that is easy to read and more fun to write. We want you to read this book as if we are actually in the same room having a conversation—a one-sided conversation, granted, but a conversation nonetheless.

What other “special” items can you look forward to in this book? We are big believers in humor; it’s always easier to contemplate difficult content if it’s put in a humorous context. Each chapter starts with what we call *Voices From the Field* so that you can connect with the focus of the chapter right away. We move immediately into *The Big Picture* so you know what to expect in that chapter. Throughout the chapter, we have pulled aside key words and concepts and put them in boxes to draw your attention; we have also created *In A Nutshell* pages to eliminate the need for lots of narrative when you may want to have a boiled-down version of the information to reference. As we mentioned earlier, we are big believers in making sure information is practical and realistic. Thus, we have vignettes and real-life scenarios called *In Practice* that demonstrate various aspects of collaboration and the impact on students. These will help you “see” what the strategies look like.

This book is created for the variety of individuals impacted by inclusive education. We anticipate that our readers will be administrators, general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, staff developers, special service providers, and parents, among others. Thus, we recognize that there will be different frames of reference in terms of your reading of the content, as well as your issues related to collaboration. To make these different perspectives explicit, we have call-out *Frames* indicating when someone’s frame of reference may color his interpretation of the information. Strategies for an administrative point of view are called *Principal Points*. Different readers also require different levels of research-related support to our suggestions; some of you will skip right over any citations, while others will want to know where we got our ideas and what research was involved. Thus, while we keep our citations minimal in order to enhance readability, we also provide *Eye on the Research* pages and *Diving Deeper* references in our website supplement (<http://www.corwin.com/diverseschools>) so that those interested in studying further can go to primary sources.

To keep the focus on practical strategies and student learning, each chapter ends with a section devoted to taking the focus of that chapter out of the abstract. These sections provide bulleted suggestions for educators to grab and go. We know that the last thing educators have is time and we want to be respectful of that. Chapters are short, to the point, and focused on tips and tricks. That is just up your alley, isn’t it? How did we know? Because in our hearts we are teachers, and our goal with this book is to reach out to other educators to make it all work better. It’s as simple as that.

Well, now that you know what to expect, let’s stop wasting time on an introductory chapter and get to the meat of the matter—finding ways to work together better so that we can help our students succeed!