Stronger Together: Co-Teaching and Collaboration as Cornerstones of Special Education

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ABSTRACT

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), collaboration has been a defining feature of special education. Initially embedded in legal requirements such as individualized education program (IEP) development and related services, collaboration has evolved into a core professional practice shaping instruction, service delivery, and student participation. This article traces the historical and legal foundations of collaboration under IDEA, highlights major advances such as co-teaching and interprofessional teaming, and examines the expanding roles of families and students. Implications for research, practice, and educator preparation are discussed, along with recommendations to strengthen collaborative systems for the next generation of special educators.

KEYWORDS

IDEA, collaboration, educator preparation, co-teaching, interprofessional practice, family–professional partnerships

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), collaboration has been a defining feature of special education. Federal law established shared responsibility among educators, related service providers, and families through requirements such as individualized education programs (IEPs), related services, procedural safeguards, and education in the least restrictive environment (LRE; IDEA, 2004). These provisions positioned collaboration as a structural expectation rather than an optional practice.

Over time, collaboration moved beyond compliance and into instruction. As access to the general education curriculum expanded for students with disabilities, educators were expected not only to plan together but to jointly design, deliver, and assess learning. Collaboration became a driver of instructional practice and student outcomes rather than a process confined to formal meetings. Within this shift, co-teaching emerged as a prominent model of shared instructional responsibility, alongside consultation, interprofessional teaming, and family-school partnerships (Friend & Cook, 2020). Today, collaboration also encompasses interdisciplinary service delivery, student participation, interagency partnerships for transition, and professional standards that define collaboration as a core competency. Because these competencies do not develop automatically, educator preparation programs must intentionally teach and develop them, with ongoing professional learning reinforcing them throughout educators' careers (Shidler, 2024).

This article examines how collaboration evolved from a legal requirement to a cornerstone of inclusive education under IDEA. We highlight key developments, including co-teaching and interprofessional models, and examine their implications for research, practice, and educator preparation. As collaboration has expanded to include students, families, and community partners, preparation programs must equip future educators not only to collaborate effectively, but also to strengthen the collaborative systems that support inclusive education. We conclude

with recommendations to guide the next generation of special educators as IDEA enters its next 50 years.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND FOUNDATIONAL MILESTONES

Mandating Collaboration

From its inception, federal special education law required coordinated decision making among educators, related service providers, and families (EAHCA, 1975). Core provisions, including IEPs, related services, procedural safeguards, and education in the LRE, embedded shared responsibility within the legal framework of special education. Although implementation continues to vary across states, districts, and schools, the law established team-based practice as an essential component of special education.

The IEP formalized this expectation by requiring collective decisions about student needs, goals, services, and progress monitoring. Participation by parents and multiple professionals was intended to bring varied expertise to those decisions, while related services reinforced interdisciplinary coordination. The LRE mandate also required teams to determine how students could be educated alongside nondisabled peers with appropriate supports. Together, these provisions positioned collaboration as the primary means through which IDEA's vision is intended to be realized in practice (IDEA, 2004).

Legal Support for Collaboration

Early court decisions reinforced the role of collaboration in implementing IDEA by affirming the importance of the IEP process. In *Board of Education v. Rowley* (1982), the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed that the IEP is the primary mechanism for providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

> Over time, collaboration evolved beyond addressing the needs of individual students to strengthening teacher practice and school systems. This shift reflected a more proactive, systems-oriented view that recognized building educators' capacity could improve outcomes for many learners.

Although the Court did not mandate specific instructional methods or require schools to maximize a student's potential, it emphasized procedural compliance, individualized planning, and meaningful parental participation. *Rowley* underscored that FAPE is developed through structured, team-based planning rather than unilateral school decision making.

As inclusion expanded, later cases shifted attention from placement alone to the supports needed for student success. In *Oberti v. Board of Education* (1993), the court held that schools must first determine whether students can be educated in general education classrooms with appropriate supplementary aids and services before considering more restrictive settings. This decision reframed the LRE as a collaborative problem-solving process, requiring teams to design supports rather than simply select placements.

Subsequent rulings further emphasized access and coordinated services. In *Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garret F.* (1999), the Supreme Court held that schools must provide necessary related services, even when those supports are intensive. That same year, in *Olmstead v. L.C.* (1999), the U.S. Supreme Court held under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that unjustified segregation of individuals with disabilities constitutes discrimination and that services should be provided in the most integrated setting appropriate. Taken together, these cases clarify that providing FAPE in the LRE requires intentional, team-based planning. Educational access is achieved not by placement alone, but through collaborative decision making that aligns instruction, services, and supports. For educators, these rulings demonstrate that collaboration is not simply a professional preference; it is how IDEA's legal protections become meaningful educational practice.

Collaboration as Professional Practice

Although collaboration in special education was initially shaped by legal mandates and procedural requirements, the field increasingly came to view it as a distinct professional skill set. As inclusive practices expanded, educators recognized that effective collaboration could not be assumed; it required intentional development of communication, role clarity, and shared problem solving (Friend & Cook, 2020). This evolution marked a transition from collaboration as compliance to collaboration as professional practice.

Early models of collaboration were grounded in behavioral consultation. Caplan (1970) emphasized indirect service delivery through a consultant-consultee relationship in which specialists supported classroom teachers by analyzing problems and recommending

interventions. Over time, collaboration evolved beyond addressing the needs of individual students to strengthening teacher practice and school systems. This shift reflected a more proactive, systems-oriented view that recognized building educators' capacity could improve outcomes for many learners. Collaboration was no longer viewed as merely a response to student difficulties, but as a strategy for improving teaching and learning across entire schools.

By the 1980s and 1990s, collaborative models increasingly emphasized parity and shared responsibility among educators. Idol et al. (1994) conceptualized collaboration as a non-hierarchical professional partnership characterized by shared expertise and joint responsibility, positioning general and special educators as instructional partners rather than consultant and consultee. Building on this shift, Cook and Friend (1995) advanced co-teaching as a structured model of shared instructional delivery that integrated collaborative planning and instruction within the general education classroom.

As standards-based reform expanded in the late 1990s and early 2000s, collaboration became embedded within broader educational systems. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) helped define and advance Response to Intervention (RTI), a framework in which educators use student data to identify learning needs early, provide increasingly intensive supports, and monitor progress. RTI later evolved into the broader framework of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), which integrates academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports within a coordinated schoolwide system. Both RTI and MTSS rely on teams of educators who analyze data, solve problems collaboratively, and adjust instruction based on student response. In doing so, these frameworks made collaboration an expected part of everyday school practice rather than an individual professional choice.

Since the mid-2000s, research has shifted from establishing collaboration as a promising practice to understanding how it can be implemented most effectively. Implementation science emphasizes the importance of organizational structures, leadership, and fidelity, while recent meta-analyses and international syntheses (e.g., Strogilos et al., 2023; Vembye et al., 2024) examine how collaboration functions across contexts. Rather than asking *whether* collaboration works, current research examines how it works, under what conditions, and for whom. This shift reflects a maturing field that evaluates collaboration not only by its presence, but also by the quality of its implementation and its impact on educators and students. The following sections highlight major innovations that demonstrate how collaboration has continued to evolve in response to changing research, policy, and practice.

MAJOR ADVANCES AND PRACTICE-CHANGING INNOVATIONS

Co-Teaching as an Instructional Expression of Collaboration

The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA marked a shift from procedural collaboration to instructional collaboration by moving collaborative practices directly into the classroom. By requiring general educators to participate in IEP teams and emphasizing access to the general education curriculum, IDEA positioned special education as a shared instructional responsibility rather than a separate system (IDEA, 2004). Collaboration was no longer confined to meetings; it became part of daily teaching.

These expectations intensified under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), which required students with disabilities to receive standards-based instruction and participate in accountability systems. At the secondary level, many special educators were not certified as "highly qualified" in specific content areas. Schools therefore needed instructional models that combined content expertise with specialized support in the same classroom (Brownell et al., 2010). Co-teaching emerged as one practical and effective response.

Cook and Friend (1995) initially defined co-teaching as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space" (p. 2). Their definition established co-teaching as shared instruction rather than a support role, but it offered little guidance for implementation. Building on this foundation, Murawski and Swanson (2001) and Murawski (2006) operationalized co-teaching through the framework of "co-planning, co-instruction, and co-assessment," helping educators translate the concept into classroom practice. More recently, co-reflection has been recognized as an essential component for sustaining effective partnerships (Fluijt et al., 2016).

Co-teaching also reshaped professional roles by positioning special educators as instructional partners who share responsibility for the learning of all students rather than as classroom assistants (Jenkins & Murawski, 2024). When implemented well, co-teaching reflects IDEA's vision for educating students in the LRE by embedding collaboration within daily instruction. Research consistently demonstrates, however, that successful co-teaching depends on intentional preparation, including communication, role clarity, collaborative planning, and strategic use of co-teaching approaches (King-Sears et al., 2021). It also requires organizational supports such as common planning time, aligned scheduling, and

administrative leadership (Murawski & Jenkins, in press). Clearly, administrators and school leaders are also integral members of collaborative teams. When treated as a schoolwide priority rather than an individual accommodation, co-teaching is far more likely to succeed.

Although co-teaching is one of the most visible expressions of collaboration, it is not synonymous with collaboration itself, nor is it appropriate in every setting. Instead, it represents one model within a broader continuum of collaborative practices. When implemented with fidelity and supported by strong leadership, co-teaching demonstrates how collaboration can be embedded within daily instruction to improve access, participation, and shared responsibility. One resource that can guide this work is the Co-Teaching Competency Framework (Murawski & Lochner, 2018), particularly its 22 core competencies, which provide a common language for developing, observing, and strengthening effective co-teaching across preparation programs and school settings.

Expansion Beyond the Teacher Dyad

Growth of Interprofessional Collaboration

As IDEA expanded expectations for educating students with IEPs in general education settings, it became clear that co-teaching was not always feasible or appropriate in every context. At the same time, research showed that traditional pull-out models for related services often had limited impact on classroom learning and student outcomes (McLeskey et al., 2012). In response, the field increasingly emphasized interprofessional collaboration, which coordinates instruction and related services around shared goals rather than separate, discipline-specific interventions (Friend & Cook, 2020).

FIGURE 1: Collaboration in Practice

Collaboration in Practice

"That was probably the most productive lunch I've had all year," Barb, the 5th grade teacher, laughed as she gathered her notebook. "Thank you all for helping me figure out how to better support Jason. Honestly, every strategy you suggested will help lots of my students."

Suz, the gifted education teacher, nodded. "Exactly. Jason's twice-exceptionality brought us together, but lots of these ideas work for many kids."

The speech-language pathologist smiled. "Maybe we shouldn't wait for an IEP meeting to collaborate. Imagine what we could accomplish if we met like this once a month." The behavior specialist and special educator both nodded, smiling. This might be the beginning of a professional – and fun – lunch bunch.

Early scholarship distinguished among multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary models, with transdisciplinary teaming representing the most integrated approach (Bruder, 1994). Across these models, professionals increasingly shared responsibility for assessment, planning, and implementation. They coordinated supports within natural learning environments rather than working in isolation. For example, instead of a general educator, special educator, speech-language pathologist, multilingual specialist, and behavior specialist each developing separate plans, the team works together to design coordinated supports that address students' multiple and often overlapping needs. These approaches align closely with IDEA's emphasis on educating students in the LRE through coordinated, team-based supports.

Transdisciplinary teaming gained momentum in early childhood and early intervention, where fragmented services often created challenges for families. Bruder (1994) and others emphasized shared assessment, role release, and coaching, enabling team members to implement strategies informed by one another's expertise. The focus shifted from isolated therapeutic goals to functional, family-centered outcomes embedded within daily routines. These practices later influenced K-12 service delivery and the development of more coordinated systems of support.

In K-12 settings, researchers likewise advocated for teachers, administrators, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and other specialists to collaboratively design and deliver instruction (Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997). Coordinated service delivery and shared progress monitoring help teams address the needs of the whole child rather than working in professional silos. Despite these advances, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration remain unevenly implemented. Scheduling constraints, caseload demands, and discipline-specific preparation continue to limit sustained collaboration (Murawski & Lochner, 2018). Advancing interprofessional collaboration therefore requires leadership support, protected planning time, and shared accountability. Schools intentionally designed around inclusive education, such as the CHIME Institute and WISH Community Schools in Los Angeles, illustrate how collaboration becomes more effective when it is embedded within a school's mission, organizational structures, and daily routines rather than treated as an isolated initiative. Both schools have served as national demonstration sites for inclusive educa-

tion, highlighting the value of school-wide systems that integrate co-teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and family partnerships.

Evolution of Family–Professional Partnerships

Family advocacy, particularly through legislative efforts and the disability rights movement, played a central role in challenging exclusion and securing access to public education for students with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2011). IDEA established family participation as a legal requirement by including parents as members of the IEP team, shifting educational decision making from schools alone to a shared process. Over time, research and practice have moved beyond procedural involvement toward authentic partnerships characterized by communication, mutual respect, and shared problem solving. High-quality family-professional partnerships have been associated with increased family trust, stronger parent advocacy and participation, greater consistency between home and school supports, enhanced student engagement and achievement, and improved social-emotional outcomes for students with disabilities (Johnston & Burke, 2024).

More recently, attention has expanded to culturally responsive family-school collaboration. Emerging work highlights the importance of honoring cultural and linguistic diversity while addressing systemic barriers that families may face (e.g., Hepburn et al., 2025). For example, before developing goals or classroom supports, a teacher might ask families, *"What should we know about your child, your family, or your culture that will help us better support your child?"* and *"Are there strengths, routines, or traditions from home that could be easily incorporated into the classroom?"* Questions like these position families as valued partners and help educators build on students' cultural and linguistic assets rather than viewing differences as deficits. Historical inequities, language differences, communication practices, and power imbalances may also influence families' trust in schools, underscoring the importance of approaching collaboration with humility and responsiveness (Harry & Klingner, 2022). This includes creating welcoming environments, ensuring language access, and engaging families in developing goals and services. When educators intentionally integrate family knowledge and cultural context into instructional planning, collaboration extends beyond meetings and becomes part of everyday teaching (Hepburn et al., 2025).

For future educators, this evolution requires more than learning effective communication strategies. It also requires examining deficit-based assumptions that families may be "uninvolved," "difficult," or "adversarial," recognizing that such perceptions often overlook barriers such as previous experiences with schools, language differences, work schedules, or the ongoing need to advocate for appropriate services (Harry & Klingner, 2022). By approaching every family with curiosity, respect, and an asset-based mindset, educators can build trusting partnerships that strengthen inclusive education for all students.

Student-Centered Collaboration

IDEA positions students not only as recipients of services but also as participants in educational decision making, particularly during transition planning. Collaboration is most effective when it centers students' goals, strengths, and aspirations. This requires that IEP development, instructional planning, and transition discussions actively include students, especially as they grow older.

Student-centered collaboration also requires intentional support for student voice. Students benefit when they are prepared to participate in or co-lead IEP meetings, reflect on their goals, and monitor their own progress (Bross & Craig, 2024). These practices align with research on self-determination, which identifies goal setting, decision making, and self-advocacy as important predictors of positive adult outcomes (Shogren et al., 2015). At its core, this evolution shifts collaborative teams from planning *about* students to planning *with* them.

When students are meaningful participants, collaboration becomes a partnership among educators, families, and students that promotes engagement, independence, and preparation for adult life. Embedding opportunities for student choice, goal setting, and reflection throughout instruction reinforces these outcomes and aligns with the high-leverage practices, which identify both collaboration and student-centered instruction as essential competencies for beginning special educators (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC] & CEEDAR Center, 2024; Jenkins & Murawski, 2024).

Expanding Collaboration Beyond the School

Students with disabilities do not leave their needs behind when they leave school. As IDEA's focus expanded from school success to successful adult outcomes, collaboration similarly expanded beyond educators, families, and students to include community agencies, employers, postsecondary institutions, and adult service providers. The IDEA Amendments of 1990 established transition services as a required component of the IEP for students beginning no later than age 16, recognizing that successful transitions to adulthood require coordinated planning across

multiple systems. The 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations strengthened these provisions by emphasizing student involvement, measurable postsecondary goals, and coordinated transition services designed to support employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation.

These legislative changes established interagency collaboration as a core component of effective transition planning. Depending on students' goals and needs, collaborative teams may include representatives from vocational rehabilitation, developmental disability agencies, independent living centers, postsecondary education programs, employers, and other community organizations. IDEA also permits participating agency representatives to be invited to IEP meetings, with appropriate consent, to coordinate services and support successful transitions beyond high school (IDEA, 2004). As a result, collaboration expanded beyond school personnel to include community partners who help students navigate the transition to adulthood.

Within this expanded collaborative network, educators play an important role in helping students and families identify available agencies, understand eligibility requirements, and establish connections with community resources that support postsecondary goals (Harvey et al., 2020). Recognizing this shift, the Division on Career Development and Transition of the CEC has argued that educator preparation should extend beyond the legal requirements of transition planning to include explicit preparation in interagency collaboration and community partnerships (Harvey et al., 2020).

Collaborative Innovations Expanding Inclusion Across the Disability Spectrum

One of the most significant advances under IDEA has been the growing expectation and expanding evidence base for educating students with extensive support needs (ESN), including those with intellectual disabilities and complex communication needs, in general education settings. Historically, these students were often excluded based on assumptions about readiness or potential. Although inclusion rates remain uneven, research increasingly suggests that barriers stem less from student ability than from the absence of collaborative systems that support meaningful participation (Ruppar et al., 2023). When teams intentionally design instruction, communication supports, and classroom routines, students with ESN demonstrate measurable academic, social, and communicative growth (Mansouri et al., 2022).

Interdisciplinary collaboration has driven major innovations, particularly in terms of providing communication supports for students. Rather than assigning communication needs solely to speech-language pathologists, effective teams now view it as a shared responsibility among educators, families, paraprofessionals, and peers. Practices such as Functional Communication Training emphasize teaching meaningful communication within natural classroom contexts (Ghaemmaghami et al., 2021). Likewise, principles such as the *Communication Bill of Rights* (National Joint Committee for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities, 2024) reinforce that every student deserves meaningful opportunities to communicate, participate, and have their voice heard. To support these efforts, educators should understand the potential of augmentative and alternative communication and learn to design inclusive learning environments in which students with significant communication needs can participate meaningfully alongside their peers.

Another important innovation involves the evolving roles of paraprofessionals and peers. Traditional one-to-one paraprofessional support can unintentionally limit student independence and peer interaction in general education settings. Contemporary approaches instead position paraprofessionals as instructional partners who collaborate with teachers to promote access, participation, and student autonomy (Brock & Anderson, 2021). While Karten and Murawski (2020) clarified that paraprofessionals are not expected to co-teach, they encouraged educators to co-instruct with paraeducators in the classroom. As districts increasingly develop paraprofessional-to-teacher pathways to address educator shortages, these future educators benefit from explicit preparation in collaborative practice (Fogle et al., 2024). In addition, peer support strategies expand opportunities for belonging by preparing classmates to serve as collaborators, communication partners, and natural supports, reinforcing that meaningful inclusion depends on students participating with one another as members of the classroom community rather than relying exclusively on adult support (Brock et al., 2020).

Together, these innovations demonstrate that greater inclusion for students with ESN has advanced not only through policy, but through the collaborative redesign of instruction, communication supports, and classroom roles. As collaboration has expanded to include paraprofessionals, peers, related service providers, and families, students with the most significant support needs have gained greater opportunities for meaningful participation in inclusive schools.

Codification of Collaboration Into Professional Standards

Over time, collaboration has evolved

from a recommended professional attribute to an explicit expectation within educator preparation and accreditation standards. The InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards identify collaboration as a professional responsibility, expecting educators to work with colleagues, families, and other professionals to support student learning (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). Similarly, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2022) embedded collaboration within its professional dispositions and clinical practice standards. These frameworks translate IDEA's principles of shared responsibility into expectations for educator preparation and professional practice.

Within special education, collaboration is defined even more explicitly as both a professional competency and an ethical responsibility. The CEC's Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards embed collaboration across assessment, instruction, and professional practice (CEC, 2020), while the high-leverage practices identify it as one of the core domains of effective special education (CEC & CEEDAR Center, 2024). These frameworks reflect an important evolution: collaboration is no longer assumed to develop naturally. It is expected to be intentionally taught, practiced, assessed, and continuously refined throughout an educator's career.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Maturation of the Evidence Base

The research base on collaboration, particularly co-teaching, has expanded substantially over the past decades. Early studies were largely descriptive, focusing on teacher perceptions, feasibility, and classroom structures. Although this work helped define collaborative practice, it provided limited evidence regarding instructional quality or student outcomes (e.g., Scruggs et al., 2007).

> Overall, the evidence base reflects a maturing field that recognizes collaboration and co-teaching as multidimensional, context dependent, and central to improving access, participation, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Early research syntheses on co-teaching reflected these limitations. Murawski and Swanson's (2001) meta-analysis reported a moderate overall effect while noting concerns about study quality and inconsistent outcome measures. Similarly, Scruggs et al. (2007) synthesized research on teacher experiences and structural challenges during co-teaching but found limited evidence regarding academic outcomes. More recent research demonstrates greater methodological rigor and clearer conceptual distinctions. Quantitative meta-analyses include larger numbers of studies and apply stronger quality criteria, resulting in positive but more cautious conclusions about academic effects (King-Sears et al., 2021). Vembye et al. (2024) further distinguished co-teaching from related collaborative models while examining the influence of implementation quality. Qualitative syntheses on co-teaching have also matured. For example, Strogilos et al. (2023) incorporated international perspectives while examining both teacher learning and student outcomes. Collectively, this body of research reflects a shift from asking **w**hether collaboration works when co-teaching to examining how, under what conditions, and for whom it is most effective.

The evidence base has also broadened in how success is defined. In addition to academic achievement, researchers now examine cognitive engagement (Lochner et al., 2019), access to the general education curriculum (Hudson et al., 2021), social participation (Mansouri et al., 2022), and students' sense of belonging (Brock et al., 2020). This broader perspective aligns with IDEA's emphasis on meaningful participation in the least restrictive environment. At the same time, researchers continue to call for stronger evidence regarding academic outcomes (e.g., King-Sears et al., 2021) and for studies that examine culturally responsive and contextually grounded implementation (CEC & CEEDAR Center, 2024). Overall, the evidence base reflects a maturing field that recognizes collaboration and co-teaching as multidimensional, context dependent, and central to improving access, participation, and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Implications for Practice and Preparation

The growth of research on collaboration has clear implications for both practice and educator preparation. Collaboration is not an automatic skill; it must be intentionally taught, practiced, and assessed. When schools assume educators already know how to collab-

TABLE 1: Developing Collaborative Competencies Across the Teacher Preparation Continuum

Collaboration Competency	Observe During Field Experiences	Practice During Preparation	Build Before Entering the Profession
Communication Skills	Observe effective communication among educators, families, and related service providers.	Role-play difficult conversations, active listening, and collaborative problem solving.	Communicate professionally with colleagues and families using respectful, strengths-based language.
Collaborative Decision Making	Observe IEP meetings, MTSS/problem-solving teams, and data discussions.	Analyze case studies, participate in mock IEPs and collaborative meetings, and justify decisions using data.	Facilitate portions of collaborative meetings and contribute to shared decision making.
Co-Planning	Observe co-teachers or departments planning lessons and accommodations together.	Co-plan lessons, accommodations, assessments, and behavior supports with peers.	Co-plan standards-based universally designed lessons with another educator.
Co-Instructing	Observe multiple co-teaching approaches in authentic classrooms.	Teach mini-lessons using different co-teaching approaches and reflect on instructional decisions.	Demonstrate effective co-planning, co-instruction, co-assessment, and co-reflection during clinical practice.
Interprofessional Collaboration	Examine how teachers, administrators, therapists, psychologists, and other specialists coordinate services either in-person or through interviews, videos, or document analysis.	Participate in interdisciplinary mixed-reality simulations and collaborative case conferences.	Collaborate effectively with professionals from multiple disciplines to develop coordinated supports around one student.
Family Partnerships	Observe family conferences and IEP meetings that demonstrate respectful partnerships.	Conduct simulated conferences, develop family communication plans, and analyze culturally responsive practices.	Demonstrate culturally responsive communication and collaborative goal setting with families.
Student-Centered Collaboration	Observe students participating in IEP meetings, goal setting, and transition planning.	Practice facilitating student voice through role-play, self-determination activities, and student-led conferences.	Engage students as active participants in planning, goal setting, and decision making.
Transition & Community Collaboration	Observe transition planning meetings involving community agencies.	Identify local agencies and develop transition resource guides or referral plans.	Collaborate with community organizations to support postsecondary transition planning.
Reflective Practice	Observe collaborative debriefing after instruction or meetings.	Use structured reflection protocols following simulations and field experiences.	Analyze collaborative practice, identify strengths and challenges, and develop improvement goals.
Professional Dispositions	Observe how experienced educators demonstrate parity, trust, flexibility, and shared responsibility.	Reflect on personal beliefs, implicit biases, and collaborative behaviors.	Demonstrate professionalism, shared responsibility, openness to feedback, and commitment to inclusive practice.

orate, implementation often becomes inconsistent or limited to compliance. Effective collaboration requires communication, shared planning, role clarity, joint decision making, and reflective problem solving (Jenkins & Murawski, 2024), applied across instruction, related services, family partnerships, and community agencies that support students across the lifespan. Over the past 5 decades, collaboration has evolved from a legal mandate into a complex professional competency. As a result, educator preparation should intentionally develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to collaborate across interconnected school, family, and community systems.

Preparation programs play a central role in developing these competencies. Rather than treating collaboration as a single course topic, effective programs intentionally weave collaborative competencies throughout coursework, clinical experiences, and supervised fieldwork. Teacher candidates benefit from authentic and simulated collaborative experiences, including IEP meetings, interdisciplinary teaming, co-teaching, family-professional interactions, and transition planning. Role-play, mixed-reality simulations, and supervised field experiences provide opportunities to

observe, practice, receive feedback, and refine collaborative skills (Qualls et al., 2025). Collaborative competencies are further strengthened when general and special education candidates learn together through shared coursework, interdisciplinary assignments, co-planning experiences, co-taught methods courses where professors model collaborative skills, and joint clinical experiences. Most importantly, collaborative competencies should be explicitly taught, practiced, and assessed rather than assumed to develop incidentally. Repeated opportunities to observe, practice, receive feedback, and reflect help candidates develop the knowledge, confidence, and professional judgment needed for effective collaboration.

One way teacher educators can intentionally develop collaborative competence is to scaffold learning across observation, guided practice, and independent demonstration. Introducing collaboration early in a teacher preparation program helps candidates recognize it as an essential component of professional practice rather than an optional skill. Table 1 illustrates examples of collaborative competencies that can be intentionally embedded throughout educator preparation.

For co-teaching specifically, the Co-Teaching Competency Framework (Murawski & Lochner, 2018) provides a structure for developing collaborative expertise. Its 22 core competencies offer a common language for preparing, observing, coaching, and evaluating co-teaching practice across preservice preparation, induction, and ongoing professional learning. Used alongside the broader collaboration competencies illustrated in Table 1, the framework helps ensure that co-teaching is intentionally developed rather than learned through trial and error.

Preparation programs should also model the collaborative practices they seek to develop by creating authentic opportunities for candidates to work with families, schools, related service providers, and community partners. Initiatives such as *Families as Faculty*, in which families serve as partners in educator preparation, allow candidates to learn directly from family experiences while strengthening collaborative knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Collier et al., 2015). Additional approaches include inviting family members and professionals as guest speakers, facilitating simulated IEP meetings and collaborative problem-solving activities with family and professional participants, and creating interdisciplinary coursework that brings together future teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and related service providers. Partnerships among universities, schools, related service providers, and community organizations further extend these opportunities by engaging candidates in authentic collaborative planning, problem solving, and service delivery. These experiences align with the CEC's (2020) Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards while preparing candidates for the collaborative partnerships that characterize today's schools.

While educator preparation lays the foundation for collaboration, schools ultimately determine whether collaborative practices are supported and sustained over time. Protected planning time, leadership that reinforces parity and inclusive practice, and systems that promote integrated service delivery are essential (Jenkins & Murawski, 2024). Ongoing professional learning, coaching, and collaborative inquiry help educators refine collaborative competencies throughout their careers. Meaningful collaboration also includes students, particularly during transition planning, so they can participate actively in decisions that affect their futures. Aligning educator preparation, school leadership, and organizational structures helps ensure that collaboration becomes an integral part of professional practice rather than remaining a procedural expectation.

FORWARD-LOOKING RECOMMENDATIONS TO INSPIRE THE NEXT 50 YEARS

As special education enters its next 50 years, collaboration remains both a defining strength and an ongoing priority. Decades of policy, research, and practice demonstrate that IDEA's guarantees of FAPE in the LRE cannot be realized through isolated expertise or parallel service delivery. Yet collaboration is still taught, implemented, and supported inconsistently across schools and educator preparation programs. Moving forward, collaboration must continue to evolve as a professional competency that is intentionally developed, refined, and sustained throughout educators' careers. In doing so, shared responsibility can become routine rather than aspirational. Building on the lessons of IDEA's first 50 years, five priorities can help shape the future of collaborative practice: teach collaboration intentionally, broaden collaborative service delivery, center belonging and equity, lead collaborative practice, and innovate through research and technology.

Teach Collaboration Intentionally

Collaboration should be treated as a professional skill set rather than an assumed disposition. Like effective instruction, it requires intentional design, explicit teaching, guided practice, feedback, and meaningful evaluation. Clear expectations for communication, shared planning, facilitation, and collaborative problem solving should be embedded

throughout educator preparation and ongoing professional learning (CEC & CEEDAR Center, 2024; Jenkins & Murawski, 2024). Candidates and practicing educators alike should have repeated opportunities to observe, practice, receive feedback, and demonstrate collaborative competence. Schools, in turn, should examine not only whether collaboration occurs, but also how it improves instruction, aligns supports, and enhances student outcomes and experiences.

Broaden Collaborative Service Delivery

Co-teaching remains one of the most powerful collaborative models but should be understood as one option within a broader continuum of collaborative services. Effective systems match the intensity of collaboration to student needs by drawing on consultation, coaching, interprofessional teaming, and co-teaching as appropriate (Jenkins & Murawski, 2024). Rather than relying on a single model, schools should normalize multiple collaborative structures that reduce professional silos and encourage shared responsibility across educators, families, related service providers, and community agencies. Sustained coaching, observation, and job-embedded professional learning can further strengthen implementation over time.

Center Belonging and Equity

The next phase of collaborative practice must prioritize belonging and equity. Students with ESN should be considered when collaborative planning and when designing instruction, rather than treated as exceptions. Equally important, culturally responsive collaboration should become standard practice by recognizing families as authentic partners and valuing linguistic, cultural, and community knowledge as assets (Grant & Ray, 2023). Grounding collaboration in equity moves IDEA beyond placement toward meaningful participation, belonging, and high expectations for every learner.

Lead Collaborative Practice

Future educators must be prepared not only to participate in collaboration but also to facilitate it. Although inclusive education is a shared responsibility, special educators are often called upon to coordinate collaborative efforts by serving as facilitators, instructional designers, coaches, and advocates. Developing these leadership capacities requires intentional instruction in communication, conflict resolution, facilitation, and collaborative problem solving, along with repeated opportunities to lead teams, navigate challenging conversations, and engage in authentic shared decision making. Preparation alone, however, is not sufficient. Teachers, administrators, and related service providers all benefit from ongoing professional learning that strengthens collaborative leadership, supports co-planning and co-teaching, and develops the organizational structures necessary to sustain inclusive practice (Murawski & Lochner, 2018).

Innovate Through Research and Technology

Continued progress depends on research that both informs practice and reflects the realities of today's schools. Educators need clear, actionable evidence regarding which collaborative practices improve outcomes, for whom, and under what conditions (Vembye et al., 2024). Research-practice partnerships among universities, schools, and community organizations offer one promising approach by addressing authentic challenges identified by practitioners while creating opportunities to implement, evaluate, and refine evidence in real-world settings (Coburn et al., 2021). Rather than viewing research and practice as separate endeavors, these partnerships position educators and researchers as co-constructors of knowledge, helping ensure that innovation remains both rigorous and relevant.

Emerging technologies will also shape the next era of collaboration. Digital tools increasingly support co-planning, progress monitoring, and family engagement, while artificial intelligence offers new opportunities for lesson design, data analysis, communication supports, and administrative efficiency (Karge & Rhoads, 2024). When used thoughtfully and ethically, these tools can reduce logistical barriers, strengthen collaborative decision making, and expand access to coordinated supports. Like collaboration itself, technology should enhance rather than replace professional judgment. Used intentionally, these innovations can help realize IDEA's promise through more connected, responsive, and collaborative systems.

CONCLUSION

Fifty years after the passage of IDEA, collaboration remains central to its enduring success. From team-based IEP decision making to today's instructional and interprofessional partnerships, IDEA has consistently affirmed that educating students with disabilities is a shared responsibility. Over time, collaboration has evolved from a procedural mandate into a defining professional practice that shapes instruction, service delivery, and meaningful participation. In doing so, it has transformed how schools organize supports, structure classrooms, and work together to provide FAPE in the least restrictive environment.

Co-teaching stands as one of the most visible and influential expressions of this evolution. It demonstrates how collaboration can be embedded within daily instruction rather than confined to meetings or compliance processes.

Alongside interprofessional teaming, family partnerships, student-centered planning, and collaboration with community agencies, co-teaching reflects the field's continued growth in both vision and practice. As research, educator preparation, and implementation continue to advance, collaborative models such as co-teaching remain essential for expanding access to rigorous, inclusive learning opportunities (Murawski & Jenkins, in press).

Looking ahead, the challenge is no longer determining whether collaboration matters but ensuring that every educator is prepared and supported to collaborate effectively throughout a professional career. This requires educator preparation programs, schools, and professional organizations to intentionally develop collaborative expertise through ongoing learning, coaching, reflection, and shared leadership. By continuing to strengthen collaborative systems, the field can move beyond compliance toward truly inclusive educational communities where students, families, educators, and community partners work together to support every learner.

Ultimately, IDEA's greatest legacy extends beyond its legal protections. Its lasting contribution is the recognition that meaningful inclusion depends on people working together. Collaboration remains the cornerstone that transforms the promise of FAPE in the LRE into everyday practice, ensuring that students with disabilities are not only present in schools, but valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

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