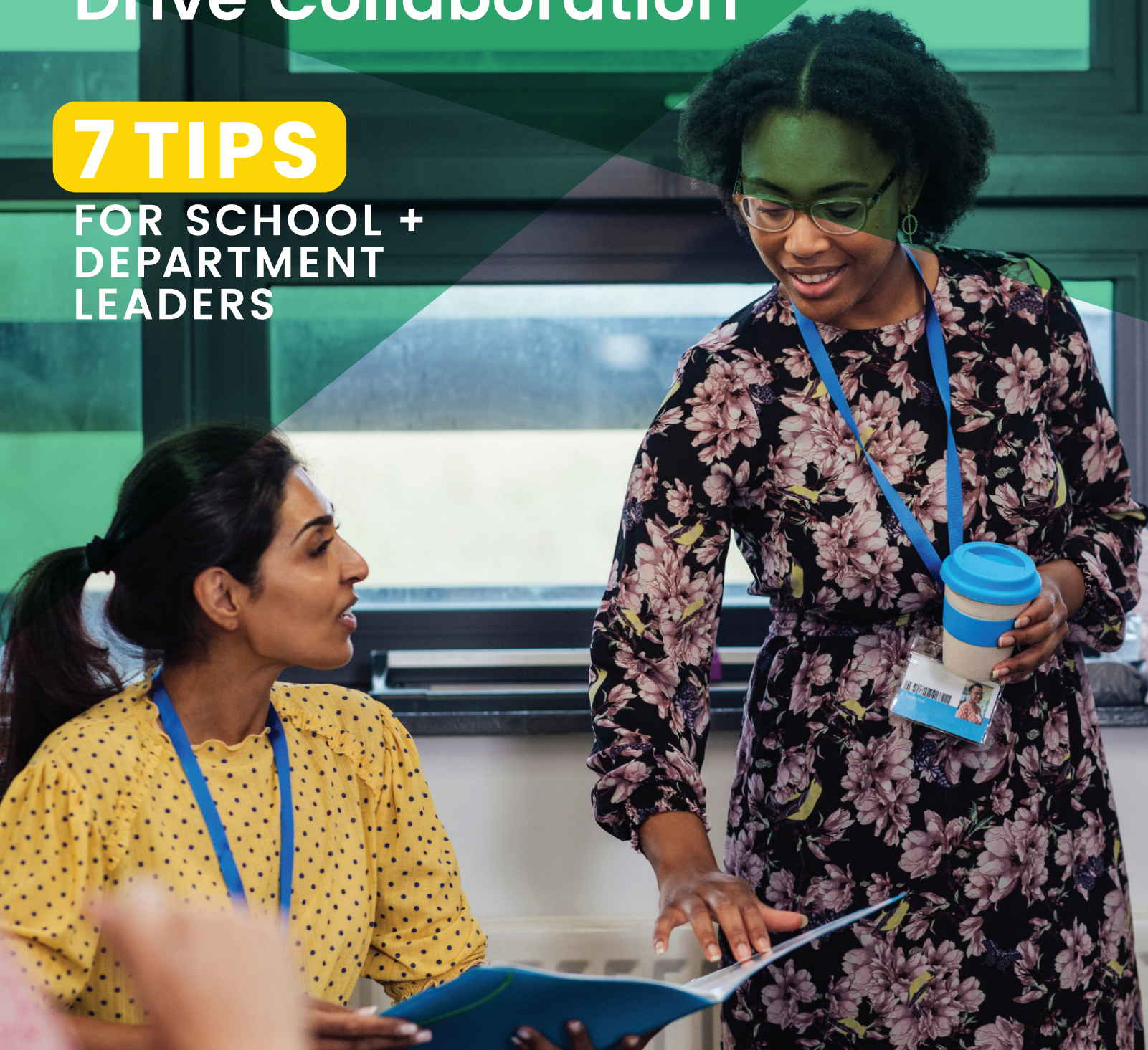


Co-Teaching to Support Students with Disabilities: Leadership Tactics That Drive Collaboration

7 TIPS

FOR SCHOOL +
DEPARTMENT
LEADERS



When general and special educators work in isolation, students don't get the support they need, classroom disruptions rise, and teachers become overwhelmed trying to manage it all on their own. But when schools create structures for collaboration, the impact is transformative.

Effective co-teaching between general and special educators can **improve student outcomes, reduce unnecessary special education referrals, and foster a culture of shared ownership.**

This guide offers practical strategies for education leaders to create the conditions for cross-functional co-teaching to thrive and meet every student's needs.



1.

Set the Vision for Shared Responsibility

Reinforce a unified message

Communicate that every student is everyone's responsibility. Avoid language that separates "special ed" and "general ed" as different worlds.

Model the mindset

When speaking with teams or families, lead with inclusion. Highlight co-teaching success stories and offer examples of shared leadership.

Align roles to mission

Ensure job descriptions, evaluation criteria, and team goals reflect the expectation that educators will collaborate to support diverse learners.

2.

Build Time for Real Collaboration

Protect co-planning time

Schedule shared planning periods or provide paid collaboration time for general and special educators to meet regularly.

Offer flexible scheduling solutions

Where master scheduling is a barrier, explore creative solutions such as staggered planning blocks or designated collaboration days.

Streamline meetings

Avoid siloed IEP meetings or team huddles. Integrate opportunities for cross-functional teams to align on student supports.



3. Provide Joint Professional Learning

Train together:

Offer PD sessions that include both general and special educators, focused on co-teaching models, differentiation, behavior strategies, and inclusive instruction.

Invest in coaching

Provide instructional coaches or mentors who understand inclusive practices and can support collaborative teaching partnerships.

Create learning communities

Launch PLCs (peer-led cohorts) focused on strengthening co-teaching effectiveness and reducing barriers to collaboration.

4.

Strengthen Systems for Data and Decision-Making

Ensure shared access to student data

Provide general and special educators access to IEPs, 504 plans, progress monitoring tools, and behavior data.

Align data protocols

Help teams work together to use data when making decisions, ensuring the support provided meets student needs and complies with requirements.

Identify trends early

Use schoolwide data to flag referrals, accommodations, or academic progress patterns and proactively address system-level gaps.

5.

Build Time for Real Collaboration

Implement consistent behavior frameworks

Ensure all staff are trained on PBIS, MTSS, or other tiered systems and understand their role within them.

Coordinate across roles

Clarify how general educators, special educators, paraprofessionals, and mental health staff work together to respond to student behavior.

Promote data-informed response

Encourage teams to analyze student behavior as a form of communication and adjust supports accordingly.

6.

Foster a Culture of Partnership

Break down silos

Create opportunities for general and special educators to learn from each other's strengths and see each other as equals.

Recognize collaboration

Celebrate effective co-teaching teams in staff meetings, newsletters, or performance evaluations.

Listen to your teachers

Regularly gather input from staff on what's working, what's missing, and what they need to do to better support students.

7.

Keep Students at the Center

Focus on inclusion as a pathway to equity

Remind teams that co-teaching is not just a strategy. It is a way to ensure access and belonging for every student.

Encourage student agency

Promote practices that help students understand their learning profiles, advocate for their needs, and participate in setting goals.

Lead with empathy and high expectations

When leaders model compassion and rigor, it sets the tone for a school culture that supports and believes in all learners.

Differentiate Instruction

Combine content knowledge with specialized strategies for learning differences.

Feeling the strain on your teams?

eLuma partners with schools and districts to deliver expert online professional development, special education, and behavioral health services that enhance service capacity, reduce unnecessary referrals, and support co-teaching success.



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