

Community Roots Charter School **Fort Greene, Brooklyn, NYC**

The recent spike in charter school enrollment in New York City, to more than 38,000 (NYC Charter School Center) students – and the resulting controversy over who gets in to charter schools - may be a story you think you have heard before (The Choosiest of Charters, NY Times, June 8, 2010). Throughout the first two decades of charter schools, each new school has prompted criticisms from opponents, in part because student enrollment in charters has tended to be less racially diverse (Orfield 2010) and less likely to serve equivalent proportions of special education students, than the district in which they sit. But, there have been a number of charter schools that have – both of their own accord, and with increasing incentives from the NY State Education Department – gone out of their way to recruit and retain students with special needs and a racially diverse student body. Perhaps now we can begin a debate that holds serious promise of charters making gains on both fronts.

Community Roots Charter School, located in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, serves 300 students in grades K-5 (50 students in each grade). Founded in 2006, the mission of Community Roots Charter School (CRCS) is to prepare its students “to meet or exceed the New York State standards and be prepared to excel in the 21st century by being taught to be independent thinkers and to work productively within a diverse group of learners.” The school has continued to raise student achievement. In 2010, 72% of fourth graders at CRCS tested proficient in math, 60% were proficient in ELA, and 88% were proficient in science (<http://www.nyccharterschools.org>). But, according to the school’s co-director Alison Keil, the school also believes its mission is to take the lead in another area that she calls a “movement:”

“For us, we want to incorporate children with special needs and create an inclusive classroom.”

CRCS serves a relatively large proportion of kids with special needs at approximately 20% (by comparison, NYC district schools identified about 14.1% of students with special needs in 2010). For Keil, this helps the school respond to the criticism that some charter schools are “counseling out” students with special needs. Indeed, the school has a comprehensive plan for creating an inclusive environment, reaching out in the community, and specific expectations that staff will do both: (<http://www.communityroots.org/enrollment/specialeducation>).

But, there is also a critical, educational reason to have a diverse group of learners in the classroom - at CRCS, they have a theory for how instruction for learners with special needs is effective for all kids, and they have a teaching model that they believe supports this theory.

Co-Teaching at CRCS: Building the kind of school that supports an inclusive classroom requires powerful instruction – at Community Roots, that means teachers

who embrace a co-teaching model and want to work as a team. As it turns out, putting together a classroom team is quite “complicated.”

During the hiring process, Keil and Co-director Sara Stone are looking for people who say they have experience with collaborating. But, they have learned that previous experience with collaboration doesn't always predict success in their co-teaching model. So Keil will ask applicants, “Why do you want to co-teach?” For some teacher applicants, this question is much more difficult than it sounds. “The answer is important to listen to,” Keil says.

The answer is important because the school has a particular theory about the impact of the co-teaching model – it's a model that allows for collaboration and diversity, not just along race and class, but also collaboration among, and diversity of, learners.

Learning, and Re-learning to Collaborate: However, the focus on co-teaching and collaboration doesn't end once a teaching team is hired. And, things haven't always gone smoothly.

“When we first opened, sometimes you'd see direct instruction by two different teachers in front of 25 kids. Most teachers don't have previous experience co-teaching, so we had to go back and do some studying.”

One of the first things they did was define what they mean by co-teaching. Keil and Stone adapted several definitions and guiding questions from Marilyn Friend's work, *The Power of Two*. This resulted in a unique definition of “teaming” that they all could point to (See Appendix 1 for additional models) and some questions to ask one another about their teaching practice.

Teaming: The two teachers fluidly share the teaching responsibilities of the classroom.

- When might it work best?
- What might make this a somewhat threatening approach for teachers?
- What could be accomplished using this approach that is not possible with other approaches?

Co-teaching also requires partners who are willing to work through disagreements and reflect on their practice. The school provides support to co-teachers in both areas during and at the end of the year.

“We want to know, ‘How did the teaching go?’ ‘Did it feel like someone was the assistant?’”

To support this process of reflection, the school adapted a checklist from the book, A Guide to Co-Teaching (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). (See Appendix 2 for additional checklist items.). Keil and Stone use this checklist at the end of each school year to gather information on how the teams are working together, and what they still need to learn.

Yes	Sometimes	No	
			We decide which co-teaching model we are going to use in a lesson based on the benefits to the students and the co-teachers.
			We share ideas, information, and materials.
			We identify the resources and talents of the co-teachers.
			We teach different groups of students at the same time.
			We are aware of what our co-teacher(s) is doing even when we are not directly in one another's presence.

Now each co-teaching team gets regular feedback about the instructional model. Keil says that their focus on reflecting on the work means that “co-teaching becomes a theme for everything you talk about.”

As the debate over the role of student data in teacher evaluations intensifies, one area that remains clear is that all schools will need to develop coherent processes for gathering and processing information about teaching and learning. And, those processes will need to capture and value the people doing the work. At CRCS, asking teachers regularly *about* the co-teaching model means Keil and Stone are able to ground conversations of student performance in a teaching model around which teachers already have high levels of agreement. This likely increases the chance that student performance data can actually influence and drive instructional improvement in the school.

An Inclusive Future: Now, with thoughtful investment in charter schools that share CRCS's movement to create inclusive classrooms, we might just be able to create a portfolio of schools that will enhance the educational options for all students. What Community Roots Charter School has demonstrated so far, is that it takes deep, committed, sustained learning and collaboration by adults, to meet the diverse learning needs of kids.

- Written by John Roberts, in collaboration with Community Roots Charter School.

APPENDIX 1

Co-Teaching Approaches Definitions and Guiding Questions

One Teach-One Observe: One teacher observes while the other manages the classroom.

- What information can be gathered using this approach?

Station Teaching: Students and teachers are arranged in stations, so that eventually all students work with each teacher (and if appropriate, independently).

- What types of instruction might best be addressed using this approach?
- What are potential strengths and drawbacks of this approach?

Parallel Teaching: Each teacher works with half the group for a designated period, but not with the other half.

- For what purposes might this approach be best suited?
- This approach can be used to introduce different viewpoints. How might you use this technique in your co-taught classroom?

Alternative Teaching: A small group of students is pulled from the large group to accomplish a specific instructional purpose.

- How can you ensure that this approach does not become solely a remedial group?
- How could this approach be used to benefit all the students in a class?
- How can you ensure that students in the small group do not miss critical instruction occurring with the larger group?

Teaming: The two teachers fluidly share the teaching responsibilities of the classroom.

- When might it work best?
- What might make this a somewhat threatening approach for teachers?
- What could be accomplished using this approach that is not possible with other approaches?

One Teach-One Assist: One teacher offers assistance to students while the other manages the instruction.

- Why do you think this is the most often used and most often poorly used co-teaching approach? What are the appropriate uses of this approach? What are the abuses of it?
- How could you take advantage of its potential strengths while avoiding its pitfalls?

All Approaches

- Why is it important that co-teachers exchange roles when using approaches such as one teach, one observes and one teach, one assist?
- How certain approaches better meet the needs of particular students in your classrooms?
- How could differentiation be combined with the approaches for better instruction?

APPENDIX 2

Self- Assessment: Co-Teaching 2010-2011

Teachers:

Date:

Yes	Sometimes	No	
			We decide which co-teaching model we are going to use in a lesson based on the benefits to the students and the co-teachers.
			We share ideas, information, and materials.
			We identify the resources and talents of the co-teachers.
			We teach different groups of students at the same time.
			We are aware of what our co-teacher(s) is doing even when we are not directly in one another's presence.
			We share responsibility for deciding what to teach and how it will be taught.
			We agree on what will be taught in a lesson.
			We share responsibility for deciding who teaches which part of a lesson.
			We are flexible and make changes as needed during a lesson.
			We identify student strengths and needs.
			We share responsibility for differentiating instruction.
			We include other people when their expertise or experience is needed.
			We share responsibility for how student learning is assessed.
			We can show that students are learning when we co-teach.
			We agree on discipline procedures and carry them out jointly.
			We give feedback to one another on what goes on in the classroom.
			We make improvements in our lessons based on what happens in the classroom.
			We communicate freely our concerns.
			We have a process for resolving our disagreements and use it when faced with problems and conflicts.
			We celebrate the process of co-teaching and the outcomes and successes.
			We have fun with the students and each other when we co-teach.
			We have regularly scheduled times to meet and discuss our work.
			We use our meeting time productively.
			We can effectively co-teach even when we don't have time to plan.
			We explain the benefits of co-teaching to students and their families.
			We model collaboration and teamwork for our students.
			Our students view us both as their teacher.
			We depend on one another to follow through on tasks and responsibilities.
			We seek and enjoy additional training to make our co-teaching and teaching better.
			We use a variety of co-teaching approaches.
			We are deliberate about which co-teaching models to use to best meet the needs of our students.
			We communicate our need for support and resources to our supervisor.