

Supporting Teachers in Their “Work Marriage”

by Lee Kyler and Jessica Sie

macy and connection. In the Boquet Valley Central School District in rural, upstate New York, a new model of teaching the prekindergarten program was approved and implemented at the start of the 2025–2026 school year. The general education teacher and special education teacher both are fresh out of college and, while eager to take on their new roles, admittedly struggling with the model. Having just learned of a way to support building a strong staff culture, successful co-teaching reinforces a shared instructional framework that elevates teacher efficacy and professional agency, both of which are strongly linked to retention. By investing in collaborative practices that distribute expertise and reduce isolation, schools create conditions where educators feel supported, valued, and more likely to remain in the profession. Teaching can be rewarding but also demanding. School leaders often say co-teaching is like a ‘work marriage’ because it demands relational labor: vulnerability, communication, trust, conflict navigation, and shared growth. While the original context is romantic, the underlying insight, that structured, progressive self-disclosure prompts trust and relational closeness, can be adapted to professional pairings. In this article, leaders draw on that metaphor to offer concrete strategies for leaders to support co-teaching teams.

Co-teachers must advocate, offer feedback to one another, and navigate mistakes. Without relational trust, fear of judgment or defensiveness can suppress needed conversations. Early relational breakdowns in co-teaching can contribute to burnout or attrition. Leaders who build relational scaffolds increase the odds of durability. Thus,

10 Ways to Support New Teachers in Strengthening their “Work Marriage”

So, the co-teachers said... “When did you last sing to yourself, to someone else?” That is just one of the 36 questions that lead to love that principal Lee Kyler pitched to new co-teachers during an introductory meeting. This touchpoint comes from a *New York Times* article titled, “The 36 Questions That Lead to Love,” which helped popularize an experiment using 36 structured questions to deepen inti-



leaders can play a pivotal role in scaffolding relational infrastructure for new co-teaching teams. Below are ten practices and structural interventions leaders can undertake so that new co-teachers feel supported, understood, and equipped relationally as well as instructionally.

What the Research Shows

Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that relational trust among teachers, principals, students, and parents serves as the social foundation for effective school improvement. Their research finds that “relational trust fosters the necessary social exchanges among school professionals as they learn from one another” (p. 43). Their research across Chicago schools demonstrates that higher levels of trust lead to stronger collaboration, greater teacher commitment, and significant gains in student engagement and academic achievement. Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that elementary schools with high relational trust were much more likely to demonstrate marked improvements in student learning” (p. 43).

1. Introduce a protocol early

Leaders can adapt to the 36-question format by drafting a set of prompts (from light to deeper) for co-teachers to explore their hopes, work styles, vulnerabilities, and goals. At the start of co-teaching (before the school year, or early in the year), allocate time for pairs to dialogue using these prompts in a facilitated setting, ideally by a mentor with similar coaching experiences. After the dialogue, ask pairs to note surprises, insights, and any relational agreements they wish to form.

2. Create norms

Ask each teacher to define what an ideal integrated classroom feels like. What does it look like? Similar to marriage, when couples bring their own furniture and belongings into a

shared space, co-teachers literally need to plan space for their stuff. Teachers should name their norms and be encouraged to put their norms in writing, or visually as anchor chart, to revisit periodically.

3. Embed check-ins

Leaders should schedule brief check-ins and share one highlight observed during those check-ins, focusing on the positive. If constructive feedback needs to be given, it should be brief but focused. Teachers should allocate time midyear for deeper reflection between the pair. These periodic checks can be attended by administration, or they can have a neutral facilitator if needed.

4. Professional learning

Professional learning should be offered specifically on difficult conversations, feedback models, conflict de-escalation, and relational competency. Think of this as marital counseling before it’s necessary. Principals or instructional leads can occasionally share their own relational learning or mistakes to normalize that partnership growth is ongoing.

5. Monitor roles

Leaders should watch whether one partner is defaulting to taking more tasks such as instructional, planning like field trip requests, behavior management, etc. Leaders need to encourage co-teachers to alternate who leads a lesson, unit, or assessment; similarly contacting families or attending CSE meetings should be shared. This helps build mutual capacity and respect. Early in these relationships, pairs need to articulate each other’s strengths and how they complement one another.

6. Celebrate wins

During staff meetings or newsletters, leaders should spotlight co-teaching pairs and comment not just on student outcomes but relational milestones. Principal coils also

support this through school wide climate initiatives like exchanging gratitude notes to one another posted in the staff common area.

7. Provide scaffoldings

Research has shown that a strong new teacher mentor program supports teacher retention, and most certainly would support teachers in a co-teaching role. This is especially important when a new teacher joins the staff mid-year or after a difficult transition such as teacher turnover. When conflict or misalignment arises, leaders can offer mediation or other ways to reset the dynamic.

8. Building relationships among teachers

(just as we do for students)

We know that students learn more effectively in community, and school leaders must intentionally create that community throughout the school, especially with co-teachers. I think we could bring this relationship building into a theme. It could be powerful to talk about understanding strengths to build trust and sharing where they each hope to grow professionally to build vulnerability.

9. Use Data

I think we could bring in the intentional use of data to understand student needs and plan for effective co-teaching. The outcome of co-teaching is to provide stronger support for our students. We could bring in specific examples of how teachers can use the data to understand student strengths and opportunities for growth and outline how this data-driven approach should be used to bring co-teachers together on a shared goal with differentiated roles to ensure all students learn.

10. Planning for co-teaching lessons and roles

I appreciate how thoughtfully you have outlined the relationships building aspect!

Co-teachers are most effective when they carefully plan for co-teaching. School leaders and teachers need to ensure the time is invested for both the time for collaboration on lesson plans and their roles for each section of the day. Whether parallel teaching, team teaching, one leading and one assisting, etc. teachers need to have intentionally plan and communicate effectively to avoid frustration and ensure that they are working effectively together to enable strong learning for kids and a positive experience in their working relationship.

Conclusion

Co-teaching partnerships are a relational system. Without intentional scaffolding, misalignments in expectation, feedback, vulnerability, and trust can undermine excellent instructional design. Educational leaders have the responsibility to build scaffolds, normalize vulnerability, and intervene when relational dynamics first go awry. By adapting principles from relational practices and weaving relational infrastructure into onboarding, professional learning, coaching, and monitoring, you increase the likelihood that co-teachers will not just coexist, but grow, learn, and thrive together. In the end, every successful co-teaching team starts the same way, a leap of trust and a willingness to say "I do." This requires a shared commitment to the work marriage ahead. ■

References

- Jones, D. (2015, January 9). No. 37: Big wedding or small? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/style/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html>.
- Bryk, A. S., and Schneider, Sources B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. trust and open communication, creating a safe space where they can thrive and feel confident in their roles.

Lee Kyler is an elementary principal based in Northern New York. With a background in special education and a passion for school climate, family engagement, and literacy, Lee leads through empathy, vulnerability, reflection, and service.

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