

Co-teaching to launch districtwide in 2019-20

The 2019-20 school year will bring many new beginnings for General Brown students, staff and parents. And while some changes will be obvious: new teachers, new friends, and for some students, [new schools](#); other changes will be more subtle.

District officials have been researching inclusive classroom instruction for nearly a year, and in September, the district will implement co-teaching at all grade levels. Integrated co-teaching is an educational model in which a general education teacher and a special education teacher jointly provide instruction to a class that includes students with and without disabilities.

This method enables teachers to meet the diverse needs of all students in their classroom rather than sending some students out of the classroom for such services as math and English language arts support. Eventually, the district would like to see all services, such as occupational and speech therapy, taking place in the general education classroom, Superintendent Barbara Case said.

“The best place a child can be is in their general education classroom with their peers,” Case said. “We want all students to feel like they are a valued part of our school community.”

According to 2017-18 New York State Report Card data, General Brown’s special education classification rate was 16.1%, which was higher than the New York state average of 13.98%. In spring 2018, district leaders performed an informal evaluation of the district’s special education services, which led them to wonder if the district could continue providing high-level support services to those students who need them in a less restrictive environment, Case said.

“We can be doing interventions—and should be doing interventions—in the general education classroom,” she said.

In fall 2018, the district’s leadership team began working with consultants Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod, co-founders of [Inclusive Schooling](#), to research additional ways to fulfill the district’s mission of preparing and inspiring each student to meet future challenges, with a focus on students with disabilities.

At the same time, the district forged a relationship with the Northern Regional Center for Independent Living, a local disability rights and resource center, to help parents of students with disabilities navigate the state’s and district’s special education process and access community supports and resources.

Strategic plan calls for inclusion

While the district was working with Causton and MacLeod, it was also undergoing planning for a new strategic plan. A task force comprised of about 30 individuals, including community

members, parents, and students, crafted the plan. In February, the Board of Education approved the 2019-22 plan, which included a focus on three areas: academic achievement, intentional investment in learning and school culture and community, which involves ensuring an inclusive environment in which all students will be educated in inclusive settings, according to the plan document.

To assist in meeting that goal, the district formed a steering committee on inclusion in April that consisted of district administrators and staff, as well as a representative from the Northern Regional Center for Independent Living who has worked closely with the district throughout the past year.

What will change?

Special education teachers are already working in classrooms with students at the junior/senior high school, but for the 2019-20 school year, classrooms will shift to a co-teaching model in which the general education teacher and the special education teacher will plan and teach collaboratively to support all students with strategies to master the content.

“Inclusion really allows you to hit all learning levels, from those students who need extra support to those students who need to be stretched and challenged,” Case said.

What students will see is that, at times, depending upon the content being taught, there will be two certified teachers in their classrooms available to help any student, Case said.

“When co-teaching is at its best, you can’t tell which is the inclusion teacher,” she said.

The district has hired three additional certified special education teachers so that co-teaching may be implemented at all elementary grade levels. Currently, elementary students who receive special education services are placed in separate classrooms from their general education peers or they are pulled from the general education classroom throughout the day to receive additional services.

Next year, under the co-teaching model, students will be placed in general education classrooms where they will receive their special education services within the general education classroom. For students currently in a more restrictive setting, transitioning to a co-teaching model will provide them with the opportunity to become more a part of the school community and to form relationships with more of their classmates, Case said.

The plan for the next school year is also to build time into the teachers’ schedules so they can plan lessons together so their instruction is cohesive and blended. The general education teacher and the special education teacher will work together to plan instruction to meet the individual and diverse needs of the students.

“We know we’re in the very beginning stages and that this will be a several year process,” Case said. “We’ll never be at the end because we’ll always be looking for ways to enhance how we are supporting all of our students.”

Preparing for the shift

Causton worked with General Brown staff in March and will be brought back several times during the 2019-20 school year to help staff integrate co-teaching into their practices. In August, a team of district staff, including some from the inclusion steering committee, plan to attend a Summer Leadership Institute in Syracuse that focuses on inclusive schools. Throughout the school year, administrators and staff will periodically evaluate their progress and, as with any new initiative, make changes if necessary. In addition, Nicole Donaldson, junior/senior high school principal attended a national conference on co-teaching train the trainer, so that she can be an in-house resource for the district.

Case said she is excited for the opportunities that lie ahead for both students and staff members.

“This plan hits upon each of our strategic plan’s three focus areas as we are being very intentional in how we ensure we offer an inclusive environment that supports academic achievement and promotes a positive school culture and community,” she said.