



Are Two Teachers Better Than One?

The Effect of Co-Teaching on Students With and Without Disabilities

Nathan Jones, PhD Associate Professor Boston University
Marcus A. Winters, PhD Associate Professor Boston University

POLICY ISSUE

Federal special education law prioritizes two concurrent goals for students with disabilities (SWDs). Instruction should be individualized—specially designed to meet students’ individual academic and behavioral needs. At the same time, instruction should be inclusive—ensuring that SWDs have access to the general education curriculum and a highly-qualified content area teacher. At \$13 billion annually, providing special education services is the second largest category of federal K-12 funding. That SWDs nonetheless achieve substantially worse educational outcomes than their peers has led policymakers to consider alternative strategies.

Co-teaching has become a common strategy for educating SWDs in these inclusive environments. It involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together to teach students with and without disabilities in a single classroom. Co-teaching is meant to give SWDs access to both the general education curriculum and the specially designed instruction outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

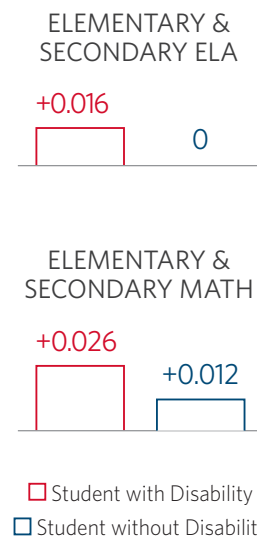
Co-teaching has widespread support within special education literature and is widely recommended by state departments of education. However, though the logic behind co-teaching is intuitively appealing, we know little about its impact on student learning. The handful of studies that have examined the effectiveness of co-teaching using quantitative indicators of student outcomes suffer from severe methodological limitations and/or are limited to only one or a few schools or classrooms. In this study, we provide the first causal estimate for the effect of co-teaching on student test scores across a large public school system.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

We estimate the effect of attending a co-taught classroom instead of a single-teacher-led classroom on the math and English language arts (ELA) standardized test scores for both students with and without

KEY FINDINGS

Effect of Attending a Co-Taught Class (standard deviation units)



disabilities enrolled in public schools across the state of Massachusetts. We use data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for students and teachers in the public school system between the fall of 2007 and the spring of 2019. Specifically, our analysis focused on students in Grades 3-8 who we observe at least once in a co-taught class.

As currently implemented in Massachusetts, we find that attending a co-taught classroom on average leads to test score improvements for both students with and without disabilities. However, the magnitude of the benefit is small relative not only to prior estimates

for the impact of co-teaching but also relative to the impact of other educational interventions. We find similar effects from co-teaching regardless of subject tested, grade level, as well as the student's sex or race/ethnicity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our findings are generally positive for co-teaching. However, the broad endorsements of co-teaching common among special education researchers and policymakers are perhaps not warranted given the magnitude of the effect. Policymakers require detailed information about the financial and other costs associated with co-teaching. Additional research exploring the

social impacts of moving SWDs into inclusive classroom settings could also be useful. If, in combination with the small test score benefits, co-teaching improved the social skills and friendships of SWDs, then it might be worthwhile even if it imposes significant costs.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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wheelockpolicy@bu.edu



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