After team teaching English classes for grades 11 and 12 for a combined 23 years, we are convinced that team teaching is a more effective approach to meeting the needs of students with learning and mild emotional disabilities than isolating them in self-contained classes. This has been proven by our students’ consistent growth as learners and self-advocates once they are given the necessary support.

Although pairing teachers is not a new concept, more schools are teaming general education teachers and special education teachers in regular classrooms because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (IDEA ’97) mandates that students receive special education services in the least restrictive environment. Team teaching provides one viable avenue to reach students with special needs.

Nevertheless, effective teams are not accidental, and principals and program managers must think carefully when forming teams. Here are four key ideas to keep in mind:

Seek volunteers. The adage about leading a horse to water applies here. You can draft individuals and require them to work together, but you can’t ensure effective team teaching or genial relationships. Effective teams work collegially in an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation. You are more likely to have an effective partnership when both members want to team and are willing to compromise. And if a member of an existing team is unable to continue, his or her replacement also must understand and value all aspects of the teaming process.

Give potential team members time to talk. They need to discuss grading policy, classroom space, pet peeves, and planning and instruction. We recommend a questionnaire as a basis for this discussion.

Once they are in the process of teaching, it is too late for teams to redefine their roles or agree on management policies. Any lack of agreement will lead to problems when it is time to grade or hold students accountable for their work and behavior. NASA does not send astronauts who are unclear of their roles into space, so why send teachers into classrooms when they are unsure of their responsibilities to one another and to their mission?

Provide as much common planning time as possible. In fact, schedule common planning time every day, if you can. This time is necessary to maintain communication with parents, reflect on lessons, organize materials to meet accommodations, and make modifications in unit plans. All of this is extremely hard to do between classes when teachers are answering students’ questions and quickly preparing for the next class. We were fortunate to have common planning time and therefore were able to preview audiotapes of novels, create slide shows, install software to help students organize their notes, and create Internet activities.

Common planning is also helpful for record keeping. Completing and monitoring individualized education programs (IEPs) and individualized transition plans, as well as attending annual IEP meetings, is time consuming. Two-thirds of teachers who responded to a recent study, led by Mary Ruth Coleman of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children, reported that they spend up to 30% of their time preparing IEPs. The average length of an IEP ranged from 8 to 16 pages, and teachers needed up to four hours to prepare for each IEP conference. Teaming provides for easy access to a general education teacher’s comments and observations that are required aspects of the IEP. Having common planning reduces the time that special education teachers spend seeking information from general education teachers because at least one teacher is readily accessible. General education teachers gain an important understanding of the recommended accommodations and students’ individual situations by being a part of the record keeping and IEP meetings.

Provide time for different teams to meet and observe one another. Acquisition of knowledge and skills is vital to a teacher’s growth, and team teachers benefit from regular communication. Although the typical school day is busy from bell to bell, administrators should make it a priority for teams to observe one another. During our second year of teaming, we had the opportunity to observe another class, and although the grade level was different, we learned a new approach to evaluating student progress. Similarly, while observing
our class, other English and special education teachers discovered a new method of introducing novels.

There are many benefits of team teaching for students with learning and mild emotional disabilities; nevertheless, the success of such teams depends on the staff members’ willingness to work together and adequate administrative support for planning and communication. PL

Levi C. Folly (lcla@erols.com) is a preK–12 remediation specialist with Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools. He has been a teacher for more than 20 years and has team taught English for grades 11 and 12.

Kathryn P. Baxter (eitakb@aol.com) is a special education teacher at Oakton High School in Fairfax County, VA, and has team taught for three years.