

## Cooperative Education: Making It Work

A teacher explores the concept and methods of cooperative learning.

BY LYNN SURIN

Several key factors must be kept in mind in order for cooperative learning to work in the classroom:

- Teachers are clear about what they want to accomplish with the cooperative-learning task (including both academic and social-emotional goals).
- Composition of specific groupings (size, as well as mix of student characteristics) is informed by the goals.
- The task -- whether short term or long term and whether project based or not -- is constructed so that students have the opportunity to promote each other's success.
- Clear explanations are given to students of the academic and social goals of the task and the norms of behavior (for example, individual students are accountable for their fair share of the work).
- Students discuss the SEL skills required to enhance project success.
- The class reflects on academic and social learning, what worked, what didn't, and what might be the next lesson goals in light of this experience.

### Once It's Over

We always debrief as a class. It is this follow-up that is really important; the learning takes place in the reflection. For social goals (for each lesson, we have an academic goal and a social goal, written right on the board), we'll discuss whether we attained them, what we learned, what worked, and what didn't. We'll ask the kids for ideas about solutions and strategies we might try, and, in light of this experience, what goal we want to set for next time.

For example, cooperative learning is a great way to teach students how to disagree respectfully and not take disagreements personally. The kids love this, once they learn it. A great debriefing topic is, "Did anyone have a disagreement in his or her group? How did you handle it? What worked? What didn't work? Does anyone have ideas for how these students might have handled this disagreement differently? What might our social goal be for our next small-group work? Should we try some of these strategies you generated?"

Thus, the children themselves become the sources of the solutions, and they will explore what works and what doesn't, and reflect and discuss again. These steps become powerful lessons in self-awareness (one's role in dominating or facilitating a group's efforts, one's feelings when someone disagrees, how feelings change when disagreement is respectful versus disrespectful), relationship skills (can people disagree and still respect each other and be friends, and, if so, how?), responsibility (to think about solutions), creativity, critical thinking, self-management (anger control, pursuing group-learning goals in the face of disagreements and setbacks), and problem solving. The students see that the solutions reside within them, and that they have useful ideas to contribute -- that they can affect things around them. -- *Lynn Surin, Cossitt Avenue School, LaGrange, Illinois*

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