WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

The use of the word collaboration may lead to confusion because it refers to how people are carrying out a specific task or activity, not the nature or purpose of the activity. For example, when teachers meet to plan lessons, the activity is lesson planning and they are collaborative in the way they work together. Similarly, a parent–teacher conference is an activity that can be carried in various ways. If done collaboratively there is more openness between the parties which results in a sense of shared responsibility.

Friend and Cook’s (1992) definition of collaboration is intentionally general and takes this into account: "interpersonal collaboration is a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 5). They clarify this definition by detailing several defining characteristics.

Characteristics of Collaboration:

**It is voluntary.**
Collaboration requires that all participant members want to work together towards a common goal. People may work in close proximity, but they cannot be required to collaborate. They must make a personal choice to work collaboratively.

**It is based on parity.**
Collaboration is based on a sense that all participants are valued equally. Each person participating in a collaborative effort contributes some type of resource. This has the effect of increasing commitment and reinforcing everyone’s sense of parity. The amount and nature of particular contributions may vary greatly, but the participants recognize that what they offer is integral to the collaborative effort. The process embraces the unique perspectives of all team members (Resources may include time, expertise, space, equipment, or any other such assets)

**It requires a shared goal.**
Collaboration is based on a strong sense of purpose. Participants collaborate only when they share a goal. If they are working on poorly defined goals, they may be unintentionally working on different goals. When this happens, miscommunication and frustration often occur instead of collaboration.

**It includes shared responsibility for key decisions.**
Requires trust and a sense of shared responsibility. Although participants may divide their labor when engaged in collaborative activities, each one is an equal partner in making the fundamental decisions about the activities they are undertaking. This shared responsibility reinforces the sense of parity that exists among the participants.

**It includes shared accountability for outcomes.**
This characteristic follows directly from shared responsibility. That is, if teachers share key decisions, they must also share accountability for the results of their decisions, whether those results are positive or negative.