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Education Leader

Special Education Paraprofessional
Supports in Inclusive Schools



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School leaders play a critical role in establishing effective educational practices for all students. A common challenge in this role relates to establishing and sustaining the effective use of paraprofessional support for students with disabilities. Historically, paraprofessional supports have been configured one student or one classroom at a time rather than deployed deliberately across the school. Through strategic planning and active supervision, paraprofessionals can serve as resources to support classrooms, teachers, and students with positive outcomes.

In Pennsylvania, there are two types of paraprofessionals who provide support to students with disabilities in schools:

- **Instructional paraprofessionals** work under the guidance of general and special education teachers to support educational programming across settings. Instructional paraprofessionals may also be referred to as classroom aides, instructional aides, teacher assistants, or job coaches.
- **Personal care assistants** (PCAs) provide individualized support to students in activities of daily living, health care, behavior support, and other noninstructional needs. PCAs may support more than one student, but not at the same time.

In this document, the term “paraprofessional” is used to refer to individuals who support students

IDEA 2004 allows for “...paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised...to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities” (34 CFR 300.156.iii)

who receive special education services under the supervision of a certified professional.

Strategic Planning

Effective school leaders use systematic decision-making to determine how best to structure supports, including paraprofessionals, for students in inclusive settings. The types and levels of supports for classrooms and students may be determined through school-wide strategic planning, as well as the special education planning process. School leaders have the unique opportunity to identify and allocate resources that will most effectively promote success for all students, including those with disabilities, at the classroom, school, and district levels.

As schools become more inclusive, paraprofessionals and special educators move across classrooms and collaborate with many professionals to provide educational services to students with disabilities. This may reduce paraprofessional access to direct guidance from special educators who have responsibility to direct and monitor implementation of each student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). It is essential that special and general

educators share responsibility for designing instruction, monitoring student progress, and providing direction to paraprofessionals, to ensure that paraprofessionals deliver appropriate levels and types of supports for students. Giangreco (2003) cautions that “special education models that rely heavily on paraprofessionals to deliver instruction represents a double standard.” Inclusive schools combine the effective use of paraprofessionals with other practices (e.g., Universal Design for Learning, formative assessment), which results in the effective delivery of instruction to all students in general education classrooms. Making changes to the system by reallocating resources; implementing collaborative planning and co-teaching; and facilitating peer supports complements the use of paraprofessionals in a balanced approach to delivering inclusive educational services.

School leaders should ensure that IEP teams follow these guiding principles when making decisions about individualized paraprofessional support:

- Support is determined based on **student needs**, not disability category.

- The IEP team develops a clear plan for when, where, and how paraprofessional support is to be provided, and how support will be faded over time.
- A certified teacher is the primary source of instruction for every student.

Educating families and establishing a shared understanding of the roles of paraprofessionals can reduce tension and result in a common vision. Given that decisions regarding paraprofessional supports to individual students occur at IEP meetings, it is important that school leaders inform families of the range of supports available, and enlist them as equal partners in decision-making. A clear explanation of the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, teachers, and others should be provided to families.

Giangreco (2010) states that, “one-to-one paraprofessional support should be considered among the most restrictive support options, and as such, should be among the last resorts considered rather than a first or only option.” IEP teams sometimes make an assumption that when a student, particularly a student with more complex support needs, is educated in the general education setting, an “extra” adult is needed to provide support. IEP teams need guidance to avoid identifying a paraprofessional to deliver support in a general education setting without carefully considering alternatives. Careful planning and ongoing monitoring is needed to prevent overuse of paraprofessionals, which can have unintended effects such as: reduction in the amount of time students with disabilities are engaged in direct instruction from teachers and related service

personnel, limitations to peer interactions and natural supports, increased behavioral concerns, less student independence and self-advocacy, and dependence upon the paraprofessional as the primary provider of educational programming (Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, M. & Kurkowski, 2007; Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadas, 2007; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Ongoing evaluation of the impact of paraprofessional support on student learning and independence is a responsibility of school leaders.

When paraprofessionals are effectively utilized as whole class supports, increased student engagement, flexible grouping opportunities, enhanced social interactions with peers, and improvement in data-based decision-making regarding student progress can result (Mueller & Murphy, 2001).

Understanding each student’s strengths and needs leads to the development of individualized goals and specially-designed instruction. To achieve those goals, teams should consider a variety of supports, including those related to the instructional process, the environment, social or behavioral supports, physical supports, and natural supports from adults or peers. When a team identifies a potential barrier to participation and learning in a general education setting, they should consider a range of supplementary aids and services to overcome potential barriers. For example, if a student needs support with note-taking, a team might consider providing a structured outline, partnering with a peer to share note-taking responsibilities, using technology to capture critical information, or having an adult assist the student.

School leaders can support IEP teams in careful consideration of the range of supports that may help students access the general education curriculum and participate as school members. School leaders can ensure that IEP team members discuss multiple options to promote student achievement. Once a decision has been made that paraprofessional support is needed under some circumstances, it is critical to define the specific role that the paraprofessional and other adults will play in delivery of a free appropriate public education (FAPE). When an IEP team makes a decision that paraprofessional support is needed, they should also develop a plan to fade support or an “exit strategy,” which includes a timeline and a description of how the support will be systematically faded.

At every IEP meeting, students’ strengths, needs, and instructional contexts should be assessed in relationship to the need for paraprofessional support. In addition, school leaders must continue to view the use of paraprofessionals through a systems-level lens in order to maintain effectiveness.

A balanced approach begins with an analysis of services and supports available to all students and an assessment of roles and responsibilities. Increasing the strategic structures that are put in place at the system level is likely to reduce the identification of paraprofessional support as a need for individual students with disabilities. For example, paraprofessional support should not be a substitute for regularly scheduled collaborative planning and problem-solving meetings for general and special educators.

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Framework for Considering the Full Range of Supplementary Aids and Services (SaS)

Category	Examples
Collaborative Adults working together to support students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduled time for coplanning and team meetings • Instructional arrangements that support collaboration (e.g., coteaching, paraprofessional support) • Professional development related to collaboration • Coaching and guided support for team members in the use of assistive technology for an individual student • Scheduled opportunities for parental collaboration • All school personnel collaborate in the development and delivery of SaS
Instructional Development and delivery of instruction that addresses diverse learning needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing modified curricular goals • Providing alternate ways for students to demonstrate learning • Providing test modification • Providing alternate materials and/or assistive technology (e.g., materials on tape, transcribe text into Braille, large print, alternate computer access) • Providing instruction on functional skills in the context of the typical routines in the general classroom • Changing method of presentation • Using reader services • Providing research-based supplementary materials • Providing instructional adaptations (e.g., preteaching, repeating directions, extra examples and nonexamples)
Physical Adaptations and modifications to the physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Furniture arrangement in environments • Specific seating arrangements • Individualized desk, chair, etc. • Adaptive equipment • Adjustments to sensory input (e.g., light, sound) • Environmental Aids (e.g., classroom acoustics, heating, ventilation) • Structural Aids (e.g., wheelchair accessibility, trays, grab bars)
Social-Behavioral Supports and services to increase appropriate behavior and reduce disruptive or interfering behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social skills instruction • Counseling supports • Peer supports (e.g., facilitating friendships) • Individualized behavior support plans • Modification of rules and expectations • Cooperative learning strategies

To meet the changing needs of students in inclusive settings, ongoing professional development of paraprofessionals may be planned as a result of observation, monitoring, evaluation, and surveying paraprofessionals, teachers, and others.

Active Supervision

Paraprofessional support should, in most cases, be a temporary aid toward a goal of independence. From the outset, the role of the special education paraprofessional should be to prepare students to navigate the school experience independently, through teaching, modeling, and encouraging. This

expectation should be articulated clearly and shared among the student, family, and educators on the team to avoid establishing a student-paraprofessional relationship that feels “permanent” and reduces autonomy. School leaders should take an active role in monitoring how supports are implemented. When a student needs personal

care assistance, the student may spend more hours of the day with the paraprofessional than any other individual. If the student has complex support needs and receives assistance in many areas (e.g., hand-over-hand writing, feeding, communication, personal hygiene), the student may become accustomed to having an adult other than the teacher providing support and direction. This can create over-reliance on the support; a lack of motivation or self-confidence to do tasks independently; or difficulty transitioning when a different paraprofessional is assigned to assist the student.

The school leader is in a position to schedule opportunities for collaborative planning between and among the general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals who support and teach a shared group of students. School leaders should set expectations for the content and outcomes of this collaborative planning. When

special education paraprofessionals are a part of the educational team, it is important that their roles and responsibilities are defined clearly and periodic discussions among paraprofessionals and the teachers they work with are facilitated. In inclusive schools, special education paraprofessionals often interact with several teachers, which adds complexity to collaborative teaming. For example, paraprofessionals need to understand the individualized goals for students and the ways in which they should support instruction; paraprofessionals should receive direction from teachers in how to support instruction and periodic feedback on their delivery of supports to students. Classroom and building walk-throughs can be used by school leaders to observe the roles of teachers and paraprofessionals in the delivery of instruction and provide feedback to teachers on their collaboration and support to paraprofessionals.

Effective school leaders:

- Ensure that general and special education teachers understand their roles and responsibilities in guiding the work of paraprofessionals
- Model respect for paraprofessionals as valued team members, who can contribute to school-wide improvement processes
- Facilitate careful decision-making that results in paraprofessional supports that:
 - ▶ Have a clearly understood purpose at all times
 - ▶ Meet, but do not exceed, the need for support
 - ▶ Are flexible and change over time based upon data
 - ▶ Have a plan for fading support in the future

Guiding Questions

Do you provide support to paraprofessionals to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to:

- Follow plans that are developed by the educational team (behavioral, instructional, etc.)?
- Carry out instructional tasks, data recording, etc.?
- Collaborate with educational team members?
- Allow students to be as independent as possible?
- Provide support, but fade support over time?
- Use the types of cues and prompts that the specific student needs?
- Support the use of special equipment, devices, and communication systems?

Resources

National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources

www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals

www.nrcpara.org/

Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)

www.pattan.net

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