

# Supervising Volunteers and Paraprofessionals



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Paraprofessionals fulfill key roles in supplementing classroom teacher instruction. Less qualified than certified teachers, their instructional responsibilities are appropriately defined within clear parameters. The trend of placing more students with acknowledged disabilities in regular education is accompanied by a need for increased learning support. A wide range of students with specific disabilities or individual education needs requires the help of paraprofessionals with appropriate skills and expertise. When serving specific learning needs and coping with displays of inappropriate behavior from students, an experienced paraprofessional may be able to exhibit a higher specific skill level than their supervising teacher. Effective teachers recognize paraprofessionals as valuable colleagues who need management, guidance, nurturing, and training in order to maximize their positive effect on students.

Charlotte Danielson asserts that effective volunteers and paraprofessionals should be empowered to show initiative and make independent contributions in support of student learning (Danielson & Axtell, 2009). A supportive teacher may be key to the successful placement and supervision of paraprofessionals by ensuring that roles are clearly understood, standards are adhered to, and professional development is provided with on-the-job coaching or formal training courses.

# Information Alignment

Materials presented in this eBook align with the following:

## Module Questions

- How can understanding the roles, standards, and guidelines for paraprofessionals aid in their supervision?
- How can volunteers and paraprofessionals best be supported?
- How can training enhance paraprofessional skills?

## Learning Outcomes

- Investigate roles, standards, and guidelines for paraprofessionals.
- Explore the skills necessary to support and supervise volunteers and paraprofessionals.
- Examine training opportunities for teachers and the paraprofessionals they supervise.

## Module Topic Focus

- Roles, Standards, and Guidelines for Paraprofessionals
  - Definition, Roles, Responsibilities, Terminology, and Job Titles
  - Federal Legislation for Paraprofessionals Working With Students With Disabilities
- Topic 2: Support and Supervision of Volunteers and Paraprofessionals
  - Paraprofessional and Volunteer Assignments
  - Working With Teachers
- Topic 3: Training Opportunities for Teachers and the Paraprofessionals They Supervise
  - Behavior Management Strategies
  - Communication Strategies

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At time of publishing, all of the website information was accurate. Due to the nature of the internet, some of the website information may have changed or become unavailable. Please see the references section of the corresponding online module for the most up-to-date information.

# Roles, Standards, and Guidelines for Paraprofessionals

Many schools and districts publish a set of standards or guiding principles that direct the work of paraprofessionals. The supportive teacher ensures that paraprofessional colleagues adhere to those standards and are not asked to exceed the boundaries of their professional responsibilities and competencies.

## Definition, Roles, Responsibilities, Terminology, and Job Titles

Educational paraprofessionals support students by supplementing the time that a classroom teacher is able to share with each class member. Lesson planning and assessment remain the responsibility of the certified teacher. Additionally, the paraprofessional always works under the direct supervision of a teacher or several teachers. The Pennsylvania state code § 14.105 (Pennsylvania Code, 2010) defines an instructional paraprofessional as “a school employee who works under the direction of a certificated staff member to support and assist in providing instructional programs and services to children with disabilities or eligible young children.”

The U.S. Department of Education, Center for Parent Information and Resources (2014) describes typical duties of paraprofessionals. Although details may vary from state to state, some commonly assumed roles performed under the direction of the certified teacher are:

- modifying or adapting instruction for students with disabilities;
- providing one-on-one assistance to students with disabilities;
- working with individual students or small groups of students to reinforce learning of material or skills introduced by the teacher;
- guiding independent study, enrichment work, and remedial work with students as set up and assigned by the teacher;
- assisting some students with self-care tasks; and
- record-keeping.

Almost one million paraprofessionals provide support across a wide age range of students in U.S. educational establishments (American Federation of Teachers, n.d.). A variety of job titles include:

- Teacher aide or assistant;
- Instructional aide or assistant;
- Special education assistant;
- Preschool or early childhood assistant;
- Bilingual assistant; and
- Library assistant.

Paraprofessionals must demonstrate an acceptable level of qualification by completing a minimum of two years in higher education, holding at least an associate's degree, or passing a formal assessment.

## Federal Legislation for Paraprofessionals Working With Students With Disabilities

The opportunities and requirements for the deployment of paraprofessionals in education are framed in two U.S. federal laws: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act.

IDEA recognizes that students with disabilities are better able to maximize their achievement when supported by trained and professionally supervised paraprofessionals. The act requires U.S. states to publish “written policies, regulations, or laws regarding the certification” of paraprofessionals who serve students with disabilities (National Education Association, n.d.). Additionally, states are required to ensure that paraprofessionals are appropriately trained to a standard that is defined by established qualifications. The National Education Association reports that local education agencies (LEAs) must allocate funds for professional development activities to ensure that paraprofessionals meet the qualification requirements. LEAs are afforded some flexibility in being able to include paraprofessionals in the professional development budgets that are allocated for principals and teachers. According to New America Foundation (2014a), in the year 2014 IDEA federal funding covered 16 percent of the estimated excess cost of educating children with

disabilities and the remainder was funded by states and local school districts.

NCLB is a federal act that requires all states to develop student assessments in basic skills. Public schools are required to conduct annual testing in order to monitor academic progress. All students, especially disadvantaged students, are served by the NCLB goal to provide highly qualified teachers and paraprofessionals. NCLB mandates the minimum qualifications that must be held by paraprofessionals and stipulates sources of funding for professional development (New America Foundation, 2014b).



# Support and Supervision of Volunteers and Paraprofessionals

Macfarlane et al. (2007) assert that “paraprofessionals need supervision and training to accomplish the goals of independence and socialization of the students whom they support.” Untrained and inexperienced paraprofessionals may struggle to perform above a level that is merely an adult presence or babysitter. Well-intentioned but misguided paraprofessionals may create dependency in students and contribute little toward the goal of student self-sufficiency. Maximizing the effectiveness of paraprofessionals requires initial and subsequent training and continuous monitoring.

Volunteers are used in a variety of roles within schools. Single event volunteering may include guest speakers or parent-chaperones on field trips. Regular volunteers may help in libraries, contribute to fundraising events, or coach students in special skills such as digital literacy or track and field. According to Johansen (1998), “People who volunteer their services to the public schools should be treated with fairness and respect and their privacy should be respected.” A degree of screening is necessary before volunteers are allowed to work with students. Volunteers “should not be subject to screening that is more invasive than is justified by the risks they pose and should not be required to undergo training for skills their position does not demand.” School or district boards generally adopt a volunteer policy that may involve criminal record checks as part of a registration process. Generally, teachers are able to use their discretion when inviting volunteers such as guest speakers when the presentation is under direct supervision of the teacher. More regular volunteer work, especially activities that may involve small groups of students, is usually governed by policies that require criminal background checks. Teachers are not permitted to recruit volunteers without following due process and policy. A level of training in appropriate behavior when working with students and awareness of the need for privacy regarding student and family information is usually included along with a volunteer handbook.

## Paraprofessional and Volunteer Assignments

The **initial assignment** of paraprofessionals is logically based upon parameters such as the needs of the program, skill levels, experience, and personal preferences (Macfarlane et al., 2007). Some paraprofessionals relate better to a specific age range such as early years or adolescents. Macfarlane et al. (2007) advise that if possible, “an inexperienced paraprofessional should not be assigned to a severely challenged student.” For example, an inexperienced and untrained paraprofessional cannot realistically provide the intervention needed for a student who operates with an extreme form of autism spectrum disorder. Paraprofessionals need job satisfaction in order to bring out their best qualities. Experience and appropriate professional development will gradually extend the range of skills and variety of students that paraprofessionals can reasonably support.

Macfarlane et al. (2007) describe the potential problems that may occur when paraprofessionals become embedded in an assignment to one student or group of students. **Reassignment** of personnel is inevitable at some stage and becomes difficult when a paraprofessional works well with a group of students or the class teacher. The paraprofessional, students, teacher, and parents may resist change when a move is necessary. Administrators may reduce the resistance to change by establishing a regulation for all paraprofessionals to rotate assignments at a set interval (e.g., every three months). Additionally, rotation of personnel offers educational benefits for students who may become accustomed to the style of one paraprofessional and exposes students to different personalities, additional teaching skills, and furthers their ability to adapt to new situations. The arguments in support of a regular rotation of paraprofessionals are summarized as tips and traps (see Figure 1).

Tips	Tricks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An effective regulation for the reassignment of paraprofessionals includes a maximum time duration for working with one student or group, and a procedure for the rotation of personnel.</li> <li>Students are more likely to develop the disposition of an independent learner when they have to adapt to the styles of a range of paraprofessionals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students, when supported by one paraprofessional, for an extended time interval, become more dependent and less adaptable to new learning situations.</li> <li>Administrators may face resistance from all stakeholders when trying to change long-standing, comfortable assignments of paraprofessionals.</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Reasons to rotate paraprofessionals.

**Volunteer guest speakers**, usually for one-off visits, create interest and bring a new and authentic perspective to a course of study. A skillful teacher will exercise care in selecting an appropriate speaker and prepare thoroughly for the visit.

The speaker should be given background information about the course of study and the purpose of the presentation. The expected length of the talk and topics to be covered should be agreed upon in advance. Clarification about any equipment or technical help is essential in order to avoid frustrations. Students need preparation ahead of the visit as well. Interest levels are raised when students have knowledge of the speaker in advance. Viewing the speaker's website or displaying posters in the room are two suggestions for raising awareness. Events are more likely to be successful when students have prepared a list of possible questions that link the presentation with instructional outcomes for the course. Questions generated from curiosity alone are also valid. The speaker will appreciate advance notification of some potential questions. The visit is more meaningful when a class assignment requires insights gained from the speaker. A follow-up of a written thank you is always appreciated and ensures that the speaker is more inclined to volunteer valuable time for a repeat visit in the future (Inviting Guest Speakers, n.d.).

**Handbooks** for paraprofessionals serve both to inform and train the employee and specify regulations to which they must be held accountable. Typical chapter headings may be:

- Information about specific disabilities
- How to observe students and collect data
- The need for confidentiality and adherence to laws
- Tips for classroom management
- Positive behavior support
- Handling a crisis
- Safety, medical issues, and first aid
- Appropriate classroom relationships
- Professionalism expectations

## Working With Teachers

When supervising paraprofessionals the teacher “designs and develops all aspects of instruction, including social skills instruction, behavior interventions, communication systems, and data collection methods” (Austin, 2014). Additionally, the paraprofessional must be trusted to work with an element of independence in order to fulfill a defined role. Typically, paraprofessionals may work in a number of classrooms and support a schedule of several students or groups. The collegially-orientated teacher will build an effective partnership that is characterized by open communication, sharing of classroom skills, and common goals. Paraprofessionals learn knowledge and skills from the teacher such as the use of classroom technology, how to relate to students, nonjudgmental phrasing of questions, and sections of curriculum content. Paraprofessionals are often allocated tasks outside of the classroom such as break and bus supervisions and clerical duties related to their students. The responsible teacher recognizes that a paraprofessional's role is primarily directed at supporting nominated students and refrains from allocating duties and menial tasks that teachers should themselves perform as part of their everyday responsibilities. Movement between classrooms provides correlated data on one student in a variety of subject areas and environments. When working within a multidisciplinary team, the paraprofessional may need to assume the role of link person for all specialist teachers with whom a student meets during the weekly schedule. Valuable insights may be shared with teachers when individualized educational plans are reviewed.



# Training Opportunities for Teachers and the Paraprofessionals They Supervise

Likins (2003) identifies three categories of paraprofessional training that enhance effectiveness in the classroom: “on-the-job, inservice, and preservice.” The most effective training is conducted over an extended period of time and reinforces new skills and knowledge with follow-up activities. Courses should be based upon documented professional competencies and planned according to a sequence and at an appropriate level for the participant. Providers may be universities offering credit-based courses, community colleges, or districts and schools offering workshops. Teachers in their supervisory role may offer on-the-job training that is directed by a clear plan and individualized objectives. Paraprofessionals represent a wide range of backgrounds, qualifications, and levels of experience. Specific needs must be canvassed and taken into account and a single training package is unlikely to meet the needs of all individuals.

## Behavior Management Strategies

Paraprofessionals often develop closer relationships with students than their teaching colleagues. Knowledge of individual students and an appreciation of their individual education plans enable informed decisions when supporting behaviorally challenged students. Paraprofessionals are often the best placed people to manage behavioral issues and de-escalate situations before a real crisis arises.

The establishment of positive relationships lessens the likelihood of students behaving inappropriately (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2010). Paraprofessionals may employ a number of simple measures in order to develop a positive learning environment. These may include:

- Using correct names
- Avoiding all sarcasm
- Making positive comments
- Offering support by asking if help is needed
- Asking questions about personal interests and pastimes
- Smiling and demonstrating pleasure when meeting each student
- Extending some choice, when appropriate, in seating, partners, and order of assignments
- Starting each lesson with a clean slate, even when a student demonstrated inappropriate behavior during the previous lesson

The ability of paraprofessionals to de-escalate volatile situations may be enhanced immeasurably with coaching in basic strategies. The main goal of de-escalation is to divert a situation before the commencement of verbal outbursts or aggressive physical behavior. De-escalation ideas include:

- Listening beyond the anger and hearing what students say
- Maintaining a calm posture and voice, even when being shouted at
- Resisting the temptation to halt the communication of frustrations by interrupting
- Demonstrating listening and validating feelings with nonjudgmental responses; for example, using phrases that begin with *I understand that...*
- Presenting a simple choice of actions and consequences when an outburst ends

Students with serious behavior problems may require a behavior intervention plan (BIP) as an addition to their individual educational plan (IEP). The purpose of a BIP is to define behaviors in need of change and indicate any interventions designed to effect change. A BIP is based upon the premises that behavior is predictable and can be altered, and should include the components shown in Figure 2.

According to Mauro (n.d), a BIP makes use of information gathered by observations in order to develop a clear plan to support the student in managing behavior problems. The BIP may recommend changes to the classroom environment, strategies to reward good and redirect negative behavior, and the provision of appropriate support. Paraprofessionals are likely to contribute observations and advice when BIPs are created and reviewed. Typically, a special education teacher or an educational psychologist is responsible for writing and signing the plan.

Components of a BIP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Targeted behaviors</li><li>• Nominated personnel</li><li>• Proposed interventions</li><li>• A review schedule</li><li>• Data collection procedures</li><li>• Results of previous interventions</li><li>• Expectations for behavior changes</li><li>• Indicators to measure interventional success</li><li>• Protocol for sharing information between home and school</li></ul>

Figure 2: Components of a BIP.

Communication Strategies

Communication between paraprofessionals, teachers, and other colleagues is an essential element in the creation of a harmonious and productive working environment. Communication begins with teachers who are responsible for guiding the sound practice and efficient working of paraprofessionals. Specifically, the dissemination of schedules, sharing of lesson plans, updates on school regulations, and details about relevant students are essential. Establishing a regular pattern of communication reserves time for team members to discuss student needs, goal setting, and current challenges and successes. Parents and professional colleagues are also important stakeholders contributing to the success of students who work with the help of paraprofessionals. The communicative teacher ensures that all parties are clear about the roles, expectations, and the limitations of paraprofessionals under their supervision. The University of Minnesota, College of Education and Human Development (2007) suggests specific competencies to be observed when communicating with paraprofessionals. Teachers should provide paraprofessionals with:

- Regular updates on plans and schedules;
- Clear, receptive, and responsive communication;
- Scheduled opportunities to meet and collaborate;
- Clarification about their responsibilities and the roles of colleagues and parents; and
- Updated student information on goals, assessments, behavior, and medications.

Successful communication with paraprofessionals is the same for other colleagues: Everyone likes to feel valued and works more happily in an environment that is defined by clear expectations and is free of misunderstandings.

## Conclusion

Teachers who skillfully manage the work of paraprofessionals ensure that students receive the quality support they deserve. Professional, collegial relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals are characterized by clear directions, open communication, and a common understanding that the needs of students are at the center of all decisions. Both teachers and paraprofessionals need to understand and adhere to professional standards or guidelines, including federal regulations, that are commonly published by the school, district, and/or state. Supportive teachers recognize that inexperienced colleagues are in need of skills-development and ensure that paraprofessionals benefit from advice, tips, and training within the classroom. Additionally, on-site and online courses are available to paraprofessionals from school districts and academic institutions.

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