

Dream Team

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In many of today's classrooms, the traditional model of one teacher having responsibility for all students has been replaced by a partnership between a teacher and one or more paraprofessionals, such as teacher's aides or instructional assistants. In the 1970s and 80s, paraprofessionals were employed primarily in special education settings and in the elementary grades, but now numerous K-12 classrooms have the advantage of a paraprofessional for at least part of the school day. Among other duties, paraprofessionals help students with disabilities access the general curriculum, provide tutoring in basic literacy and numeracy skills, assist English as a Second Language students, and provide enrichment for students in gifted and talented programs.

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act states that paraprofessionals must work "under the direction" of a teacher or other qualified professional. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows for the use of paraprofessionals to deliver special education and related services provided they are "appropriately" trained and supervised. However, neither of these pieces of legislation stipulates what supervision should look like, and very little training is available for teachers in their supervisory role. So we offer here tips for teachers and paraprofessionals seeking to build and maintain a productive relationship.

1. Examine your own mind. Take time to ponder what your goals are for your teacher-paraprofessional team. Identify what you see as the ideal instructional team relationship, and what you really expect. If you really don't know what you want, you may find that you are just wandering around in circles or bumping up against each other. So, first clarify your own expectations. This takes some thought and perhaps discussion as your team comes together.

Teachers: It's OK to begin with an outline in general terms; for example "I'd like her (over 90 percent of paraprofessionals are female) to feel valued" or "I'd like us to be colleagues," but once you have a list of general principles, fill in the detail by asking yourself, "What does that mean?" and "What will it look like on an everyday basis?" Then extend this even further, by asking yourself "What if she..?" - considering various possible actions by a paraprofessional and how you would react to them. This exercise is often easier if you can talk it through with another teacher or friend who can challenge you with the "What if the paraprofessional.?" scenarios, because it gives you another viewpoint and may offer situations you had not even imagined possible.

Paraprofessionals: Ponder what your goals are for the instructional team, too. What do you expect of a teacher? Do you want specific directions in order to complete your tasks, or do general guidelines suit you best? Consider whether you work best with the teacher close at hand, or if you want to move away and work with students on your own. These are important considerations that you could share with the administrator when you are hired and given your assignment. You may also share this with the teacher to whom you are assigned. Sharing and learning about each other's learning styles will assist communication, learning and teamwork.

2. Establish a proactive, collaborative working environment. Teachers and paraprofessionals, you are a team, and your team purpose is no casual affair: together you are dedicated to teaching children and broadening minds. You can only accomplish this if you have the necessary tools. The most important of these is to have effective communication. No team is effective without it.

Teachers: Establish lines of communication with your paraprofessional partner by setting a regular time when you a) look forward and plan your work together; and b) look back and evaluate your work together. Make this a time of open and honest communication by seeking the paraprofessional's opinion and insights, and allowing her to talk as much as you. Keep a check on yourself - teachers are used to teaching/talking--so make a point of using the Socratic method of teaching by asking questions, and you will both learn more.

Paraprofessionals: Find time to inform the teacher of the successes as well as the roadblocks to learning for the students you are working with. Make sure the teacher is informed of situations that may require action—for example, if a child is sick, or there has been a playground/parking lot incident. Parents often call about these and the teacher will need to know about them in order to answer questions and respond appropriately.

3. Know your role. A classroom instructional team has been compared to masterful ballroom dancers. They move together, sometimes furiously fast, and at other times in a rhythmically slower pace—but always in step: Never tripping or stumbling, and definitely avoiding stepping on each other's toes!

Teachers: Assign roles intelligently and responsibly. As a teacher, you carefully assign tasks to your students according to their current levels of knowledge and skill - otherwise you would be setting them up to fail. Use the same good practice when you assign roles and responsibilities to your paraprofessional partner: Do not ask her to carry out tasks she doesn't have the expertise to complete effectively. Otherwise, you will undermine her confidence and your students' potential for progress. As you assign responsibilities, take care to specify the nature of the tasks, rather than just making general assignments such as "listen to the children read." This level of assignment should already be in a paraprofessional's job description, but what she needs from you is more like a task analysis, with each responsibility broken down into its component parts, so that she knows both the extent and the limits of her responsibilities.

Paraprofessionals: Know your strengths, talents and the areas in which you have been trained. And know your limits. If you receive a request to do something which you feel is beyond your skill level, ask for guidance or training. Some roles are restricted to teachers only -- you shouldn't decide the curriculum that will be used with students, for example, and student assessment is usually restricted by school policy -- but many activities are yours to do. Know which is which.

4. Training. On-the-job training is a great way to improve the instructional process. We suggest an apprenticeship model of training, should there be any question of whether the paraprofessionals are appropriately supervised and trained, such as in a due process hearing when parents challenge the school district on the adequacy of provisions being made for their child under IDEA. Just as importantly, these actions will help protect against instructional vulnerability, as students receive the best possible support from both teacher and paraprofessional.

Teachers: Of course, you are extremely busy and it may seem unfair to add another item to your to-do list, but training for your paraprofessional partners is one of the many things that you really must do. Training is essential because it reaps rewards in the long run. This doesn't have to take inordinate amounts of time, but—as with many of the things you habitually do—it does need to happen regularly and as part of your planned day. Focus your attention on a specific strategy that you would like to help develop ("Watch the different ways I get the students' attention" or "Take note of the ways I try and promote positive behavior"). Then actively encourage your paraprofessional partner to keep a binder with notes and other documentation of training and supervision activities you undertake together. This way there will be a permanent record to refer back to, and increasing evidence of her own professional development. By gradually gathering evidence of her own expertise, your partner will have a realistic picture of her skills and professional needs. Although you will not want to lose a good paraprofessional, a portfolio will also be a great help to her if she should apply for work in another school or go on for teaching licensure.

Paraprofessionals: There are many places to get training: online classes (such as those offered through the University of Nebraska), your local community college, and your school's inservice or professional development program. However, one of the best places you can get training is by observing the teacher as he or she teaches. Talk to the teacher in advance about the things you would like to learn and make sure it's a good time to observe. It's ideal if the two of you can spend some time together discussing and reviewing the observation. Later, you may ask the teacher to observe you as you try the same technique. Then, as noted above, keep a portfolio and add this training to it. For example, On [today's date] I observed the teacher using techniques to involve all the students in the class discussion This is what I learned.. You could also include the list of skills and assets that your teacher and you felt you were able to demonstrate.

5. Find out who your partner really is. You may feel that you know your team member well but how much do you know about her background and the personal assets she brings to her work? This gives you a much better picture of the personality and skills of your partner.

Teachers: Ask your paraprofessional partners to make a note of what they see as their assets, making sure they include:

- formal qualifications (such as high school diploma or GED, college credits)
- paid work experience, whether it relates to education or not
- voluntary service provided over the years (where she volunteered, for how long, and the type of the service she provided)
- vocational qualifications (for example, CPR and other emergency techniques), and any training she has attended, formal or informal, short- or long-term.

Paraprofessionals: Know your teacher partner's preferences and interests. Learn the challenges she may have. Some days may not be "bad days" where the teacher is unhappy with your work, but rather a day where he or she is caring for a loved one who is ill or injured-or even contemplating the care of an elderly parent and those concerns or anxieties have spilled over into the work day. Think beyond yourself and analyze what you can do to help him or her. Above all, if your teacher asks you to change what you are doing and do it differently, do not take it as a personal criticism, but recognize it for what it is - a preference expressed.

6. Be an advocate for your paraprofessional partner. Your partner has either been hired by a school administrator or by the school division and often neither teachers nor paraprofessionals are involved in the interview and hiring process. However, once hiring has taken place, the two-or more-of you are in a setting where you can become a team. Of course it is logical to work to become a team for the instructional work you do, but it can also be the beginning of a rich friendship.

Teachers: Once that appointment is made, there may be very little further interaction between paraprofessionals and the administration. However, it is important for the administration to be kept abreast of what the paraprofessional is doing, and how well she is doing it. So be her advocate. Provide feedback to your administrator on the paraprofessional's work - whether it is requested or not, especially when annual evaluations are due. Help prepare the paraprofessional for the evaluation by finding out its format and focus. Advocate for training opportunities for the paraprofessional - and manage without her in the classroom for a day or two, so that she can attend training. You can petition for her to have paid preparation time during her working week, and to attend faculty meetings so that she is more completely included in the life of the school.

Paraprofessionals: Often paraprofessionals live in the school area and know the community and church and business leaders. As such, they are often approached for information. How you respond to a question such as, "How's the new teacher working out?" can be the difference between being supportive and undermining. Choose your words carefully! Be an advocate for your teachers and your school. Help paraprofessionals, teachers and the community to work together in the best interest of students.

7. Encourage "success story" telling. This item is for both of you - teachers and paraprofessionals: Together consider what your real success stories are. Some of them will be "big" achievements (excellent test score results, whole class progress in reading, a fabulous display of project work) but many of them will be smaller and related to individual progress, (the child who finally understands the basic concepts of multiplication, or musical notation). They're the sort of things that you want to share, because they make you feel good, and make all the hard work worthwhile. Get into a habit of prompting each other to share such success stories. It's all too easy to dwell on the frustrations and difficulties. While it is important to talk about these so that you can brainstorm and seek new ways of tackling persistent problems, it is even more important to set a time for celebrating success. Finish planning and evaluation meetings on a positive note with everyone sharing "my best moment of the week" or "our students accomplished ___ with our help." This proactive approach will send a positive message. It helps all team members feel valued and supports your efforts to work together. It also sets a fine example of professionalism, as you regularly evaluate your work and enjoy your achievements.

NCLB established standards for both teacher and paraprofessional roles and qualifications. It states that paraprofessionals may provide one-on-one tutoring; assist with classroom management, in the computer lab, or with parental involvement activities; act as a translator; provide support in a library or media center; etc. - all under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher.

With regard to qualifications, NCLB requires that all instructional paraprofessionals have at least two years of higher education or an associate degree, or pass a rigorous assessment that measures their knowledge and ability to assist with reading, writing and math. IDEA has the same basic requirement that paraprofessionals receive adequate training and supervision. This generalized level of role and skill description may be adequate at the federal level, but in the classroom where professional and paraprofessional partners work together with children and youth, it falls far short of what is needed for effective collaboration in the teaching and learning process. Supervision is required by the law, but first and foremost it is indispensable on a practical level. Try the tips we have recommended to not only meet the demands of the law, but also to build a rich and rewarding working relationship that will bring lasting benefit to your students.

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