

WORKING WITH PARAPROFESSIONALS IN YOUR SCHOOL

The Paraprofessional and Supervision

Introduction

The increased use of paraprofessionals in a variety of educational settings has resulted in the need for teachers and other educational professionals (nurses, speech-language pathologists, occupational/physical therapists) to assume the tasks of supervising these individuals. Being a qualified educational professional, however, does not automatically translate into being equally prepared to supervise another adult. In too many cases, this new role is undertaken with little or no training or previous knowledge of supervisory skills. Current state and federal legislation emphasizes the importance of adequate supervision for paraprofessionals, and those charged with supervision must learn strategies for directing the work of the paraprofessional to improve student achievement. This issue of NASET's Working with Paraprofessionals in Your School provides information on the principles of supervision and establishing an effective supervisory relationship whose ultimate goal is success of the child in the school setting.

Thoughts on Supervision

Supervision is one of those words that by definition and common use is assumed to be consistent and constant. Yet when actually put into practice, supervision strategies differ greatly from one program to another. Most classroom teachers have experienced supervision in the form of an administrator sitting through a pre-arranged observation, providing written and verbal feedback, and then returning at a later date to repeat the process. Many other educational professionals have experienced supervisory practices that have included coaching, instructional dialogues, and even instructional modeling. The educators who mentor or supervise paraprofessionals share invaluable knowledge and skills and build an effective partnership with shared power, clear mutual expectations, and open communication.

To clarify the basis for selecting material for this manual, it is important to share some thoughts and general assumptions about supervision. In fact, the first element of effective supervision is to be aware of personal beliefs, philosophy, and attitudes about supervision and share them with the paraprofessionals supervised.

1. Not everyone wants, or needs, to be supervised in the same way. There is no single right way to supervise. Your supervision practices should be flexible enough to match your paraprofessional's need for oversight and guidance.

2. Supervision is an on-going process, not a product. This means that supervision is proactive rather than reactive. Reactive supervision works to neutralize or repair a problem. In proactive supervision, interactions are based on goal setting, understanding the uniqueness of each person's roles and responsibilities, and an analysis of each individual's effectiveness, competencies, and style.

3. Supervision, when effective, results in change. As the process evolves, changes will occur in the development of additional skills and competencies for both the paraprofessional and the educator-supervisor. Be prepared to accept the dynamic nature of supervision by expecting and preparing for new responsibilities to shift from the educator to the paraprofessional. It is important to acknowledge the personal growth experienced by the educator-supervisor and paraprofessional.

4. Supervision is a relationship-centered process. Effective supervision and constructive feedback require frequent interactions over an extended period of time. As all teachers know, 180 days can either seem to go by quickly or last forever depending on how each day flows. Expanded duties, coupled with less direct instructional time, make it pertinent that the educational professional and paraprofessional trust and respect each other and the job that each one is doing.

Expectations of the Teacher –Supervisor*

As an educator-supervisor of a paraprofessional you will be expected to:

- Orient the paraprofessional to the school
- Train the paraprofessional to use instructional and management approaches
- Schedule and plan the assignments for the paraprofessional's day
- Communicate regularly with the paraprofessional
- Delegate tasks and direct their implementation
- Provide skill development opportunities
- Provide feedback of the paraprofessional's job performance.

* Supervision expectations may vary based on the disciplines and applicable state requirements shall be followed (e.g. nursing).

Overview of a Supervision Plan

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1998) recommended the following as a minimal set of guidelines for direct supervision of paraprofessionals:

- ◆ The first 10 hours in which the paraprofessional has direct contact with a student should be observed and supervised by the teacher.
- ◆ After that initial period, at least 10 percent of the supportive instructional sessions conducted by the paraprofessional should be supervised to ensure continuity of instruction and program. Using these guidelines the teacher is also able to guarantee contact with the child involved as well as direct interaction with the paraprofessional.

◆ There must be on-going communication on at least a weekly basis between the teacher and the paraprofessional during which data pertaining to the student's progress are reviewed.

Barriers to Effective Supervision

1. Inadequate feedback is provided to the paraprofessional. Feedback which is subjective rather than objective or which is provided infrequently can be considered inadequate.

2. The paraprofessional's lack of commitment. Lack of commitment to the program or to the educator will undermine the program and increase frustration in carrying out one's role as educator-supervisor.

3. The educator's or paraprofessional's attitudes about supervision are negative. For instance, if one or the other believes that supervision is solely for the purpose of evaluation, the relationship will become more reactive than proactive.

4. Inter-role conflict can occur when there is a belief that each individual's role, although different, is equal. Such a belief demonstrates that there is a poor understanding of roles and responsibilities. In addition, conflict will arise when one individual has a strong interest in maintaining the status quo and rejects a process that will lead to change in the form of growth and improvement. An individual who views change as a personal loss may view supervision as a threat.

5. The organizational structure of the school may not support effective supervision. In schools where the climate does not encourage change, there will be little or no time set aside for team planning and feedback. Rather than rewarding the efforts of the team to work as a unit toward change, the organization may present barriers in the form of time constraints, negative feedback, or increasingly burdensome student loads.

We hope that you found this issue of **NASET's *Working with Paraprofessionals in Your School*** to be a very practical and helpful publication. **NASET** thanks the Virginia Department of Education for the use of use information from research gathered through the Virginia Department of Education, Division of Special Education and Student Services.