

# WORKING WITH PARAPROFESSIONALS IN YOUR SCHOOL

## Team Building: Working with a Paraprofessional

How an educator-supervisor proceeds to build a relationship with the paraprofessional will depend on whether the team is working with a new paraprofessional or a person in a preexisting position. In the latter case, the orientation takes the form of building rapport with the individual and explaining any differences that exist in the program and teaching style. Part II of the NASET Paraprofessional series expands upon expectations of the classroom teacher-supervisor discussed in Part I of the series.

### Orienting the Paraprofessional

The task of orienting the new paraprofessional, which often rests with the teacher/supervisor, requires a fresh view of the school, the classroom, and the policies and procedures that may have become so familiar that they are taken for granted. The new paraprofessional often feels like an outsider, with unclear expectations of what to do and when to do it. To ensure a successful transition, expectations, directions, and communications should be stated as clearly as possible. One way to think of the orientation is as a new unit including an advanced organizer, providing new concepts, and establishing a context for retention of the material. The orientation should always be based on the local educational agency's policies and procedures as stated in the local educational agency's manual. Knowledge of law, rules, and regulations, and local district policies and procedures is a recommended professional competency for paraprofessionals.

Some general guidelines for explaining these policies and procedures include the following:

- Provide examples of policies and procedures. Simply stating the policy or procedure will not be enough. The more meaningful the material, the better it will be remembered.
- Use clarifying questions to check for understanding. After providing information, be certain that the paraprofessional has focused on the important points by asking what should be done in a particular situation or when a policy or procedure should be followed.
- Provide a context for the policy or procedure. New concepts make more sense when given in context. They will also be remembered longer. As duties are performed, the teacher-supervisor should comment on why they are done in a particular way and their relationship to the policies and procedures.

Topics that need to be communicated during the orientation, which may or may not be in the local educational agency's manual, are:

- Ethical issues, especially those related to confidentiality and professionalism should be stressed (see Figure 1 for a listing of ethical issues). Ethical issues also extend to informing parents, other service providers, and, when appropriate, the child of the use of a paraprofessional in the context of the program. It is important not to misrepresent the role and responsibilities of the paraprofessional. In addition, the teacher directly responsible for the paraprofessional's performance is also under a professional code of ethics to provide competent supervision.
- Legal issues, such as nondiscriminatory practices, due process, and negligence should be reviewed. Many of these issues are covered in the local educational agency's policy manual, which should be reviewed as part of the paraprofessional's training. The supervisor will be responsible for ensuring that the paraprofessional has reviewed the policy manual and is familiar with it. Briefly go over the content together emphasizing particular points that are relevant to the position. Ask the paraprofessional to review the material and be sure to follow-up the next day by asking if there are any policies that need clarification.
- The school and classroom environments are largely unfamiliar to the new paraprofessional and need to be explained. Identify people and their roles that are important to the paraprofessional or the student. Think through a typical week and note the people with whom there is routine contact and those people who are important in moments of disruption or crisis. These are the individuals to whom the paraprofessional needs to be introduced. Provide a list of these individuals, their jobs, and where they can be contacted.
- What is the day's routine? Share both the schedule for the class and the paraprofessional's personal schedule that is to be followed. Explain why certain routines have been established.

## **Ethical Issues for Paraprofessionals**

1. Records and information related to students and their families are considered confidential. Children and youth have legal and human rights that must be respected. Local educational agency's policies are to be understood and followed at all times.
2. Respect the roles of others in the schools and demonstrate your understanding of how your position relates to theirs.
3. Positive acknowledgment should be given to cultural diversity and the differences among individual children.
4. You are responsible for following the directions given to you by your supervisor and other administrators.
5. Learn and follow the chain of command for administrative procedures.
6. Professional behavior includes attendance, punctuality, appropriate dress, and being a good team member.
7. As a member of the school team, you should be committed to its programs.

(Adapted from: Pickett, A. L. (1997). A training program to prepare teachers to supervise and work effectively with paraeducator personnel (5th Ed.). The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services.)

## **Establishing a Working Relationship with a Paraprofessional**

### **Determining Common Ground**

Whether the paraprofessional is new to the school, is changing positions, or staying in a position where the supervisor is new to the team, requires that a new relationship must be formed. The supervisor and the paraprofessional may be uncomfortable at first with their assigned roles and responsibilities, especially if there are age, gender, or cultural differences between the two individuals. Keep in mind that these feelings are natural. Take the time to build rapport with the paraprofessional. Some things to remember during this early period of developing a relationship are:

1. Clearly state educational philosophy and expectations for the school, the teacher, and the paraprofessional. For instance, what is the key to the relationship with the students? What are the main objectives for the year? What routines are to be followed each day and what is the management style?
2. Get to know the paraprofessional as a co-worker.
3. Listen to the paraprofessional's understanding of the role and the expectations that the paraprofessional has for the teacher as a supervisor.
4. Let the paraprofessional know that consideration will be given to any concerns that exist. When there are points of disagreement, explain positions and come to acceptable decisions.
5. Find areas of agreement and highlight them as the basis for the developing relationship.
6. Include the paraprofessional in discussions about changes or the establishment of new routines, schedules, or approaches. The paraprofessional may offer a unique point of view from experience working with the child. Participation allows the paraprofessional to become more of a stakeholder in the process and will result in greater commitment.

### **Developing a Working Team**

Both the educator-supervisor and the paraprofessional must recognize that the year's success depends largely on the working team's effectiveness. Taking the time and effort to build the team is well worth it. Pickett and Gerlach (1997) state successful teams (1) share common goals, (2) believe in the benefits of working as a team rather than as an individual, and (3) have identified roles. Remember that the team's primary goal is to increase student achievement.

## **The Team as the Working Unit:**

- Team members need to feel that they contribute to team goals
- Team members need to feel their contribution is appreciated
- Team members must be committed to the team as a unit
- Team members develop shared channels of communication
- Communication among team members is open and regular
- Common language among team members reflects the involvement in the team (i.e., “we” instead of “I”)
- The team works efficiently and respects the time of team members
- The team creates rules and procedures to be followed by all members (meetings, communications, schedules, etc.)
- Team members enjoy each other and are motivated by being involved with the team

## **Sharing Common Goals and Objectives:**

- All members understand the goals of the team and are focused on achieving them
- Team members work to solve problems together
- Team members support each other in tasks and in spirit
- Team members provide feedback to each other

## **Recognizing Team Roles**

- Team members’ roles are clarified and discussed
- Team members work to increase the skills of all members
- Team members acknowledge the leader’s role in the team’s functions
- Team leader shares achievements of the team with all members

## **Selecting a Paraprofessional**

As paraprofessionals become more and more a part of the school, some administrators are asking educators to participate in the selection process. If the local educational agency or building administrator asks the teacher to participate, this invitation should be recognized as an opportunity, and the teacher should prepare for the task of interviewing and recommending individuals who can play an important role in the school’s success. The following lists “Promising Practices” of successful interviews.

## **Promising Practices**

### **Interviewing Paraprofessional Applicants**

The paraprofessional applicant may never have had school-related work experience. A prospective paraprofessional may have a resume that reflects diverse experiences and educational backgrounds but provides few clues as to how successful the person will be in this particular role. As a result, the interview’s importance is heightened. The interview itself can be divided into three components: (1) preparation, (2) the actual interview, and (3) follow-up (Russell, 1997).

Prepare for the interview by developing the job description. This will help determine the necessary baseline skills one must have coming into the position as stipulated by state and federal legislation (NCLB, 2002). Also, consider what elements of the instructional program, supervision, and personal style will affect the appropriateness of the match. Finally, plan how to conduct the interview, what topics will be covered, who will be present, and when and what type of feedback will be given to the applicant.

The interview is a combination of a social situation and a business function that should help in selecting the best applicant for the position. At the beginning, establish a welcoming atmosphere and a good rapport with the individual applying for the position. Introductions should include full names and titles and preferred personal names. Casual conversation will help to ease the transition into the more formal parts of the interview relating to the description of the position and job qualifications. The interview should allow you to learn about the applicant's skills, personal style, and ability to relate to children and adults.

Questioning skills are an essential component of every teacher's repertoire, but teachers who ask questions to students may have difficulty transferring this skill to the interview process. It is important to remember that questions pertaining to personal information (e.g., age, race, marital status, religion or national origin) which are not job related may be considered discriminatory in nature and should not be asked. Concerns about an applicant's physical or mental condition may be questioned only if the condition is related to on-the-job performance. \*

\*Review questions with the human resource office to assure inquiries are appropriate.

### **Areas to explore in the interview are:**

- Past experiences with children or with adults working cooperatively in a team
- Knowledge of schools, education, and special programs such as special education
- Expectations about the job
- Examples of initiative and independence in past employment
- Ability to take directions and willingness to do noninstructional tasks such as copying, clean up, making materials, etc.
- Special talents that the program may draw upon such as art, music, etc.

During the interview you should note whether the applicant uses appropriate nonverbal communication, displays a genuine interest in the position, and appears competent in personal management.

Follow-up to the interview includes reviewing notes, checking with others who may have met with the applicant, and writing a brief statement concerning the final decision as a record of the interview process. As soon as possible, contact the applicant selected for the position and clarify any concerns that exist and establish the procedure to complete the employment process.

### **Setting Expectations**

From the beginning, the educator-supervisor must envision how the school team will operate, how decisions will be made, and who will perform what tasks. Several sources of information may help in this process:

- the local educational agency's official job description for paraprofessionals

- lists of strengths, weaknesses, and preferences of the team members
- the teacher's own expectations for instruction and classroom management

By integrating information from these three sources, the teacher may develop a list of preferences that clearly define roles, duties, and expectations for the paraprofessional.

## **The Paraprofessional's Role**

In essence, the paraprofessional's job is to play a supplementary or complimentary role to the classroom teacher (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1998). For instance, the role of "teacher" implies certain expertise in instructional and behavioral management.

Complimentary roles are those that exist in relation to one another. That is, without a teacher there would be no paraprofessional position. All services performed by the paraprofessional related to instruction and classroom management are done under the guidance of a trained teaching professional.

The local educational agency may have a general job description that applies to all paraprofessionals or more specific descriptions for certain types of positions. A job description acts as the starting point for developing a more personalized description that fits the particular characteristics of the teacher's classroom and the team members. The type and frequency of tasks performed by paraprofessionals have been shown to depend on the teacher's own beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals (French, 1998).

## **Work Style Preferences**

The next step is for the educator to become familiar with the strengths, abilities, weaknesses, needs, and preferences of the paraprofessional. Not only will this information help to define the paraprofessional's role in the classroom and school, but it will also indicate potential training needs for which the teacher can begin planning. Obviously, a great deal of information will only be learned over time and after observing and working with each other on a daily basis; however, some immediate information can be gained from the interview, or by using a checklist of preferences. Educators can facilitate the process and avoid potential problems by taking the time up front to learn more about the particular characteristics of each team member.

An example of a rating scale that might serve as an informal assessment of an individual's work style preferences is provided in Figure 3. This is not intended to be a comprehensive assessment, but it may be useful as the springboard for discussions about individual strengths and weaknesses. Whether a rating scale like this or some other method is used for gathering information, all members of the team, including the teacher, should participate in the activity. It is just as important for the paraprofessional to be aware of the teacher's work style as it is for the teacher to be conscious of the paraprofessional's preferences.



## Work Style Preferences

**Instructions:** Teacher and paraprofessional each fill out the form independently. Then share the results, and use them as a guide for developing a "Personalized Job Description."

	Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
1. I prefer to work alone.	( )	( )	( )	( )
2. I make lists of things to do.	( )	( )	( )	( )
3. I can do many things at one time.	( )	( )	( )	( )
4. I enjoy talking on the phone.	( )	( )	( )	( )
5. I like to create things.	( )	( )	( )	( )
6. I am very organized.	( )	( )	( )	( )
7. I like to try new things.	( )	( )	( )	( )
8. I like to be a leader.	( )	( )	( )	( )
9. I enjoy being part of a team.	( )	( )	( )	( )
10. I appreciate feedback.	( )	( )	( )	( )
11. I am a morning person.	( )	( )	( )	( )
12. I prefer written to oral directions	( )	( )	( )	( )
13. I am artistic.	( )	( )	( )	( )
14. I am often quiet in groups.	( )	( )	( )	( )
15. I give praise easily.	( )	( )	( )	( )
16. I am on time for appointments.	( )	( )	( )	( )
17. I am musically talented.	( )	( )	( )	( )
18. I am a procrastinator.	( )	( )	( )	( )
19. I am very emotional.	( )	( )	( )	( )
20. I have a good memory.	( )	( )	( )	( )

(Adapted from Pickett, A.L. (1997). A training program to prepare teachers to supervise and work effectively with paraeducator personnel.

New York: National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services.)

## Collaboration Among Team Members

After reviewing the general job description and obtaining some information about the particular characteristics of each team member, the teacher should decide how best to use each person's strengths and abilities to create an efficient and cooperative classroom team. Several models exist for collaboration, and the teacher must determine which one works best for the particular situation. Some teams use a collaborative model, in which the teacher devises instruction and the paraprofessional supports the teacher's instructions and plans. They may teach some lessons working together or teach small groups at the same time. Remember, it is never the paraprofessional's responsibility to develop instructional plans or curriculum or provide direct instruction on teaching a new skill. This model works well for a well-established team with a paraprofessional who already has a high skill level and extensive experience.

Many teams work toward a collaborative model only after having worked together for a period of time. The key to successful implementation of this model is the scheduling of joint planning time.

Other teams use a teacher-assistant model for classroom instruction. In this model, the teacher assumes responsibility for direct instruction of new material, while the paraprofessional provides supplementary instruction involving practice and feedback for individuals or small groups. When the teacher is instructing the whole group at one time, the paraprofessional under this model may be moving around the classroom, helping students to stay on task, or assisting a student whose IEP indicates an individual accommodation (e.g., a student who needs someone to help him follow along in a book).

A third model assumes a primarily clerical or organizational role in the classroom. Organizational duties, such as taking attendance and lunch count, charting behavior, marking and sorting papers, preparing materials, and creating classroom displays, can be performed by the paraprofessional while allowing more time for the teacher to engage in instructional planning and delivery.

Finally, a paraprofessional may be assigned to a particular student with responsibilities focused primarily on the student's needs. For some children to be successfully included in the general education classroom, it may be necessary to provide additional support. In such cases, which are becoming more and more common in special education placements, the paraprofessional may be responsible for implementing the instructional and management procedures that have been developed by the special education teacher and the general educator (Freschi, 1999). This model works best when the special education teacher and the paraprofessional have pre-arranged daily contact since they may actually be working in separate classrooms throughout the day.

A combination of these models may be used to create the most effective team. It is essential that the teacher and paraprofessional clarify from the start what their expectations are concerning the team's functioning. This includes clearly defining each team member's role and contributions to the team. The line of authority needs to be established from the start; although the paraprofessional's ideas and input are needed and valued, the teacher is responsible for making the final decisions that affect the operating classroom and service delivery to students.

## **Establishing a Team Schedule**

Another component in establishing expectations is designing a team schedule. Developed by the educator-supervisor, the schedule should indicate where each team member will be and generally what the member will be doing at all times throughout the day. It may be helpful to post the schedule in the classroom for easy reference.

## **Goal Setting and Skill Development**

Goals for the paraprofessional can be established in several different areas and may take into consideration ways of improving performance in delivering supportive instruction, managing behavior, organizing and using time wisely, and meeting standards of professionalism. When a team is just beginning to work together, initial goals may be quite broad, becoming more specific as team members become familiar with one another, the students, and the program. Over time, individual goals should reflect personal strengths, weaknesses, and program needs. Goals should be reviewed and revised periodically; perhaps once per grading period.

The paraprofessional's performance goals should be clearly stated with a plan for achievement and a method of monitoring progress. Goal setting is also a way of documenting and planning training needs of individual team members, essential for local educational agencies (LEAs) and state educational agencies (SEAs) for compliance with state and federal laws. When conceived of in this manner, established goals may become the professional development plan for the paraprofessional. Just as the teacher can hold the paraprofessional responsible for delegated tasks, the paraprofessional should hold the teacher and the local educational agency responsible for providing the proper training and support needed to carry out those tasks.