

WORKING WITH PARAPROFESSIONALS IN YOUR SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION TO WORKING WITH PARAPROFESSIONALS IN YOUR SCHOOL

Paraprofessionals: Who are they?

A paraprofessional is a school employee who works under the supervision of a licensed staff member to assist in providing instruction and other services to children, youth, and their families (Adapted from A.L. Pickett, Director for the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, City University of New York, 1997). The prefix "para" means "along side of." Therefore, it is correct to assume that a paraprofessional works along side of an educator (teachers, related service providers, etc.). In the early 1960's, there were approximately 10,000 paraprofessionals working in schools, primarily in non-instructional areas. Currently, due to the increase in student population and diversity, the estimated number of paraprofessionals is between 500,000 and 700,000 nationwide performing a variety of instructional and noninstructional roles, from helping students in classrooms, supervising playgrounds, to performing as health assistants. These paraprofessionals work in several learning environments from infant care and family respite to adult vocational sites.

The provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires schools to serve students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, also contributed to the rising use of paraprofessionals in schools today. Paraprofessionals are often utilized in educational settings to provide direct and indirect services to students with disabilities. The increasing use of instructional support staff and other paraprofessionals and the corresponding expansion of their duties and responsibilities have created the need for increased professional development of these critically important members of the school community.

Recognizing that the majority of paraprofessionals possess intimate knowledge of school and community but often lack formal training, state and federal legislation, such as IDEA and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB Act), have affirmed the need for high-quality professional development and training. Additionally, these federal laws emphasize the need for adequate supervision of paraprofessionals, which in the past has been a gray area for school personnel many of whom are unsure of who actually supervises the paraprofessional - the special educator, the related service provider, the general education teacher, or the building principal.

State and Federal Legislation

Accountability is critical in all areas of public education today. Until recently, there were few regulations surrounding the employment of paraprofessionals. Due to the increased reliance on paraprofessionals, state and federal mandates have been adjusted to guide the training and supervision of paraprofessionals. For example, state education agencies (SEAs) must now provide leadership in the development of standards to ensure that ALL personnel, including paraprofessionals, are adequately and appropriately supervised (No Child Left Behind, 2001). Provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and new proposed federal special education laws specifically identify the need for paraprofessional training and supervision. According to statutory language in these federal special education laws, states need to address the identified needs of professionals and paraprofessionals for inservice and pre-service preparation to ensure that all personnel who work with children with disabilities (including both professional and paraprofessional personnel who provide special education, general education, related services, or early intervention services) have the skills and knowledge necessary to improve early intervention, educational, and transitional results for children with disabilities.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), places major emphasis upon teacher quality as a factor in improving student achievement. The NCLB Act, Title II, Part A, Improving Teacher Quality State Grants, asserts that paraprofessionals play a critical, often daily, role in educating the next generation of American leaders, and that these important educators are part of the largest teacher quality improvement effort in American history (NCLB, 2002). Therefore, both the local educational agency (LEA) and state education agency (SEA) will be held accountable and must report annually on their progress in meeting annual measurable objectives for ensuring highly qualified paraprofessionals to help all students succeed academically to the fullest extent.

The NCLB Act additionally recognizes the importance of teacher mentoring and supervision for paraprofessionals. NCLB states that paraprofessionals, functioning in supportive instructional roles, must work under the direct supervision of highly qualified teachers. Three stipulations are voiced in relation to a paraprofessional's supervision by an educator. The act notes that (1) the teacher plans instructional activities, (2) the teacher evaluates achievement of students with whom the paraprofessional works, and (3) the paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity of the teacher.

In response to federal special education laws and the NCLB Act, state and local education agencies have intensified efforts to design effective paraprofessional development programs and strategies for adequate supervision for paraprofessionals.

Organization of This Series

The purpose of *Working with Paraprofessionals in Your School* is to assist teachers and administrators with guidance on the supervisory relationship with paraprofessionals. This series is intended to offer suggestions for dealing with the changing nature of schools and specific services they provide, including special education. Many educators can use the information contained in this series as a foundation for preparing them for a future role as supervisor and supporter of paraprofessionals.

In this series, we describe and discuss principles of supervision, tools for the educator, and recommended paraprofessional competencies. Topics included in the series were obtained from a literature search, discussions with stakeholders, and data from a Virginia Department of Education 1999 survey. The survey was conducted to learn more about the professional development and career advancement needs of paraprofessionals. More than 7,000 surveys were completed and returned by paraprofessionals and supervisors. Results from this survey found that approximately 42 percent of current paraprofessionals were interested in becoming a teacher or other educational professional. High quality professional development based on topics in the manual can be one means to assist these individuals in achieving their educational goals.

The series is divided into six user-friendly issues. Although the first four issues focus primarily on the supervision of paraprofessionals assisting teachers in the classroom, the supervisory principles can also be applied to other school supervisory relationships, such as speech-language programs and occupational/physical therapy. Section Five specifically applies these principles to related services supervision. Additionally, recommended competencies for paraprofessionals will be referenced in appropriate sections to assist with professional development plans. For example, Issue Number Two addresses a paraprofessional's need to be aware of a local educational agency's policies that relate to a recommended competency listed in Issue Number Six (Philosophical, Historical, and Legal Foundations of Special Education).

Issue Components:

The *First Issue* of the series defines a framework for effective supervision. The principles of supervision and the supervisory relationship are also discussed.

The *Second Issue* of the series expands upon teacher-supervisor expectations and roles – team building. This part of the manual discusses the process of identifying and delegating roles and responsibilities that the teacher assigns to the paraprofessional and scheduling and planning assignments for the paraprofessional. Sample goal-setting plans and work-style preferences forms are included to assist in building a collaborative team.

The necessity for on-going communication and productive feedback to the paraprofessionals on their job performance is the subject of *Issue Three* of the series. Formats and agendas for effective meetings and instructive observations are provided.

In virtually any working relationship, problems may arise. *Issue Number Four* of the series provides strategies for solving possible performance and interpersonal problems.

The *Fifth Issue* of the series as previously stated, details competencies and issues relating to related services paraprofessional and is based on principles of supervision previously emphasized in Issues One through Four.

The *Sixth Issue* of the series lists competencies from The Council for Exceptional Children for paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities. Developing a good training program begins with identifying which skills and knowledge are most important for paraprofessionals to cultivate.

Experts recommend that professional development programs include topics that not only provide the foundation for instruction support activities but also build a shared professional language for

collaborating with teachers (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). Use of these competencies could be a starting point for analyzing needs of your teacher-supervisory relationship.

We hope that you find ***NASET's Working with Paraprofessionals in Your School*** series 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