SECTION 4: PARAEDUCATORS AND PLANNING

PLANNING FOR PARAEDUCATORS: DEFINING DUTIES

The position of paraeducator is not equivalent to the position of special education teacher, occupational therapist, speech and language clinician, early childhood specialist, ESL teacher, or Title I teacher. Regardless of the experience, certification, or college degrees held by the person employed as a paraeducator, the position cannot be viewed as a replacement or stand-in for a certified staff member. The role of paraeducator is that of a support to or extension of the certified staff responsible for programs; that is, the responsibilities and duties of the paraeducator are supportive in nature and are supervised by others.

In special education, paraeducators are viewed as a supplemental aid or service rather than a related service, such as speech and language, counseling, or physical therapy. Supplemental aids and services are basically tools used by certified professionals to enhance and support student learning and success. Paraeducators should be considered tools in the general classroom, as strange as that may sound. It is the responsibility of both the special program teacher and you, the general classroom teacher, to define and direct the classroom and instructional duties of the paraeducator.

As a general classroom teacher, you can safely assume that if a paraeducator has been assigned to your classroom, there is, at the very least, some type of rationale. As discussed earlier, paraeducators are assigned:

- by individual needs of a student or group of students;
- in accordance with a student’s written plan, such as an IEP or modification plan;
- based on the recommendation of a team, the special program teacher, or an administrator;
- according to the “sum total of need” in a classroom; or
- at the request of the general classroom teacher.

In a best-case scenario, the rationale for a paraeducator’s assignment to a general education classroom will be clearly spelled out—the student’s needs and the paraeducator’s duties or tasks are specifically listed. For example, let’s say you’re a fifth-grade teacher and you need a paraeducator in your classroom to help Adam take notes, to
directly monitor Jerome’s behavior management plan, and to be available to read printed material aloud to Justine. In this scenario, both you and the paraeducator have been given some information that details specific job tasks from the outset. It’s a place to start. You have the names of identified or targeted students and, just as important, the task objectives the paraeducator is to carry out. These objectives are the reason the paraeducator is in your classroom.

This situation is good because both you and the paraeducator have been told the intended outcome of the paraeducator’s presence in your classroom. The objectives convey the intended results and may not describe how they’re to be carried out. For example, there are many ways to provide note-taking assistance or review vocabulary. The technique, strategy, or method may be left to the paraeducator to implement. If you have an experienced paraeducator, he or she may already know how to take notes for a student, may understand the do’s and don’ts of holding a student accountable to a behavior contract or management plan, and may be skilled at unobtrusively reading aloud to a student in a classroom full of other students. Therefore, if the paraeducator already demonstrates skills and strategies, it’s your next responsibility to see that the paraeducator’s chosen methods mesh with your classroom routines and instruction. You can certainly offer suggestions to help fine-tune and define the strategies and tasks.

However, if your paraeducator is not particularly skilled or knowledgeable, you will need to offer suggestions, engage in some collaborative problem solving, and even model or demonstrate ways of meeting the task objectives. This may be a good time to involve the special program teacher as a consultant to help better define the paraeducator’s specific instructional duties.

In another, less satisfactory scenario, let’s say you’re a high school math teacher. A paraeducator comes to your classroom and tells you that she is assigned to you because there are eight students with identified learning needs enrolled in your first-hour class. Since you didn’t even know you had students with special needs in your class, the task objectives have not been spelled out yet. Of course, this makes assigning the paraeducator some specific job tasks difficult! In this case, go directly to the special program teacher, learn the identities of the eight students, and get information on each of their individual
instructional needs. From that point, you can proceed in the same way as in the first scenario.

The real key in both scenarios is to get all the information you can about the students and their instructional strengths and needs. The specific duties of the paraeducator are defined by these particular needs, as well as by the instructional environment of your classroom. The instructional deficits and strengths of students with identified special needs or disabilities can be obtained from the special program staff that collect and monitor that information. You, the general classroom teacher, are certainly the best source of information about the instructional environment of your classroom. That instructional environment includes the classroom routine and schedule, student expectations and requirements, instructional groupings, techniques and activities, teaching styles and materials, and the methods and forms of assessment.

The specific duties of the paraeducator are defined by the instructional needs and the instructional environment in your classroom. The special services staff that collects and monitors information about the strengths and deficits of students with special needs should share that information with you. A mistake many general education teachers make is that they believe the paraeducator comes to the general classroom with all of this vital information. This is not always the case! One way to approach this problem is to always assume that the paraeducator is the one person who does not have the data about either the identified students or the classroom environment. Working under this assumption, you will have a clearer path to follow and will know how to proceed. Please consider this chart that outlines what each member of the team knows and does.
### Special Education Teacher Roles
- Case manager
- Collaborator
- Consultant
- Resource teacher

### General Education Teacher Roles
- Content specialist
- Instructional leader
- “Chief cook”

### Paraeducator
- Student supporter
- Teacher supporter
- Extra pair of hands
- On-the-spot adapter
- Communication medium
- Data collector

### Info
- **This person has:** Information about the student’s specific needs.
- Information about the IEP (modifications and instructionally relevant information).
- **This person has:** Information about own teaching styles.
- Information about the class.
- Information about the curriculum.

- **This person has:** Information from the IEP (modifications and instructionally relevant information).

- **This person needs:** Information about teacher/styles.
- Information about the class.
- Information about the curriculum.

### Duties
- Communicate student needs.
- Allocate resources.
- Support students.
- Support teachers.
- Support paraeducators.
- Monitor student programs.
- Provide strategies and interventions.
- Prepare lessons.
- Plan instructional activities.
- Teach students.
- Develop awareness of special student needs.
- Consult with special service staff.
- Evaluate student progress.
- Support paraeducator.

Before paraeducator classroom duties can actually be defined, paraeducators must be given information from both the general classroom teacher and the special program teacher. One way to use this chart is to ask the paraeducator with whom you work what information he or she already has about the students and about your classroom or subject area. You should then sort out what information the paraeducator still needs to properly support the students.

It’s important from the beginning of your working relationship to define and agree on the specific duties of the paraeducator. It appears that the largest single area of frustration between professionals and paraeducators is the lack of role and responsibility specification.