



WILLIAM & MARY

CHARTERED 1693

Training & Technical Assistance Center

P.O. Box 8795

Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795



**Teachers' Tools for
Building Productive
Relationships with
Paraeducators
Considerations Packet**

For more information contact:

E-mail: ttacwm@wm.edu

Phone: 757-221-6000 or 800-323-4489

Website: <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php>

Teachers' Tools for Building Productive Relationships with Paraeducators

This *Considerations Packet* focuses on tools that special education teachers need in order to build effective working relationships with paraprofessionals. The packet offers some suggestions and practical application tips to strengthen teacher-paraeducator relationships, including effective communication and collaboration.

The prefix “para” is defined as “at the side of, beside, alongside of.” A “paraeducator,” therefore, is a person who works alongside of the teachers, specialists, and administrators in a school. Paraeducators are likely the most valuable human resource in our schools today (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001a). Paraeducators can be referred to as school employees

whose position is either instructional in nature or who deliver other direct or indirect services to students and/or parents; and who work under the supervision of a teacher or other professional staff member who is responsible for the overall conduct of the class, the design and implementation of individualized educational programs, and the assessment of the effect of the programs on the student progress. (Pickett, 1988)

For the first time in special education law, the 1997 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included a provision for paraprofessional assistance with the delivery of services to children with disabilities. This reauthorization placed more emphasis on ensuring that students with special needs are included in the general classroom as well as the general curriculum (Doyle, 1997). As schools become more inclusive by integrating special education students into general education classrooms, paraeducators in both general and special education classrooms increasingly assist students with disabilities.

When a teacher and paraeducator work in the same classroom, they share responsibilities, workloads, successes, and challenges. Although there are many benefits to teaming, sharing instructional space creates some level of anxiety in both parties. (England and Cupp, 1994) identified the following as some tasks or issues that, if discussed prior to working together in the same classroom, can ease the tension and create a climate of mutual respect among teachers and paraeducators.

- Roles and responsibilities
- Students
- Discipline
- Interruption of the teacher
- First day of class
- Planning
- Common planning time for instruction
- Sharing the workload

The teacher has the ultimate responsibility for all that happens in the classroom and is obligated to correct serious misunderstandings about the extent of a paraeducator's responsibility and authority.

Communication

The teacher sets the atmosphere and expectation for open and effective communication. Communication is not just saying something. It is expressing comments, questions, and concerns in such a way that someone else can understand. Communication also includes the way we choose to act as we approach our work. One of the many challenges facing teachers in their work with their paraeducators is ineffective communication. This is particularly true in schools where inclusion is practiced, due to the variety and number of individuals with whom educators must communicate.

It is important to avoid communication roadblocks. Roadblocks (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001b; Virginia Department of Education, 2002) are red flags to interaction, halting the development of effective collaborative relationships. They may be verbal or nonverbal behaviors that send out messages such as, “I’m not listening,” “It doesn’t matter what you think,” or “Your ideas and feelings are silly and unimportant” (Dettmer, Dyck, & Thurston, 1996, p.153). An effective way to prevent roadblocks is to practice active listening. Take time to listen and to demonstrate your interest in your paraeducator’s messages by repeating back what was said. The paraeducators will know that you are paying attention. This also provides an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings.

Top two questions most often heard from paraeducators
“What are we working on today?”
“What will we be working on tomorrow?”

Principle vs. Preference

Several researchers (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001b; Pickett, 1988; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Virginia Department of Education, 2002) discuss ideas that may help prevent problems in the classroom. Most of us have principles that govern the actions we take, and most of us have preferences, too. Principles can be looked at as truths, laws, or moral standards that we will not compromise, whereas preferences are the things that we choose to do or prefer to do as the most desirable among various choices (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001a). Teachers should be aware of their paraeducators’ strengths and preferences. For example, some paraeducators prefer to have things written down. They may not say this, but the teacher notices that tasks do not get done unless they are written down. Other paraeducators may need to have instructions explained several times. Express your needs and preferences to the paraeducator so that the strengths of each person can be respected. It is important for both the teacher and paraeducator to recognize the significance of principle and preference and the difference between the two. Communicating about what is important may prevent working relationship problems. The *Self-evaluation Checklist* (Virginia Department of Education, 2002, p.3) may help pinpoint some areas of focus for continued improvement.

Communication / Collaboration Self-Evaluation Checklist

Key

- 1 = No problem I have done this or do it regularly
- 2 = Minor problem I could improve on this
- 3 = Major problem This definitely needs attention

Activity	Rating 1-3	How can I improve in this area?
I have a clearly defined role for my paraeducator.		
I have checked that my paraeducator understands this role.		
My paraeducator(s) knows the school district, and state guidelines regarding the paraeducator roles.		
I have clear priorities for student learning		
I have communicated these to my paraeducator (s)		
I understand my paraeducator's preferred work style.		
I have clear priorities for student learning and have communicated these to my paraeducator.		
I set aside regular time to meet and plan with my paraeducator.		
I foster respectful and beneficial relationships between families and professionals.		
I encourage and assist individual students and their families to become active participants in the educational team.		

(Virginia Department of Education, 2002)

Roles and Responsibilities

French (1999a) describes the role of a paraeducator as a person who works in a school in an instructional capacity alongside school professionals and is supervised by the licensed professional. According to French (1999b), teachers should always maintain the following four professional roles:

- Assessment
- Planning
- Collaborating and consulting with general educators and families
- Supervising paraprofessionals

The professional role of assessment is imperative for the purposes of special education eligibility or for use in instructional decisions. Planning for the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is another key professional role, which includes long-term goals as well as adaptations and modifications for daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and semester-long instructional sequences. It is important for teachers to collaborate and consult with general educators and families to ensure that IEP goals are addressing access to the general education curriculum for the students and involvement in their student's total educational program for the families. Finally, supervising paraprofessionals ensures that they contribute appropriately to the educational process and receive adequate on-the-job training, direction, and performance feedback (French, 1999b).

Without a doubt, paraprofessionals can contribute to all four roles. For example, the paraeducator collects student data and charts the frequency of certain behaviors. The teacher uses these data to make assessment decisions (French, 1999b). A paraeducator also may suggest or carry out lesson plans, and modify instructional materials based on the directions provided by the general education or special education teacher. The following table lists several examples of both instructional and noninstructional responsibilities that many paraprofessionals uphold:

Paraeducator Responsibilities	
Noninstructional Responsibilities	Instructional Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perform clerical and organizational tasks (e.g., attendance records, lunch count). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observe, record, and chart students' behavioral responses to teacher demonstration.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitor students in the hallway, on the playground, and at the bus stop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist with full-class instruction.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist with supervision during meals and snacks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist with individualized class instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Operate audiovisual equipment in the classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tutor individuals and /or small groups of students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide specific personal care for students (e.g., restroom use, repositioning). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement and reinforce teacher-developed instruction.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contribute ideas and suggestions related to general instruction.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participate in team meetings.

(Doyle, 1997)

Collaboration

Collaboration is both interactive and dynamic (Picket & Gerlach, 1997). It is a process among partners who share mutual goals and who work together to make decisions. Teachers and paraeducators should collaborate to provide quality instruction for students with disabilities. Cooperation, congeniality, camaraderie, and professionalism should characterize the working relationship. Working together with other adults provides benefits such as talking about and sharing ideas and workload. England and Cupp (1994) suggest two simple but realistic tips that foster a positive working relationship between teachers and paraeducators -- value each other's role in the teaching process and give credit where credit is due. It is important that the teacher takes the time to clarify goals and discuss them with the paraeducator. Paraeducators should be encouraged to do the same. Picket and Gerlach (1997) report a former coach at the University of Alabama recommending five things a winning team needs to know:

1. Tell me what you expect from me.
2. Give me the opportunity to perform.
3. Let me know how I am getting along.
4. Give me guidance when I need it.
5. Reward me according to my contribution.

Communication and Collaboration Classroom Application Tips

(Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001b; Virginia Department of Education, 2002)

The following strategies can assist in building productive relationships with paraeducators.

- Be sure you have a clear idea of what is to be accomplished with students before sharing ideas and asking for suggestions from the other adults with whom you work, but keep an open mind. Their suggestions may warrant changes in original plans.
- Set aside regular time to meet and plan. Situations change, so the planning that was done and the roles that were assigned at the beginning of the school year may need to be adapted to new student needs, changes in schedule, etc.
- Do not neglect to identify the legal limits of roles and responsibilities.
- Know what to do, how to do it, and why it is being done.
- Have a "teamwork party" where both the teacher and the paraeducator can see each other's strengths in a different setting.
- Be honest with the paraeducator. If you have concerns with the way something was done, then discuss it. Remember, also, to let the paraeducator know when something is done that you like.
- Remember that the student's best interest comes first. All of the decisions made with and in regard to paraeducators work should be based on whether or not they will generate student success.
- Keep a binder (with papers and information relating to the student) in a place that is accessible for everyone concerned.
 - See the forms *Paraprofessionals Daily Schedule* and *Instructional Support Lesson Plan* (Doyle, 1997) on pages 8 and 9. These may serve as beginning frames to aid in teacher-paraeducator communication and collaboration.

Conclusion

Paraeducators are recognized today as a major means of support to programs and students with special needs. When assigning tasks to paraeducators, teachers need to consider students and personnel, as well as the competencies and skills of the paraeducator (French, 1999a). Students benefit from having the teacher and paraeducator work together as a team and sense this “oneness of purpose” between the teacher and paraeducator. Such unity assures students that the team’s first priority is their learning and well-being. Pickett and Gerlach (1997) recommend that school officials ensure that teachers and paraeducators have time to meet on a regular basis to plan activities and exchange information. When teachers and paraeducators communicate well and routinely, they have a more positive impact on student achievement.

References

- Dettmer, P., Dyck, N., & Thurston, L. (1996). *Consultation, collaboration, and teamwork: For students with special needs*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Doyle, M. (1997). *The paraprofessional’s guide to the inclusive classroom: Working as a team*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.
- England, J., & Cupp, C. (1994). Getting started on teacher paraeducator teaming. In *Paraeducators as partners: Building a team for the inclusive classroom*. Lisa Lombardo (Ed.)
- French, N. (1999a). Paraeducators and teachers: Shifting Roles. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 32(2), 69-73.
- French, N. (1999b). Supervising paraeducators: What every teacher should know. *CEC Today* 6(2). Available online at www.cec.sped.org/bk/cectoday/1999/parasup-sept99.html
- Morgan, J. & Ashbaker, B. (2001a). *A teacher’s guide to working with paraeducators and other classroom aides*. Richmond/VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Morgan, J & Ashbaker, B. (2001b). 20 ways to work more effectively with your paraeducator. *Intervention in School and Clinic* 36(4), 230-231.
- Pickett, A. L. (1988). *The employment and training of paraprofessional personnel: A technical assistance manual for administrators and staff developers*. New York; city University of New York, National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services, Center for Advanced Study in Education.
- Pickett, A.L. & Gerlach, K., (Eds) (1997). *Supervising paraeducators in school settings: A team approach*. Pro Ed: Austin: Pro Ed.
- Virginia Department of Education, (2002). *Get on the Team! Improving the working relationship between teachers & paraprofessionals*. Richmond.

Additional Resources

Resources are available for loan through the T/TAC W& M library. Visit our website at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php> for a complete listing of all materials. Select the Library link off the home page and enter Paraeducator as the subject of your search.

Websites

Technical and Training Assistance Center, The College of William & Mary
<http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php>

Council for Exceptional Children Professional Standards
<http://www.cec.sped.org/Standards>

Project PARA
<http://para.unl.edu/index.lasso>

American Federation of Teachers, Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel Division
<http://www.aft.org/yourwork/psrp/>

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services
<http://www.NRCpara.org>

This Considerations Packet was prepared by Loury Floyd, June 2002.

PARAPROFESSIONAL'S DAILY SCHEDULE

Time	Location	Students and Activities for Which You are Responsible	Case Manager

(Doyle, 1997)

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT LESSON PLAN

Student _____ Subject/Course _____ Unit _____ Date/s _____

Instructional Objective/s For Most Students	Instructional Prompts		Modifications
	<u>Type of Prompt</u>	<u>Who Provides Support?</u>	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facts • concepts • skills • materials Process Product
	___ natural	___ peer	
	___ gestural	___ general educator	
	___ indirect verbal	___ special educator	
	___ direct verbal	___ paraeducator	
	___ model	___ related services personnel	
	___ partial physical		
	___ full physical		

(Doyle, 1997)

Additional IEP Objective/s for this Lesson:
