

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

The Practical Teacher



This Issue's Topic:

**Training and Working with your
Assistant Teachers and
Paraprofessionals**

One of the most frequent questions we get from special education teachers involves guidelines for training and working with assistant teachers and paraprofessionals. This arrangement can be rewarding or a disaster depending on how it is structured, defined, and managed. Most special educators have one or more paraprofessionals, aides or assistant teachers to help them. The best way to get the most from these assistants is by encouraging them to take responsibility for getting results in the classroom. To do this you need to involve them in almost every phase of the classroom—supervision, planning, grading, record keeping, and teaching. Keep in mind that the level of responsibilities will vary for all three positions; aid, paraprofessional and assistant teacher depending on their training and job description. Therefore you may want to consider the following:

- Try to get a copy of the job description from central administration or the principal. This is usually put together when hiring for a position. This job description will provide an excellent starting place for discussion and expectations.
- Make it very clear from the beginning that you are responsible for everything that goes on in the classroom and therefore you must be made aware of anything that might have implications for the staff or students. Setting your role as the leader at the beginning will be crucial. The tendency for some may to become friendly and for some people this may become cloudy when it comes to setting boundaries. The trick here is to be friendly and maintain the awareness that you are still in charge.
- Find out all their interests, hobbies, and talents. Allow them to use these abilities and talents whenever possible; give them the chance to make and try suggestions.
- Let them see that you appreciate initiative. Make sure they realize that they are essential to the success of the students with whom they work.
- Treat your aides, paraprofessional or assistant teachers as "second teachers" in the classroom. Encourage them to look around, see what needs to be done, and do it. However be very aware that liability issues may arise if the children are left with an aide, paraprofessional or assistant teacher who is not a licensed certified teacher. If a child gets hurt or problems arise while you are not in the room there could be problems. Meet with your supervisor and discuss this matter to see what your guidelines and responsibilities are in these cases.
- You should make sure that your aide, para, or assistant teacher is familiar with certain special education information i.e. IEP's, modifications and accommodations, related services etc. This training may have to be done by you in a mini-workshop arena. Make the aide, paraprofessional or assistant teacher aware of the IEP goals for each student. These individuals will acquire personal growth when you trust them and appreciate what they do.
- Teach them practical management skills for dealing with children who have behavioral issues since this is one of the major concerns expressed by individuals working in special education settings.

- Short written notes of thanks are a really good practice such as "I want to thank you for being so positive when talking to the students."
- First-year teachers seem very unsure of how to use their aide. If aides are idle, resources are being underutilized. Do not be afraid to be very direct in what you need your aide to do. Sit down and have planning sessions. This will actually reduce his/her anxiety surrounding his/her uncertainty and lack of experience.
- Aides and teaching assistants should perform numerous duties including assisting with grading and duplicating worksheets.
- Working with students, however, whether individually or in small groups is their most important function. Encourage them to develop a healthy working relationship with the students to make them feel important and special.
- If problems arise with your aide, paraprofessional or assistant you may want to meet with the school psychologist, your coordinator of special education or the principal to determine a way to resolve the problems. It is advisable to act promptly in these instances—the longer you wait to talk about a challenging situation, the more difficult it often becomes.
- Use checklists for what you may want the goals to be for the day. In this way the aide or para can see what they have accomplished and maybe you can figure out what variables need to change in order to complete other unfinished tasks.
- You will need to train your staff on how to address and speak to a child, how to write up observations in behavioral terms, how to channel a child's energy before it turns into a behavior issue and how to identify certain behaviors that may be indicative of an impending outburst before it happens i.e. fidgeting, bothering other children.
- Be solution oriented and if a problem occurs ask your staff what needs to be done to avoid this from happening again. Never be blame oriented since this will only reduce cohesiveness.
- Have weekly team meetings and listen carefully to the suggestions and concerns of the staff. If it's logical, try it. However, if it's impractical, then explain why it might not work and offer alternatives.
- Include them in parent conferences. However, if you have an aide and an assistant then use a round table for all conferences to reduce the parent feeling intimidated.

A staff that works like a team will benefit the students throughout the school year. You are the manager of that team and your leadership will be crucial.