

Supporting Paraprofessionals in Special Education Settings

Best Practices for Collaboration, Instruction, and Professionalism

Introduction

Paraprofessionals play a critical role in supporting students with disabilities across instructional and non-instructional settings. Effective collaboration between special education teachers and paraprofessionals helps ensure consistency, appropriate support, and positive student outcomes. However, differences in training, role expectations, and communication can create challenges without clear guidance. This resource provides special education teachers with practical strategies for working effectively with paraprofessionals by focusing on establishing clear roles, supporting instructional practices, and fostering student independence.

Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to support special education teachers in building effective, respectful working relationships with paraprofessionals. It offers guidance on clarifying roles and maintaining professional standards to promote consistency and collaboration across educational settings. This guide emphasizes that while paraprofessionals provide vital support, the special education teacher remains responsible for instructional planning, decision-making, and overall student accountability.

Section I: Foundational Framework

Collaborative Partnerships: Support, Not Replacement

In a special education classroom, the paraprofessional serves as a "force multiplier" for the teacher, rather than a replacement for direct certified instruction. While they are essential partners, federal guidelines specify that a paraprofessional may not provide any instruction unless they are working under the direct supervision of a certified teacher.

- **Instructional Responsibility:** The teacher is responsible for assessing student performance, planning instruction, and designing the Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- **Paraprofessional Role:** The paraprofessional implements instruction as directed, provides feedback on student performance, and reinforces skills already introduced by the teacher.
- **Student Independence:** A primary goal of the partnership is to promote student independence by using the least intrusive prompt possible to avoid over-reliance on adult assistance.

Key Considerations for Professional Collaboration

To maintain a high standard of professional practice, educator teams should adhere to the following guardrails:



- Establish Open Communication: Create a supportive environment with regular check-ins to discuss student progress and share updates.
- Maintain Confidentiality: All student records and information must be kept confidential in accordance with legal requirements (FERPA/IDEA).
- Define Authority: Recognize the teacher as the supervisor and team leader who has ultimate responsibility for the classroom's management and instruction.
- Foster Mutual Respect: Acknowledge the expertise and contributions of the paraprofessional to foster a positive, cohesive learning environment.

Section II: Common Capabilities & Shared Responsibilities

Capability Area	Special Educator Role	Paraprofessional Role
Clarifying Roles & Responsibilities	Plans lessons and models instructional strategies; determines which skills need reinforcement.	Implements instruction as directed; works with individuals or small groups to reinforce skills already taught.
Supporting Instructional Practices	Provides lesson plans and guidance; monitors instructional fidelity and provides feedback	Reinforces concepts and models skills; assists with guided practice and monitoring engagement
Promoting Professionalism & Communication	Models ethical conduct and leads communication with families; protects student confidentiality.	Maintains strict confidentiality (FERPA/IDEA); follows school policies and communicates concerns only to the teacher.
Collaboration & Problem-Solving	Leads team meetings; incorporates paraprofessional input into instructional adjustments.	Shares observations of student patterns; contributes insights to help solve student challenges
Fostering Student Independence	Determines appropriate scaffolding and when to gradually release responsibility.	Uses the least intrusive prompts possible; encourages self-advocacy and reduces assistance to avoid over-reliance.
Training & Behavioral Support	Conducts FBAs, designs Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), and trains staff on specific interventions.	Implements BIP strategies consistently; utilizes prompting hierarchies to support students in meeting behavioral expectations.
Data Collection & Observation	Determines what data to track and develops the collection tools (e.g., frequency charts, ABC data).	Records data accurately and promptly using the provided tools; shares relevant classroom observations with the teacher.
Accommodations & Resource Use	Determines appropriate IEP accommodations and ensures they are written into the legal document.	Ensures accommodations and modifications are provided as directed during instruction and testing.



Section III: Applying Collaboration in Practice

Action Planning Process

Teachers should follow these steps to integrate paraprofessional support effectively:

1. Identify the Task: Choose a specific instructional or behavioral task that requires support.
2. Provide Clear Guidance: Discuss how the support should look (e.g., small group, one-on-one, or circulating the room).
3. Review and Adjust: Monitor the effectiveness of the support and provide constructive feedback for improvement.

Case Scenarios for Professional Reflection

Review the following scenarios to understand how paraprofessional support is implemented while maintaining teacher leadership

Sample Case Scenario 1: Supporting Small-Group Instruction

Scenario: A special education teacher is planning a small-group reading session for students with diverse literacy needs. A paraprofessional is assigned to assist.

Considerations:

- How can the paraprofessional provide support without taking over instruction?
- Which students might need individualized prompting or modeling?
- How should the teacher monitor progress and provide feedback to the paraprofessional?

Discussion/Reflection Points:

- Appropriate: The paraprofessional circulates to guide students through targeted exercises while the teacher leads instruction.
- Inappropriate: The paraprofessional teaches independently without following the teacher's plan.

Sample Case Scenario 2: Behavior Support During Transitions

Scenario: Students become disruptive during classroom transitions. A paraprofessional is tasked with supporting behavior management.

Considerations:

- How can the paraprofessional implement the behavior plan consistently?
- What strategies ensure students practice self-regulation rather than relying solely on adult support?
- How will the teacher provide guidance or feedback afterward?

Discussion/Reflection Points:

- Appropriate: The paraprofessional uses visual prompts and positive reinforcement according to the behavior plan while encouraging student independence.
- Inappropriate: The paraprofessional handles every behavioral issue without involving the teacher or promoting self-management.

Sample Case Scenario 3: Supporting Student Independence in Work Tasks

Scenario: A paraprofessional works with a student completing a multi-step math assignment. The student tends to seek help for every step.

Considerations:

- How can the paraprofessional scaffold support to encourage independent problem-solving?
- What cues or prompts should be used to guide rather than give answers?
- How does the teacher monitor the student's progress and adjust support?

Discussion/Reflection Points:

- Appropriate: The paraprofessional asks guiding questions and provides minimal prompts, allowing the student to attempt tasks independently.
- Inappropriate: The paraprofessional completes the steps for the student, reducing opportunities for independent learning.

Case Scenario 4: Collaborative Problem-Solving with Paraprofessional Input

Scenario: A student struggles with attention during a science lesson. The paraprofessional notices patterns in behavior that may help the teacher adjust instruction.

Considerations:

- How can the paraprofessional share observations constructively?
- What steps should the teacher take to incorporate this feedback without undermining instructional consistency?
- How does this collaborative problem-solving support student success?

Discussion Points:

- Appropriate: The paraprofessional records observations and shares them in a brief meeting; the teacher adjusts small-group activities accordingly.
- Inappropriate: The paraprofessional makes changes to the lesson independently without communicating with the teacher.

Critical Reflection Questions

Before finalizing any instructional plan involving a paraprofessional, new teachers should ask themselves:

- How does this collaboration enhance, rather than replace, my instructional leadership?
- What specific guidance is needed to ensure support remains aligned with student IEP goals?
- How am I actively promoting student independence to avoid over-reliance on adult support?
- What steps am I taking to ensure professional confidentiality is maintained by all staff?



Paraprofessional Reflection Worksheet

Teacher: _____ Date: _____ Class / Grade: _____

1. Instructional or Behavioral Task:

What specific task do you want paraprofessional support for?

2. Paraprofessional Support Ideas

Briefly list ways a paraprofessional could assist:

3. Adaptations & Professional Judgment

How will you guide, adjust, or review paraprofessional support to align with student needs and instructional goals?

4. Evaluation & Safeguards

How will you monitor the effectiveness of this support and ensure professional boundaries (like confidentiality) are maintained?

5. Next Steps

What follow-up actions, training, or collaboration are needed to improve support in future lessons?
