

Communication  
and Collaboration

# "TOP 10 LIST"

## To Teachers What Paraeducators Want You to Know

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**"I don't know what she's supposed to be doing."**

**"I think she knows what to do."**

**"I don't know how she finds out what to do."**

In my role as a supervisor of elementary school student teachers, I frequently hear comments like these when we discuss a student teacher's relationship with the paraeducators in a general education classroom. This confusion is probably typical of many student teachers and novice teachers who are just beginning to work with paraeducators (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?")

Because of the lack of exposure, many preservice teachers have difficulty identifying specific skills or knowledge that they need to work with paraeducators. As student teachers, these beginners often find themselves assigned to a

classroom with one or more paraeducators. Working effectively with paraeducators seems to be something they are supposed to learn on the job.

Both my students and I realize that this lack of preparation creates stress and uncertainty. Wouldn't it be better if they entered the classroom with a clearer understanding of the role of the paraeducator?

### Surveying Paraeducators

Like many others in the teacher education field, I am challenged by the large amount of content knowledge that beginning teachers must know to be effective. Realizing that working with paraeducators is becoming an integral part of many teachers' jobs, however, I want to be sure my students begin to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. In an attempt to define what is essential for students to know to be effective teacher-partners, I asked veteran paraeducators for assistance. Experienced paraeducators who have

"been there" working along side of teachers to implement programs, are articulate in describing what they would like teachers to know about their relationship.

Thirty-five paraeducators responded to my invitation to attend a workshop and help define exactly what they would like teachers to know, whether beginning teachers or teachers who are working with paraeducators for the first time. Because participation was purely voluntary, the paraeducators who participated were employed in various set-

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***"I think it is important for the students to see us working together as a model for how they should work together." —A paraeducator***

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tings (both special education and general education) and with different ages of students (pre-K through high school). Most of the paraeducators who participated in the workshop had never met each other and were not employed in the same state, let alone the same district.

Working in small groups for about an hour, they were able to generate a number of consistent responses to the question, "What should teachers know about working with paraeducators?"

The paraeducators were eager participants. Perhaps more than anyone else, they are aware of the changing roles of paraeducators in U.S. classrooms. To reach consensus concerning what they would like teachers to know about working with paraeducators, the paraeducators worked in small groups of 5-7 individuals, using Post-It notes and clusters of ideas. These clusters became the list of "Top 10 Things Beginning Teachers Need to Know About Working with Paraeducators" (see box, "Paraeducators Speak Up"). Later this list was mailed to all participants so that they could make additional comments or add clarification if they wished.

### Working With Paraeducators

The compilation of the paraeducators' responses echoes much of what is already considered best practice for working with paraeducator-teacher

**Knowing the paraeducators by name is the first step toward welcoming them into the school and classroom.**



### What Does the Literature Say About Preparation to Work With Paraeducators?

Teacher education has largely neglected to prepare new teachers to work with paraeducators (Drecktrah, 2000; French & Pickett, 1997). Although some special education teacher preparation programs have taken steps to integrate content about working with paraeducators into their curriculum, most preservice teachers in general education certification programs have little background in this area (Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996).

As more children with severe special needs enter neighborhood schools and inclusive classrooms, the role of paraeducators expands. Paraeducators are important members of the education team, and the successful implementation of programs for students may be dependent on paraeducator support (Minner & Lepich, 1993). Many paraeducators have seen a shift in their responsibilities over the last 10 years, requiring them to perform many more instructional tasks than in previous decades (French, 1998; French & Gerlach, 1999; Pickett, 1996; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995).

teams. The importance of this new information is that it reflects paraeducators' opinions.

**1. Know the paraeducator's name, background, and interests.** Paraeducators often feel overlooked in the school community (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Knowing the paraeducators in the school by name (not merely as "Joey's helper," "the playground lady," or the "Office Aide"), is the first step toward welcoming paraeducators into the school and classroom. Just as a teacher is expected to know the background and interests of students in the classroom, the teacher should display an interest in the staff members who

work there. A simple exchange of information about hobbies and interests can lead to a more productive and happier paraeducator/teacher team.

In addition, paraeducators who perceive themselves as members of the community show greater job satisfaction and tend to remain in their positions for a much longer time, a factor that benefits both teachers and students (Mueller, 1999; Riggs, 1997).

**2. Be familiar with district policies for paraeducators.** Beginning teachers are often unsure about the limits of a paraeducator's responsibilities. They may also be unfamiliar with paraeducator contractual agreements concerning working hours, breaks, and supervision. To avoid unnecessary conflicts, teachers and paraeducators both need to be clear about district policies up front. If everyone understands the ground rules, then teams can work together to maximize their time together and to understand each other's position.

**3. View the teacher and paraeducator as a team.** Paraeducators should be considered members of the educational team (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, &

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***"She gives me responsibility, but doesn't overload it." —A paraeducator***

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MacFarland, 1997). The classroom is no place for turf battles. There is little enough time in an already crowded school day, without adults working at cross-purposes. There are few benefits to students when the teacher/paraeducator team is malfunctioning.

The paraeducators who participated in this project were adamant about their wish to be treated as fully participating team members. They recognized that just as children at an early age see the personal benefit in pitting one parent against another, children in the classroom can sense a weakness if the adults do not provide a unified approach to classroom management and student expectations. This makes everyone's job more difficult. When conflicts arise, teachers and paraeducators can set a good example for students by resolving conflicts in a thoughtful and professional manner. Above all, the work relationship between teacher and paraeducators should be one of cooperation, camaraderie, and professionalism (Palma, 1994).

**4. Share your classroom expectations with paraeducators.** In new situations, most of us are unsure of exactly what is expected. In classrooms, as one paraeducator put it, "Knowing what to do, or what not to do, is so important" (Riggs, 1997). The paraeducators felt that teachers should share their expectations for classroom management and student behavior, as well as their curricular expectations for specific students, with them. If paraeducators are clear about a teacher's expectations, it is easier to do an effective job. Conversely, if the teacher leaves it up to the paraeducator to guess about classroom expectations or to figure them out over time, both the teacher and the paraeducator can end

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***"I have a new job where I work with two paraeducators. I don't have any idea what to do [with them]."—A beginning teacher***

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### **Paraeducators Speak Up: Top 10 Things Beginning Teachers Need to Know About Working With Paraeducators**

1. Know the paraeducator's name, background, and interests.
2. Be familiar with district policies for paraeducators.
3. View the teacher and paraeducator as a team.
4. Share your classroom expectations with paraeducators.
5. Define specific roles and responsibilities for paraeducators and teachers.
6. Direct and supervise paraeducators—it is the teacher's responsibility.
7. Communicate with paraeducators.
8. Recognize that paraeducators have experience and knowledge to share.
9. As the teacher, take ownership of all students.
10. Show respect for paraeducators.

up frustrated—and students may lose out.

### **5. Define specific roles and responsibilities for paraeducators and teachers.**

Lack of agreement on appropriate tasks for paraeducators makes it difficult for teachers and paraeducators to know exactly where their individual responsibilities lie (Lamont & Hill, 1991; Pickett, 1999). Confusion about the paraeducator's role, particularly in instruction, can increase classroom uncertainty (Salzberg & Morgan, 1995).

Both paraeducators and teachers will benefit if the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators are clearly defined and reflected in job descriptions that include duties and responsibilities, orientation and training requirements, and procedures for supervision and evaluation (Pickett, 1999; Pickett, Vasa, & Steckelberg, 1993). Although paraeducators and teachers may often assume similar roles, schools and districts should clearly articulate the differences between paraeducator and teacher

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***If paraeducators are clear about a teacher's expectations, it is easier to do an effective job.***

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responsibilities (French & Pickett, 1997).

### **6. Direct and supervise paraeducators—it is the teacher's responsibility.**

Paraeducators enter the profession with various levels of experience and training and are assigned to work with a wide range of students (e.g., those with multiple disabilities, autism, learning disabilities, social/emotional disabilities). Many paraeducators have experience with groups of children in youth groups, churches, or preschools, but have no experience in classrooms or with instructional responsibilities. Teachers need to be specific about what is expected and about how to do it.

Paraeducators often indicate that they are unclear about the specific policies and procedures for their supervision and evaluation, although they welcome the idea of supervision (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Many paraeducators feel that a general education teacher guides their daily work, even when a special education teacher provides them with lesson plans or instructions for working with specific students. These teachers are typically prepared to work with children, not to supervise adults; and many of them are uncomfortable with supervising paraeducators (Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). At least one study has shown that teachers are so reluctant to supervise that the ideal paraeducator is a person who requires very little supervision (French, 1998).

### **7. Communicate with paraeducators.**

Good communication paves the road for a successful paraeducator/teacher working relationship. Feedback is critical to paraeducator success, and it is an essential quality for a supervisor (Palma, 1994). This feedback can be informal (a smile, nod, shake of the head, or a brief conversation) or it can be formal. Formal meetings and written lesson plans with feedback opportuni-

ties provide concrete ways for paraeducators and teachers to develop strong working relationships (French, 1998). Though teachers and paraeducators often report that it is difficult to find time to meet, even a few minutes a day, or a short weekly meeting, can go a long way toward improving communication.

**8. Recognize that paraeducators have experience and knowledge to share.**

Paraeducators often report that staff relationships are not characterized by mutual respect, and that they are not asked for their opinions on student issues. Involving paraeducators in planning and decision making can have a positive effect on student learning. Although they are not teachers, and most do not have the formal education or training of certified staff members, paraeducators are often in a position to observe students in a variety of settings and among many task demands. They can provide a great deal of anecdotal information that may be useful in making educational decisions. Also, experienced paraeducators acquire skills on the job that can be shared. Many paraeducators develop specific techniques for working with children with behavioral issues or for facilitating student friendships and classroom participation that

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**Involving paraeducators in planning and decision making can have a positive effect on student learning.**

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both professionals and paraeducators may find useful.

**9. As the teacher, take ownership of all students.** Paraeducators expect teachers to be classroom leaders. As such, teachers must take an active interest in and responsibility for all students. Sometimes when a paraeducator works one-on-one with a child for long periods, the general education teacher reduces his or her contact with the child and unintentionally excludes the child from participation. This may be the result of the teacher's lack of familiarity with children with disabilities, lack of

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**The job satisfaction and retention of paraeducators are clearly linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition.**

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support for inclusion, level of discomfort with the paraeducator or the child, or simply an oversight in a busy classroom. Teachers must be the teachers of all the children, and each child should feel that he or she has a relationship with the teacher. Paraeducators feel supported when the teacher acknowledges their work and the children with whom they are working as important members of the classroom community.

**10. Show respect for paraeducators.**

All of us like to be respected for our participation and contributions. When teachers show respect for paraeducators they demonstrate the behavior for students. Students learn that paraeducators are part of their school and classroom and are to be appreciated and valued. The job satisfaction and retention of paraeducators are clearly linked to the presence or absence of mutual respect and recognition for their contributions to the educational community (Mueller,

1999). In addition to fostering an ongoing climate of respect, teachers and others can recognize the efforts of paraeducators during conferences, special staff appreciation days, and so forth (Palma, 1994; Riggs, 2001).

**Get Ready, Get Set, Go?**

Researchers and educators have substantiated the need to train teachers to work effectively with paraeducators; and the development of training objectives and content skills for teacher supervisors is on going (French & Pickett, 1997; Pickett, 1999). By identifying what they would like teachers to know about paraeducators, the participants in this project added their voices to the body of knowledge. Although their main focus was on what beginning teachers should know to work more effectively with paraeducators, the participants noted that the skills and knowledge they identified should be part of the repertoire of any teacher working with a paraeducator. Although the list they compiled provides valuable information to the preservice teacher education community, it also can provide useful information for the inservice professional development of teachers.

Preservice education is an important component in developing the skills teachers need to work with paraeducators. As faculty members in preservice teacher education programs, especially

**Paraeducators should be considered members of the educational team.**



those in general education, become more aware of the role of paraeducators as members of the classroom team, greater efforts will be devoted to helping preservice teachers identify and address what they need to know to work with paraeducators. In the next decade, the development of teacher certification standards that reflect the importance of preparing teachers to work with paraeducators may require the inclusion of these competencies into preservice education.

At the inservice level, states, districts, and even individual schools must develop systematic and ongoing support for teachers who are teaming with paraeducators in their classrooms. Many of the ideas gathered by the paraeducators in this study require a shift in beliefs as much as the development of skills. Most of the items on the "Top Ten" list can be addressed through training in problem-solving and collaboration, along with the provision of ongoing support for paraeducator/teacher teams.

Those who administer preservice and inservice education must direct resources and time into addressing this important issue. Then we, as an education community, may gain the momentum we need to go forward so that all teachers (both novices and veterans) will have the necessary skills to work effectively with paraeducators.

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