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Developing a Shared Understanding: Paraeducator Supports for Students with Disabilities in General Education

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Introduction

In order for groups of people to become effective teams it is vital that they develop a shared understanding of the underlying beliefs, values, and principles that will guide their work together. This shared understanding evolves over time as members learn about each other, spend time together, and engage in the work of their group.

Having a shared understanding provides a basic structure within which teams:

- develop common goals;
- determine actions that will lead toward the attainment of their goals;
- ensure that their actions are consistent with their beliefs; and
- judge whether their efforts have been successful.

In essence, having a shared understanding helps team members develop their collective vision of the direction in which they would like to head. Therefore, a shared understanding is a statement of what is aspired to, rather than necessarily what currently is. In seeking to establish the what, prior to the how, developing a shared understanding is an

initial step that must be followed by effective planning, implementation, and evaluation if the aspirations of the team are to be realized.

What constitutes an appropriate level of training to be an effective paraeducator¹ is currently a topic of national debate. However, there does seem to be widespread consensus that some level of orientation and training is required for individuals to be effective paraeducators. While some states have developed standards for paraeducators or enacted certification requirements, many have not. Under the provisions of IDEA, it is the responsibility of each state and local education agency to ensure that "qualified personnel" are working with students in their schools.

This article lists a set of statements that reflect the shared understanding of the authors regarding paraeducator supports for students with disabilities in general education classes. This shared understanding is based on our collective personal and professional experiences as parents, community members, advocates, paraeducators, teachers, special educators, related services providers, and administrators. We have combined those experiences with what we have learned

from educational literature and research.

In presenting the following set of statements it is not our intention to suggest that these are the only, best, or correct components to be included. Rather we present them as our thoughts at this point in time, with the knowledge that they have changed since we first drafted them and we expect that they will continue to evolve. We hope that they will be helpful to other groups who are interested in paraeducator issues and foremost are interested in quality education for all students. In this context they can be used as a starting point in developing a shared understanding among the people in your own setting.

Ask yourself what you think about the items we have listed. How might you reword them to reflect your own collective thoughts and match your own situation? Are there any you would delete or add to those listed here? The set of statements included in one's shared understanding can also be used as a practical tool. It can help teams identify and prioritize their needs by collecting facts about the status of each component of the shared understanding using a self-assessment format. An action-planning

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¹ Throughout the remainder of this article you will notice that we have used the generic term "paraeducator" to refer to individuals who are trained to work with, and alongside, educators in classrooms and other educational settings to support the education of students with and without disabilities in a variety of capacities (e.g., physically, socially, instructionally). Paraeducators are school employees who, while not hired to work in the capacity of a professional position (e.g., teacher, special educator, related services provider), do provide important supportive services in schools under the direction and supervision of qualified school personnel.

We recognize that the terms used to refer to these school personnel vary widely and often are used interchangeably (e.g., teacher assistant, teacher aide, instructional assistant, program assistant, educational technician, job coach). Individuals with these various job titles are referred to in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as "paraprofessionals." We support the use of locally adopted job titles that are descriptive of the work done by these school personnel and which are designed to establish or increase respect for individuals who are providing these vital educational supports to students.

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process that includes this application of a shared understanding is currently being developed and field-tested by staff at the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion in conjunction with the Vermont Department of Education and local schools.

Acknowledging Paraeducators

1. Paraeducators should be considered members of the educational teams for the students with whom they work. These teams typically consist of the student (when appropriate), the student's parents, teachers, special educators, and others as needed on an ongoing or situational basis (e.g., related services providers, school nurse, bus driver, mentors with similar disabilities as the student).
2. Paraeducators provide important services that influence student learning, social/emotional development, and inclusion.
3. Paraeducators should be valued, appreciated, and recognized for their unique competencies, hard work, and contributions to the classroom, school, and community.

Orienting & Training Paraeducators

4. Paraeducators should receive orientation (e.g., information about the student, classroom, and school) and entry-level training prior to working directly with students (e.g., family-centered principles; multicultural and other diversity issues; teamwork; inclusive education; roles and responsibilities of team members; principles of learning, to name a few).
5. Paraeducators should receive ongoing, on-the-job, training to match their specific job responsibilities and assignments.
6. Paraeducators should have access to ongoing learning opportunities, in addition to their on-the-job experiences (e.g., workshops, courses, internet study), that promote their skill development in relevant areas

(e.g., supporting students with challenging behaviors; approaches to literacy; use of technology; needs of students with low incidence disabilities) and have input into what training they need.

7. Paraeducator training experiences should be designed to allow individuals to gain continuing education or college/university credit.

Hiring & Assigning Paraeducators

8. Practices should be established to recruit, hire, and retain paraeducators.
9. Substitute paraeducators should be recruited and trained to ensure that a student's access to education and participation in his/her educational program is not unduly disrupted when the regular paraeducator is unavailable due to occurrences such as illness, injury, personal leave, or professional development.
10. Each school should have an agreed upon team process and criteria for determining whether paraeducator support is needed for students with disabilities to receive an appropriate education.
11. When paraeducator support is determined to be necessary for a student, a written plan should explicitly clarify the nature and extent of the support and explain how it is referenced to the student's educational program (e.g., IEP goals, general education curriculum).
12. In most circumstances it is advisable to assign paraeducators to classrooms or instructional programs rather than to an individual student. In the rare cases when a paraeducator is needed for an individual student, efforts should be made to ensure that paraeducators provide supportive, rather than primary or exclusive, services.
13. When administrators make work assignments and re-assignments to meet students' educational needs, it is advisable to gain input directly from paraeducators and other team members (e.g., parents, teachers, special educators, related services providers) to understand factors that may influence job performance, job satisfaction,

and reduce burn-out (e.g., variety of duties; interpersonal dynamics; individual skills and interests; longevity with a particular student).

14. Paraeducators should have an accurate job description that outlines their roles and responsibilities. This job description should be commensurate with the paraeducator's skill level as it pertains to students both with and without disabilities.
15. Paraeducators should be compensated in accordance with their level of education, training, experience, and skills.

Paraeducator Interactions with Students & Staff

16. Paraeducators are expected to demonstrate constructive interpersonal skills with students and other team members (e.g., use respectful communication when speaking with or about others; maintain confidentiality; ensure dignity when providing personal care).
17. Paraeducators should develop and demonstrate attitudes and work habits that encourage student independence; foster appropriate interdependence; promote inclusion and peer interactions; enhance each students' self-image; and prevent the unintended negative effects often associated with the potential over-involvement and proximity of adults.

Roles & Responsibilities of Paraeducators

18. Within the classroom, on a day-to-day basis, the classroom teacher is the instructional leader and interacts directly on an ongoing basis with students who have disabilities. Paraeducators, under the direction of the teacher and special educators, function as vital support to students under the direction of the teacher and special educators.
19. Teachers, special educators, and related services providers (e.g., speech/language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists) have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the appropriate design, implementation, and evaluation

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- tion of instruction carried out by paraeducators.
20. Paraeducators should be informed about the educational needs (e.g., IEP goals and objectives; components of the general education curriculum) and characteristics of the students with whom they work, as well as classroom and school practices and routines.
 21. Paraeducators should have opportunities to contribute to the development of the educational program, instructional plans, and activities created by each student's educational team, but should not be given sole responsibility for these and related activities.
 22. Some of the primary functions of paraeducators are to: support the implementation of instructional programs; facilitate learning activities; collect student data; and carry out other assigned duties (e.g., supervise students at lunch or recess; provide personal care supports to students; do clerical tasks) based on plans developed by the teachers and special educators.
 23. Times and mechanisms should be established to allow opportunities for paraeducators to be oriented to teacher's plans, report on student progress, ask questions, and offer their perspectives.

Supervision & Evaluation of Paraeducator Services

24. Paraeducators should receive ongoing supervision and regular performance evaluations which are based on their job descriptions and apply clearly defined processes and procedures.
25. Supervisors of paraeducators (e.g., teachers; special educators) should be trained in effective supervisory practices through preservice, inservice, or graduate training.
26. Paraeducator services should be considered in school and district-level school improvement action-planning to ensure that appropriate services are available and effectively utilized.

27. When a student is receiving support from a paraeducator, an evaluation plan should be established to determine, if possible, how and when paraeducator services can be faded through increased student independence or replaced by more naturally occurring supports (e.g., classroom teacher, peers).
 28. School districts should develop ways to evaluate the impact of paraeducator services on individual students, classrooms, and staff.
- For additional information on the points highlighted in this article, visit the following websites:
<http://www.uvm.edu/~uapvt/parasupport/>
<http://www.uvm.edu/~uapvt/paraprep/>

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