

Who Is in Charge Here?

Putting Systems in Place to Enhance the Performance of Paraprofessionals

Harriet Fayne

Lehman College, The City University of New York, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A middle school principal in a low-performing urban middle school recognizes that he must reassess the roles and impact of paraprofessionals within the building. After observing several special education and general education classrooms, he concludes that his teachers are well equipped to manage students but appear to be uncomfortable managing the paraprofessional staff. The principal recognizes the potential for this situation to escalate if left unaddressed and has determined that the time for intervention is now. He would like to devise a plan that aligns with federal, state, and local regulations that also considers the professional development needs of the special education instructional staff in his building. But will this be enough?

INTRODUCTION

Paraprofessionals (also called teaching assistants, paraeducators, or paraprofessionals) make up a significant percentage of the instructional staff who deliver services in our nation's schools, particularly those designated as high need because of the economically and socially marginalized populations they serve. Gartner and Reissman (1974) provided a historical context for what they referred to as "the paraprofessional movement." The call for paraprofessionals built up steam in the 1960's because of growing dissatisfaction with existing services offered to individuals below the poverty line,

pressure to recruit caregivers from economically challenged communities, and the need for a cost-effective response to increased demand for educational and social services. Since the 1970's, federal legislation (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), has required that students with disabilities be served within the least restrictive environment. This mandate provided a rationale for growing the paraprofessional workforce. Bisht et al. (2021) noted that, between 1990 and 2018, the number of paraprofessionals employed in schools increased by more than 100%. Based on recent data, paraprofessional employment is projected to continue, and by 2031, the number of paraprofessionals employed in schools will likely exceed special education teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

School districts assign paraprofessionals to work in various situations. Paraprofessionals are sometimes utilized as classroom assistants where they may support the teacher by working on administrative tasks, classroom preparation and organization, and providing instructional support. They might also be assigned to work as a one-to-one paraprofessional, working exclusively with a single student, as dictated by the conditions stipulated in that student's individualized education program (IEP). One-to-one paraprofessionals may help with transportation to and from school, provide personal/health care, implement behavior plans or specialized instruction, and/or facilitate social interactions with peers. While general guidelines can be found in the federal laws that govern special education service delivery, states have considerable latitude for implementing the statutes (see McDermott et al., 2023 for a recent state-by-state analysis).

Whether serving as classroom assistants or working with individual students, paraprofessionals can significantly impact how students with special needs fare in school. Federal legislation dating back to 1975 stipulates that all special education service providers must have the requisite knowledge and skills to address the needs of children and adolescents with disabilities. It would be fair to assume that paraprofessional training would be substantial in depth and breadth. Surprisingly, more than 20 years after IDEA was first enacted, Carlson et al. (2002), in their *Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education*, reported that paraprofessionals spent an average of only 37 clock hours in professional development during the 1999-2000 school year. Given the limited hours of formal training, the researchers concluded that paraprofessionals depended on job-embedded professional learning. However, special education teacher respondents felt they needed training to serve as mentors, with 77% of those surveyed indicating that they had never received any training on supervising paraprofessionals in their pre-service preparation.

We are now close to five decades from the original legislation governing paraprofessional use in special education. Recent literature on the subject of professional development reveals that there is considerable variability in what states

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