

Tips from the Special Education Division: Staffing

Question: How do districts provide students the basic education and special education services when facing continued staffing shortages?

Revised Response:

Note: *In response to partner feedback on our November 2022 staffing tip, we have revised the tip and are reissuing it in this month's December update. Partner feedback included concerns that OSPI was recommending or encouraging the removal of paraeducator supports as a response to staffing shortages. That was in no way OSPI's intent. Our message was to communicate that students should not be asked to stay home or experience a reduction in supports due to lack of staff or paraeducator absence. Schools should consider plans and supports to ensure students are receiving special education services by implementing creative staffing solutions. The technical assistance papers included were intended to recommend best practice and research-informed strategies for using resources effectively, including paraeducators staff, while continuing to provide high-quality supports and instruction for students. We are grateful to our partners for engaging with us to find better ways to message staffing innovations that continue to meet student needs.*

OSPI understands that districts are facing continued staffing shortages and disruptions that create barriers for the provision of both general education and special education services to Washington students. While some level of impact on students may be unavoidable, districts and school teams must ensure students have access to both basic education and special education services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and WAC 392-172A, along with related RCW, require school districts to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities ages 3–21. Students should not be asked to stay home or receive a reduction of support because of a lack of staff.

Partnering with Families

OSPI strongly encourages IEP teams to consider ways to mitigate the impact of staffing shortages on students without removing or reducing needed services and support. To support family partnerships and communication, districts should maintain open communication with families about the staffing challenges districts are facing and the efforts to address those challenges. These efforts should include sharing plans and efforts to minimize the impact on students and prioritize preservation of services and supports for students receiving special education services. Additionally, districts should proactively communicate to families that



ongoing disruptions to instruction and special education services will be prioritized and addressed when considering and planning for student services.

Staffing Innovations

For a full list of innovative staffing practices shared by school and district partners across the state and country, along with strategic planning and long-term solutions please refer to the [Special Education Staffing Tip, February 2022](#). To highlight a few practices, districts are encouraged to:

- Develop policies and practices that consider how to:
 - Ensure equitable access for students, staff, and families, including those engaged with special education supports during staffing shortages.
 - Document and respond to barriers in learning as a result of changes in staffing.
 - Maintain open and proactive communication with families about staffing barriers and efforts to address those challenges.
- When experiencing staffing shortages, districts are encouraged to consider practices such as:
 - Temporarily reallocate staff to address student IEP needs. IEPs must continue to be implemented; however, the location of services may shift (provided placement is not impacted).
 - If staffing shortages impact the educational placement or provision of FAPE to a student, districts should provide prior written notice of changes to parents. See OSPI's [Q&A, Question H-1](#) for more information on prior written notice.
 - Having other staff temporarily provide specially designed instruction.¹
 - Temporarily increasing group sizes or combining groups for small group instruction.
 - Thinking creatively about when specially designed instruction is provided. Districts are reminded that a service area does not equal, necessarily, a class period.

Reminder: Paraeducator Best Practices to Support Student Outcomes

OSPI has received concerns that due to staffing shortages, students with 1:1 paraeducators are being asked to stay home. As discussed above, it is contrary to the IDEA to require a student to stay home or receive reduced support due to a shortage of staff. While staffing shortages present a barrier to schools and districts, they also present an opportunity to consider best practices for assigning, deploying, and fading paraeducators to best support student outcomes.

Research has shown that IEP team overreliance on the use of 1:1 paraeducator support may result in students becoming overly dependent upon adult support; students being segregated or isolated from their peer group; and students receiving limited interaction with the general

education teacher. These unintended and detrimental effects often occur when students receive a level of paraeducator support that surpasses the level of student need².

Fading support and ongoing training for paraeducators can reduce student overreliance on adult assistance and allow for a greater degree of student independence. To prevent over-prompting, paraeducator services should be systematically faded when:

- the student has accomplished specific skills;
- when the student achieves a determined level of independence; or
- when specific conditions identified by the educational team are met.

Any IEP team decision to fade paraeducator or other adult support should be done systematically, based on student progress data and all team members, including parents, should have input into the creation of a fading plan for adult support.

Fading supports is not only about reducing support, but also about changing how the support is provided. Instructional needs to build skills or knowledge necessary for the student to become more independent should also be considered and added to the plan for fading supports. Some examples of how student support may shift when developing a plan to fade adult support include:

- using targeted peer support to transition a skill to the natural environment
- a shift to educator delivered prompts and then a plan to systematically decrease the level of prompting until the student is independent
- embedding and utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts in the learning environment

Along with the strategies above and in the Special Education Staffing Tip, February 2022, schools and districts are encouraged use the current staffing shortages as an opportunity to enhance the use of best practices with the assignment, deployment, and fading of paraeducator support by considering:

- Evaluating the current practices of assigning and fading paraeducators based on individual student level data to support student independence while having timely information for staffing decision.
- Opportunities for a variety of team members to provide instruction, scaffolds and supports to facilitate student learning.
- Increasing the development and use of data driven adult support fading plans, ensuring all members of the IEP team, including parents, are a part of the development process.
- Holding an IEP meeting, if needed, to discuss the type, level, function, and frequency of the support and the development of a fading plan for adult support. Perhaps a student now needs shared paraeducator support as opposed to 1:1 support or may only require a 1:1 support during specific activities.

- Remember, unlike specially designed instruction and related services, which are the responsibility of the evaluation group to recommend, supplementary aids and services (SAS) are the decision of the IEP team (refer to WACs 392-172A-02065 and 392-172A-03110(2)(b)(ii)). There would therefore be no requirement to conduct a reevaluation prior to modifying SAS.

For a complete list of guidance and best practices on paraeducator support and best practices please refer to:

- [TAP #6: Paraeducators and Students Eligible to Receive Special Education Services](#)
- [TAP 6 Appendix A: Best Practices for Planning Paraeducator Support](#)