

# *Appendix A: Best Practices for Planning Paraeducator Support*

## **Introduction and Purpose**

This best practices document is intended to help administrators and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams effectively assign and utilize paraeducators to improve student outcomes and increase meaningful student participation in general education environments. This document acknowledges the value brought to the education system by paraeducators, presents a rationale for the meaningful utilization of paraeducators, and describes the relationships and roles of school personnel as they work as a team, ensuring the most desirable outcomes for students with disabilities.

## **Paraeducators are Valued and Essential Members of a Student's Educational Team**

Paraeducators, also known as paraprofessionals or teacher's assistants, are trained professionals who work in classrooms under the supervision of a teacher or educational staff associate (ESA). Paraeducators are essential and valued members of the educational team and are critical to support the social, emotional, academic, and vocational success of Washington's students P-12. Teachers, administrators and other members of the educational team have a critical role to support paraeducators to be effective in their work by providing resources, support, training and feedback.

Paraeducators assist all students, including those with and without disabilities, with health needs, and with limited English proficiency. They are vital members of the school community and play a key role in bridging the systemic gaps in educational justice for all students by:

- supporting the teaching and learning of all students—paraeducators review lessons and provide drill and independent practice opportunities with individual students or groups of students;
- assisting students in meeting class and school expectations for appropriate behavior;
- modeling and prompting appropriate behavior and leading small groups to reinforce social skill learning;
- playing an active and essential role in their work with students by providing encouragement, support, assistance and advocacy;
- serving as a force multiplier to support teacher intervention and consistency in educational program implementation;
- facilitating the integration of students with individual needs in typical classrooms and settings;
- building student relationships and connections to the local community.



# The Paraeducator's Role in Supporting Specially Designed Instruction

## Considerations for Meaningfully Utilizing Paraeducators

District administrators and staff responsible for assigning paraeducators, should carefully plan to ensure that the paraeducator:

- only be assigned to tasks for which they have been appropriately trained and prepared;
- assists in the provision of special education and related services, provided that the instruction is designed, supervised, and monitored by special education certificated staff, or for related services by a certificated educational staff associate;
- provides supplemental instruction and intervention; students with disabilities should not receive the majority of their instruction from paraeducators. Additionally, instructional content provided to students with disabilities should include access to their general educators, across subjects, as well as meaningful access to their peers without disabilities;
- is assigned a designated educator to supervise, mentor, and guide their work—this educator can assist with coordinating a schedule and be an established contact and resource for them;
- focuses supplemental instruction on:
  - practicing skills the student has already acquired, focused on individually appropriate dimensions (e.g., accuracy, quality, latency, response rate);
  - minimizing educational regression, and
  - strengthening maintenance and generalization of learned skills;
- provides services based on educator-developed written plans that include a data collection component designed and monitored by a general and/or special educator;
- is not asked to develop student lesson plans; however, they may have insightful and useful contributions to share with the general and special educators.

## Examples of Assigned Duties of a Paraeducator

- Modifying educational materials in accordance with special education teacher direction to include supports such as manipulatives, pictures for text, or text highlighting.
- Following a special education certificated staff or ESA written instructional plan to provide prompts and instructional support such as to:
  - support a student contact reinforcement from a predetermined reinforcement system,
  - support a student in their behavior management system (e.g., behavior contracts or check-in check out procedures), and
  - promote a student's independence across a variety of tasks (using the least intrusive prompt possible in the prompting hierarchy).
- Supporting student engagement, independence, and safety in work settings.

- Reinforcing previously provided “specially designed instruction” and generalizing accommodations in response to immediate needs. Paraeducators build on skills that have been introduced to students. For example, if a student has been introduced to and trained in the use of a particular strategy, that strategy can be generalized to other subject areas or social settings with the assistance of the paraeducator. Or, if a paraeducator has been trained to verbally model grammatical correctness, that modeling can be generalized to several settings.
- Facilitating teacher instructions in small group activities.
- Constructing instruction materials (e.g., flash cards, games for review, or other review materials under the supervision of a teacher or ESA.
- Assisting the teacher in modifying or adapting instructional strategies and materials according to the needs of the learner.

### Examples of Duties of an Educator

- Introducing new skills and concepts.
- Independently providing “specially designed instruction.”
- Planning instruction or selecting instructional materials.
- Setting goals for students.
- Designing and modifying instructional materials.
- Varying any component of scripted programming or making assessments and instructional decisions regarding student responses in a scripted program.
- Designing student outcomes and expectations in work settings.
- Supervising paraeducators and adapting instruction based on student progress.

## Paraeducator Supervision and Training

### Paraeducator Supervision

Paraeducators who assist with the provision of special education are required to be under the close supervision of a certificated teacher with a special education endorsement or a certificated educational staff associate. [WAC 392-172A-02090\(i\)](#).

The role of the supervising certificated special education teacher or ESA includes designing tasks or strategies for paraeducators to implement, monitoring a paraeducator’s day-to-day performance and providing feedback, contributing to the development of the paraeducator’s schedule, and providing on-the-job training (Pickett, 2000). Additionally, certificated teachers may be asked to provide input on the paraeducator’s job performance to the administrator who is responsible for formally evaluating the paraeducator’s performance. Formal evaluation of a paraeducator should be conducted in accordance with the district’s policies and collective bargaining agreements. Formal evaluation procedures should encourage the paraeducator to identify strengths and performance goals for professional development. Evaluation policies and procedures, as well as the certificated teacher or ESA’s role in the evaluation process, must be transparent and clearly communicated to administrators, supervisors, and paraeducators.

## Paraeducator Training

It is the responsibility of districts to ensure that paraeducators are appropriately trained to meet the needs of students eligible for special education. Paraeducators who assist with the delivery of specially designed instruction or related services should be trained by qualified staff (e.g., special and general education teachers, ESAs, instructional or behavioral specialists). Certificated special education teachers and/or ESA staff are responsible for identifying the practices and skills that paraeducators must demonstrate in order to assist with the provision of special education as outlined in students' IEPs. The identified practices that paraeducators must implement should be included in paraeducator training activities. Specific training is recommended on prompting hierarchies to support student independence and basic principles of reinforcement, as the primary roles of paraeducators often involve:

- pausing (to observe, record or elicit a response),
- prompting (to support students independence/progress and provide access to a task), and
- praising (to provide reinforcement to increase the frequency of desired responses in the future).

For further guidance on appropriate special education paraeducator skills, districts should reference the [\*Council for Exceptional Children's Special Education Paraeducator Preparation Guidelines\*](#) and the [\*Professional Education Standards Board paraeducator competencies\*](#).

Comprehensive paraeducator training includes a combination of on-the-job training and formal professional development. Effective on-the-job training is continuous and includes direct modeling, performance feedback, and practice with a gradual release of responsibilities from the certificated teacher and/or ESA to the paraeducator. Formal training includes district or school provided professional development and other relevant professional learning opportunities. When applicable, paraeducators should be included in professional development opportunities with certificated teachers. This practice encourages collaboration across roles and ensures consistency of training across special education providers.

Maintaining documentation of training is necessary to ensure that paraeducators have been provided adequate training to assume responsibilities related to the delivery of special education. Documentation may include logs that briefly describe training activities, topics, and the date. Supervisory activities which may include observations, coaching or feedback, should be documented in addition to formal professional development. Appropriate documentation ensures the effective and appropriate delivery of special education in compliance with state and federal laws, provides evidence of professional development, and can assist with formal evaluation of paraeducators' performance.

## Research-Based Considerations for Paraeducators

### Fading or Discontinuing Adult Supports

Fading assistance means systematically reducing the type and level of support given to a student so that the student is receiving the least intrusive supports necessary to be successful on a given task or objective.

Fading support can reduce student overreliance on adult assistance and allow for a greater degree of student independence. The research in fading adult assistance is clear. Over-prompting and over-reliance on supports can have inadvertent detrimental effects on students. To prevent over-prompting, paraeducator services should be faded or discontinued 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.

Special education certificated teachers and ESA staff will closely monitor student progress data to determine when to systematically fade prompts and paraeducator supports. This is an important step that should be planned for, as Giangreco, et al (2012), found that in most cases, procedures to fade the need of the paraeducator, or decrease the dependence of students on the paraeducator, were not in place. All team members, including parents, school staff members, and the student, 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. Generally, to appropriately fade or discontinue supports of a paraeducator, the educational team should determine, document, and monitor the following:

- the level of independence or skill acquisition that will indicate the need to revise the level of support and,
- the type of modification and services needed, such as the skills that need to be acquired for the student to be independently successful.

### Unintentional Effects of Over-Prompting

The effects of over-prompting, and the overreliance of IEP teams use of one-on-one 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 effects often occur when students receive a level of paraeducator support that surpasses the level of student need. Over-prompting (e.g., prompting too frequently or not quickly fading supports based on student progress data using a prompting hierarchy) can slow a student's progress or lead to prompt dependency, which is contrary to the intention on the initial adult support.

## 1:1 Paraeducators and Inclusionary Practices

Inclusive education provides all students, regardless of disability or need, access to age-appropriate general education classes and the instruction, intervention, and support to meet grade level core learning standards. When planned for and utilized effectively, paraeducators can be leveraged to support both general education and special education teachers so that every student is meaningfully included and can make progress in the general education curriculum and environment.

It is important to remember that all students are general education students and should have access and support from general education teachers who remain the content experts for a school system. Special education teachers, who often receive the bulk of their training as behavioral and academic interventionists, are imperative to support the differentiation and modification that allow the student to access and make progress in the general education content. Districts should work together to leverage the content knowledge of their general education teachers, the intervention and differentiated support expertise of their special education teachers, and the prompting and assistance from their paraeducators to support all students to meaningfully participate in the general education classroom alongside their typically developing peers.

Teams should work within a structure, address natural and alternative supports, document plans for assistance and independence, and include documentation explicitly showing the extent to which support is necessary. This teaming is not only needed for effective and successful inclusion but will also promote quality peer interactions that facilitate a sense of belonging, enhance student learning and promote friendships. Please refer to the [OSPI Inclusionary Practices Guidebook](#) for more information on supporting all students to learn in general education environments.

### Paraeducators and Families

Paraeducators are often the first line of communication with many students and families. This, coupled with the time spent with some of the most involved students, lead to many paraeducators developing close bonds with a student's family. To further support paraeducators to effectively collaborate with families, consider the need to include them in district professional development regarding:

- the impact of historical oppression, generational trauma, systemic racism, and ableism on families of students with disabilities,
- civil rights and equity, and
- family needs, family and student cultures, language differences, and strengths.

Paraeducator and family relationships are integral parts of a student's educational program. However, they can potentially develop into challenges. For example, families can become dependent on the high level of paraeducator support their student receives and may be reluctant to fade services, even when data indicates fading is needed. An over-reliance on

paraeducator support can hinder a student's progress, lead to prompt dependency, and is often in direct conflict with IEP goals. It is important to communicate the importance to families to fade support and increase student independence across goals and environments.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. What are the recommended core competencies for paraeducators working with students with disabilities?

The Washington State Recommended Core Competencies for Paraeducators were developed to meet federal requirements mandating qualifications and training for special education paraeducators and [WAC 392-172A-02090\(f\)](#). Implementation of the core competencies provides compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 and [WAC 392-172A-02090](#).

1. Understanding the value of providing instructional and other direct services to all children and youth with disabilities.
2. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of certificated/licensed staff and paraeducators.
3. Knowledge of (a) patterns of human development and milestones typically achieved at different ages, and (b) risk factors that may prohibit or impede typical development.
4. Ability to practice ethical and professional standards of conduct, including the requirements of confidentiality.
5. Ability to communicate with colleagues, follow instructions, and use problem solving and other skills that will enable the paraeducator to work as an effective member of the instructional team.
6. Ability to provide positive behavioral support and management.
7. Knowledge of the legal issues related to the education of children and youth with disabilities and their families.
8. Awareness of diversity among the children, youth, families, and colleagues with whom they work.
9. Knowledge and application of the elements of effective instruction to assist teaching and learning as developed by the certificated/licensed staff in a variety of settings.
10. Ability to utilize appropriate strategies and techniques to provide instructional support in teaching and learning as developed by the certificated/licensed staff.
11. Ability to motivate and assist children and youth.
12. Knowledge of and ability to follow health, safety, and emergency procedures of the agency where they are employed.
13. Awareness of the ways in which technology can assist teaching and learning.
14. Awareness of personal care and/or health related support.

## **2. Is the teacher the paraeducator's supervisor?**

Yes, but there is a difference between the person responsible for hiring and evaluation of performance (an administrator) and the person directing day-to-day work with students (the teacher). The teacher or ESA staff must provide the day-to-day supervision of the paraeducator<sup>1</sup>, but an administrator, such as a principal, program manager, or special education director, may be responsible for completing the evaluation of performance.

## **3. What is the definition of "direct supervision?"**

[Title I, Part A Guide to Paraeducator Requirements](#) describes paraprofessionals as employees who work under the direct supervision of a teacher, and whose duties could include helping the teacher with reading, writing and math instruction.

Section D, Programmatic Requirements interprets "under the direct supervision of a teacher" this way:

1. the teacher prepares the lesson and plans the instructional support activities the paraeducator carries out, and evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional is working, and
2. the paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher. Teachers must make sure that the paraeducator follows direction and the lesson plan carries out their instructional support duties based on the learning goals set for each unit of study.

## **4. Can a paraeducator see a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP)?**

There are no state or federal regulations prohibiting a paraeducator from seeing a student's IEP. In fact, [WAC 392-172A-03105](#) states that each district must ensure that the IEP is accessible to each general education teacher, special education teacher, related service provider, or any other service provider who is responsible for its implementation. OSPI encourages paraeducators whose support includes students with disabilities to have an understanding of the IEP information, including the intended scope and function of their support as this information is imperative to their role as an implementer.

## **5. Are paraeducators required to attend IEP meetings?**

Paraeducator attendance at IEP team meetings is an individual district and school-based decision. It is important that district or school personnel explain their policy on the attendance of paraeducators at IEPs to both parents and school staff. Paraeducators are not a required IEP team member.

If a paraeducator spends an extensive amount of time with a student, a decision might be made for that paraeducator to attend the student's IEP. If a paraeducator is required in the IEP and does not attend a student's IEP meeting, it is the responsibility of the student's

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<sup>1</sup> [WAC 392-172A-02090](#)



teacher and/or the paraeducator's supervisor to communicate in detail with the paraeducator about the student before and after the IEP.

**6. Is there any research that shows a relationship between paraeducators and student achievement?**

Recent studies demonstrate the positive impact that paraeducators can have on student achievement when they receive ongoing professional development, training, and supervision. Dr. Michael Giangreco, a professor at the University of Vermont, has conducted a number of research studies regarding the effects of paraeducator support on students with disabilities. Full-text pdfs are available on his project Web site: [University of Vermont, Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, Michael Giangreco, Ph.D.](#)

**7. What is the paraeducator's role in a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)?**

Collaboration among all school staff ensures positive learning experiences and outcomes for struggling students whose needs are identified early. Paraeducators are a valuable part of MTSS teams by assisting classroom teachers and special educators with:

- Screening
- Assisting teachers with benchmarking and progress monitoring assessments
- Recording observations of behavior and learning strategies
- Entering assessment data into a management system
- Serving as a member of the intervention team
- Collaborating with teachers to provide support for students
- Implementing interventions
- Participating in school-wide professional development.

**8. Can a paraeducator act as a substitute for a teacher if the paraeducator is not certified?**

No. However, paraeducators who meet the minimum requirements may apply for a substitute teaching certification. Please visit OSPI's certification website for detailed information: [OSPI-Certification](#).

**9. Can a paraeducator be asked to perform personal care duties (e.g., toileting)?**

Yes. Toileting is an activity of daily living and generally falls under the responsibility of a paraeducator. If the child has special needs, the Washington State School Staff Health Training Guide does say that the school nurse can assess the situation to ensure that the proper position, equipment available, etc., are in place and that any training for the paraeducator should be provided. This document is available here: [Washington State Staff Health Training Guide](#)