

## Preparing Teachers for Effective Paraeducator Supervision

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### Executive Summary

Paraeducators are an integral part of the instructional process and support services for students with disabilities. Referred to synonymously as paraprofessionals, teacher assistants, instructional assistants, educational assistants, special needs assistants, and personal learning assistants, paraeducators shoulder increased responsibilities for supporting students with disabilities in today's classroom (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2014). Federal law mandates that paraeducators receive appropriate training and supervision by a certified education professional; however, researchers consistently confirm that paraeducators lack supervision and training (Brock & Carter, 2016; Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016; Giangreco, 2013). Too often, unsupervised paraeducators become the primary mechanism for providing instruction to students with disabilities, resulting in teachers relinquishing their teaching role. Excessive and inappropriate over reliance on paraeducators may have detrimental effects on the quality of educational and related services for PK–12 students with disabilities (Chopra & Giangreco, 2019). Though the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Special Education Standards for Professional Practice (CEC, 2015) outline the critical knowledge and skill sets for special education professionals to use when directing the work of paraeducators, many report inadequate preparation for their supervisory role (Brock & Carter, 2016; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). Taken together, these critical issues thwart the effectiveness of paraeducators in schools. This brief offers recommendations and guidelines for better preparation of teachers for their supervisory roles with paraeducators.

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education teachers.*

*—U.S. Department  
of Education, 2018a*

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### Aim & Background

In 2016, the number of paraeducators serving children with disabilities ages 3–21 was 488,247 with more paraeducators than special education teachers working in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). By definition, paraeducators are employees who provide instructional support, including those who: (a) provide one-on-one tutoring, if such tutoring is scheduled at a time when a student would not otherwise receive instruction from a teacher; (b) assist with classroom management, such as organizing instructional and other materials; (c) provide instructional assistance in a computer laboratory; (d) conduct parental involvement activities; (e) provide support in a library or media center; (f) act as a translator; and (g) provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). This definition is consistent with the federal mandate that paraeducators receive appropriate training and supervision by a certified professional (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

To ensure high-quality services for students with disabilities (CEC, 2015; Chopra & Uitto, 2015), special education experts, in collaboration with personnel from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), have generated professional guidelines for paraeducators that include ethical responsibilities (see Figure 1). In spite of the federal mandate and standards for professional practice, researchers have found that teachers remain reluctant to supervise paraeducators and report feeling ill prepared to work effectively with them (Biggs, Gilson, & Carter, 2019; Chopra &

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*As instructional demands on teachers have increased, so have those of paras [paraeducators].*

—Rosales, 2016

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Uitto, 2015). Teachers have also reported that navigating professional relationships with paraeducators can be difficult. Researchers have reported, too, that teachers receive limited instruction to support their supervisory responsibilities with paraeducators, despite repeated calls to improve teacher preparation in this area (Biggs et al., 2019; Brock & Carter, 2016; Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, & French, 2011; Douglas et al., 2016). The lack of supervision often leaves unqualified paraeducators to fend for themselves and to carry out instructional tasks beyond the scope of their responsibilities and competence. The excessive and inappropriate use of paraeducators can be problematic and may result in a wide range of unintended negative consequences for students with disabilities such as (a) learned helplessness, (b) disempowerment and over-dependence on paraeducators, (c) insular relationships because of lack of boundaries in paraeducator interactions with students and families, (d) interference with teacher engagement and diminished teacher responsibility resulting in limited access to competent instruction for the students, (e) missed inclusion opportunities including social barriers that prevent peer interactions and result in stigmatism and non-assimilation/acceptance by peers (Chopra & Giangreco, 2019; Giangreco et al., 2010).

## Findings, Implications & Recommendations

Drawing on CEC's (2015) recommendations (summarized in Figure 1) and the professional literature, the following teacher competencies and functions, which are specific to paraeducator supervision, are recommended as the core of training programs for teachers preparing to work with paraeducators: A teacher should learn/possess the skills to (a) demonstrate up-to-date knowledge of paraeducators' instructional roles and responsibilities, including intervention and direct service, (b) assign specific tasks based on the expected role of the paraeducator(s), (c) develop instructional plans for paraeducators and ensure implementation of plans with fidelity, (d) hold planning meetings, (e) provide on-the-job training and coaching, (f) provide feedback, (g) monitor day-to-day activities, and (h) conduct ongoing open discussions to build trust and collaborative relationships with paraeducators (Biggs et al., 2019; Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012; CEC, 2015; Chopra & Uitto, 2015). In addition to the knowledge and skills described above and to ensure that the field continues to widely support this initiative, the following guidelines are recommended for supporting and preparing teachers for their supervisory roles with paraeducators:

**Guideline 1** (Federal and State Policy). Policy makers must ensure that paraeducator supervision content is included in special education teacher licensure and certification requirements. Both traditional and alternative certification programs must ensure that teachers have the necessary coursework and practical experiences to effectively supervise, train, coach, and provide feedback to paraeducators.

**Guideline 2** (Paraeducator Content for Teacher Candidates and In-service Teachers). The paraeducator content in teacher preparation and professional development programs must draw upon the CEC (2015) Special Education Standards for Professional Practice and the supervisory functions detailed in the literature as stated above to ensure enhancement of teacher skills in the area of paraeducator supervision.

**Guideline 3** (Teacher Education). Incorporation of paraeducator supervision content into teacher education coursework and clinical experiences and in-service teacher professional development needs to emphasize the aforementioned knowledge and skills. For example, to ensure that the instruction for students is teacher-driven, not paraeducator-driven, include class assignments that require teacher candidates to create instructional plans for paraeducators to implement with students; use videos of paraeducators working with students with disabilities and provide models and opportunities for performance reviews that promote constructive feedback skills; include class assignments that require teacher candidates to conduct a brief coaching session with the paraeducator; include course assignments that require pre-service teachers to use training models and materials (videos, handbooks etc.) to promote paraeducators' knowledge and skills in supporting classroom instruction; and invite a panel of paraeducators as guest speakers during

coursework to help teacher candidates learn ways to use paraeducators effectively in their clinical experiences.

**Guideline 4** (School Leaders). Administrative support should include policies and practices concerning: (a) role clarification among teachers and paraeducators, (b) professional development of teachers for their role in co-directing the paraeducators work, and (c) support for planning time and communication for team members.

For continued development of both new and veteran teachers in the field with regards to effective utilization of paraeducators, policy makers, teacher educators, and school administrators need to understand the importance of helping teachers learn to supervise paraeducators. Additional recommended resources to support this call can be found in Figure 2.

## Conclusion

Paraeducators hold a central role in supporting students with disabilities in today's classrooms; policies and practices must be put into place to better prepare teachers for their supervisory roles with paraeducators. Educational outcomes for students with disabilities are too important to wait.

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**Figure 1. Critical Knowledge for Special Educators with Regards to Paraeducators**

Special educators must:
Provide appropriate training for paraeducators for the tasks they are assigned.
Assign tasks to paraeducators once they have been appropriately prepared.
Provide feedback to the paraeducators regarding the performance of the assigned tasks.
Be supportive and collegial during communication toward paraeducators when discussing tasks and expectation.
Be timely and responsive if a paraeducator's behavior is unlawful, unethical, or might cause harm to students with disabilities.

**Figure 2. Internet Resources for Ensuring Teachers are Prepared to Work Effectively with Paraeducators**

Considerations for effective use of paraprofessionals:
<a href="https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/ECSETS/Para/ConsiderationsEffectiveUseParaprofessionals.pdf">Kansas State Department of Education</a> <a href="https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/ECSETS/Para/ConsiderationsEffectiveUseParaprofessionals.pdf">https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/ECSETS/Para/ConsiderationsEffectiveUseParaprofessionals.pdf</a>
CEC Standards for Professional Practice:
<a href="https://www.cec.sped.org/~media/Files/Standards/Professional%20Ethics%20and%20Practice%20Standards/Standards%20for%20Professional%20Practice.pdf">Special Education Standards for Professional Practice</a> <a href="https://www.cec.sped.org/~media/Files/Standards/Professional%20Ethics%20and%20Practice%20Standards/Standards%20for%20Professional%20Practice.pdf">https://www.cec.sped.org/~media/Files/Standards/Professional%20Ethics%20and%20Practice%20Standards/Standards%20for%20Professional%20Practice.pdf</a>
K–12 paraprofessional supervision resources:
<a href="https://paracenter.org/library/k-12-paraprofessional-supervision-resources">The PARAprofessional Research and Resource Center</a> <a href="https://paracenter.org/library/k-12-paraprofessional-supervision-resources">https://paracenter.org/library/k-12-paraprofessional-supervision-resources</a>
CEC TED Position Paper
<a href="https://tedcec.org/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017">Position Paper on Training for Paraeducators in Special ...</a> <a href="https://tedcec.org/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017">https://tedcec.org › uploads › 2018/09 › Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017</a>