



## Teachers' Desk Reference: Practical Information for Pennsylvania's Teachers

# Teachers and Special Education Paraprofessionals: Working as a Team to Support Students

Effective collaboration between teachers and special education paraprofessionals helps to ensure that students with disabilities receive quality services, make progress in the general education curriculum, and meet their educational goals. This issue of the *Teachers' Desk Reference* highlights ways that teachers and paraprofessionals, working together, can blend their respective talents and expertise to advance student success.

Paraprofessionals may be known by various titles, including teacher's aide, teacher assistant, one-to-one aide, and job coach. In Pennsylvania, there are two types of special education paraprofessionals: instructional paraprofessional and personal care assistant (PCA).

A paraprofessional aid is an individual who is noncertified in the area in which they are assisting (even though he/she may be licensed or certified in another profession or a technical field) who assists a certified professional in a team approach to the performance of the certified professional's assigned program responsibilities.

(Pennsylvania Department of Education, CSPG No. 101)

This publication will focus on ways that instructional paraprofessionals, teachers, and other personnel can work together as a team.

### The Classroom Team

An educational team, which may include teachers, administrators, related service providers, and parents, collaborates to ensure the delivery of educational services and instruction to students. Here, we focus specifically on the **classroom team**, whose members work together to identify students' strengths and needs, establish instructional priorities, and carry out specific instructional tasks within the classroom, school, or community setting.

Classroom teams may be comprised of a variety of individuals, such as:

- A special education teacher and a special education paraprofessional(s)
- General and special education teachers and one or more paraprofessionals
- General education teachers and classroom paraprofessional(s), with a collaborating special education teacher
- General and special education teachers; a special education paraprofessional; and, related services personnel, such as a speech/language pathologist

To ensure that teachers, special education paraprofessionals, and other personnel understand their responsibilities as members of the team, roles should be defined at the beginning of the school year and reviewed periodically, as needed. Role definition helps prevent misunderstandings and sets the stage for a positive long-term working relationship. Classroom teams that have well-defined roles work more efficiently and can spend more time focused on instruction. Teachers and paraprofessionals each have specific roles as part of the classroom team. Sometimes the roles are distinct, and sometimes the roles overlap.

### The Teacher

Each teacher who serves students with disabilities takes a role as a member of the team. The teacher has primary daily responsibility for providing instruction to all students, making educational decisions, and managing various service providers within the classroom. Teacher responsibilities include:

- Identifying learning needs
- Planning and delivering instruction
- Adapting curriculum or instructional materials
- Evaluating effectiveness of instruction

- Communicating with parents
- Implementing behavior management
- Creating a positive and caring learning environment

The teacher also guides the work of paraprofessionals in the classroom, which may include:

- Determining paraprofessional tasks
- Monitoring day-to-day performance
- Ensuring confidentiality
- Providing on-the-job coaching
- Ensuring that paraprofessionals have the skills or receive the training needed to support student-specific needs
- Meeting regularly with paraprofessionals to share plans and expectations

### The Paraprofessional

Paraprofessionals assist certified teachers or other professionals in implementing the educational program. Paraprofessionals should only be expected to perform tasks for which they are trained. Each type of paraprofessional has a distinct role, defined by the 22 Pennsylvania Code, Chapter 14.

**Personal Care Assistants (PCA)** provide one-to-one support to individual students, which includes using medical equipment and augmentative and assistive technology, supporting activities of daily living, and monitoring health and behavior. A PCA may deliver these services to more than one student, but not at the same time. Their services are **not** instructional in nature. PCAs:

- Assist with activities of daily life
- Monitor individual health and behavior
- Know how to operate medical equipment
- Know how to operate assistive technology used by the student

**Instructional Paraprofessionals** are school employees who work under the direction of certified staff members to support and assist in providing instructional programs and services to children with disabilities or eligible young children. This may include, for example, reviewing materials taught by certified staff with individual students or groups of students, assisting with classroom management, or implementing positive behavior support plans. Services may be delivered in a general education, special education, or other instructional setting (e.g., a job site), according to the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Instructional paraprofessionals:

- Support the teacher in advancing students toward their learning goals
- Complete assigned tasks, whether instructional or noninstructional
- Implement teacher-developed instructional activities with individuals or small groups
- Work collaboratively with related personnel who support the student, including speech and language pathologists, behavior specialists, school psychologists, counselors, etc. to promote a positive and caring environment
- Follow policies of confidentiality, security, and safety
- Support the implementation of behavior plans under the direction of the teacher
- Provide input to the team regarding student progress, successes or challenges; for example, a paraprofessional may report to the partner teacher that the student reads exceptionally well in the general education science class as a result of the accommodations the special and general education teachers made to the text
- Know how to operate assistive technology used by the student
- Work with the team members to solve problems that may arise

## Collaboration and Communication

Consider incorporating these concepts\* into your practice to encourage a collaborative working relationship with your team members.

**Know yourself:** Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses related to the particular teaching situation or content area. Acknowledge biases, apprehensions and, perhaps, the need for assistance in learning what you need to know to be effective in working with a student.

**Know your partner(s):** Know your partner's likes and dislikes, teaching style and preferences. You don't need to be best friends with your partner, but you should cultivate a friendly, respectful working relationship – and encourage a shared vision of the classroom structure. The team needs to come to consensus about acceptable noise levels, everyday procedures, how transitions should occur, room arrangements, behavior procedures, etc.

**Know your students:** Each team member needs to have a good working knowledge of the students regarding IEP goals, behavior plans, status related to the content areas, specially designed instruction and supports, interests, preferences, etc. You can use self-assessments, curriculum-based measures, and interest inventories to get this information.

**Know your stuff:** All the effective classroom management, competent teaming, well designed classroom arrangements and scheduling will be for naught if you do not know the content. You must have an understanding of the content area in order to effectively teach or support learning for students. You may want to look at this as a long-term commitment to your team and to the students. Always communicate, share, and learn from one another and protect each other's interests.

\* Adapted from Keefe, E.B., Moore, V., & Duff, F. (May/June 2004). The four "knows" of collaborative teaching. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, (36)5, pp.36-42.

**“...Effective communication is imperative when working in an educational setting. Team members must specify task directions and expectations proactively, must be willing to ask for clarification when unsure, utilize each other’s special talents and interests, and must work together to create an atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and respect.”**

(Pickett, A.L. et al., 2007)

### **Addressing Team Conflict**

When people work together, they have different ideas about how things should be done. Effective teams prevent conflict proactively by sharing expectations and communicating respectfully. Inevitably, even with the most effective teams, there will be times when conflicts arise. Often, in educational settings, conflicts are not readily resolved due to the more immediate pressures of dealing with student issues. In addition, having related service providers (such as speech/language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and vision and hearing itinerants, etc.) in classrooms can create complex situations due to the number of people involved. Many people (students and staff) may be competing for your time and attention. When conflicts arise it is important to have effective ways of dealing with them in a timely manner before they get worse. If an issue cannot be resolved within the team, the issue should be taken to a mediator, such as an administrator or supervisor, depending on your school’s procedural policies. Often, an outside opinion can help resolve the situation.

Consider using this effective five-step, problem-solving strategy when addressing conflicts:

1. **Find a good time to talk.** Avoid addressing problems when you’re upset. It is better to wait until you are calm then set up a time to talk with your team partner, in private, when both of you can give your time and attention to the issue.
2. **Listen carefully and speak carefully.** Be positive and respectful. Listen to what the other person is saying without interrupting, and speak with clarity when it is your turn to present your side of the issue.
3. **Take the time to get at the real problem.** It is important to clearly define the issue rather than focusing on the position each of you is taking. Each person sees the issue from a different perspective. The problem must be clearly understood by both parties in order to develop a course of action that will lead to a satisfactory solution. Prior to discussing the issue, identify the problem in your own mind.
4. **Focus on possible solutions to the problem.** Once the problem has been identified, strategies can be developed. Consider what course of action is within your control, which strategies are the easiest to implement and the least disruptive. And of course, consider which solution will best meet the needs of those involved and achieve the desired outcomes. Make sure all parties agree on the course of action that will be implemented.
5. **Put the plan in place and evaluate the situation over time.** Set a time to meet in the future to evaluate whether the solutions were sufficient or whether you need to adjust the plan.

Effective teams have a common vision and value the strengths of each team member. Team members must know, understand, and perform within their defined roles in order to make the team the most productive. Teacher

paraprofessional partnerships should be based on understanding, respect, and communication to ensure a relationship that works in the long term and best benefits the students they serve.

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For more information about this topic, including a downloadable presentation with trainer's notes and handouts, visit: <http://tinyurl.com/parateacherteamtraining>

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## References and Resources

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# **Commonwealth of Pennsylvania**

**Josh Shapiro, Governor**

