



## Northern Lights Special Education Cooperative

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### Paraprofessionals in the general education setting

#### Supervising vs. directing the work of.....

In Minnesota, "supervision" is referred to as "directing the work" of paraprofessionals since teachers do not hire, terminate and are not responsible for performance evaluations. These functions are the responsibility of administrators. However, teachers are critical in directing the work of paraprofessionals and their work with students. Increasingly legislation has strengthened the role of teachers in providing this type of "instructional supervision" to paraprofessionals to ensure paraprofessionals are assisting and supporting the teacher in facilitating student learning.

Paraprofessionals need feedback on their performance, support in assisting the teacher in the use of accommodations, and direction when working in independent situations (e.g., community settings, non-classroom settings, etc.)

#### Role shift.....

Directing the work of paraprofessionals is an important component of an effectively run classroom. As the role of teachers has changed and policy and practices have evolved, the role of paraprofessionals has also changed. Paraprofessionals were once responsible for preparing materials, monitoring the lunchroom and playground, and taking attendance. Now, paraprofessionals are members of instructional teams assisting teachers in ensuring students are receiving the support they need to learn.

#### Who's on first.....

Many teachers have a concern about who should be directing the work of a special education paraprofessional when they are in the general education classroom. In many cases, the responsibilities of the paraprofessional are not understood by any member of the team. This is most often because no one has ever taken the time to discuss what the paraprofessional is supposed to do. There is just a general sense that they will simply know what to do and how to do it.

The easiest solution to "who should be directing....?" is to clearly define the paraprofessional's role in the IEP. Also, an established communication process among the general education teacher, the case manager and the paraprofessional, solves many issues. There are some basic facts that help. In the hierarchy of education, the teacher is the paraprofessional's superior. The general education teacher is the manager of, and directs the activities within her/his classroom.

The case manager designs the support structures (accommodations) which the paraprofessional implements. Therefore, within the general education classroom, the classroom teacher would direct the work of the paraprofessional unless there is a conflict with the IEP requirements. If that occurs, then a meeting with teacher, case manager and paraprofessional, needs to be held to re-affirm roles and duties.

## **Don'ts.....**

Paraprofessionals are a great asset to the educational process, but there are limits on the responsibilities they should and, by law, can have. Paraprofessionals cannot:

- Write programs without supervision by a certified teacher
- Create new, alternative instruction without direction from the teacher
- Implement "behavior" ideas without the direction of the teacher
- Take complete responsibility for any student
- Administer standardized assessment tests
- Make referral for additional services
- Communicate with the student, family, or others regarding any aspect of the student's status or service without the specific consent of the case manager.

In short, paraprofessionals are not intended to be the instructional designer or the sole implementer of an educational program. Additionally, if their role is not clearly defined, they may actually be a barrier to a student's learning.

## **Function.....**

It is the function of paraprofessionals to continually seek to work themselves out of a job. While assisting a student, they should constantly be asking, "Is this something a classmate or peer tutor could do instead of me? Can this student be successful if I help less?" The ultimate goal for all children is increased independence and self-determination. There is a fine line between 'enabling' and 'assisting'. Direct interaction between the student and the paraprofessional should decrease over time as natural supports are developed; as the student becomes comfortable with the classroom routines; and as the student's confidence and skills improve.

## **Within the general education classroom.....**

When a paraprofessional is assigned to a classroom to assist a student(s) with a disability, though their primary responsibility is to implement the supports set forth in the IEP for the student(s) with a disability, it is important that they be viewed as a support for all students. This encourages the general education teacher to assume ownership for the instruction of the special needs student(s). It provides all students with the opportunity for extra instruction and support. It reduces the attention drawn to the special needs student's disability. Paraprofessionals commonly assist with tasks such as:

- Leading small group discussions designed by the teacher
- Gathering materials
- Assisting students to complete directions given by the teacher
- Facilitating interaction between students
- Adapting lessons under the guidance of the teacher
- Providing assistance for personal care or other physical needs
- Enhance or supplement instructional activities or provide extended practice as long as supported by the teacher
- Schedule activities, prepare charts, records, graphs or otherwise display data
- Assist with informal documentation

## **How.....**

In a word.....relationships. An essential component to student success in the learning environment is the relationship that exists between the classroom teacher and the paraprofessional as well as their relationship with the rest of the IEP team. It is working together that builds success. When there is confusion about who is to do something, it is important for the team to discuss the answer together. Components that will help the educational process to proceed smoothly are:

- Time together in planned regular meetings to learn to work together, to problem-solve, to brainstorm and to celebrate success.
- Provide paraprofessionals with a job description and review it with the paraprofessional to clarify his/her role and responsibilities.
- Classroom teacher takes ownership for all students in their classroom by interacting, teaching, talking, and having fun with every student.
- Paraprofessionals share the responsibility for supporting all students in the classroom.
- Paraprofessional does not act too quickly to step in and assist the student but looks for the teacher to identify the need.
- Provide paraprofessionals with training opportunities
- Teacher and paraprofessional continually look for ways to facilitate and encourage independence.
- Paraprofessional move throughout the classroom to help all students rather than to hover over the student with special needs.
- Paraprofessional seek opportunities to encourage classmates and others about how to say something and when to say it rather than acting as an interrupter for the student with a disability.

Perhaps the most efficient method for directing the work of paraprofessionals is for the teacher to model the caring, respectful, positive and patient approach in dealing with the challenges and disruptions that occur on a daily basis.

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