



Understanding the Role of Paraprofessionals in Your Child's Education in Inclusive Classrooms



Ricki Sabia and Martha L. Thurlow

Paraprofessionals should be available to students with significant cognitive disabilities in the inclusive classroom if needed for a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Depending on each student's needs, paraprofessionals may provide supports, including supports for instruction, communication, or movement.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams may push back on a request for a paraprofessional. They may point to limited resources or claim that a paraprofessional makes the general education classroom a

more restrictive environment. **These arguments are not valid.** The paraprofessional decision must be based what an individual student needs to have a satisfactory education in the general education classroom. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provisions in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) focus on the amount of time a student spends in general education settings with peers without disabilities. They do not address the type of supports a student needs in the classroom.

Paraprofessionals may not be required to have specific credentials. However, they should be trained to meet the needs of the students with whom they work. It is important for parents to know what paraprofessionals should be expected to do in inclusive classrooms. Parents should also know what qualities paraprofessionals should have, and what supports and training they need to be successful in their role. The purpose of this Brief is to address these points. It also provides examples of appropriate use of paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms and some red flags that might indicate a need to adjust paraprofessional support or training.

Other Terms for “Paraprofessional”

Paraprofessionals may be called by other terms in your state, district, or school. Some of these names are:

- Paraeducator
- Parapro
- Aide
- Teaching assistant
- Independent assistant

What Qualities, Knowledge, and Skills Paraprofessionals Must Have

Paraprofessionals working with students who have significant cognitive disabilities must understand each student. Evidence of this understanding includes:

- High expectations for the student and adherence to the [Least Dangerous Assumption](#)
- An understanding of the family’s vision for the student’s life after school and the need to continually support the student’s capabilities to reach this vision
- Knowledge of the individual student’s strengths and interests, and how to build on them
- Knowledge of the individual student’s needs and how the student displays

those needs in different environments

- Knowledge of how the student communicates, and ability to program any assistive technology a student uses
- Ability to implement the student’s IEP goals and needed supports with supervision from teachers or other professional team members
- Knowledge of how to plan ahead to provide age-appropriate supports in inclusive settings
- Ability to match the most appropriate instructional supports provided by the teacher to existing learning opportunities, even when not specifically planned
- Ability to identify opportunities for peer support and other ways to fade the need for paraprofessional support. This may include, for example, using only needed prompts and cues that allow the student to be as independent as possible
- Knowledge that they can help other students, rather than “hovering,” when the assigned student is working independently
- Awareness of signs a student may be getting overly dependent on adult support

What Paraprofessionals Should Be Expected to Do

Paraprofessionals should be expected to fulfill several basic functions in the inclusive classroom. These include:

- Collaborating with members of the instructional team
- Working under the direction of a teacher or specialized instructional support personnel such as occupational or speech therapists
- Providing instructional and other supports designed by a licensed professional, such as giving physical assistance, helping with personal hygiene, and assisting with bathroom routines

- Following a schedule that includes directions about responsibilities
- Directing supports and using modifications and adapted materials in a way that maximizes student independence, social relationships, and learning
- Recording academic or behavioral data

The student's assigned paraprofessional can serve many different purposes related to IEP goals. For example, if increasing communication with peers is one of the student's goals, the paraprofessional can start by modeling and facilitating that communication. Then, over time the paraprofessional can fade the support that is provided. The paraprofessional might use aided language modeling when the student is with a small group. This would include modeling and coaching peers about aided language (for example, pairing speech with graphic symbols) and communication devices.

If a student's goal is to be calm in the inclusive classroom, the paraprofessional might use a check-in strategy to support positive behavior. At specific times during the school day, the paraprofessional could meet with the student to review the day's schedule and goals. The two of them can problem solve any challenges, discuss how the student is feeling, discuss choices in activities, and celebrate successes.

It is important not to use a paraprofessional when the student can be independent. For example, some students need support during instruction, but do not need it in the hallway or in non-academic activities. Or, a student may need assistance to get settled and begin a lesson, but then can follow directions and participate independently. To build greater independence, it is important to identify the specific purpose for paraprofessional support. Also, it is helpful to determine what support will look like and to plan for fading that support.

Examples of Paraprofessional Responsibilities in Inclusive Classrooms

Participating in Routines and Transitions

- Providing many opportunities for students to make choices and problem-solve new situations
- Assisting students to ask for help from other people, including peers
- Prompting students to understand and recognize natural environmental cues (for example, noticing that all classmates are getting up to leave for lunch and then joining the class, or entering the appropriate bathroom by choosing the correct bathroom sign and then identifying which stall is open based on a door being ajar)
- Grouping or minimizing the number of transitions across the day (for example, offering breaks within the classroom, reducing the number of times a student is required to leave or return to classroom areas or the number of tasks a student is asked to start or stop within a timeframe)

Engaging in Grade Level Academics and Other Essential Skills

- Pre-teaching or re-teaching content as needed
- Supporting the development of organization and executive functioning skills (such as creating checklists and visual schedules, or learning how to drag and drop documents into a daily folder)
- Making sure adaptations, modifications, and communication supports are consistently available in all learning environments, and in different formats such as high-, low-, light-, and no-tech options

Interacting with Others

- Supporting active responding in the classroom in ways compatible with the student's communication strengths

- Modeling respectful and enjoyable interactions with peers and adults
- Highlighting common interests with classmates and acting as a bridge to peer relationships
- Providing discrete support for interacting with others

If the student is participating in school through distance learning, see the TIES Center Distance Learning Series #23, [Pivoting Between Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Schools and Distance Learning](#) for more ideas. It provides detailed information on paraprofessional knowledge and skills, responsibilities, and possible supports in both virtual and in-person settings.

Including the “Paraprofessional” in a Student’s IEP

Paraprofessional support can be noted in several parts of an IEP, depending on the student’s needs and the format of the IEP. It may be listed in:

- Supplementary Aids and Services
- Transportation
- Addendum

The IEP statement of Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) should document the student’s needs that would justify paraprofessional support.

Supporting Paraprofessionals for Success

Schools and districts should support paraprofessionals so they can be successful in working with the student. Some ways to support paraprofessionals include:

- Professional development on strategies and skills to fully support the student, while maximizing the student’s grade-level academic engagement, independence, and peer relationships
- Coaching and feedback to improve skills
- Written guidelines about communication with families (including when, how, and to what extent specific information can

be shared) and when to refer the family to the teacher about a specific question

You can talk to your child’s IEP team, principal, or district special education coordinator to determine whether these supports are available for your child’s paraprofessional.

Red Flags to Watch For

There are some “red flags” you can watch for with respect to the use of a paraprofessional:

- Indications that your child is not being held to high expectations during learning. An example would be signs that the paraprofessional completed your child’s work. The teacher, not the paraprofessional, should be making decisions about work assignments and the work must be aligned to the grade-level content (with accommodations, adapted materials, and modifications matched to the individual needs of the student).
- Indications that the paraprofessional is making your child more isolated and dependent on adults instead of supporting independence and peer interaction. The paraprofessional should understand how to facilitate peer relationships and independence, as well as how to fade support.

If any of these “red flags” emerge, you should talk to a school administrator about your concerns. You may want to request an IEP team meeting to discuss how to address issues with your child’s paraprofessional support.

Key Points to Remember

Paraprofessionals can help to ensure the success of students with significant cognitive disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Remember these key points:

- The individual needs of the student should determine whether paraprofessional support is provided in the inclusive classroom.

- The student's paraprofessional needs to have the qualities, knowledge, and skills to provide appropriate supports.
- The paraprofessional's activities in the inclusive classroom should be related to the student's IEP goals and making progress in the enrolled grade-level general education curriculum.
- The student's teacher, not the paraprofessional, should be making instructional decisions.
- Talk to your school or district staff if you see "red flags" like low expectations or a lack of support for peer interactions and independence.

Resources

Causton, J. (2014, Nov. 20). *The role of the paraprofessional in the inclusive class* [Webinar]. Brookes Publishing Company. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wn8fcbj1Y6U>

Ghere, G., Sommerness, J., & Reyes, E. (2020). *Pivoting between paraprofessional support in inclusive schools and distance learning* (DL#23). TIES Center.

<https://publications.ici.umn.edu/ties/building-engagement-with-distance-learning/dl23-pivoting-between-paraprofessional-support-in-inclusive-schools-and-distance-learning>

Ghere, G., Sommerness, J., & Sachs, H. (2020, Nov. 9). *Pivoting parapro supports for current learning environments* [Webinar]. National Down Syndrome Congress. <https://www.ndsccenter.org/outreach-education/parent-webinars/>

Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., Luiselli, T. E., & Macfarland, S. Z. C. (1997). Helping or hovering? Effects of instructional assistant proximity on students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 64(1), pp. 7-18. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/252204530_Helping_or_Hovering_Effects_of_Instructional_Assistant_Proximity_on_Students_with_Disabilities

New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education (n.d.). *Developing a plan for facilitating independence and fading support*. <https://www.lehsd.org/cms/lib/NJ50000067/Centricity/Domain/1039/Worksheets%20for%2012.2018.pdf>

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TIES Center
University of Minnesota
215 Pattee Hall
150 Pillsbury Dr. SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Phone: 612-626-1530

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