

THE
MASTER TEACHER®



The Personal Planner and Training Guide for the
PARAEDUCATOR



SECOND EDITION

By Wendy Dover Balough, Ed.D.

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Dedication

To my mother, Ann Fetner

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Wendy earned her B.S. in Special Education from Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. She completed her M.S. and Ed.D. in Special Education at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. She has several other worktext publications and video series on inclusive schools and paraeducators with *THE MASTER TEACHER*[®], which have enjoyed national success.

Wendy received the 1996 Kansas Special Educator of the Year Award from the Kansas Federation of the Council for Exceptional Children.

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Personal thanks go to the SPEDs and SPED want-to-bes in Withers—the future looks bright! Love and kisses to John and Paul for just being so much darn fun and willing to celebrate when Mom finishes a book.

—W. D.

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MYTHS ABOUT PARAEDUCATORS

- ▶ *The paraeducator will take care of all students with special needs and see that they get their needs met.*
- ▶ *The paraeducator is fully trained for his or her assignments.*
- ▶ *The paraeducator receives all of his or her instructions and directions from a special program teacher.*
- ▶ *The paraeducator cannot be a part of student planning.*
- ▶ *Paraeducators can work only with specific students.*
- ▶ *There are no restrictions on the use of paraeducators, as long as what they are asked to do is in the best interest of the student or students.*
- ▶ *Paraeducators always understand and support inclusive programming for students with special needs.*
- ▶ *Paraeducators always know what to do!*

When I am asked to speak to school staffs concerning special services, inclusion, and supporting students with diverse needs, the subject of paraeducators—their roles and responsibilities—always receives a lot of attention. The feeling among most teachers is “We need more help—we need paraeducators!” But when more paraeducators are employed, those same teachers want to know what they are to do with the paraeducators or they wonder why the paraeducators haven’t been trained. During my presentations, I discuss the myths listed above. I’ve also used these myths as starting points for several sections in this *Personal Guide for the Paraeducator*, in order to address the misunderstandings. Pinpointing these common areas of confusion helps keep the guide short and to the point, which is my aim. I know how busy you are—both inside and outside the classroom. I hope that, in addition to dispelling these myths, this guide will also provide paraeducators and all others involved with supporting students who have special needs some parameters for the role of paraeducators in general education and special education programs. If, after reading this book, you can explain why each of the above statements is a myth, I will have met my goal for writing it.

With the movement toward more inclusive schools and classrooms, paraeducators have a hard job to do—to work in all types of school and community settings, providing day-to-day, even minute-to-minute support to a child or group of children with special needs. Unfortunately, paraeducators may not always have the confidence or specific direction they need. In addition, the ability to provide the support that students need cannot be specifically taught—it must come through experience. I hope that gaining that experience will be made easier with these guidelines, suggestions, and—my trademark—forms to use as information-gathering and communication tools.

—Wendy Dover Balough

Section 1

UNDERSTANDING INCLUSION AND SPECIAL SERVICES

The number of paraeducators working in schools throughout the United States is at an all-time high. In 2014, The U.S. Department of Labor reported that over 1.2 million individuals were working as paraeducators and projections indicate that number will continue to climb. By far, the

Paraeducators Go by Many Names

Although *paraeducator* is becoming the most widely recognized term, these noncertified, school support personnel may also be known as:

- Paraprofessionals
- Paras
- Paraprofessionals
- Instructional Assistants
- Aides
- Instructional Aides
- Teacher Assistants
- Teaching Assistants

largest number of these paraeducators works in special education programs supporting students with identified disabilities such as learning disabilities, emotional disorders, intellectual disabilities, or health and physical disabilities. Paraeducators are also hired to work in general—or “regular”—education classrooms and early childhood programs to support classroom teachers who are dealing

with an ever-wider range of student needs. Still others are hired by other special instructional and support programs such as Title I reading and math programs; programs for students who are “at risk” of poor educational performance; or for programs targeting students for whom English is a second language.

Even though the number of paraeducators working in schools throughout the United States is at an all-time high, the number is expected to continue to grow as more and more students needing special services and supports are included in general education instruction as well as district or state assessments. Including students with special needs in general education classrooms while supporting appropriate access to the general curriculum is known as “inclusion.”

“Inclusion is a philosophy, rather than a specific program or classroom. The aim of inclusion is to allow students with special needs and disabilities to learn in the same classrooms and schools as their friends, neighbors, and siblings.”

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Paraeducator Qualifications
Regarding training, paraeducators are not required to have earned a professional teaching certificate or license to be hired for a position. ESEA outlines requirements for assistants working in Title I schools, including two years of post-secondary training or a two-year degree, or successful completion of a test of basic skills. Many districts use these same requirements for most assistants, regardless of the program they support. Even with these increased expectations, most paraeducators receive much of their training through staff development and on-the-job-training *after* they are hired.

Inclusion has brought about changes in the delivery of special education services—both in *where* that service is delivered and in *who* delivers it. Paraeducators are additional personnel hired to extend the services of a school’s certified special support program personnel. They are assigned to programs and directed to support individual students or groups of students in a variety of school and community settings. In its

Paraeducators Target Special Needs
Most paraeducators are hired by programs working with students with special needs. You may think only of special education, but there are many other programs in addition to special education that support students with special needs:

- Title I
- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- At-Risk
- Head Start
- Preschools
- Infant and Toddler Programs

Occupational Outlook Handbook, the U.S. Department of Labor (2014) describes clerical tasks, supervision of students, and instructional responsibilities as support provided by paraeducators. IDEA and NCLB are clear that paraeducators can be used in student instructional programs if they are appropriately trained and supervised.

Until a few years ago, most paraeducators worked almost exclusively in the special education classrooms, resource rooms, and Title I rooms of a school, and they were occasionally seen on the playgrounds and in the cafeterias. Inclusion has brought increasing numbers of paraeducators into classrooms at all levels—preschool through high school—as well as to community and job-training sites. With this movement into the “mainstream” of communities, schools, classrooms, and curricula, paraeducators are faced with new roles and responsibilities. Naturally, paraeducators, the teachers with whom they work, and administrators have questions. Many of those questions form the backbone of this guide. In answering them, the author brings to bear her own experiences and education, as well as the input of the many paraeducators and certified teachers with whom she has worked.

.....

“So, what *exactly* is inclusion?”

Inclusion is a philosophy rather than a specific program or classroom. The aim of inclusion is to provide students with disabilities or special needs the opportunity to appropriately access and participate in the general curriculum. To best understand inclusion, you need to know something about special education, because that is where inclusion started.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

There have always been children with special needs, but there have not always been special education programs. Almost all the special education

A Brief History of Special Education

1975 – Access to Schools

PL 94-142 required public schools to provide a free and appropriate education to all students, regardless of the severity of a disability. Special education programs were developed around a continuum of services and placements. Most placements were separated from the general classroom. Placements included resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, and special schools.

Mid/Late 1980s – The Regular Education Initiative (REI)

After 10 years, special education was found to have many successes—specialized programs and individualized instruction. But students with disabilities were separated, and there continued to be problems with low graduation rates, unemployment, and underemployment. Discussions included “merging” special education and general education into one system.

1990 – Access to the General Classroom

The federal law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and several key changes were made. The concept of “least restrictive environment” (LRE) made teachers consider the general classroom as the starting point for planning and delivering special education services rather than removal to a separate setting. Special education and other support programs began to look at ways to include more students with needs in classrooms with non-disabled peers. Transition services were mandated in this reauthorization. The areas of Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury were added as areas of disability.

1997 – Access to the General Curriculum

Updates to IDEA added more emphasis to ensuring that student participation goes further than a physical presence in the classroom. Students with special needs are to be included in the general classroom curriculum and receive instruction to the maximum extent appropriate.

2001 – No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

This federal law outlined changes to other student support programs, including Title I, ESL, and Bilingual programs through increased accountability standards, focus on reading achievement, and quality of teachers and assistants/paraeducators. Many of the standards and regulations also applied to special education and were confirmed after IDEA was reauthorized in late 2004.

2004 – Increased Accountability

This reauthorization of IDEA included a focus on academic accountability for student and school performance. Many areas were refined and strengthened to further the inclusion, performance, and achievement of students with special needs in the general classroom.

The addition of a paraeducator can often make the general education classroom the least restrictive placement for a student or group of students. Without the presence and support of a paraeducator, a target student may need to be removed to a resource or self-contained classroom. *Paraeducators are that important!*

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programs that are in today’s schools, districts, and states were developed through a series of federal special education laws. Those laws are briefly outlined in the box above.

The first special education law, PL 94-142, was enacted in 1975. It required all schools to offer a “free and appropriate public education...in the least restrictive environment” to all students, regardless of their disabilities or the severity of those disabilities. That law was amended and reauthorized in 1990, 1997, and 2004. The amendments were named the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). You will hear frequent references to IDEA. Interestingly, the term *inclusion* does not appear in this law. Inclusion is, technically, the way in which IDEA interprets “least restrictive environment.”

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In the 1970s, special education started as a separate support for students, aimed at either remediating their skills so they could “make it” when placed back into a general classroom, or providing separate instruction for the students outside the general classroom. While the general education classroom was seen as the “least restrictive environment,” students who were unable to keep up were placed in more restrictive environments, including resource rooms, self-contained classrooms, special schools, and even hospitals and institutions.

IDEA-90 and IDEA-97 provided more information about “least restrictive environment”—that is, *where* students who are receiving special education services should be taught. IDEA-97 specifically states that a student should not be removed from the general education classroom or curriculum unless the student’s disability or needs are so severe that his or her education cannot be achieved in that environment, even with the use of “supplementary aids and services.” The term *supplementary aids and services* means the “whole bag of tricks” that special education personnel have and use when designing, implementing, and evaluating educational programs for students with special needs. You should consider yourself, the paraeducator, among the “tricks in the bag.”

The bottom line is this: more and more students with identified special needs are staying in the general classroom for instruction, and paraeducators often make this possible by (1) being present in the classroom; (2) monitoring and supporting student needs; (3) supporting teachers and classroom instruction, activities, and materials; (4) facilitating necessary accommodations; and (5) implementing modifications or planned instruction on related or alternative skills.

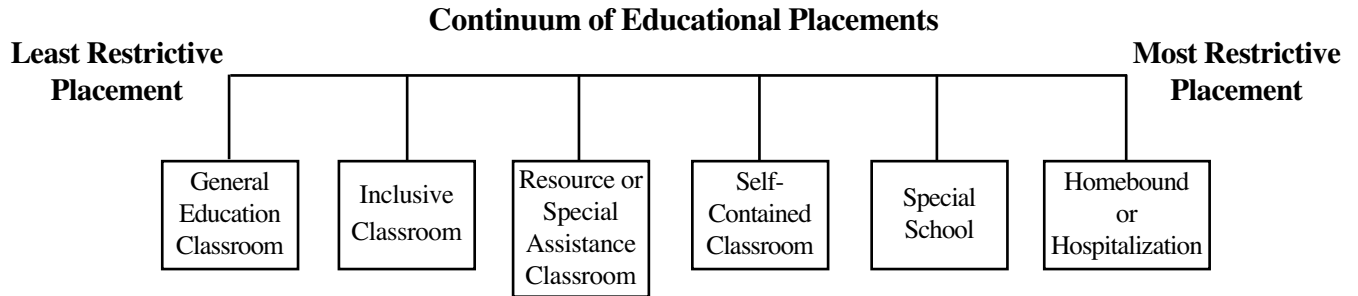
CONTINUUM OF EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENTS

.....

“So, I should expect to work only in a general education or inclusive classroom?”

You should expect to work in a *variety* of classrooms or places, depending on which special needs program you support and the students with whom you work. Special Education, Title I, ESL, Headstart Preschool, and At-Risk Programs (you’ll learn about these in Section 2) are usually school-based programs. That is, they provide services to school-aged children somewhere in or around a school building. Headstart and Special Education also serve younger children—from birth through preschool. Since these children don’t yet attend school, services for them and their families *may be* provided in a school building or other community site—but they are *most often* provided in homes or childcare/daycare facilities. One of the goals of inclusion for school-aged children is for them to achieve in the general education classroom, to the “maximum

extent appropriate.” Students who, because of the nature of their needs or the severity of their disabilities, cannot achieve in general education classrooms, even with support, may need instruction in another setting. Schools and school districts provide a range of educational placements, that is, locations of service delivery or *where* the educational services take place. This range, from least restrictive to most restrictive, is often called the continuum of educational placements, illustrated and described below.



Let’s take a closer look at each of these placement options, starting with the least restrictive.

General Education Classroom. No direct special services teacher, therapist, or paraeducator is provided; only the classroom teacher works with students during class instructional time. A special program teacher or therapist may be providing advice, suggestions, and information to the classroom teacher during planning times.

Inclusive Classroom. A special program teacher, therapist, or paraeducator works with students with special needs in the general education classroom during class instructional time.

Resource or Special Assistance Classroom. Students receive individual or small-group help in a special classroom within a school from a special program teacher, therapists, and/or paraeducators. Students are usually scheduled to come to the resource or special assistance classroom at certain times, but spend most of their day in general education classrooms. Schools and school districts may use different names for this type of classroom. These include Content Mastery Classroom, ESL Classroom, Support Center, and Help Room.

Self-Contained Classroom. Students spend the majority or all of their school day in a special program classroom.

Special School. Sometimes, students with special needs attend a separate school that provides more structure, intensive programming, or specialized instruction than is available even in a self-contained classroom.

Homebound or Hospitalization. Some students may need the most restrictive setting of home or a hospital.

Deciding where a student should receive instruction and support is the responsibility of the student’s planning team. A student may move from one setting to another as his or her needs change. For instance, the team directing the student’s educational program may choose to reduce his or her time

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quickly in a separate setting, parents and educators of today recognize that successful integration into society requires so much more than academic performance. The goal of special education is no longer that of being a “cure.” It now seeks to provide a support that helps each individual student benefit from the general classroom and curriculum, at whatever level is appropriate for him or her. Integration into the mainstream of society is a goal, so it only makes sense that our schools reflect that goal. Accepting and understanding people who are different from oneself makes this integration possible, and that can happen naturally with young children. In the videotape *Regular Lives* (Goodwin & Wurzburg, 1988), the mother of an elementary child with severe disabilities remarks that the other students in her son’s general education class will someday be the adults in his workplace, and she is comforted by the fact that they will be more aware of him, know him, and even like him because of their experiences in school.

In addition, so many exciting and beneficial things are happening in the general curriculum and classroom, such as cooperative learning, integrated curricula, performance assessment, projects, differentiated curriculum, the use of technology, and the recognition of multiple intelligences. General classroom instruction and curriculum are now better and more able than ever before to accommodate differences in student abilities and needs. Parents want to make sure that all children have opportunities to benefit.

Be mindful, however, that none of the benefits of inclusion, either for students with disabilities or those without, will “just happen” simply because a child with special needs is placed in a general education classroom. Achievement in any area, whether academic, social, behavioral, physical, or another, must be planned for, supported, and evaluated—thus often requiring the placement and supervision of a paraeducator.

.....

“I’ve done mainstreaming; isn’t inclusion the same thing?”

If you have worked with students in general classrooms or helped them with work from a general classroom under a mainstreaming model, your goal was to help them complete assignments and keep up with the rest of the class. In an inclusive classroom, some students for whom you make accommodations will still be working to complete assignments and keep up with the class; but other students may have a different goal.

Sheri Appel, a second grade teacher, has observed that in inclusive classrooms, children are allowed to share the same space but do different things, as well as do the same things as other students, but for different reasons. The main difference between inclusive education and mainstreaming is that with inclusive education, students are allowed to benefit from a class at whatever level is appropriate, instead of always being expected to do what everyone else is doing.

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Because of this inclusive idea of some students sharing the same space to do something different from what the rest of the students are doing, or doing the same thing for different reasons, classrooms around the country are experiencing a “paraeducator boom.” The rationale is that if a paraeducator is placed in the classroom or assigned to a student with special needs, the needs of that student will be taken care of. The assumption is that paraeducators know how to work with students and how to modify and adapt classroom materials and activities. The *reality* may be that the paraeducator lacks the training or the appropriate management and supervision from teachers and administrators. Too, there may be a lack of communication between general education and special needs personnel, and this lack will also affect the paraeducator. To deal with these realities, Sections 2 and 3 of this *Personal Guide* provide information on two main areas: working with students in instructional settings and working with other adults, including the general education teacher, special needs personnel, and parents.

PREPARING FOR YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Now let’s begin to “personalize” your *Personal Guide* with some general information that will help prepare you for your assignment. Get **Form 1: Classroom Schedule** from the Appendix (run a copy and keep the “original” for future use). Completing this form will provide you with a quick overview of your various classroom assignments, including the days and times, room numbers, and the names of the students who are targeted for some type of support or monitoring.

Form 1

CLASSROOM SCHEDULE

CONFIDENTIAL

Paraeducator Ann Cheenut

School Year 2002-03

Official Supervisor Maggie Braun

SAMPLE

Instructions: Complete this form to provide an overview of your assignments.

Classroom Schedule
I will be working in the classroom with the following teachers:

Regular Classroom Teacher	Day and Times/Periods	Room #	Target Students (first names only)
1. Cynthia Harris	Tues. & Thurs. 8:45-10:00 (Lang. Arts/Spelling)	106	Derick B. Amy W. Ashley N. Marcia D. Clint C.
2. Rob Cook	Mon. — Thurs. 1:00-1:45 (Soc. Studies)	118	Jeff F. Nathan N.
3. Susan Gibbes	Mon. — Fri. 2:00-3:00 (Science/Health)	110A	Mathew B. Kevin C. Larissa W. Bette S.
4. Sandy Gaston	Wed. 10:00-12:00 Fri. 8:30-11:00	105	Kim G. Marti S. Sandra C. Brad V.
5.			

Many paraeducators are responsible for several students or groups of students and may be assigned to more than one classroom or teacher during the day or week. If you'll notice on the example on the preceding page, Ann has also listed some subject areas.

While this form requires little explanation, a couple of tips might prove useful:

- **Use a pencil on this form.** A paraeducator's schedule is rarely "set in stone." Information in any of the four columns can change, and may change more than once!
- **Keep this form confidential.** As you list students' names in the "Target Students" column, use only first names—and last initials, if necessary. Never list any information about a student's area of disability or need or program title (i.e., special education, Title I, ESL, at risk).

To help with organization, you may want to start an individual file, notebook, or notebook section for each classroom on your schedule so you can save and find the papers you collect in each of them.

OFFICIAL SUPERVISORS AND IMMEDIATE SUPERVISORS

.....
"With the possibility of working with several teachers, how do I know who is in charge of me? Who is my boss?"

Let's start by identifying your **official supervisor**. Unless otherwise designated, in most cases, your official supervisor is the special program person—the special education teacher or therapist, Title I teacher, ESL teacher, or at-risk program teacher or coordinator. If you stay in one classroom all day long or work closely with only one teacher or therapist, it may be safe to assume that this person is your official supervisor. If you are assigned to a specific student, your official supervisor is the case manager for that student. A student's case manager is the teacher or therapist responsible for the student's special program paperwork—the one who oversees the student's overall program.

Your official supervisor will most likely be the person who develops your schedule. He or she may also have some responsibility for monitoring or evaluating your job performance. Your official supervisor may even be the building principal.

Whenever you are in the general classroom, or working with a teacher or therapist who is not your official supervisor, this person could be identified as your **immediate supervisor**. If you work in more than one setting or classroom, the chances are good that your official supervisor and immediate supervisor are not the same person. And, while you

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most likely have only one official supervisor, you may have several immediate supervisors. In this event, you may run into difficulties if directions from your official supervisor conflict with directions from an immediate supervisor. What's a paraeducator to do? A good rule of thumb is to comply with directions of the immediate supervisor when working in that teacher's classroom with students. Later, away from the students, express your concerns and ideas to that immediate supervisor,

Typical Duties of Official and Immediate Paraeducator Supervisors	
Duties of an Official Supervisor (usually a special educator) will most likely involve...	Duties of an Immediate Supervisor (in inclusive settings, usually a general classroom teacher) will most likely involve...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General orientation (related to job, routine, assignment, hours, employee procedures, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific orientation (classroom rules, expectations, specific procedures, activity times, etc.).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing and revising your daily or weekly schedule. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pinpointing specific times your support is needed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names of target students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names of non-identified students with needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to helpful target student information regarding present level of performance, instructional and behavioral goals and objectives, adaptations and modifications, needs and strengths, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about topics, subjects, lesson plans, curriculum, classroom procedures, instruction and access to materials.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General/overall job task objectives, roles, and responsibilities ("marching orders"). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific job tasks as related to students and instructional activities or classroom needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approving or developing inservice programs and training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggesting areas of needed skill development for the paraeducator.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "On the job" skill training.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of job performance that may include input into continued employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on task performance.

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your official supervisor, or both. You will need direction and clarification. Just remember, you must continue a good working relationship with both supervisors, and they will also need to maintain a good working relationship with each other, so use good communication skills and good judgment. A smile doesn't hurt either. The best situation is to talk to both of them at the same time, such as during a team meeting or planning period.

In short, every teacher or therapist you work with should provide you with support and guidance as you work with students in various settings. The problem is they may not know they are supposed to be providing you with support and guidance. They may assume that the second Myth About Paraeducators is accurate (*The paraeducator is fully trained for his or her assignments*), or there may be other reasons. For example, it is well documented that teachers actually receive little preservice or inservice training on supervising or even working with paraeducators (Demchak & Morgan, 1998; French, 1999; Likins & Morgan, 1999; Moshoyannis, Pickett, & Granick, 1999; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). Things are improving, but know that you may need to seek out appropriate supervision if you begin to feel "all alone" out there in working with students with special needs. If your classroom teacher expresses concern over his or her training in working with paraeducators, you might mention that the publisher of this book also offers a companion book called *The Classroom Teacher's Guide to Working with Paraeducators*.

The box at left lists more typical duties of official and immediate supervisors. Knowing the types of information or support you can get from each of the teachers or therapists with whom you work should improve team communication and help clarify the different roles everyone has.

STUDENT PLANS AND PLANNING TEAMS

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"Which 'boss' is directing my support of each student?"

Every teacher with whom you work has responsibilities for supporting, managing, and supervising you so that you can provide support for a student or students served by a special program. Further, every student served by a special program has an individual, written plan for his or her educational progress. This plan is created by a team that includes the parents. Thus, all members of this team have input in directing your support of the student.

For a student receiving special education services, this plan is called an IEP—an Individualized Education Plan—and it contains important information about the student's abilities and needs in academic, social, behavioral, health, and other areas. An IEP must be

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What is a Section 504 Plan?

Some students may have a modification plan or support plan called a Section 504 Plan. These may be students who do not qualify for services under more rigid special education eligibility guidelines but do need assistance and do qualify for accommodations and modifications under Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Law of 1973. A school team that is not a special education team uses the federal guidelines set forth in Section 504 to develop this modification plan. This plan only lists accommodations and modifications that must be made for the student to ensure that no discrimination takes place because of the student's permanent or temporary handicapping condition. There are no programs or personnel directly associated with Section 504 plans, like there are in special education. It is up to the school administration and the teachers involved with the student to see that the accommodations or modifications are made for the student.

reviewed at several points during the school year and rewritten at least once a year. An IEP also lists program goals and objectives that the IEP team feels need special, intense attention, and it includes accommodations and modifications for instruction and testing. In some cases, the IEP contains a behavior improvement plan.

To say the least, this plan would be very, very useful to you. The special education teacher or therapist will have each student's IEP on file. The general education teacher should also have either the IEP or important information

from the IEP. You can ask to read the IEP or receive information from the IEP that will help you work with the student.

Students who are not receiving special education services won't have an IEP, but they will most likely have a plan with another title that lists important instructional information and program goals. One plan that lists modifications, accommodations, or special considerations for students, but is *not a part of a specific special support program* is a Section 504 plan. Section 504 plans are explained in the box above.

All education plans for students with special needs are developed by teams. The people who make up the team will differ depending on the program and the student. IEP team members include at least one general education and one special education teacher. Other members may include therapists, the school psychologist, the guidance counselor, social workers, administrators, and parents. If you work with students receiving special education services, you might consider the members of each IEP team "your bosses." Actually, you are a member of the team, too—whether you get to attend team meetings or not. You gain valuable knowledge and make regular observations of students as you work with them in various settings. The IEP team needs your input. If you get to

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attend team meetings, you can ask questions, clarify your roles and responsibilities, and receive suggestions in person. Whether you can attend IEP meetings depends on your district's or school's policies. You may be working with students or be "off the clock" during meeting times, making it difficult or impossible for you to attend. If this is the case, you can still participate in team meetings by writing down your observations, recommendations, comments, concerns, or questions regarding individual students, and by giving this written information to an attending team member.

The bottom line is this: A team directs the individual programs of students receiving support from special programs by defining the services, goals/objectives, accommodations, modifications, and supplemental aids and services. While the IEP or other plan will help guide your work with individual students, so can the team, as well as the individual members of the team. You can address questions about what works best, what doesn't work, and points that need clarification—as well as your suggestions for ways you can support each student—to the team or to individual members of the team. It's like having a group of experts to answer your questions. Be sure to take advantage of the diversity of expertise.

RESPECTING CONFIDENTIALITY

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"What if someone asks me about one of the targeted students with whom I work?"

The first consideration you should have in answering questions about children with special needs is a **respect for confidentiality**. Basically, respecting confidentiality means respecting privacy. As a paraeducator, you will hear, read, and observe information about students that is considered confidential. In short, you will learn a great deal about the students you work with, as well as their families. You must always respect the privacy of the students and their families.

There are federal and state laws designed to protect the confidentiality of students served by special education, and your school or district may have more specific guidelines. The laws say that only educators directly involved in delivering services to a student may have access to records and information about him or her. Persons not directly involved in delivering services to a student do not have a right to the information. Count yourself among those "directly involved" educators. Yes, you have the right to know information that will aid you in offering appropriate support to the student. But remember, you are allowed access to information *only* for the students with whom you are involved.

Having access to records and test results, being part of discussions and planning for a student, and observing and working closely working with the student are some of the ways you will gain information about

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the student. All of these formal strategies for learning about students' abilities and needs are carefully monitored and even documented.

More informal ways of finding out about students, such as asking questions and listening to conversations about the students, are also useful and they are also less strictly monitored. Just remember: whenever *any* information about a student is concerned, you are a professional, and professionals honor confidentiality. Doing otherwise is not only unprofessional, it is also illegal.

Remember, too, that problems of confidentiality are not always intentional. Eagerness to brag about a student's accomplishment or progress, for example, may appear harmless, but you may give more information about a child's area of disability, needs, or educational plan than should be shared. Here are a few tips to help keep confidentiality from becoming a problem:

- Be careful with whom you share information. Is that person directly involved with the student's education?
- Don't point out or label children in public, outside of school, as "my students."
- Avoid using students' names if you are asked about your job.
- Suggest that questions about a student be directed to the regular classroom teacher or special education teacher.
- Be careful not to distort, exaggerate, or confuse information.
- Never use information about a student as gossip or as a joke.
- Focus comments on student strengths and be positive.
- No matter who asks you a question about a student, if you don't want to answer or are unsure whether you should answer, don't. You can do this gently and politely. Just be direct and honest: "I'm sorry—I can't say."
- Develop a workable response to questions about student information. Write it down here, practice it, and use it!

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“What if one of the other students in the class asks me about the child with the disability—questions like ‘What’s wrong with her?’”

It's only natural that students will have questions, and these questions need to be addressed—but in a way that won't betray confidentiality or give out more information than the student with the question can understand or really wants to know. Older children can understand terms like *muscular dystrophy* or *mental disability*, whereas younger children need short explanations. For example:

For kindergarten or first grade: “Anne can't walk so she uses a wheelchair to get around.”

For upper elementary/middle school: “Sometimes, people with muscular dystrophy can’t walk and have to use a wheelchair.”

Be very honest and direct. Emphasize that the student is like all the other students in many ways, but may be different in a few ways. In the best of situations, the special education teacher and regular education teacher have developed some type of explanation for the students in the class when a student with an obvious difference or disability first comes to that class. Some other suggestions for addressing student questions include the following:

- Try to talk about the specific behavior or characteristic or condition, rather than the child.
- Make sure your own questions about the child and the child’s disability have been answered. You don’t want to pass along inaccurate information. Also, the more you know, the easier it will be for you to answer questions.
- Don’t alarm other students by giving too much detail or description.
- It’s OK to use the lines, “...because she was just born that way” or “...that’s just the way he is” or “...sometimes he needs a little help doing some of the things you can do, and that’s OK” and finally, “Well, remember, everyone is different.”
- Encourage students to offer help or support, but also remind them that people with disabilities need to learn to do things for themselves.
- Instead of asking a student to “take” a student with a disability somewhere, ask the student helper to “go with” him or her.

Remember, all the students in the class will look to adults for examples. The best way to encourage understanding and interaction between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers is to model tolerance, patience, and acceptance. If it’s OK with the adults and that message is reinforced both verbally and nonverbally, the students will pick up on it.

Are you concerned with some questions you’ve been asked? The chart on the following page lists a few common student questions and possible responses. The notes column at the left gives you space for recording student questions or comments you’ve experienced, as well as the opportunity to develop good responses you may want to refer to later.

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Responding to Student Questions

Student Comments or Questions	Possible Responses
“What is wrong with him?”	“ <i>Wrong</i> is not the right word to use. He’s <i>different</i> from you in some ways, but alike in some others. Let’s talk about ways in which you and he are alike.”
“It’s not fair. She gets the easy work and I have to do the hard work!”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It is fair. She’s working on what she needs and you are working on what you need.” • “We don’t always do the same things in this class.” • “Something that’s easy for one person may be hard for another.” • “If you needed it, you would have it too!” • “What’s more fair— we all get the same thing, or we all get what we need?”
“She talks funny.”	Use reflective statements such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You’re having trouble understanding her.” • “Some people talk differently, so you may have to listen more carefully.”
“How does he go to the bathroom?”	“Just the same way as everyone else. Sometimes he may need a little help, and that’s OK.”

YOUR ROLE AND DUTIES IN THE CLASSROOM

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“Now that I better understand the basics, exactly what is my role in the classroom?”

First, let’s distinguish between “roles” and “duties.” Don’t be so overly anxious to get to the “what” that you rush right over the “why.” If you don’t understand the basics that underlie your day-to-day actions in the classroom, problems will eventually arise. So before you ask, “What am I supposed to do?” let’s answer “Why am I here?”

Paraeducators are in classrooms to...

- Support the implementation of individual student plans and programs.
- Work with a variety of students who may have diverse learning needs.
- Provide support, suggestions, and feedback regarding the strategies and instruction that have been implemented.
- Become a team member for some types of planning and evaluation of individual students' plans and programs, as well as classroom, school, and district initiatives.
- Provide *all* students with opportunities for positive learning and interpersonal experiences.
- Provide a variety of support to both students and teachers.

Paraeducators Play Many Roles

A paraeducator's role may be defined by the other adults who work with him or her. Some names used to describe paraeducator support in classrooms include:

- Student Supporter
- Teacher Supporter
- Extra Pair of Hands
- On-the-Spot Adapter
- Communication Tool
- Data Collector

Other ways of describing the paraeducator's roles are listed in the box at left.

Now that you understand the "why" of your position, let's look at the "what"—the day-to-day activities, tasks, and duties that you will perform in order to fulfill your role.

The exact respon-

sibilities of paraeducators in educational programs are gradually becoming more defined—for obvious reason. As you can tell by now, most paraeducators no longer work side-by-side with one teacher or therapist in one place all day long. As paraeducators become instructional supports for students in an increasingly wider variety of places, they need to know what actions and tasks they should be prepared to perform.

IDEA-97 doesn't give teachers or administrators much guidance on this topic. The law does say that paraeducators can assist with special education programs if they are appropriately trained and supervised. This law is scheduled for reauthorization in 2002 or 2003, and it is expected that the reauthorization will better define the terms *trained* and *supervised*. Some states, districts, and even schools have already developed their own guidelines for paraeducators and those who work with them. You'll want to ask your supervisor or an administrator if such guidelines are available.

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*ParaEducator PD Now, created by THE MASTER TEACHER®, the publisher of this book, provides online training to help paraeducators prepare for the responsibilities of their assignments and to assist schools in meeting Title I, Section 1119 requirements. For more information, visit www.masterteacher.com/Paraeducator-Online-Training.

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The national Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, more specifically defines the requirements for paraeducators associated with Title I programs and programs supporting students with limited English proficiency*.

Title I paraeducators hired *after* February 2002 must have completed at least two years of study at an institution of higher education, have an associate's (or higher) degree, or be able to demonstrate, through a formal academic assessment, knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing reading, writing, and math, including readiness skills. Paraeducators hired for Title I programs *before* February 2002 have several years to meet one of these standards.

Currently, there are no such federal guidelines for all special education paraeducators. However, the ESEA-2001 regulations will apply to instructional paraeducators, including those in special education, English as a Second Language, and general education who work in schools with "school-wide" Title I programs. Exceptions to this Title I hiring criterion are paraeducators and individuals who work solely in noninstructional roles, such as food service, cafeteria or playground supervision, personal care services, and non-instructional computer assistance.

The ESEA-2001 legislation also provides specific guidelines regarding the *duties* of Title I paraeducators. Again, these are guidelines for Title I paraeducators and all paraeducators working in schools with school-wide Title I programs, but they offer good advice for special education paraeducators and their supervisors who may not yet have defined state or local guidelines. Each school district must ensure that Title I paraeducators are prepared for any of the following tasks:

- Providing one-on-one tutoring.
- Assisting with classroom management, such as organizing instructional and other materials.
- Providing assistance in a computer lab.
- Conducting parent involvement activities.
- Providing support in a library or media center.
- Acting as a translator.
- Providing instructional services to students under the direct supervision of a certified teacher.

For special education, and perhaps other special-needs support programs, the job descriptions, responsibilities, and tasks vary widely. As mentioned earlier, special education paraeducators may be supporting students in home-based or center-based early childhood programs, or in community and work-related sites related to elementary, middle, and high school programs. In classroom and academic settings, special edu-

cation paraeducators may be providing support in areas beyond reading, writing, and math readiness and instruction.

For example, in addition to supporting academic programs and needs, paraeducators may be assisting with student behavior management, as well as special physical needs, personal needs, health needs, and transportation needs. While guidelines for hiring and job responsibilities must take into account the needs of the students served, those guidelines let you know the basic parameters of your job and the tasks you will do. The purpose of better defined guidelines at federal, state, and local levels is to improve programs, ensure appropriate training for paraeducators, and see that paraeducators are not misused or left to “fend for themselves.” All of the current guidelines and guidelines yet to be defined with the reauthorization of IDEA will improve services and support to students and the teachers who serve them.

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When I am working with target students in a classroom, what do I do if another student asks for my help or I think another student needs my help?”

One of the intents of inclusive education is that resources, both human and monetary, are to be used to their best advantage. Unless specifically directed not to, you are allowed to work with other students in the classroom. Just remember that your first priority is always to see that the needs of any specifically targeted student or students are met. After all, those specific students are the reason you are providing support in the first place.

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