

The Paraprofessional Conundrum: Why We Need Alternative Support Strategies

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“It’s an explosion!” That’s the way one administrator described the rapidly increasing numbers of paraprofessionals who support the special educational needs of students with disabilities. Assigning paraprofessionals to classrooms or individual students has become a dominant and growing model of support, especially for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Increasing the numbers of paraprofessionals sounds like a good idea to many parents and professionals. Families are pleased to know that an additional person will be watching out for their child. Busy teachers and special educators are pleased to have an extra person to share the workload. Administrators often agree to hire paraprofessionals in an effort to be supportive of

practices are double standards that likely would be unacceptable if suggested for students without disabilities.

On the surface, the solutions to under qualified, inadequately supported, or inappropriately utilized paraprofessionals seem obvious: hire more qualified individuals, clarify roles, implement appropriate training, provide professionally prepared plans, ensure supervision, demonstrate appreciation, and improve compensation. These are all reasonable actions worthy of being pursued. Herein lies the *conundrum*, (i.e., “anything that puzzles”). No matter which way you fit together the pieces of the puzzle, something about paraprofessionals playing a dominant role in teacher-type activities just doesn’t fit.

Consider the six variations presented in Table 1; each has an undesirable result. For example, if we don’t adequately train and support paraprofessionals, the IDEA is being violated and students are less likely to be appropriately supported. However, if paraprofessionals are trained for teacher-type roles and not compensated accordingly they feel taken advantage of. If, in recognition of their low wages, paraprofessionals are not asked to engage in teacher-type roles they report feeling disrespected. The combination of these variations generally results in a dissatisfied paraprofessional workforce characterized by low morale and high turnover. This compromises quality and continuity and wastes resources. Yet when paraprofessionals are paid at a level approaching teachers’ wages, it raises budgeting and resource utilization questions for schools. Although in most cases pay differences between professional educators and paraprofessionals are substantial, a story in the *Seattle Times* (9/18/02) reported that paraprofessionals with more than 8 years of experience in the Seattle Public Schools actually earned more than first-year teachers.

While strengthening paraprofessional supports is necessary, it is *not sufficient*. We must be vigilant to ensure that we are not inadvertently perpetuating a double standard whereby students with disabilities receive the bulk of their instruction from paraprofessionals, while students without disabilities have ongoing access to qualified professional educators. Simultaneously, we need to focus on the factors that have contributed to the expanded and inappropriate use of paraprofessionals, namely the attitudes, skills, roles and working conditions of general and special educators to plan for and teach students with a full range of disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The following list includes service delivery options that have emerged as alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals or their inappropriate use. Although currently not in widespread use, these alternatives represent promising possibilities for increasing instructional contact between students with disabilities and qualified professionals.

- **Resource Reallocation**

Trade-off: Additional positions for special educators (e.g., repdms) vs. paraprofessionals with special education training

¶ Generalist educators share teaching duties and work together.

¶ A teacher can provide special education services for a couple