

# Determining When a Student Requires Paraeducator Support

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How should district and school teams decide when they need to hire paraeducators, or teaching assistants? When should the individualized education program (IEP) require the use of paraeducators? How do schools prevent overreliance on paraprofessionals? How can they encourage communication among educators and paraeducators and prevent burnout among paraeducators?

To address some of these issues (see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”), we developed a process to help IEP teams determine when to assign paraeducators to support students with disabilities. This article outlines the rationale for developing the process and then describes the formal, decision-making model, its benefits, and its effects.

## Rationale and Setting

The model originated in the Chittenden Central Supervisory Union (CCSU), a school district in northeastern Vermont, comprised of approximately 3,500 students (Murphy, 1998). In 1988, in response to Vermont’s emphasis on inclusion, the district began to adopt an inclusionary approach to educating stu-

*IEP teams need to review what students need in terms of paraeducator support.*

dents with disabilities. At that time, the district employed 21.5 special educators and 10 paraeducators. By 1999, there were 25.5 special educators and 58 paraeducators employed in the district. This represented a 19% increase in special educators and a 480% increase in paraeducator staff in the 11-year time period. In part, this growth resulted from the availability of resources and the district’s commitment to quality services.

Although the district had an effective team structure for each student, the rapid increase in the number of students and accompanying paraeducators greatly affected the service delivery system. Supervising special educators lacked the time and ability to adequately supervise

and monitor the work of paraeducators responsible to them. There was a concomitant decrease in communication between special and general educators as paraeducators assumed responsibility as the “mediator” between the two groups of teachers. The response to the need for increased related services and paraeducators drove costs ever higher, constricting the capacity to augment the professional staff. This model of delivering services drove the district into a spiral where they were increasingly dependent on paraeducators, but less able to supervise them.

In 1997, the district began to encounter concerns from some classroom teachers and parents that some of the students with disabilities did “not seem to fit in.” To investigate these concerns, the administration conducted an evaluation of the elementary grades, which determined that the concern was specific to the area of peer interactions, but only at the upper elementary grade levels. Such concerns were absent in Grades 1 and 2, where teachers and parents tended to emphasize academics, safety, and functional skill acquisition;

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## What Does the Literature Say About Paraeducators in Inclusive Classrooms?

Since the advent of the Education for Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) in 1975 (now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA), increasing emphasis has been placed on including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Typically, to provide what some educators call “responsible inclusion,” schools assign some students with severe disabilities a paraeducator (also known as a “teacher assistant” or “paraprofessional”) to support them in the general education environment. The size of the paraeducator work force continues to climb as schools and districts place more students with disabilities in programs alongside their peers without disabilities (Pickett, 1999). The focus of this article addresses the need for a comprehensive decision-making model for determining supplementary aids and services (Etscheidt & Bartlett, 1999).

Recent research into this model has pointed to the potential damage to students when schools rely too much on paraeducators (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). These studies suggested that too much of a good thing (paraeducator support) can have far-reaching effects on the following:

- The classroom teacher’s ability to assume ownership for the student.
- The frequency and types of peer interactions the student has.
- The student’s ability to become an independent learner.

Research on the paraprofessional role in inclusion has also shown that paraeducators often assume too much responsibility for the student, bond with students to the point of becoming overprotective, inadvertently interfere with the student’s social interaction goals, and are viewed by parents and educators as the student’s primary teacher (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French & Chopra, 1999). In addition, Mueller (1997) witnessed high turnover rates as paraeducators burned out from increased reliance on them as the sole resource for implementing complex student programs while receiving little or no training to do so. Finally, the authors witnessed their special education budgets inflate as paraeducators were hired due to the belief that the only way a student could successfully be included in a general education classroom was to have adult support (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999).

social interaction and skill development were downplayed. By the time students reached fourth grade, however, when students tend to identify with a social network, educators perceived that some students with disabilities who were included in the general education program were only marginally successful because of their lack of social skills. Although not a pervasive problem, this was a signal that something was wrong; therefore, the district conducted a more intensive review of how paraeducators interacted with students. This analysis revealed that paraeducators were successful at helping students meet most academic goals, but there was little evidence of paraeducators being involved in enhancing a student’s social goals.

Parents who viewed success as achieving academically tended to communicate this to paraeducators; thus, these students were the least equipped socially. Also, parents tended to demand the maximum coverage (by adults) for their children, thereby inhibiting the use of natural peer supports even further.

Confusion also existed as to the paraeducator’s role in assisting the student to be included with his or her peers to the maximum extent possible. Some staff and parents tended to view paraeducators as individual tutors rather than dynamic agents of change, interacting in a much broader capacity by facilitating peer and adult interactions. So, regardless of the parameters put in place to structure the paraeducator’s role, their function was subtly adjusted through day-to-day contact with the teacher and parent. A powerful filtering mechanism was at work that was undermining the integrity of the program, and it was not sufficiently obvious until fourth grade.

Out of this research and discussion, the district established the need to

devise a formal decision-making model that would address the focus of the paraeducator’s role. In addition to the IEP, the district wanted the model to provide a process and a recording document to ensure that all involved shared a common understanding of how the paraeducator was to function, and one that acknowledged the critical component of peer interaction. This was, perhaps, most important for the paraeducator.

### The Planning Process and Instrument

The planning process applies to any student who requires paraeducator support for 50% or greater during the day. The student’s IEP team develops the plan annually in sync with his or her annual

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review, and teams reconvene to discuss any amendments to the plan should the student's support needs change over the course of the year. The process is founded on the following assumptions that we have about paraeducators and the services they provide:

- Paraeducators are valuable members of the educational community and a necessary resource for students.
- Paraeducators are not surrogate teachers.
- The intent of support services is to promote independence, not dependence.
- Paraeducator assignments should be based on need, as specified by the IEP team, consistent with law and local policy.

What follows is a decision-making model that attempts to have all stakeholders on the same page and focused on goals that are objectively determined. Its focus is to determine the role of the paraeducator in relation to

- The specific support needs of the student.
- How independence can be progressively furthered.
- What natural supports are to be used to support the student.
- How social acceptance can be increased.

All of this can be accomplished through a progressive planning matrix that helps those involved recognize and "protect" the essential components of successful inclusion.

The instrument is divided into three parts. The IEP team, including the paraeducator, where applicable, completes the instrument.

1. The *Intensive Needs Checklist* is designed to assist in developing an overview of the student's needs in direct relation to the classroom environment. Completion of the checklist helps focus discussion, especially on more critical issues such as safety (see Figure 1).
2. The *Student's Abilities and Assistance Needs Matrix* focuses specifically on what the student can, or cannot, do and the extent to which he or she needs assistance. The objective is to systematically review

**Figure 1. Intensive Needs Checklist**

1.	Is there a safety concern for self or others? Please describe.	Yes	No
2.	Does the student require continual teacher prompts: during instruction and/or after instruction (e.g., during independent work)?	Yes	No
3.	Does the student require assistance with basic functional skills?		
	toileting	Yes	No
	mobility	Yes	No
	feeding	Yes	No
	dressing	Yes	No
	following basic safety rules	Yes	No
4.	Is the student's performance consistent with his or her aptitude?	Yes	No
5.	Do his or her peers include the student in classroom activities?	Yes	No
	Is the student receptive to peer tutoring and support?	Yes	No
6.	Is the student currently receiving specialized small or individualized group instruction in specific academic areas? Please describe.	Yes	No
7.	Please note what interventions or program changes you have tried and describe their rate of success (e.g., cooperative learning, behavior management plan, re-grouping within the classroom, pairing with other students).		
	If these interventions are not an option, please explain why.		
8.	Has an administrator observed the student?	Yes	No
9.	Does the team recommend that this position be job-shared? If yes, why?	Yes	No

Date of Review: \_\_\_\_\_ Date Amended: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Members: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**A student's program should include other powerful, natural supports, such as peer modeling, thereby enhancing the student's independence and social acceptance.**

**Figure 2. Student's Abilities and Assistance Needs Matrix**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>What student can do without assistance</i>	<i>What student cannot do and needs accommodation to complete</i>	<i>What student cannot do and needs assistance with</i>	<i>Identify areas to promote social acceptance and how peers will be utilized</i>	<i>Identify areas you will target for independence (should be identified in IEP)</i>
Arrival/Time					
Period 1/Time					
Period 2/Time					
Period 3/Time					
Period 4/Time					
Lunch/Time					
Recess/Time					
Period 5/Time					
Period 6/Time					
Period 7/Time					
Period 8/Time					
Departure/Time					

**Figure 3. Plan for Paraeducator Assistance**

<i>Specify Class Activity</i>	<i>Identify need for paraeducator</i>	<i>Identify areas to increase socialization (utilize natural supports, peers)</i>	<i>Identify how independence will be encouraged</i>	<i>Total time needed for paraeducator support</i>	<i>Total anticipated time reduction in paraeducator support by annual review</i>

the student's entire day (see Figure 2).

3. The *Plan for Paraeducator Assistance* identifies where, when, and how the paraeducator will provide support and how the team will encourage independence in the student (see Figure 3).

In completing all three parts of the instrument, the team will have undertaken a thorough review of what the student needs in terms of paraeducator support. They will have systematically ensured that the school provides support according to real versus perceived

need. Last, the team will have addressed facilitating social acceptance and academic learning by progressively reducing restrictive supports and ensuring that the student's program includes other powerful, natural supports, such as peer modeling, thereby enhancing

the student's independence and social acceptance.

### Benefits and Effect of the Planning Process

Although in its infancy, the use of this process has affected students, staff, families and budgets. Evaluation conducted among special educators assigned to the respective teams yielded

sound support for the process. Individuals consistently identified that the decision-making model allowed them to address the often-contentious subject of how much support a student should receive and the specific nature of that support in an organized fashion. The structure provided by the forms offered parents and classroom teachers a clear understanding that the decision

to provide support was *student* centered (e.g., promoting independence, enhancing peer relations, maximizing opportunities for academic and social learning). The notion that the district was trying to save money ceased to be an issue once administrators and educators introduced this model.

By having team members intentionally discussing and documenting the role and function of the paraeducator, districts experienced an increased awareness of the roles and responsibilities of those involved with the student (i.e., general and special educators, paraeducators, peers, and family members). Such documentation also explicitly shows the extent to which paraeducator support is necessary for each student. This is a vital component to responsible inclusion. The intent is to provide teams with a structure that requires team members to address alternative or natural supports. These supports are important to ensure quality peer interactions that facilitate a sense of belonging, enhance actual student learning, and promote incipient friendships—the cornerstones of effective and successful inclusion. This directed outcome enables paraeducators to gain a clearer understanding of their role in helping or hindering student independence and social growth. Last, the process provides for increased accountability for the rising use of paraeducators to support inclusion. Assignment of paraeducators to support students is increasingly judicious and, in the case of CCSU, the budget spiral has ended.

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