

# The Tip of the Iceberg: Determining Whether Paraprofessional Support is Needed for Students With Disabilities in General Education Settings

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*Paraprofessionals represent an important and growing segment of the personnel support used in American schools to provide inclusive educational opportunities to students with disabilities. When and how to utilize paraprofessionals effectively persists as an ongoing challenge in the schools. After presenting selected issues associated with employing paraprofessionals, this article extends the discussion on paraprofessional issues by exploring guidelines to assist teams in making decisions about paraprofessional supports. This includes both considerations for the appropriate use of paraprofessionals when assigned, as well as alternative support solutions. Our discussion is intended to advance dialogue on this important topic and to support the appropriate involvement of paraprofessionals in the education of students with disabilities as valued participants on collaborative teams whose roles are clearly defined and supported.*

**DESCRIPTORS:** paraprofessionals, decision making, service delivery

There seems to be national consensus that paraprofessionals<sup>1</sup> play an important role in educating students

with disabilities (Doyle, 1997; French & Pickett, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Jones & Bender, 1993; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1999; Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & HongBo, 1994; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996; Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Liskowski, 1995). In some cases, assigning a paraprofessional is an appropriate and necessary decision. Under the direction of qualified professionals, trained paraprofessionals can: (a) carry out teacher planned instruction; (b) implement positive behavior support plans; (c) assist students with personal care needs; (d) provide supervision in group settings (e.g., playground, cafeteria); and (e) engage in clerical tasks that free teachers to spend more instructional time with students (Doyle, 1997; French, 1998; Lamont & Hill, 1991; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). In some cases, the involvement of paraprofessionals may be a crucial support that allows a student with intensive support needs to be educated in a general education classroom or school, rather than be placed in more restrictive settings (Martella, Marchand-Martella, Miller, Young, & Macfarlane, 1995).

Yet, determining when paraprofessionals are a necessary support for students with disabilities remains a challenging aspect of developing an individually appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. The purpose of this article is to assist educational teams in making decisions about whether there is a need to assign an individual paraprofessional to support a student with a disability placed in a general education classroom. This article also encourages the consideration of alternative support solutions that may not involve the use of paraprofessionals. We do this by exploring: (a) selected issues regarding paraprofessionals, (b) characteristics and limitations of existing approaches to making decisions about the need for an individually assigned paraprofessional, and (c) guidelines to assist teams in deciding whether or not the individually assigned paraprofessional is a warranted and appropriate course of action.

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<sup>1</sup>The terms used to refer to these school personnel vary widely and often are used interchangeably (e.g., teacher assistant, paraeducator, teacher aide, instructional assistant, program assistant, educational technician, job coach). The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) refers to these individuals as "paraprofessionals."

## Selected Issues

One of the most commonly selected solutions to support students with severe disabilities being included in general education classes is to assign an individual paraprofessional on a full-time or part-time basis (Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996; Wolery et al., 1994, 1995). Many paraprofessionals come to their jobs with life experiences, personal characteristics, and formal education that make them highly valued by parents and professionals alike (French & Chopra, 1999). Although their value is undeniable, it is important to recognize the potential limitations associated with extensive reliance on a paraprofessional model to support inclusive education efforts. In the last few years, the proliferation of paraprofessionals and recognition of their expanded instructional role have been more closely scrutinized in the professional literature (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, 1998; Freschi, 1999; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999).

Often, an apparently straightforward decision about whether or not a student requires individual paraprofessional support is a seemingly visible issue. However, like the tip of the iceberg, most of the real substance regarding when and how to effectively utilize paraprofessional support is below the surface, out of sight. To navigate these challenging waters, one must pay attention to the whole iceberg; in this case, the myriad of important interrelated curricular, instructional, personnel, training, and administrative issues that have an impact on the decisions of educational team members about the use of paraprofessional supports.

### Inadvertent Detrimental Effects

Although the assignment of an individual paraprofessional is intended to be a benevolent, supportive action, it can have inadvertent detrimental effects on students with disabilities if the decision is not carefully made, implemented, and evaluated. Recent research has suggested that the assignment of a paraprofessional to an individual student can establish dependence on adults and interfere with the involvement of teachers, competent instruction, peer relationships, gender identity, or appropriate personal control (Giangreco et al., 1997; Marks et al., 1999; Shulka, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1999).

Giangreco et al. (1997) found that individual paraprofessionals were almost continually in close proximity to the students to whom they were assigned. This is not particularly surprising and is at times desirable. However, data have suggested that in many cases, excessive proximity of paraprofessionals actually interfered with peer interactions and contributed to limited involvement of the general education teacher with the student with disabilities. These data were supported by Marks et al. (1999), who added that paraprofessionals

perceived that it was part of their role to ensure that the student with a disability was not a “bother” to the classroom teacher.

Excessive or unnecessary proximity by paraprofessionals can contribute to the isolation of students with disabilities despite their physical placement within general education classrooms. Such problems may be addressed by teaching paraprofessionals new skills. For example, Hall, McClannahan, and Krantz (1995) trained paraprofessionals to fade prompts, resulting in increased independent engagement by students and satisfaction on the part of the paraprofessionals. Alternatively, solutions may be pursued that do not rely on paraprofessional supports. A recent study by Shulka et al. (1999) compared support provided directly by a paraprofessional with a peer support strategy. The results provided favorable evidence for the use of peer supports when compared to assistance by a paraprofessional. Students in this study who were supported by peers had higher levels of social interaction with their peers who did not have disabilities and had similar or better levels of active engagement in their classes.

### Least Trained Adults With Students Who Have the Most Complex Learning Challenges

In too many cases, reliance on a paraprofessional model used in many of the nation's schools results in the least trained, least qualified individuals assuming the primary educational responsibilities for students who have the most complex learning challenges. Marks et al. (1999) indicated that paraprofessionals were expected to be the “expert” for the student with a disability and to maintain primary responsibility for the student.

This problem of the least trained adults serving students with the most challenging characteristics is not unique to inclusive education efforts. Harper (1994) echoed the same concerns as they pertain to students from cultural minorities who were learning English as a second language. She stated, “. . . their (paraprofessionals’) lack of professional education creates a situation where children with the greatest needs are served by the adults in the classroom with the least preparation.” (p. 66). Harper questioned the instructional practices employed by paraprofessionals and expressed concern that, “Without appropriate understanding of the theoretical and methodological rationale for sound educational practice, paraprofessionals often perform reductionist activities disconnected from individual needs and knowledge that each child brings to the classroom . . .” (p. 68).

Continued advocacy efforts by proponents of inclusive education are designed to ensure that all students have ongoing access to “qualified” personnel and meaningful educational experiences in inclusive settings (Davern et al., 1997; Villa & Thousand, 2000). Brown, Knight, Ross, Farrington, and Ziegler (1999)

have suggested that students with the most challenges to learning require the most skilled teachers, rather than a heavy reliance on the use of paraprofessionals. Students with disabilities who are taught primarily by paraprofessionals and who have limited access to instruction from qualified teachers, special educators, and related services providers may be in danger of receiving inadequate education.

### **Have Professionals Delegated Too Much Responsibility?**

Inappropriate use of paraprofessionals to assume the responsibilities of qualified teachers and special educators may perpetuate a double standard whereby students without disabilities are taught by certified educators and students with significant disabilities are taught by paraprofessionals. As pointed out by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1999), "The intent of using paraprofessionals is to supplement, not supplant, the work of the teacher/service provider." (p. 38). Indicators that professionals may have delegated too much responsibility to paraprofessionals include:

1. The teacher and special educator know less about the student with disabilities than the paraprofessional.
2. Experienced, skilled classroom teachers and special educators defer important curricular, instructional, and management decisions about a student with disabilities to the paraprofessional.
3. The teacher and special educator have a less developed working relationship with the family than the paraprofessional.
4. The absence of the paraprofessional creates a crisis because other school personnel do not know what to do or are not comfortable doing it. This may result in the student being asked to stay home or the student's parent being invited to serve as a substitute paraprofessional.

### **Balancing Specialized and Natural Supports**

Although students with disabilities deserve access to qualified teachers and service providers, this is not to suggest that they must always be served directly by specialized professionals. This runs the risk of "overprofessionalizing" and "overtherapizing" the lives of people with disabilities that can interfere with leading a regular life. Also, it is important to recognize that *certified* does not necessarily equal *qualified*. Anyone who has been in the field for any length of time knows of noncertified paraprofessionals with limited training who were more effective working with a student than a certified teacher or special educator. Undoubtedly, many individuals who are not specifically trained to work with people who have disabilities (e.g., paraprofessionals, classmates, family members) have instincts and talents as natural teachers.

Similarly, many general education teachers, given an

inclusive attitude, appropriate working conditions (e.g., reasonable class size, natural proportion of students with disabilities), and supports (e.g., individually determined training, parent or community volunteers, input from related service providers), can be highly successful teaching students with disabilities. Under these conditions, the probability of their success is high because the principles of motivation and learning are the same, regardless of whether or not a student has a disability label.

Simultaneously, well-conceived natural supports (Erwin, 1996; Jorgensen, 1998; Nisbet, 1992) provided at school, at home, at work, and in the community can offer a powerful and effective counterbalance to professional supports. These natural supports refer to those human supports that would be found in the setting, regardless of whether a student with a disability was there or not. Individuals such as guidance counselors, classroom teachers, school administrators, the school nurse, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, building maintenance staff, parent volunteers, and other students are all examples of people who can provide natural supports in a school. Interestingly, in many schools, paraprofessionals who are assigned to general education classrooms (for the entire class) may be considered natural supports because their presence in the class does not depend on the presence of a student with a significant disability. When schools go beyond naturally existing resources that reflect their general service delivery model, and add resources because of the presence of a student with a disability, the assignment of a paraprofessional becomes a decision point and raises many of the issues highlighted in this article.

### **Are Paraprofessionals "The Way" to Include Students With Disabilities?**

Assigning a paraprofessional has become a fairly common national response to supporting students with disabilities in general education classes (French, 1999; Werts et al., 1996; Wolery et al., 1995). In fact, for some people, it may be a foregone conclusion that *the way* to include students with disabilities in general education classes, particularly those with severe disabilities, is to assign a full-time or part-time paraprofessional. Participants in a study by Marks et al. (1999) supported this view when they indicated that the educational benefits for the students with disabilities in inclusive settings were the responsibility of the paraprofessionals and that those benefits would have been minimal without them.

Yet, it is important to recognize that there are other ways to support students with disabilities in general education classes that do not rely heavily on the use of paraprofessionals. Palladino, Cornoldi, Vianello, Scruggs, and Mastropieri (1999) report that in Italy, a country that has had a strong national policy of inclusive education since 1977, only about 10% of the

schools employ paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities. They support inclusive education by ensuring relatively small class size and correspondingly small special educator caseloads compared to schools in the United States. Because teachers and special educators have more opportunities to work directly with students who have disabilities, paraprofessional roles focus more on personal care and mobility supports than instruction.

Often, assigning a paraprofessional can be accomplished relatively quickly and may appear to cost less than hiring more highly trained professionals who may be in short supply. Whether, in fact, assigning a paraprofessional is an educationally effective decision typically is unknown (Jones & Bender, 1993; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). Educational effectiveness depends on a variety of factors such as the purpose of the assignment, the outcomes sought, and the skills of the paraprofessional and other team members.

### **Current Approaches to Paraprofessional Decision Making**

No fully described models exist in the professional literature which have reported systematic field-testing or other research data on the use and impact of decision making models for determining the need for individual paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Freschi (1999) described one of the few published approaches for "working with one-to-one aides" (p. 42) that has been used. In this approach, the first step is a justification review with a set of accompanying guideline questions to assist teams in considering paraprofessional supports and alternative solutions. In part, this approach is based on the notion that the assignment of a one-to-one paraprofessional should be considered temporary, with an end in sight.

Informal review of a small number of school district paraprofessional decision making approaches indicates that often these local efforts, born of necessity, have been perceived positively. For example, in the Chittenden Central school system (Essex Junction, VT), efforts to address paraprofessional decision-making practices are believed to have raised people's awareness about paraprofessional issues, provided some checks and balances within the system, and established higher levels of accountability when the school board is asked to pay for new paraprofessional supports (Chittenden Central Supervisory Union, 1997; F. Murphy, personal communication, April 13, 1999).

Despite the positive aspects of locally developed approaches, some of them have limitations. Frequently, existing paraprofessional decision making guidelines rely heavily on two broad categories of criteria, student characteristics and categorical disability labels. Models that rely too heavily on student characteristics tend to

put a disproportionate emphasis on identifying "what's wrong with the student" without adequately considering whether characteristics of the school, classroom, personnel, or organization contribute to the perceived need for paraprofessional support.

Decisions about paraprofessional supports based on categorical labels (e.g., autism, deafness, blindness, deaf-blindness, orthopedic impairments, severe mental retardation, severe emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities) are highly questionable given the heterogeneity of students labeled under any disability category. This is further complicated by the fact that the level of severity is widely relative from school to school and person to person.

Some locally developed models approach decision making about supports in a manner whereby potential support solutions are limited to the student needing paraprofessional support: full-time, part-time, or not at all. This represents a potentially restrictive range of solutions to support a student's special educational needs. Models driven by identification of perceived student deficits or categorical labels may inadvertently discourage school personnel from considering alternative support solutions that involve some use of paraprofessionals in combination with alternative support solutions or solutions that do not involve the use of paraprofessionals. In other words, such models leave insufficient room for considering that it may be improvements in aspects of the school program or personnel, rather than exclusively student characteristics, that need supports that will ultimately benefit the student. Assigning paraprofessionals, when the root of the problem rests in curricular, instructional, personnel, service provision, training, or organizational factors, may mask serious concerns or delay attention to them.

Additionally, although some school personnel may be involved in decision making regarding the potential need for personnel supports, too often the decision making roles of students with disabilities, their parents, and classroom teachers are insufficient or unclear (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1998). The absence of a decision making process or the lack of clarity regarding an existing process increases the potential for conflicts among the various stakeholders who are responsible for educating the same student (Giangreco et al., 1998). This problem is exacerbated in the absence of a shared understanding about the principles and values upon which any decision making process is based.

Some school district models extend beyond student characteristics. They do this by posing questions to encourage consideration of: alternative solutions (e.g., differential teaching formats, peer supports, grouping changes); planning or problem solving strategies; identification of personnel training needs; and evaluation procedures to assess the impact and to scrutinize the continued need for paraprofessional supports (Chitten-

den Central Supervisory Union, 1997; Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union, 1994). The guidelines presented in the following section are designed to extend the work of school district personnel who have been addressing this issue.

### Guidelines for Deciding on Paraprofessional Support

When is it appropriate to assign an individual paraprofessional? Although there are no empirically verified criteria for making such decisions, some existing approaches have the following criteria in common (Chittenden Central Supervisory Union, 1997; Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union, 1994):

1. Student needs assistance in self-care (e.g., toileting, feeding, dressing, mobility).
2. Student needs intensive assistance in the area of communication support.
3. Student behavior poses a disruption in the classroom.
4. Student poses a direct discernible safety risk to him/herself or others.
5. Student needs intensive, ongoing support in vital areas (e.g., academics, functional skills, re-direction to benefit from instruction).

These criteria seem quite reasonable as a starting point when making appropriately individualized decisions about the assignment of a paraprofessional. These examples are exclusively based on student characteristics. The guidelines presented in this section of the article explore considerations that extend beyond these criteria and offer alternatives in an effort to assist teams in making appropriately individualized decisions about paraprofessional supports.

When students present any of these criteria, school personnel may run the risk of overgeneralizing support provision by assigning a one-to-one paraprofessional on a full-time basis. In discussing the utilization of paraprofessionals in programs for students with autism, some of whom meet the aforementioned criteria, Boomer (1994) identified a series of myths. One of these myths was, "Students with autism require constant one-to-one supervision" (p. 6). Few students, even those with severe or multiple disabilities, require constant one-to-one adult attention. For example, typically, a student who requires personal care assistance does not require it constantly. Similarly, although a student in need of communication support may benefit from the assignment of an individual paraprofessional for specific aspects of the school program, it is vital for that student to have other communication partners such as the classroom teacher and peers (Duncan & Prelock, 1998). The remainder of this article presents a series of guidelines that encourage teams to consider the interactive nature of student characteristics, the student's individualized education program (IEP), and the

characteristics of the school, classroom, and its personnel.

The guidelines presented in Table 1 include ideas that can be applied when: (a) paraprofessional support is being considered as part of IEP development, (b) disagreement exists among team members about the need for paraprofessional support (when an IEP is already in place), or (c) the need for support services is being reevaluated. Although the guidelines are presented as distinct points, team members are encouraged to view them as interrelated.

#### Guideline 1: Rely on Collaborative Teamwork

Effective decision making is facilitated when school personnel and the family function as a collaborative team that applies its collective skills and resources to pursue shared goals (Thousand & Villa, 2000). The collaborative team includes appropriate stakeholders (e.g., parent, student when appropriate, teacher, special educator, related services providers, local education agency representative) who are affected by team decisions. So often the perspective of the person who will be affected most by the decision about whether or not a paraprofessional is needed is not adequately considered, namely, the student with a disability. Such involvement by students is an appropriate component of self-advocacy and self-determination (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1998).

When making decisions about the need for paraprofessional supports, all team members should have sufficient knowledge about the student's characteristics, educational program (e.g., IEP goals, extent of participation in the regular education curriculum), and the context for learning (e.g., placement, classroom environment, teaching formats used in the classroom) to contribute to the decision making process. Establishing team norms for interactions (e.g., roles, conflict resolution, communication, meetings) and a working knowledge of creative problem solving (Parnes, 1997) can further improve group functioning.

It is also vital for team members to establish prin-

Table 1  
Guidelines for Deciding Whether Paraprofessional Supports Are Needed

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1. Rely on collaborative teamwork
  2. Build capacity in the school to support all students
  3. Consider paraprofessional supports individually and judiciously
  4. Clarify the reasons why paraprofessional supports are being considered
  5. Seek a match between identified support needs and the skills of the person to provide the supports
  6. Explore opportunities for natural supports
  7. Consider school and classroom characteristics
  8. Consider special educator and related services caseloads
  9. Explore administrative and organizational changes
  10. Consider if paraprofessional support is a temporary measure
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ciples to guide team decision making. This can be accomplished by developing or adopting a “shared understanding,” consisting of an agreed upon set of values, beliefs, and principles designed to help guide decision making (Giangreco et al., 1999). These principles should be consistent with promising or exemplary general education and special education practices as well as with state and federal education laws. Although this can be done at an individual team level, it is preferable if this is developed school or districtwide to ensure smooth transitions and to establish consistent patterns of expectations from grade to grade. Relying on a collaborative team to make decisions about paraprofessional supports minimizes the risks associated with individual errors in judgment.

### **Guideline 2: Build Capacity in the School to Support All Students**

An important question to ask when considering the assignment of an individual paraprofessional is: How well does the classroom currently support the diversity presented by all students? (Baumgart & Giangreco, 1996; Ferguson, Willis, & Meyer, 1996). In general, the more knowledge, skills, and abilities school personnel have to address diverse needs of all students, the lower the need for individual paraprofessional support for students with disabilities. Therefore, building the capacity of the school community allows human and material resources to be developed and utilized in ways that benefit increasing numbers of students with and without disability labels.

When making individualized decisions to support a student with a disability, consideration should always be given to how the decisions reached can be implemented in ways that benefit other students, many of whom do not have disabilities. This has been a primary consideration in the movement toward assigning paraprofessionals to a teacher or classroom (to serve the whole class) rather than to an individual student. The continuing challenge of this shift is maintaining a balance between protecting the rights and needs of individual students with disabilities and meeting the needs of the entire classroom community. Too often, resource allocation, such as the assignment of paraprofessionals, has been viewed in a competitive “win-lose” manner where parents who have children with disabilities are pitted against parents whose children do not have disabilities or are labeled “gifted” as they vie for access to scarce resources.

To diffuse this potential powder keg, it is vital to encourage stakeholders with varying agendas to realize that the challenge of support and resource allocation will be most productive when solutions are approached in a more collaborative manner where the outcomes sought are “win-win.” For example, improving teachers’ and special educators’ skills to individualize and differentiate instruction so that all students can pursue

learning outcomes that are meaningful and challenging holds the potential to benefit students with a wide range of characteristics (Kronberg & York-Barr, 1998; Tomlinson, 1995). Such practices may change the need for paraprofessional support or the ways that paraprofessionals are used by reducing the extent to which teachers relinquish instructional responsibilities to paraprofessionals and function autonomously.

### **Guideline 3: Consider Paraprofessional Supports Individually and Judiciously**

Common professional approaches to “helping” sometimes have unintended opposite effects. Schwartz (1997) refers to this phenomenon as “paradoxical counterproductivity” (p. 28) (a phrase he attributes to the work of Ivan Illich and John McKnight). Therefore, paraprofessional supports, which certainly are intended to be helpful, should be offered judiciously to minimize the potential for unintended harmful effects on students with disabilities (e.g., interference with peer interactions, overdependence, loss of personal control) (Giangreco et al., 1997).

When considering the extent to which paraprofessional supports are necessary, it is important to remember that although more is not necessarily better, a little is not necessarily enough. In other words, individualization continues to be a hallmark of special education, including when it is offered in general education settings. Try to avoid assigning paraprofessional supports just because it seems reasonable upon initial consideration and appears relatively simple to accomplish.

### **Guideline 4: Clarify the Reasons Why Paraprofessional Supports Are Being Considered**

It is important for team members to clarify the reasons why paraprofessional support is being considered and to reach group consensus so members are not working at cross-purposes. Knowing why a paraprofessional may be needed allows the team to make an informed decision and establishes a basis to evaluate the impact of paraprofessional supports when they are provided. If the reason for the assignment of a paraprofessional is unclear, such an assignment may merely shift responsibility for a challenging aspect of a student’s educational program to the paraprofessional without adequately addressing the challenge. In any case, it is premature to identify a potential solution (e.g., assignment of a paraprofessional) before the team agrees on the reasons why additional support is needed.

There are an endless array of reasons why a team member might suggest the need for a paraprofessional, such as the student needs: (a) more instructional opportunities, (b) adaptations to the curriculum, (c) assistance transitioning between classes, (d) personal care support, (e) a positive behavior support plan, (f) work site accommodations, or (g) a communication support plan. Some of these reasons (e.g., providing personal

care support) may be appropriately addressed by a paraprofessional who can offer an extra pair of helping hands (Fletcher-Campbell, 1992). Other reasons (e.g., curriculum adaptation, communication support plan) may be more appropriately the responsibility of the classroom teacher, special educator, or related services providers.

**Guideline 5: Seek a Match Between Identified Support Needs and the Skills of the Person to Provide the Supports**

Reaching agreement on why supports need to be offered has a direct bearing on identifying who should appropriately provide the support. There should be a match between the supports to be provided and the skills of the person designated to provide the supports. For example, if a student needs extensive curriculum modifications or the development of a positive behavior support plan, assigning a paraprofessional is unlikely to meet that need. The paraprofessional may appropriately implement aspects of the plans after appropriate training and with ongoing direction and feedback from a qualified professional. Sometimes, this leads to the identification of staff development and training needs for team members who may be appropriate providers, but who lack specific skills. This approach is consistent with building capacity within the school.

As decisions are being made, it can be helpful to defer judgment by asking, “In the best of all possible worlds, who would provide this support?” The reason for this question is that sometimes team members may think it is most appropriate for a certain team member to provide the support, but they know their availability is limited, so they suggest the paraprofessional as an easy backup. Decisions need not be based on existing availability. School capacity is unlikely to improve and existing problems may be exacerbated when availability becomes the primary criteria.

Considering who should provide a support or service should be pursued broadly to include any members of the school community (e.g., teachers, special educators, related services providers, peers, office staff, guidance counselors, school administrators, cafeteria workers) who have the appropriate skills or who, by learning new skills, can positively influence many students. When making these decisions, it is vital to involve individuals who have been identified in the decision making process and to recognize that supports are fluid and may be provided by a changing configuration of individuals alone or in combination.

**Guideline 6: Explore Opportunities for Natural Supports**

When considering who should provide supports, avoid the temptation to go directly to paraprofessional or specialized service providers (although either may be appropriate in some situations). Teams should consider

natural supports (Martin, Jorgensen, & Klein, 1998), namely, human supports (e.g., teacher, classmates, office staff, school nurse, librarian) that would be present even if the student with a disability was not in the school and classroom. Overreliance on paraprofessionals may be reduced by making effective use of these natural supports.

The student and family should be involved in making decisions about the use of natural supports in an effort to ensure relevance, dignity, and privacy. For example, a student who needs mobility assistance to move between locations in the school building may appropriately get that support from a combination of peers (rather than a paraprofessional). This should only be done after checking with the student, getting approval from the family, and ensuring that appropriate information is shared (e.g., wheelchair safety, student communication characteristics, liability questions answered). Similarly, many schools have established peer support programs to provide extra learning opportunities for students. For example, in some high schools, upper grade students who excel in particular subject areas may be available during designated times to tutor schoolmates seeking assistance. This can also happen less formally in classrooms where students are encouraged to help each other learn. Peer supports can be a natural way of extending practice opportunities for students with disabilities as well. When considering natural supports, ask, “Who would be involved in the same activities or functions if the paraprofessional was not present?”

Consideration of natural supports can occur as part of initial planning and can also be explored when attempts are being made to fade reliance on paraprofessional supports. Expanding the use of natural supports also contributes to building a sense of community within the school and classroom as students and adults help each other learn (Martin et al., 1998). Therefore, students with disabilities should also be given opportunities to provide natural support assistance to others.

**Guideline 7: Consider School and Classroom Characteristics**

When considering alternatives to support students with disabilities, there are many possibilities. The team could consider the physical characteristics of the school, school grounds, and classroom. For example, removing barriers, using adaptive equipment or assistive technology, rearranging the environment, and changing the location of materials and equipment can alter or reduce the reliance of paraprofessional supports.

In other cases, classroom configurations might make the difference. For example, team teaching between general and special educators or multi-age classes could provide a solution by infusing special education supports within the classroom or by creating access to a wider array of peer supports. Sometimes, the challenge

may be changing the attitudes of adults in the school about students with disabilities or addressing issues of the school climate (Fisher, Sax, Rodifer, & Pumpian, 1999). Students with disabilities are likely to fare better and require less or different paraprofessional supports when teachers and other members of the school community accept and welcome them as community members.

A common national concern is class size (Achilles, Finn, & Bain, 1998) and the percentage of students with disabilities in any given class. Teachers with smaller class sizes and a proportionally small number of students with disabilities in those general education classes may have conditions that allow them to be more involved with all of their students with and without disabilities (Palladino et al., 1999). Regardless of class size, consideration of instructional practices employed in the classroom can also address support needs. For example, in some cases, students with disabilities are inadequately included in classroom instruction because they have difficulty benefiting from the types of teaching format being used by a teacher that may be geared toward the middle achieving child (Boudah, Deshler, Shumaker, Lenz, & Cook, 1997). When teachers faced with a heterogeneous grouping employ more child centered and participatory instruction (e.g., small cooperative groups, learning centers, activity based instruction) (Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995), students may not require the same level of paraprofessional supports.

#### **Guideline 8: Consider Special Educator and Related Services Caseloads**

The caseload size for special educators and related services personnel can be a major consideration in determining the need for paraprofessional supports (Brownell, Smith, & McNellis, 1997; Marsal, 1998; Platt & Olson, 1990). Many special educators and related services providers have a caseload of students on IEPs. They may also be case managing or working with students served under Section 504 plans or students considered at risk who are served on school based educational support teams. This combination of students coupled with additional responsibilities (e.g., screenings, evaluations, committee work) may leave special educators and related services providers with insufficient opportunities to work with students and classroom teachers or to adequately supervise paraprofessionals. Adjustments to caseload size and configurations (e.g., manageable proportion of students requiring intensive supports) can allow special educators and related services personnel to more effectively carry out their roles in educational planning, implementation, and evaluation. Smaller caseload sizes or those that are reconfigured to account for personnel skills and abilities can result in more effective use of paraprofessionals in the classroom for all students. These

changes can also reduce the number of paraprofessionals being supervised by a single special educator.

#### **Guideline 9: Explore Administrative and Organizational Changes**

School administrators (e.g., principals, special education administrators, and supervisors) can have an impact on the use of paraprofessionals by exploring a variety of organizational and administrative changes (Sage, 1996). For example, scheduling paraprofessionals in concert with the school's master schedule can improve the efficiency of existing resources. Students who rely on paraprofessional supports at one time of day may not require those supports at other times and can be reassigned. Being aware of the varying requirements for paraprofessional supports at different times of the day may allow scheduling to be adjusted or personnel to be deployed more efficiently.

Administrators can also assist by considering creative alternatives to paraprofessional supports. For example, in some schools, administrators reallocate existing resources by trading paraprofessional positions for special educator positions. For example, in the Charlotte, VT, public school, the resources originally devoted to three paraprofessionals were reallocated to hire a special educator at .8 FTE (F. Williams, personal communication, October 1, 1999). The amount of special educator support that can be procured using this reallocation approach varies based on the salaries and fringe benefits of the personnel. Reallocation reduces the caseload of students served by special educators, reduces the number of paraprofessionals supervised by the special educator, and creates expanded opportunities for the special educator to work in general education classrooms.

A different approach has been employed in the Hopkins School District in Minnesota where a Learning Resource Teacher position (Grades K-8) was created in an effort to provide improved instructional supports in classrooms for all students (Hopkins School District, 1997). Learning Resource Teachers are certified teachers who spend about 80% of their time implementing instruction in general education classrooms that include students with disabilities. They engage in many of the instructional support functions often expected of paraprofessionals and are not expected to do many of the assessment, planning, reporting, and parent conferencing roles of the classroom teacher. In part, this model is based on the notion that those involved in extensive instruction of students should be trained teachers. Learning Resource Teachers are compensated on a different pay scale. They earn less than a classroom teacher, but more than a paraprofessional based on their duties and responsibilities and hours of work. This is a general education model and was not initiated to address special education issues. However, when such



models are used in inclusive schools, they can have an impact on the need for paraprofessional supports.

### **Guideline 10: Consider if Paraprofessional Support Is a Temporary Measure**

Solutions that could potentially reduce reliance on individually assigned paraprofessionals are well within the control of teams to act in a timely fashion on their own (e.g., instructional formats, heterogeneous student grouping, peer supports, participatory and differentiated instruction). Others can be accomplished by the team, but require more time (e.g., ongoing staff development). Still others are likely beyond the control of the team and require actions by administrators or school boards (e.g., reducing class size, changing caseloads, changing master schedules). Therefore, teams may find themselves recommending paraprofessional services as a temporary measure to address immediate needs while other solutions are being considered and adopted.

It is important for team members to agree whether paraprofessional services being recommended are necessary or whether they are temporary until more appropriate solutions can be reached. When the assignment of a paraprofessional is a temporary measure, written plans can help teams stay on course to pursue their ultimate goals for building capacity in their school. Written plans can include a statement of (a) short-term, medium-term, and long-term solutions; (b) proposed actions to be taken by specified people; (c) rationale for those actions; (d) required resources; and (e) timelines to facilitate accountability. In any case, it is desirable to evaluate the impact of paraprofessional support on an ongoing basis to determine if it is having its intended impact and if it is having any unintended impact.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, paraprofessionals play a major role in the education and inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes. Their involvement has undoubtedly been beneficial for many students and in some instances has inadvertently interfered with the education of others. The time is past due to more closely scrutinize our schools' increasing reliance on paraprofessionals and consider alternatives. In doing so, we are cognizant of the danger that our calls for scrutiny might be misinterpreted as "anti-paraprofessional" or might be inappropriately applied to avoid spending money or providing necessary student supports; this is clearly not our intention. Having worked closely with many paraprofessionals, we are continually impressed by the dedication, skill, and creativity many paraprofessionals bring to their work. We believe that the issues we have raised and the guidelines we have offered are "pro-paraprofessional" because they help ensure that paraprofessionals, when assigned, work as part of a collaborative team where their role is clearly

defined and their work appropriately planned and supported. More importantly, the issues and guidelines suggested are "pro-student."

Research is needed to evaluate whether paraprofessional supports truly match the educational needs of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and whether they are having their intended impact. In doing so, we are faced with many unanswered questions that cut to the core of how we think about and value our students with disabilities. Is it acceptable for students with disabilities to be educated by paraprofessionals, whereas students without disabilities receive their instruction from certified teachers? Are we willing to make the changes in our schools that are illuminated by the presence of students with disabilities that, if adopted, could benefit a wide range of students with and without disability labels? Are we willing to acknowledge that the challenges we face may have less to do with individual student characteristics and perhaps as much to do with our own attitudes and practices? Are we willing to create the working conditions that allow teachers, special educators, and related services personnel to do their work rather than pass it along to undertrained and underpaid paraprofessionals? Deciding whether an individual paraprofessional is needed to support the education of a student with a disability seems like such a simple decision, but it really is just the tip of the iceberg!

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