



Key points:

- **Divvy up classroom jobs**
- **Advocate on behalf of paraprofessionals to administration**
- **Match paraprofessional's classroom tasks to personal interests**

How to effectively incorporate paraprofessionals into the classroom: Tips for new teachers

As a new special ed teacher, Peggy Yates sometimes didn't know what to do with the paraprofessionals in her classroom. "I was not the best at managing paraprofessionals," said Yates, who is now an assistant professor at Alma College in Michigan, where she serves as program director of special education teacher preparation.

"I had no training, and in most cases in my career the paraprofessionals were older than me," she said. "So here I was, a younger teacher, being given three paraprofessionals at a time and not having any experience of how to make that plan work."

Now, after years of research, consultancy, and personal experience, Yates shares information and insight with current and soon-to-be special educators. Here are a few tips for working with paraprofessionals that you can pass along to teachers in your district.

Set guidelines from the beginning. Make sure the paraprofessional knows from the start where he needs to be and what responsibilities he has at any time of the day, Yates said. "Divvy up jobs," she said. "Say, 'I will do this, while you do that,' and 'While I'm here, you're there.'"

Encourage dialogue about paraprofessionals between administrators and teachers. Administrators can talk with teachers about what their expectations are for the paraprofessionals, Yates said. A new teacher, especially, may not know. Teachers can talk with administrators about allocating time for paraprofessional training. "A teacher needs to be able to talk to administration and say, 'I need time with this person. They need to be trained,'" Yates said.

Create a partnership. Students will know whether a teacher and paraprofessional get along, Yates said. "Break down that barrier of, 'I'm in charge, you're not,'" she said. Share lesson plans via Google Docs with the paraprofessional, and ask him what he would like to do. Express to the paraprofessional that he has the power to make some decisions.

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Paraprofessionals have filed grievances against teachers because they didn't like the way things were going in the classroom, Yates said. "You can make an ugly situation by not taking the time to say, 'What can you do while I'm working on this?' or 'Here is the instructional plan; my lesson plan has incorporated you in this way.'"

Utilize paraprofessional's strengths. Inventory your paraprofessional's interests outside of school to see if any of them can be drawn into the classroom setting, Yates said. Ask the paraprofessional what she is comfortable doing, then utilize her strengths.

For example, if the paraprofessional is good at writing, give her a few guidelines and then the leeway to do creative writing with students. If she is a good oral reader, find or create a space in the classroom where she can go to read aloud to students. If the paraprofessional is good in a particular subject area that a student is working on, whether that's math or music, pair up the paraprofessional with that student. "Say, 'I need you to work with this person today because they need to do X and we know you're good at it,'" Yates said.

Use your knowledge of the paraprofessional's strengths to ascertain the best working relationship for her and the students. "It's a teacher's responsibility to know," she said. "Don't pair them with the students where they're going to get frustrated."

Offer nonverbal affirmations. Don't underestimate the power of nonverbal communication when interacting with paraprofessionals. "Sometimes it's a gentle, friendly smile or a nod of affirmation to say, 'You're doing a good job, and I'm really glad you're here,'" Yates said.

Yates will present on this topic at the Council for Exceptional Children 2019 Convention & Expo from Jan. 29 to Feb. 2, 2019, in Indianapolis.

Mark your calendar: Educational consultant and former Deputy Superintendent Mary Schillinger will present the session [Paraprofessionals -- How to Staff and Train for Supporting Student Independence in Core Rigor Learning](#) at [LRP's 40th Annual National Institute on Legal Issues of Educating Individuals with Disabilities](#) May 5-8, 2019, at the Gaylord Palms Resort and Convention Center, Orlando, Fla.

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