



Working with a Paraprofessional

By Gina Riley

As a teacher education student or new teacher, you may not have considered your working relationship with the various education professionals who will help teach your students. Most likely you will have students who need additional resources to succeed, so you might have a special education teacher, ELL specialist, and one or more paraprofessionals (also called teaching assistants) working with your students and you.

Whether these education professionals work in or out of your classroom, it is vital to everyone's success to develop a good co-teaching partnership. It is especially important when a paraprofessional is in your classroom full-time or on a regular basis. Though a paraprofessional's duties may already be in place when you come

into the classroom, it helps to realize the various ways that these educational assistants can contribute to the classroom. For example, the paraprofessional can be a big help in:

- taking notes,
- re-directing students,
- assisting with modified work,
- offering additional or different instruction and stimuli for students,
- helping with tests, and
- answering questions.

As noted in *Special Education Resources for General Educators* (Council of Chief State School Officers 2008), many resources are available to assist collaboration with paraprofessionals, including competency areas that identify effective ways to work with paraprofessionals. These competency areas are supervising, communicating, managing work, modeling, planning and scheduling, providing instructional support, public relations, and training. These

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Creating a Positive Relationship with a Paraprofessional

1. Introduce the paraprofessional to your students as an equal teacher in terms of respect and discipline.
2. Learn his or her strengths and talents and use them in your lessons.
3. Share materials: provide a student copy and answer keys for all activities.
4. Give the paraprofessional time to adjust to you, your classroom, and your students.
5. Make sure he or she realizes which students to help and what their needs are.
6. Help your paraprofessional feel part of the class: share lessons, plans, and ideas. Ask for input, opinions, and lesson contributions.
7. Utilize him or her to oversee small groups of students when you work with inclusion students.
8. Invite your paraprofessional to attend team, student, and parent meetings.
9. Do not be afraid to ask him or her to do a task or change something that they are doing.
10. Debrief at the end of class and ask his or her opinion on the lesson.
11. Seek paraprofessionals who are talented, caring, and competent. (Giangreco 2003).
12. Encourage your school to provide on-going training for paraprofessionals (Giangreco 2003).
13. Offer mutual respect for his or her work and contribution.

resources can be found online at: http://serge.ccsso.org/question_5_5.html.

In some school districts, paraprofessionals are required to have an associate degree, but many are certified teachers or have degrees in other fields. Associate degrees can be earned to become an Education Instructional Assistant or to be in Early Childhood Education. In many states, the Department of Public Instruction issues a five-year license to qualified paraprofessionals. This license also can be obtained if the individual already has a bachelor's degree.

The bottom line is that paraprofessionals are well qualified and they should be treated as an equals. Most teachers find they enjoy having an extra set of eyes to help in the classroom! Most of all, having a paraprofessional can be rewarding for you and your students. Strong bonds can be formed and a healthy, happy learning environment obtained.

As you consider the role of a paraprofessional in your classroom, it is important to

know the expectations of the special education teacher or supervisor. Some paraprofessionals view their role as limited to only helping their special education students. Others want to be highly interactive and help the teacher and students in any way possible. If the classroom is an inclusion setting, paraprofessionals' first responsibility is to *their* students, but many are more than willing to help *any* student in need. Teachers should be open and willing to accept paraprofessionals as fellow education professionals and positive contributors to the classroom. Doing so will provide a welcoming and accepting environment. 🍏

References

- Council of Chief State School Officers. 2008. SERGE: Special Education Resources for General Educators. Available at http://serge.ccsso.org/question_5_5.html.
- Giangreco, M. F. 2003. Working with paraprofessionals: To make the most of paraprofessional support, teachers must change their role from gracious host to engaged teaching partner. *Educational Leadership* 61(2): 50-53. Available at www.uvm.edu/~cdci/evolve/working.pdf.