

STAND BY ME: PARAPROFESSIONALS SERVING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Educating special education students in public schools requires a collective and collaborative effort. Typically the school team includes general education teachers, special education teachers, specialists/therapists, and paraprofessionals. The level of support provided by any provider depends on the needs of the child as well as the specific requirements specified in a child's individualized education program ("IEP").

Paraprofessionals are referred to by many names, including teacher's aides, instructional assistants, para-educators, or one-to-one-aides. Paraprofessionals, like teachers, are held to high professional standards under federal laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and therefore must be "highly qualified" as determined by state law. This means that the level of educational background and experience of a paraprofessional is not only important for determining whether a school district is complying with such laws but also for evaluating whether a particular child's program is appropriate. Like teachers, paraprofessionals are oftentimes directly and closely involved in the instruction of special education students and, as such, their role can play a critical part in how a school responds to legal challenges to its programs or classrooms.

Duties of a Paraprofessional

So what makes a good paraprofessional? While any paraprofessional may be able to meet the minimum educational requirements or meet certain testing requirements specified by a state, strong paraprofessionals are more than merely competent. They are able to take teachers' directions well, be flexible and accommodating to the people/children and environment they support, and be good record/data keepers of children's progress or needs. Whether serving as a "floating" instructional assistant who rotates from classroom to classroom or as a full-time one-to-one aide for a severely disabled autistic child, paraprofessionals are typically called upon to demonstrate proficiency in implementing curricular modifications and IEP goals under the close supervision of a certificated teacher. Many effective paraprofessionals also know how to "read" a child or children and to anticipate what they may need behaviorally or emotionally. The challenges presented by supporting an aggressive or violent disabled child or a classroom full of non-native English language learners can make for a highly demanding job.

Proper Training and Supervision is Key

Appropriate training for a child's team of professionals is of paramount importance when ensuring that a school district has complied with all legal requirements to ensure a special education child has been provided a free appropriate public education ("FAPE"). The question of how much training or the quality of the training and/or supervision a paraprofessional has had can distinguish a highly skilled paraprofessional from an ineffective one. What services and supports are written into a special education child's IEP may very well determine what kind of supplemental training and support a paraprofessional would need in order to appropriately serve the child. For example, a child who suffers from diabetes and has an individualized health plan may need a paraprofessional who is familiar with the child's health plan and who can support the child in extra-curricular activities in



order for the child to participate. Similarly, children who require Applied Behavior Analysis or “ABA” therapy will likely need the support of a paraprofessional – be it a one to one aide or a classroom-embedded instructional assistant – who is familiar with the specialized techniques and strategies of such an instructional methodology. What’s more, the failure to provide sufficient or appropriate supervision and training to such paraprofessionals could very well directly lead to liability for the school district. For example, several cases across the country involving parental challenges to the use of restraints and/or seclusion in schools have arisen based on allegedly inappropriate measures teachers and paraprofessionals have used with special needs children. School districts would do well to train their paraprofessionals working with special needs children in particular about the current legal parameters and issues pertaining to the use of certain behavioral interventions that may be challenged as impermissible measures.

Paraprofessionals Beware

As much as paraprofessionals may have all joined the profession to work to further children’s educational growth or to gain experience working with a certain population of students, they may get caught in the middle of disputes and conflicts between parents and school officials. Paraprofessionals may be perceived to be the reason a child’s program is as successful as it is or the reason why a particular special education classroom is considered to be ineffective or not as highly recommended. What is more, because some parents even try to hire a school paraprofessional to work privately in the home on his or her own time, issues of potential professional conflict can arise. As another example, some paraprofessionals may, on occasion, be called by either a parent or a school district – or both - to testify in a court proceeding on behalf of a special education child. Foremost, paraprofessionals working in the school setting should abide by their professional obligations. To ensure proper compliance with all laws affecting special education students, paraprofessionals should be provided, and comply with, clear guidelines for what is expected protocol and behavior when carrying out their work duties.