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Special Education

Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-3 (revised): Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support

To: Administrators of Special Education, Parents, and Other Interested Parties
From: Marcia Mittnacht, State Director of Special Education
Date: February 26, 2015

The purposes of this advisory are to:

- a. Advise school districts and parents about concerns regarding inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals.
- b. Clarify when it may be appropriate to use a paraprofessional, as well as ensuring adequate training and supervision.
- c. Provide recommended actions and sample tools to increase school district capacity to support students with disabilities.
- d. Clarify the decision-making process for assigning paraprofessionals to individual students.

A. Introduction: Response to a Cry for Help

When school personnel or parents request a paraprofessional, they are asking for help. Something is amiss. Should a school district respond simply by assigning a paraprofessional to an individual student? Absolutely not.

"If schools respond exclusively to the request for a paraprofessional, without fully understanding the meaning behind the request, it increases the likelihood of masking the underlying issues and delaying attention to them."¹ Instead, "the task is to identify the underlying issues so that they can be addressed."²

The essential premise of this advisory is that the underlying learning needs of each particular student - that is, the root causes of the student's educational profile or to provide a teacher with temporary relief from a demanding student. This may leave unaddressed key issues such as (a) improving teacher ability to educate a full range of students with disabilities; (b) building capacity in general education to design curriculum and instruction for mixed ability groups that include students with disabilities; and (c) changing or improving student behavior.

B. Concerns Regarding Inappropriate Use of Paraprofessionals

Data reflecting substantial increases in the number of special education paraprofessionals raises concerns about whether districts are effectively responding to the educational needs highlighted by requests for a paraprofessional.

The Department is particularly concerned by reports that, in some cases, paraprofessionals have been assigned simply on the basis of a student's educational profile or to provide a teacher with temporary relief from a demanding student. This may leave unaddressed key issues such as (a) improving teacher ability to educate a full range of students with disabilities; (b) building capacity in general education to design curriculum and instruction for mixed ability groups that include students with disabilities; and (c) changing or improving student behavior.

The Department is also concerned that paraprofessionals have been assigned responsibilities that require the skills of a licensed teacher - for example, making curriculum decisions, planning lessons or designing adaptations, as compared with implementing decisions made by the teacher. There have also been reports of inadequate training and supervision, making it impossible for a paraprofessional to be effective. And, paraprofessionals may continue to be assigned even though other services or supports could more appropriately address the student's learning needs. Inappropriate use of paraprofessionals may have detrimental consequences such as over-dependence, interference with peer interactions, insular relationships, stigmatization, provocation of behavior problems, or diminished student-teacher interactions.

This is not to say that paraprofessional services should never be used.³ As with any other special education service, paraprofessionals are inherently neither appropriate nor inappropriate for a particular student. Appropriate use of paraprofessionals depends, to a large extent, on whether the paraprofessional has the requisite skills to address effectively one or more aspects of a student's unique needs and whether the paraprofessional is adequately trained and supervised to be effective. Importantly, appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals also depends on consideration of whether there are other service or support options that would be a better choice because they would address effectively these same learning needs and offer additional advantages such as fostering greater independence. The process for weighing these considerations and making a decision as to whether a paraprofessional should be assigned to a particular student, will be discussed in section E of this Advisory.

C. Over-Arching Goal of Promoting Students' Independence

It is the essential mission of elementary and secondary education to prepare all students for successful adult life, which may include independent living, competitive employment, further postsecondary education or training, and participation in the life of their community. State and federal special education laws recognize that independence is a key factor of adulthood and our public schools must always strive to build independence in our students, particularly as they begin to approach adult life.⁴

In order for these core educational principles to be realized, decisions regarding special education and related services (and, in particular, decisions regarding paraprofessional services) must be made in a way that allows the unique learning needs of each student to be met and that, at the same time, allows each student to become as independent as possible, particularly in preparation for the end of secondary education.

The following recommended actions are intended to respect and promote these essential principles.

D. Recommended Actions: School District Level

Whole school approach. School districts can develop greater regular education capacity to effectively serve diverse learners. School district leaders should review the use of paraprofessionals within the context of the whole school environment and consider adopting a tiered model of supports such as [Massachusetts' Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#). Data gathered in the analyses of students' needs can be compiled into a chart or matrix, and reviewed by school-based teams to make decisions regarding system-wide allocation of services and supports. Effective use of school-based student support teams (SSTs) may reduce the number of retentions, suspensions/expulsions, and referrals to special education. SSTs may also assist in reducing the inappropriate use of paraprofessionals. See the [MTSS quick reference guide for student support teams](#).

District culture. Some may unconsciously believe that a one-to-one paraprofessional is always needed for a student with a particular kind

of educational profile. It is important for the district community to examine its own assumptions and to challenge those that perpetuate a status quo that can result in unintended negative consequences. District leaders may find it fruitful to share data on the use of paraprofessionals and to discuss with students, their families and special educators together how to achieve the best instructional services, and aim for the best academic and non-academic outcomes for students. Involving families in this discussion will assist in fully considering how the community as a whole, not just the school, can help to achieve successful adult life outcomes for all students.

E. Recommended Actions: Individual Students

The IEP decision-making process. State and federal special education law require an IEP Team to make all decisions regarding the assignment of a paraprofessional to a particular student. The Team makes this decision solely on the basis of whether paraprofessional services are appropriate to meet the unique learning needs of the particular student so that he or she will have the opportunity to receive FAPE in the least restrictive environment and at the same time prepare for "further education, employment, and independent living."⁵

Breaking down the IEP Team decision-making into a three-step process, that considers use of paraprofessionals within a broader context, may substantially increase the likelihood of using paraprofessionals appropriately and effectively. First, at least one member of the Team should be fully informed about the general education environment and the expectations that typical students are expected to meet in the coming year. In that context, the Team examines information available from evaluations and other information which may include concerns of the parent, and previous progress with earlier IEPs. The Team then identifies all of a student's *special education needs* arising from the disability and presenting barriers to the student's learning. The Team must differentiate among needs that can and should be met in the general education environment with accommodations or minor modifications and needs that that must be met through the delivery of specially designed instruction⁶ so that the student receives FAPE.

Second, the IEP Team considers the goals that are most important for the student to accomplish during the upcoming year and considers these goals in the context of the general curriculum, it's available support services as well as the *entire range of specially designed instruction, related services and accommodations* that can meet the student's particular needs.

Finally, the Team then determines the extent to which needed services can be delivered in the general education classroom and which services may require removal from the classroom. Research supports that most students with disabilities have better outcomes when they are fully included in the general education classroom, and the Team is tasked with carefully considering the risks and benefits to the student when removal appears to be necessary. It is at the intersection of these two important priorities -- the least restrictive environment (the general education classroom) and the promotion of independence, that the Team may consider the use of a one to one paraprofessional. If a one to one paraprofessional can increase the student's access to the general education environment or assist in moving toward more independence, then generally the Team should identify use of the paraprofessional.

This decision-making process offers the following advantages: (1) it assists the Team to assign paraprofessionals when necessary to meet the individual student's unique special education needs, (2) precludes assignment of a paraprofessional based on limited information - for example, solely on the basis of a student's diagnosis or the needs of a teacher, and (3) seeks to ensure that service or support options (other than a paraprofessional) are also considered and utilized if they would address effectively a student's learning needs and offer additional advantages such as fostering greater independence.⁷

Training and supervision. School districts have an affirmative obligation to ensure that all paraprofessionals are trained and supervised so that they will be able to provide the services for which they are responsible, as reflected in federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) policy guidance. Therefore, once an IEP Team decides that a paraprofessional is needed for a student, the Team has a responsibility to determine the means by which a paraprofessional will have sufficient training and supervision. This may occasionally require additional services or consultation in the IEP.

Develop a plan for fading paraprofessional support. It is important that paraprofessional services continue in amount and duration only as needed. For many students, other services or supports can be substituted for some or all of a student's paraprofessional services. Therefore, whenever an assignment of paraprofessional services is initially made, the Team should discuss and develop a plan for reviewing the continued need for these services, including a process to review and monitor the student's progress and determine whether the student's need can be met with other services or supports. The Team may establish criteria which, if met by the student, will trigger initiation of the IEP amendment process to consider a change in services. The family is a critical partner in the planning process, with the family made well aware of any potential changes in the student's program and engaged throughout the process. There is no "standard" plan for fading paraprofessional services--each will be individually tailored for the particular student.

Anchor district policies and procedures with best-practices for student leadership. Depending on the age of the student involved, the student may be a "driver" but at all times will be a participant in whatever actions are taken. Keep the student's needs and desires at the center of discussions and to the extent possible, involve the student in the planning and actions taken. If, after all, the purpose is to promote independence, then the student should be able to take pride in actively working toward his/her increased independence and full participation in the life of the school. With the student central to the process, educators and families alike must remember that each student is different and may need different approaches, and different amounts of time to respond to different actions. Anticipate that some students may need paraprofessional support in one or more areas for years, while others may move forward in leaps and bounds toward independence.

F. Conclusion

Paraprofessionals may be an essential service for some disabled students. Yet, their inappropriate use can waste resources, limit a student's potential for independence, and leave key issues unaddressed. To respond to these potential challenges, system-wide changes can substantially increase the capacity of a school district to respond appropriately to a wide range of learners, and consideration of paraprofessional services for an individual student must be integrated into the IEP decision-making process for determining all of the student's unique special education needs and how they should be met.

The cause is important. The goal is the right one: successful adult life!

Attachment:

-  Examples
-   Student Needs Analysis (sample 1)
-   Student Needs Analysis (sample 2)
-   Student School Day Analysis (sample)

¹ A Giangreco, M.F., Doyle, M.B., Suter, J.C., *Constructively Responding to Requests for Paraprofessionals: We Keep Asking the Wrong Questions*. Remedial and Special Education 33(6), October 2012, 362-373.

² Giangreco, M.F., Halvorsen, A.T., Doyle, M.B., Broer, S.M., *Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools*. Journal of Special Education Leadership 17(2), October 2004, 82-90.

³ Giangreco, M.F., Doyle, M.B., Suter, J.C., *Constructively Responding to Requests for Paraprofessionals: We Keep Asking the Wrong Questions*, Remedial and Special Education 33(6), October 2012, 362, 363.

² Id.

³ Paraprofessional services may be appropriate, for example, for a disabled student to learn in the least restrictive environment - that is, with non-disabled students to the maximum extent appropriate. The paraprofessional may be appropriate to allow the student to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities, or to address a wide variety of other educational needs identified on a student's individualized education program (IEP). Assignment of a paraprofessional may also be an effective tool to foster independent living by teaching a student how to utilize a personal care attendant. See also the examples in the attachment to this Advisory.

⁴ See 20 U.S.C. § 1400(d)(1)(A) (a principal purpose of the IDEA is "to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to ... prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living"); 20 USC § 1414 (d)(1)(A)(i) (requiring transition planning and services beginning at age sixteen); *Hendrick Hudson Dist. Bd. of Educ. v. Rowley*, 458 U.S. 176, 201, n.23 (1982) (in enacting the IDEA, Congress endeavored to enable disabled students to "achieve a reasonable degree of self-sufficiency" and "become productive citizens, contributing to society"); MGL c. 71B, s. 2 (requiring transition services beginning at age fourteen or sooner).

⁵ See 20 U.S.C. § 1400(d)(1)(A) (a principal purpose of the IDEA is "to ensure that all children with disabilities have ... services designed to ... prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living"); DESE IEP Process Guide, p. 12 (2001) "(the IEP must address the unique needs of the student and, therefore, must be tailored to the individual student needs as determined through the evaluation process)".

⁶ Or related services necessary for access to the general curriculum. 603 CMR 28.02(20)

⁷ For additional guidance regarding the appropriate utilization and support of paraprofessionals, see Giangreco, M.F., Doyle, M.B., Suter, J.C., *Constructively Responding to Requests for Paraprofessionals: We Keep Asking the Wrong Questions*, Remedial and Special Education 33(6), October 2012, 362-373.

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