

Robin H. Lock, Dept. Editor

Maximize Paraprofessional Services for Students with Learning Disabilities

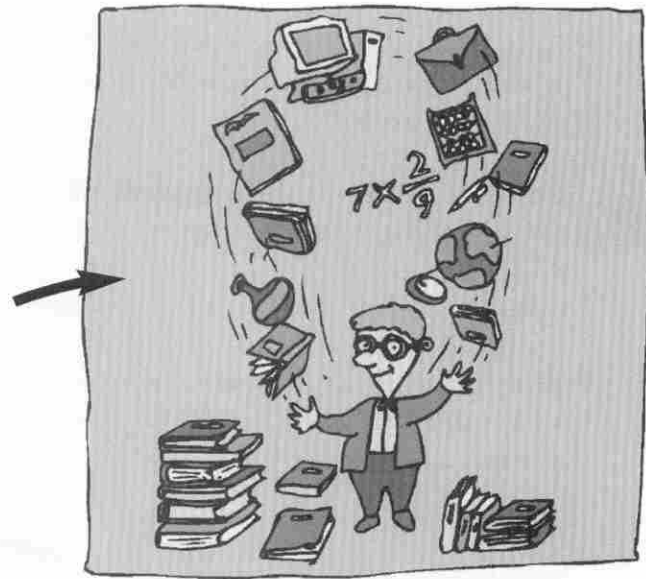
NANCY K. FRENCH

Both special and general education teachers must work closely with paraprofessionals who support students with learning disabilities (LD) in general education classrooms. Knowing how to make the most of the paraprofessional resources at hand is not easy, however. As a special educator, you are really a program manager, and you are most likely to make the most of paraprofessional services when you are able to efficiently carry out certain executive functions (French, 1997). The suggestions that follow will help you be a more effective manager and will improve the way the paraprofessional works with your students.

- 1. Provide orientation.** Remember that paraprofessionals are typically good-hearted but untrained people. To function appropriately in an LD program, a paraprofessional needs to know the people she or he will be working with, where things are, and how to get help. To ensure the safety and privacy of students in your building, the paraprofessional should be oriented with all the school's safety procedures and to the confidentiality laws before working with students.



2. Reflect on your own work style and work preferences. Work styles and preferences are unique. You may be a morning person, or you may need several cups of coffee before you are at your best. Maybe you prefer a well-organized supplies cabinet, or perhaps you care little for perfect stacks of paper. You may swing into action and buzz around at warp speed or speak slowly and softly. Perhaps you prefer to “wing it” some days, or maybe you are a detailed planner. Your work style and your preferences are neither right nor wrong, they are just “you.” However, if you can recognize what your style is and communicate effectively about what that means to the paraprofessionals with whom you work, your effectiveness with them will soar.



3. Find out what the paraprofessional's work-style preferences are. Just as you have work-style characteristics and preferences, so do paraprofessionals. Once you understand yours, have a conversation to find out what the paraprofessional's preferences are. Compare and contrast your preferences; then discuss how you will work together in spite of differences and how you will find balance for preferences you share.

4. Determine your program and student needs. Spend some time making a master list of everything that needs to be done in your program and that could be done by someone other than you. Phrase the needs in terms of paraprofessional behaviors. For example, “Cue students to apply the learning strategies taught in the resource room,” or “Remind students to use their backpack checklist at end of each class.”

5. Consult with classroom teachers to determine their needs. Find out from classroom teachers what they need the

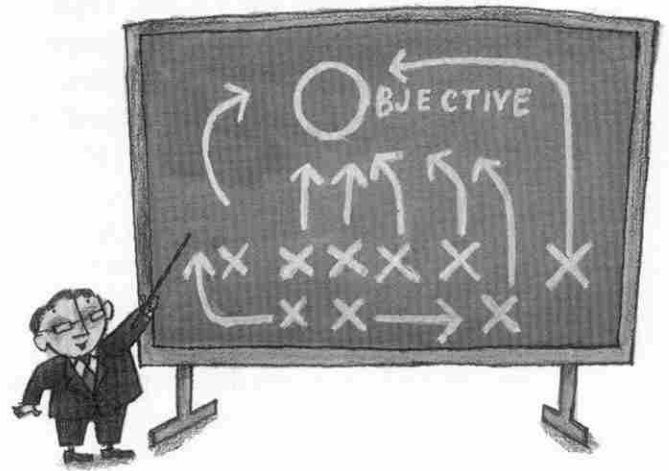
paraprofessional to do to assist LD students. They may add items to your master list, or they may have a different spin on what the paraprofessional needs to do. For example, a classroom teacher might specify, “Help student read questions on the worksheet,” to which you might add, “Remind students to use the Question–Answer–Relationship strategy to answer the questions.”

6. Assess the skills of the teaching assistant/ask him or her to self-assess. Once you've made a comprehensive list, ask the paraprofessionals to look at the list and indicate which of the tasks they are already comfortable doing and are confident that they do well. Also consider the performance you've observed in the recent past.

7. Create a personalized job assignment for the teaching assistant. A personalized job assignment serves as an addendum to the general job description that school districts use to hire paraeducators and, for legal reasons, should never exceed the lim-

its of the district's job description. In it, you define the specific duties for which a particular paraeducator will be held responsible and identify the necessary training.

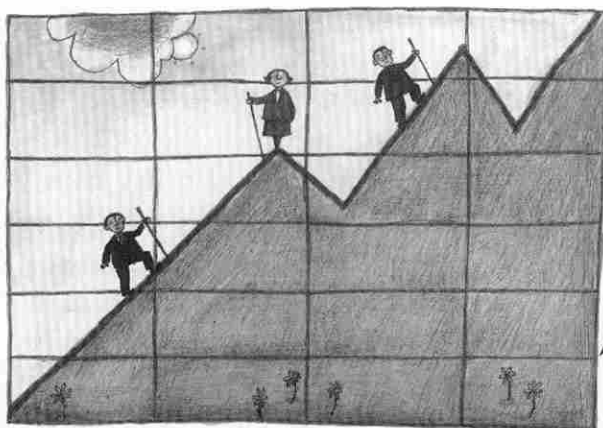
8. Determine the training needs of the teaching assistant. In the personalized job assignment, you may choose to include only tasks for which the paraprofessional is prepared. Or you may want to include all the tasks you want the paraprofessional to do, with a note reminding yourself to teach her or him that skill.



9. Teach and coach new skills. Most often training occurs on the job, incidentally throughout the day or week, or during team meetings. Try the simplest form of instruction—telling a person how to do something—first. If it works, fine. But, if the paraprofessional cannot perform the task the way you need, then add demonstration, practice, and feedback to the on-the-job training you do.

10. Give feedback on the performance of new skills. Provide feedback to the paraprofessional in practice situations so she or he can develop and practice skills to use on the job. Feedback is best when it is specific and descriptive rather than general and/or judgmental.

tal: "When you touched his shoulder, he pulled away" rather than, "Touching his shoulder is the wrong thing to do." It should also be directed toward performance rather than personal characteristics, "You should stand up when you give directions to students" versus "You're too short for them to respect your commands."



11. Observe and coach the paraprofessional. Observe paraprofessionals briefly (5 minutes is enough) while they are working with students and provide coaching. Coaching helps the paraprofessional fine tune newly acquired skills. Without coaching, newly acquired skills may become ingrained but may not be correct. When you take on the coaching role, you must take care to separate the coaching functions from the evaluative aspect of your job. Paraprofessionals will not thrive if coaching makes them feel as though they are being "called on the carpet." Just as coaching Olympic athletes consists of giving/getting feedback about athletic performance, coaching paraprofessionals consists of giving/getting feedback about their performance.

12. Document the training you've provided. Documenting on-the-job training provides a safeguard in three situations:

1. when a paraprofessional does not meet your standards,
2. when you need to protect the safety and welfare of students, and
3. when you need a basis for legal defense.

When a paraeducator is unable or unwilling to do the work, it is important that you have given the paraprofessional every opportunity to improve her or his skills. If performance remains substandard after you've provided training, then you may have the grounds for dismissal. Second, protecting the emotional safety of students is important when students have emotional or self-esteem needs that place them at risk. Third, sometimes parents sue the school when they believe their son or daughter has been placed at risk or when the child has failed to acquire the outcomes documented on the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act specifically requires that all personnel who work with students who have disability labels have the skills required for the position. You risk being sued if the paraprofessional is not adequately prepared to perform the instructional duties you assign. If, on the other hand, you provide training and document what you've done, the risk is minimized.

- 13. Provide work plans.** It is your responsibility to provide written plans for the paraprofessional. Legally and



ethically speaking, paraeducators should not make their own plans, nor should they operate without written plans. Specifically, it is not legal or ethical for a special education paraprofessional to create or plan modifications or adaptations of lessons that have been designed by general educators. Your professional judgment is needed. To make the task of planning easier, you may want to create general modification plans, rather than lesson plans, to cover numerous types of lessons and classroom activities.

- 14. Delegate judiciously.** There are numerous reasons why you should delegate tasks to paraeducators. First, it frees you to do work that cannot be delegated, like assessment, planning, and scheduling. Second, it increases your overall productivity. By delegating judiciously, you double the amount of work that gets done. Third, judicious delegation shifts the emphasis from "doing everything yourself" to "getting everything done." Fourth, delegation gives the paraeducator a chance to develop new skills. So, not only does delegation increase the amount of attention students receive, it also helps paraeducators grow and develop their skills.

- 15. Delegate skillfully.** Skillful delegation means that you give specific information to the paraprofessional regarding

1. the scope of the task,
2. the specific goals or objectives to be reached,
3. the time frame—or when you need it done,
4. the authority needed to carry out the task, and
5. the means by which you will monitor and evaluate the successful completion of the task.

- 16. Monitor the delegated tasks.** Effective delegation requires that you focus on the outcomes, but not necessarily the methods, and

that you allow for mistakes. Thus, delegation provides direction and guidance without being overbearing. You will never be able to delegate successfully if you demand that the paraeducator perform a task in exactly the same way you would. Nor should you demand perfection, but you do have to ensure that students are getting appropriate instruction based on IEP goals and objectives.

- 17. Create and manage schedules.** Your master schedule should note when tasks should be completed, who should do them, and where people are during the day or week. You may need to develop the master schedule simultaneously with lesson or work plans and make a graphic display. While a work plan answers the question, "What does the paraeducator do?" the schedule answers the questions "When?" and "Where?"



feedback, solving problems, managing conflicts, and communicating are best accomplished face-to-face.

- 18. Document performance of duties.** You may be asked to contribute information that will assist your principal in evaluating the paraprofessional. Fair evaluation is based on comparison of performance to a standard, on facts rather than opinions, and on first-hand knowledge rather than hearsay. If you want to be fair, you will want to conduct frequent, short (5-minute) observations. You will also want to be specific about what you've observed. Generalities rarely help performance; people can only improve their skills if they know what specific behaviors to work on. You'll also need to be honest and straightforward, yet tactful and respectful.

- 20 Manage conflicts.** It's inevitable. Anytime two people work closely together, conflict arises. Pay attention to every small sign of conflict. Pretending it doesn't exist doesn't make it go away—it only builds pressure. Talking about differences early and often will help keep conflict from escalating. By addressing issues early, you tackle them while you can still be creative about solutions. The best question to ask yourself when faced with conflict is, "How can we manage this so our working relationship is strengthened?"



- 19. Hold meetings.** Meetings with the paraprofessional are fundamental to ethical supervision. Many of these suggestions can only be accomplished during meetings. Giving directions, providing on-the-job training, providing

Persons interested in submitting material for 20 Ways To . . . should contact Robin H. Lock, College of Education, Box 41071, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 76409-1701.

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