

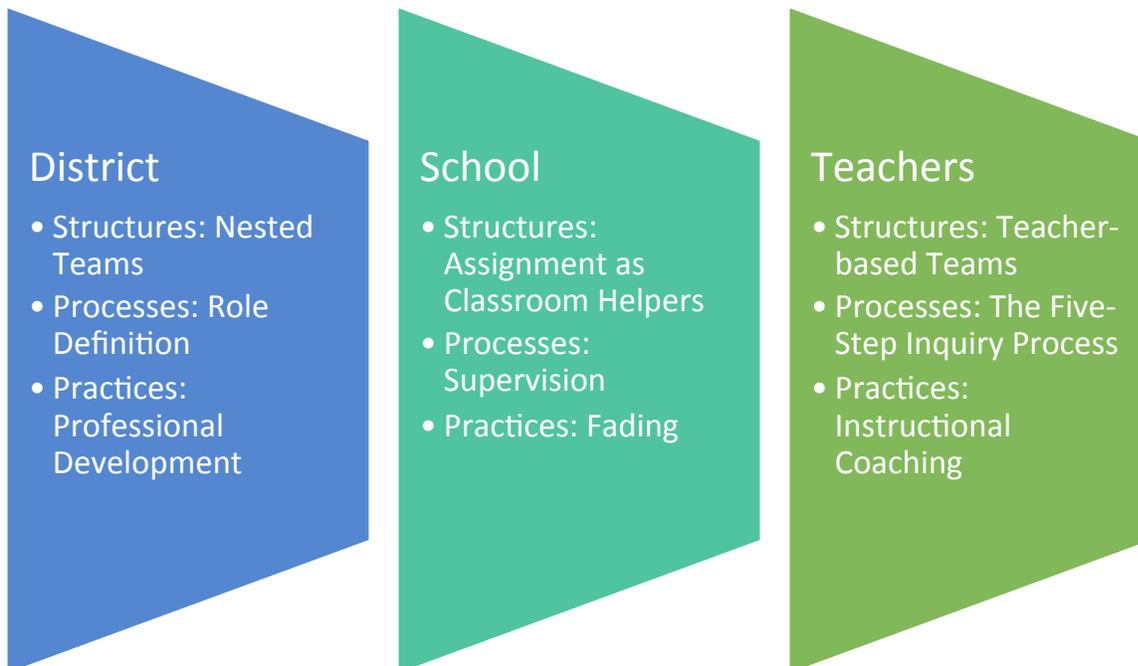
Working with Ohio's Paraprofessional Educators

Practice Guide

Paraprofessional educators perform many different kinds of work in the school districts where they are employed, but recent national and Ohio-specific standards focus attention on their work as *instructional helpers*. That focus recognizes the potential contributions of paraprofessionals, but it also reflects on-going concerns about how some districts use paraprofessional educators and how many districts treat them. Research findings, for example, show that paraprofessional educators are a neglected, underpaid, and underappreciated segment of the school work force. Research findings also show that some paraprofessional educators inappropriately serve as de facto teachers of students with complex learning needs—a role for which they are inadequately prepared.

To use paraprofessionals effectively as instructional helpers, district leaders, school leaders, and teachers need to pay closer attention to structures, processes, and practices that work to build the capacity of paraprofessionals and the teachers who work most directly with them.

This practice guide looks at the structures, processes, and practices that might be of greatest benefit to districts, schools, and teachers. The diagram below previews the discussion that follows in the three sections of the guide.



At the District Level

District-level leadership sets the stage for effective education across a system of schools. In league with elected boards of education and other stakeholders, Ohio's district superintendents set goals, formulate policies, establish structures, provide support, allocate resources, and monitor performance across their districts. They receive help with this critical leadership work from central office administrators, such as human resource directors, curriculum directors, directors of federal programs, and special education directors.

Leadership at the district level sets the stage for effective use of personnel, including principals, teachers, and paraprofessional educators. When district-level leadership takes seriously the commitment to provide high-quality education to all students, its efforts focus on building the capacity of all educators. Sometimes capacity-building involves across-the-board efforts that help all personnel perform more effectively, and sometimes capacity building involves drilled-down efforts that provide support to particular groups of educators. What *are* the structures, processes, and practices that effective districts use to build the capacity of paraprofessionals?

Structures: Nested teams. Districts that use the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) or other similar improvement processes set up teams that engage in data-based planning and performance monitoring at the district, school, and teacher-team levels. A nested-team structure involves all district educators in focused work aimed at accomplishing a common set of educational goals. The district's paraprofessional educators along with teacher colleagues and support-service providers become members of teacher-based teams. Through participation on these teams, paraprofessionals share insights about the students with whom they work and receive guidance about the particular instructional support tasks they need to perform.

Processes: Role definition. In all organizations, including school districts, personnel perform their jobs better when their roles are specified clearly. Clearly defined roles allow personnel to understand what they are expected to do and what boundaries they need to respect. District leadership that intends to use paraprofessional educators effectively must pay careful attention to how the role is defined, perhaps by revisiting job descriptions often and instituting formal procedures for providing supervision and support. Offering adequate, and tiered, compensation to paraprofessionals can also help a district build the capacity of these instructional helpers. By establishing salary increments for degree completion, for example, a district communicates the value it places on postsecondary preparation.

Practices: Professional development. Districts that use a nested-team structure to plan for and monitor continuous improvement examine and learn from data that reveal the strengths and weaknesses of personnel. Capacity-building in these districts involves on-going and job-embedded professional development that increases the knowledge and skills of personnel—individually, across teacher teams, across schools, and across the district overall. For example, the District Leadership Team might assemble and review observational data showing how skilled paraprofessionals are at providing various types of instructional support to diverse learners or how accurate they are in recording different types of assessment data. Making sure all personnel

receive professional development that focuses on their needs and provides ample support over an extended period of time is critical to overall improvement across a district.

At the School Level

A great deal of research shows that leadership at the school level contributes significantly to instructional improvement and increased student learning. Notably, when principals become instructional leaders, they inspire all educators in their schools to adopt practices that promote inclusiveness as well as high academic performance.

Certain school-level leadership strategies show promise for improving the effectiveness of paraprofessional educators. These strategies work best when a school's leadership has already instituted arrangements for including all students in general education classrooms as well as for ridding the school of damaging practices such as ability grouping and punitive discipline.

Structures: Assignment as classroom helpers. As emphasized in national and Ohio standards, paraprofessional educators can provide the greatest service to students by *helping with instruction*. Orienting to the word “helping” is important because it indicates that someone other than the paraprofessional, namely the teacher (or the teacher-team) should take responsibility for leading efforts to plan, deliver, and assess instruction.

Orienting to the word “instruction” is important because it points to the priority of the teaching mission. The personal caretaking of students that many paraprofessionals provide often becomes an end in itself rather than the means to a higher end, namely, the *education* of students. Keeping the educational mission in view allows paraprofessionals to see why *efficient* provision of personal care is so critical. Efficiency ensures that every student can participate in instructional activities to the fullest extent possible.

Processes: Supervision. High-functioning schools depend on positive supervisory relationships and constructive supervisory practices. Especially when supervisors and supervisees have good rapport, these practices make it possible to delineate, support, and monitor everyone's job performance. Supervision works best when it helps personnel accomplish tasks well, not when it evaluates or punishes them.

Research on paraprofessional educators shows that they are among the personnel in schools who receive the least supervision. Although using teachers to supervise paraprofessionals might be a logical choice, teachers typically do not consider supervision of other adults to fall within their “job descriptions.” Principals can help teachers enlarge their job descriptions to incorporate the supervision of paraprofessionals. Constructive supervision of paraprofessionals would involve: (1) setting clear expectations, (2) providing necessary resources, (3) providing necessary on-the-job training, (4) monitoring the performance of tasks, (5) encouraging collaboration, and (6) supporting self-reflection.

Practices: Fading. One common use of paraprofessionals assigns them to provide one-on-one support to children with complex needs. This assignment often turns the solution to a short-term problem—that is, how to structure accommodations for a student with complex

needs—into a long-term arrangement. One-on-one support, however, poses serious problems in its own right because it tends to remove agency from the student, making him or her dependent on the adult caregiver. Learned helplessness and disengagement from peer relationships are often the unfortunate consequences.

The alternative is to address the problem directly by making a school-level plan for accommodating the student with complex needs. The plan might assign the paraprofessional to a *temporary* role as caregiver, with the understanding that intensive support will be faded gradually. Using others besides the paraprofessional to provide some of the “care” is also critical to the student’s rapid integration into the life of the classroom and the school. Other students in the classroom, for example, might help the newcomer learn how to organize learning materials or how to follow ordinary classroom routines. The teacher (or several teachers on the team) would play a significant role in helping the child adjust by providing some direct support and also by monitoring overall adherence to the plan. Whatever else is included in the plan, it must include explicit steps, benchmarks, and timetables for fading the personal-care functions provided by the paraprofessional.

At the Teacher-team Level

Teachers work closely with students and have the greatest impact on what they learn. Teachers’ impact is magnified, moreover, when they work in teams. Further, the work of instructional teams across a school increases collective capacity overall because the team structure provides opportunities for support, engagement with a shared mission, and job satisfaction. Considering the many benefits of teaming, schools are well-served when they include all educators, not just teachers of academic subjects, on instructional teams. Schools that open up membership on instructional teams to all educators invite the participation of teachers of non-academic subjects, related service providers, and paraprofessionals.

Structures: Teacher-based teams. As part of the Ohio Improvement Process, school leaders arrange for teachers to work in small teams—teacher-based teams—most often organized by grade level or subject specialty. These teams use a structured process to learn about high-quality instruction, deploy it systematically, and monitor results. As instructional helpers, paraprofessional educators have important roles to play on these teams. For example, they may share data to help inform decision-making, discuss their impressions of the learning strategies used by various children, or offer insights about the efficacy of particular instructional practices for particular students or groups. In addition, their participation on teacher-based teams enables paraprofessionals to hone the skills needed for effective performance of the instructional-helper role.

Processes: The five-step inquiry process. Teacher-based teams function effectively when they remain focused on a systematic process for learning about and improving instruction and the outcome of instruction—students’ academic performance. Five steps define the systematic process in Ohio. Like teachers, paraprofessional educators encounter opportunities for learning at each step in the process: That’s why it’s called an “inquiry process.”

Step 1 asks team members (including paraprofessional educators) to look at various types of “rolled-up” data to learn about trends in student performance. Step 2 “drills down” to student work, providing insights about how trends play out in actual classroom assignments and assessments. At Step 3, team members identify promising instructional strategies and learn more about them; then they make agreements about which strategies to use and how to use them. Step 4 honors these agreements: Teachers follow-through with the strategies they have agreed to use, and the team monitors their use of the strategies. Finally, Step 5 provides an opportunity for the team to review results—data showing teachers’ implementation of agreed-upon strategies and data providing evidence of students’ academic growth.

As instructional helpers, paraprofessionals partner with teachers to deliver instruction. For example, when they provide support to students completing learning exercises, paraprofessionals contribute to the delivery of instruction. Or when they create an instructional scaffold, such as a concept map or notetaking guide, the product they create becomes part of the “instructional package.” Their contribution to instruction positions paraprofessionals to benefit as much as teachers from active engagement with the five-step inquiry process used by teacher-based teams.

Practices: Instructional coaching. One important difference between teachers and paraprofessional educators is the extent of their formal preparation for the instructional role. While most teachers hold university degrees in educational fields, most paraprofessionals do not. The distinction becomes important to the work of instructional teams, when they decide who will design instruction, who will take leadership for instructional delivery, and who will lend a hand.

Although there are exceptions, the typical arrangement is for *instructional teams* to design instruction, *teachers* to take leadership for instructional delivery, and *paraprofessionals* to assist teachers. This arrangement opens up many possibilities for instructional coaching. Team members, for example, might help one another learn how to use an agreed-upon instructional strategy by discussing the strategy in a team meeting or by observing one another and providing feedback.

Teams that learn to use instructional coaching in these ways encourage growth in the instructional expertise of all members, including paraprofessionals. Of course, not all schools have high-functioning teacher-based teams. Under these circumstances, teachers can partner with the paraprofessionals in their classrooms to design and evaluate instruction using the five-step process or something similar. And they can provide instructional coaching to the paraprofessionals with whom they work.

Whether used in a multi-teacher team or a team with one teacher and one or more paraprofessionals, systematic use of instructional coaching is perhaps the most effective way to promote educators’ learning. Research suggests, in fact, that without the use of instructional coaching to ensure changes in practice, professional development of educators offers little benefit. In short, teachers (or teacher teams) build the capacity of their professional and paraprofessional colleagues by using instructional coaching.