Teachers Coaching Paraprofessionals
The Ohio Partnership for Excellence in Paraprofessional Preparation (OPEPP) exists to strengthen the systems of preparation, development, and support available to paraprofessionals statewide through information dissemination, training, and technical assistance. Initiated in 2011 through federal grant funding from the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, OPEPP serves as a support to districts, schools, teachers, and other educators. By providing professional development, other resources, and technical assistance, OPEPP helps educators improve their capacity to use paraprofessionals effectively as members of instructional teams. For more information and to access OPEPP resources, go to http://www.opepp.org/.

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Coaching Paraprofessionals

Teachers Can Coach Paraprofessionals

Teachers may not be the formal supervisors of the paraprofessionals with whom they work, but they do take responsibility for making instructional plans, including plans for what the paraprofessionals in their classrooms will be doing on a day-to-day basis. We prefer the term “coach” to terms such as “supervisor” or “supervising teacher,” however, because “coaching” connotes positive practices such as giving guidance and providing support.

Whatever else forms a part of the teacher’s role, the design, delivery, and evaluation of instruction is at its center. Teachers take responsibility for instruction by:

- connecting lesson objectives to state standards,
- developing instructional materials,
- designing practice activities,
- creating assessments, and
- analyzing assessment results.

Teachers sometimes perform these functions independently, but increasingly they work in teams. Paraprofessionals can also become members of the instructional teams that include the teachers with whom they work. Teams enable instructional personnel—teachers and paraprofessionals—to collaborate on the work of planning, monitoring, and evaluating instruction.

The Purpose of This Guide: To share effective practices teachers can adopt or adapt in order to coach the paraprofessionals with whom they work.

Coaching involves practices that are built on a positive relationship. But important as it is, the positive relationship between the coach and the person being coached is not all that’s needed (de Haan, Grant, Burger, & Eriksson, 2016). To be effective, a coaching relationship must lead to the accomplishment of significant work. That’s why de Haan and colleagues refer to coaching as a “working alliance.” Effective coaching sits at the intersection between a positive relationship and productive structures.
Cultivating a Positive Relationship

To provide effective coaching to a parapro, a teacher needs to establish and maintain a positive relationship with the person he or she is coaching. As the coach, the teacher is the one responsible for ensuring that the relationship remains positive despite inevitable challenges. The teacher must:

- demonstrate care for the well-being of the parapro,
- maintain a positive emotional climate, and
- exhibit trustworthiness (Kim & Kuo, 2015).

The diagram below provides examples of how to use these three practices to cultivate a positive relationship.

The teacher takes responsibility for ensuring that the relationship with the parapro remains positive.
Confronting Challenges

Cultural differences. One challenge that teachers and paraprofessionals sometimes encounter results from differences in their cultural backgrounds and experiences. These differences may influence the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the teacher and the parapro. Working across cultural differences is not easy, but the teacher should take the lead by exhibiting openness to and interest in the parapro’s ways of seeing and thinking about the world.

Power dynamics. Although it might not seem fair, teachers typically are seen to have more power in their schools than paraprofessionals do. Power differentials can interfere with communication and teamwork because they threaten the psychological safety of those team members who have less power (Nielsen, 2008). This situation requires those with more power to create a welcoming and psychologically safe environment for those with less power. In the case of teachers and paraprofessionals, the teacher must take the lead by:

- inviting participation,
- listening attentively,
- offering affirmation, and
- soliciting constructive criticism.
Establishing Productive Structures

Teachers can structure communication with paraprofessionals to make it more effective. Three approaches are particularly useful: clarifying non-negotiables, carving out times to meet, and developing and using communication routines.

Clarifying non-negotiables. One of the most important ways to improve communication with a paraprofessional is to establish clear expectations for classroom practices. Here are some non-negotiables that might apply to all members of an instructional team, including paraprofessionals:

- “When a student misbehaves, talk about it in terms of the behavior, never in terms of the student’s traits or character.”
- “Never share personal information about a student or a student’s family with anyone other than a school administrator or counselor or another member of the instructional team.”
- “Never criticize a student for having difficulty learning something.”

Non-negotiables are so important that all members of the instructional team need to understand them deeply; and “unpacking” a non-negotiable is a good way to get to a deep understanding. The table below provides an illustration of what “unpacking” a non-negotiable might involve.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When a student misbehaves, always talk about it in terms of the behavior, never in terms of the student’s traits or character.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What Practices Fit with the Non-negotiable</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specifying behaviors in precise terms (e.g., “getting out of a seat without asking for permission first”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking about behaviors as changeable (e.g., “It’s hard to stay focused on your work for more than five minutes, but I know you can increase the amount of time you can stay focused.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanding the definition of acceptable behavior (e.g., giving students options)</td>
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Carving out times to meet. Schools are busy places, and it’s often difficult for teacher-paraprofessional teams to find enough time to confer. Establishing a routine meeting schedule and adhering to the schedule are critical steps for keeping communication channels open. Although other forms of communication can help teams stay in touch and address simple problems, face-to-face meetings work best for addressing more difficult problems, co-planning lessons, practicing new instructional methods, and debriefing classroom events.
Developing and using communication routines. In addition to periodic meetings, teacher-parapro teams can work out other ways to communicate. Here are three examples:

- On each day’s lesson plan the teacher might include instructions for the parapro. If both educators have access to the plan, then they won’t need to spend time consulting about who will be doing what.
- In some classrooms parapros share notebook entries with parents to keep them informed about their child’s progress. They can also jot down the parent’s concerns in the notebook, and share those concerns with the teacher.
- Teachers and parapros can share information via electronic documents or an electronic file folder (e.g., through Google Drive, Box, or Dropbox).

Modeling Teaching and Behavior Management Strategies

Because parapros are present in classrooms, they are always watching what teachers do, including the teaching and behavior management strategies teachers use. When parapros are asked to help with instruction—in large-group, small-group, and individual tutoring sessions—they often imitate what they see teachers doing. But the process needs to be more intentional. Teachers need to choose what kind of strategies to model. And they need to ask parapros to observe, think about, talk about, practice, and eventually use those strategies.

Some strategies are especially effective for helping students learn or for helping them regulate their behavior, and these are the ones teachers will want to model.

Effective large group teaching strategies include establishing rapport; making academic goals and expectations clear; providing options that encourage students’ engagement; and offering opportunities for practice with immediate, positive, and specific feedback in response to students’ efforts.
Effective small-group teaching strategies include scaffolding—a process that breaks knowledge down into manageable chunks and thereby allows students to experience success. In a small-group learning situation, encouraging students to share ideas with one another about how to solve a problem can be effective, because students often put more credence in what their peers say than in what the adults say. There are many ways of organizing small-group activities. Teachers might first demonstrate and then ask paraprofessionals to learn to use highly structured approaches, such as the “jigsaw” method, in which a group of students acts as a team with each team member working on a different part of an assignment. They can also demonstrate and ask paraprofessionals to learn to use more loosely structured approaches to group work, such as “books clubs” and brainstorming circles (sometimes called “quality circles”).

Effective individual tutoring strategies include methods that help tutors understand how students are processing information. When a tutor understands a student’s thinking, the tutor can reinforce accurate ways of processing information and suggest alternatives to unproductive ways of processing information. In addition, asking students to “talk through” a problem or assignment turns the tutoring session into a non-threatening, cooperative effort, rather than a daunting chore. Turn-taking with the tutor, for example in read-aloud activities or question-response activities, can serve a similar purpose.

Effective behavior management strategies begin with the positive: positive teacher-student interactions, positive peer-to-peer interactions, and opportunities for all students to feel included in a classroom community. Academic engagement also leads to positive behavioral outcomes. For some students and groups, classroom routines—including those associated with “restorative justice” models—can be particularly helpful. For others, especially students with complex needs, explicit behavior-management systems incorporating rewards and consequences may work well.
Giving feedback is one of the most powerful strategies for helping people—both children and adults—learn (e.g., Hattie, 2008). But giving feedback to adults can be more challenging than giving feedback to students. It can feel uncomfortable both for the person giving feedback and for the person receiving it. One way to increase everyone’s comfort level is to offer feedback in a non-judgmental way. What methods can teachers use for offering non-judgmental feedback to paraprofs?

Using reflective questions to provide feedback is an effective way to help educators improve (Allison, 2011). Reflective questions often work better than critical feedback because they are less likely to provoke defensive reactions. Reflective questions that explore the parapro’s own thoughts about the work often lead to productive conversations. For example, asking a question such as “What part of today’s lesson did you think was most helpful in improving Tara’s ability to use context clues?” could lead to a productive discussion about the lesson.

Offering praise and encouragement can improve performance and self-confidence, but it can sometimes have an unintended result. A teacher’s well-intentioned praise may make the parapro feel self-conscious, for example, or patronized. In general, it’s best to use praise sensibly—reserving it for work that required real effort or that was outstanding—and to praise specifics, making clear exactly what was praiseworthy.

Despite challenges associated with doing so, providing corrective feedback is sometimes necessary when a parapro’s work needs significant improvement. To be respectful and helpful, corrective feedback should focus on instructional practices, not on the parapro’s skills or character. The table below provides some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on Instructional Practices</th>
<th>Do Not Focus on a Parapro’s Skills or Character</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Say, “Tim usually requires multiple practice sessions.”</td>
<td>Don’t say, “You aren’t a good tutor.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say, “It’s important to reward positive behavior.”</td>
<td>Don’t say, “You’re being mean to Sally.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say, “Justin needs to see how to solve each of the problems he missed.”</td>
<td>Don’t say, “You were lazy when you graded Justin’s math test.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to providing specific suggestions related to instructional practices, a corrective feedback session should focus only on the most important issues: too many suggestions can be counter-productive. A written summary of the discussion and the suggestions can also be helpful, giving the parapro an opportunity to think about the feedback and guiding follow-up efforts on the part of the teacher and the parapro.
Co-planning and Co-teaching

Even though the teacher may plan and lead most lessons, students can benefit from the extra adult guidance and support that a parapro can provide. Involving parapros in the instructional work of the classroom requires the teacher’s commitment to enlarging the scope of the para-pro’s work to include co-planning and co-teaching.

Co-teaching models can structure the learning environment so that the teacher and parapro work together in a variety of ways. In using the “one teach, one support” model, the teacher has primary responsibility for the instructional activity, while the parapro plays a supportive role, such as observing and recording student responses or helping individual students who are having difficulty. Using the “alternative teaching” model, the teacher conducts a lesson with most of the class while the parapro works on a remedial or enrichment activity with either a group of students or an individual student. Using the “station teaching” model, the teacher and parapro work together ahead of time to prepare learning stations that present new concepts and skills to individual students or small groups of students. Stations typically are designed to be self-guided so that students or small groups can work at them with limited guidance from a teacher or parapro. This approach allows both the teacher and the parapro to assist individual students as needed.
The Annual Planning and Monitoring Cycle

Teacher-parapro teams also benefit from long-range planning. Early in the year discussions are likely to focus on goals for individual students and groups of students as well as the actions needed to meet those goals. In addition, teachers and paras should establish plans for their own growth—both individually and as a team. As well as specifying the steps that each of them needs to take, annual plans should identify points throughout the year when systematic monitoring can occur. Plans should indicate what will be monitored, how it will be measured, when monitoring will occur, and how feedback will be shared. The table below illustrates this type of plan by showing how one parapro (Marie) might learn, over the course of the year and with the help of a teacher (Julia), to develop graphic organizers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Marie’s Actions</th>
<th>Julia’s Support</th>
<th>Monitoring Process and Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Read about concept maps</td>
<td>Identify relevant readings on graphic organizers; develop concept map, fishbone chart, and flow chart checklists; meet with Marie to clarify expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Develop three concept maps, using the applicable checklist as a guide</td>
<td>Provide feedback on each of the concept maps using the applicable checklist</td>
<td>Julia will evaluate the concept map that Marie identifies as her best work (October 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Read about fishbone charts</td>
<td>Meet with Marie to take stock on her learning so far and clarify expectations for the next phase</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Develop three fishbone charts, using the applicable checklist as a guide</td>
<td>Provide feedback on each of the fishbone charts using the applicable checklist</td>
<td>Julia will evaluate the fishbone chart that Marie identifies as her best work (December 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Read about flow charts</td>
<td>Meet with Marie to take stock on her learning so far and clarify expectations for the next phase</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Develop three flow charts, using the applicable checklist as a guide</td>
<td>Provide feedback on each of the flow charts using the applicable checklist</td>
<td>Julia will evaluate the flow chart that Marie identifies as her best work (February 28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Review relevant readings</td>
<td>Meet with Marie to discuss how to decide which type of graphic organizer to use to teach a particular type of concept (e.g., parts of a whole, cause and effect, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Create graphic organizers to fit with 10 different lessons</td>
<td>Provide feedback on Marie’s decisions about which graphic organizer to use for each lesson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Meet with Julia to discuss ways to help with lesson planning in the next year by developing relevant graphic organizers</td>
<td>Meet with Marie to discuss ways to use her ability to develop graphic organizers to assist with lesson planning in the next year</td>
<td>Julia will hold a conference with Marie to discuss what she has learned and what Marie thought of the year-long learning experience (May 31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Including Parapros on Instructional Teams

As noted above, the pairing of a parapro and a teacher creates an instructional team. It’s a small team, though, with a focus on what takes place in just one classroom.

Many districts in Ohio and elsewhere, however, assign educators to somewhat larger teams as a way to expand overall capacity to improve instruction and, ultimately, students’ learning. These educator teams are typically organized by grade level or subject area, but cross-grade and cross-subject teams are used in some districts. Parapros are rarely included on these larger teams, but their contributions to such teams could be significant.

What parapros can contribute to instructional teams. Although not all instructional teams have parapros as members, the decision to include them certainly makes sense. Why?

Instructional teams benefit from the involvement of parapros; and parapros benefit from participation in meetings of the instructional team.
Parapros often assist with instruction. Typically, they perform other tasks as well, but their work with individual students and small groups gives them ample opportunity to observe what goes on in classrooms. For example, they might observe the teaching strategies that work well with certain students or the effects of certain types of learning environments on students’ behavior. They might see how social interactions among students support or interfere with learning or how different classroom routines impact students’ engagement and performance.

As a result, instructional teams can benefit from the information parapros share about students, instructional strategies, classroom environments and routines, and social interactions. At the same time, the discussions that take place in team meetings help parapros learn more about how to deliver instruction in effective ways—knowledge that ends up improving the support they provide to students.

What teamwork requires of educators. Despite the strong potential of teams to improve district capacity overall, teams often falter. Sometimes meetings become gripe sessions; sometimes team members ignore agreed-upon norms; sometimes unproductive power dynamics get in the way.

In order to function effectively, teams need to work hard to retain focus, follow through on their promises, and encourage the productive involvement of all members. Effective outcomes are more likely when teams discuss teaching rather than teachers, hold high expectations for all students, and rely on norms and structures to promote the accountability of all team members. By establishing protocols and sticking to them, teams can improve the focus, efficiency, and productivity of meetings.

Effectiveness of teams also depends on the integrity of each team member: teachers, support services personnel, and parapros. The integrity of team members makes it possible for teams to be both collaborative and productive. What does team-member integrity entail?

- First—demonstrate trustworthiness by treating others with respect, maintaining confidentiality, telling the truth, and honoring promises.
- Second—communicate effectively by being a good listener, sharing ideas clearly, and asking good questions.
- Third—build a community of practice by encouraging all team colleagues to contribute to discussions, entertaining different perspectives, giving consent to workable solutions, and providing kind but honest feedback.
Major Take-aways

Teachers can be effective coaches to paraprofessionals by cultivating a positive relationship with them and creating productive structures that help build a “working alliance” in the interest of the students. A working alliance between the teacher and parapro requires the teacher’s commitment to:

- Demonstrating care for the parapro’s well-being, keeping a positive emotional climate; exhibiting trustworthiness, being open to the paraprofessional’s perspectives, and offering constructive feedback as well as encouragement.

- Establishing rapport, identifying expectations clearly, scheduling regular “face-to-face” meetings, and establishing communication routines.

- Enlarging the scope of the parapro’s work to include collaborative instructional planning as well as collaborative instruction structured by co-teaching models.

- Providing a systematic approach to the parapro’s continued training by identifying training needs and addressing those needs through the annual planning and monitoring cycle.

- Recognizing and making use of the contributions that the parapro can make as a member of the instructional team.

References


