



Case Studies of Teacher-Paraprofessional Partnerships

A Teaching Guide for Working Independently or with Groups of Educators

OPEPP conducted four case studies of teacher-paraprofessional partnerships in Ohio.

These studies showed that several practices support paraprofessionals' effectiveness as members of an instructional team:

- professional preparation of paraprofessionals,
- continuity and quality of the teacher-paraprofessional partnership,
- effective communication, and
- establishment of a climate that professionalizes the role of paraprofessionals.

Schools and districts can draw on “lessons learned” from the case studies to support teacher-paraprofessional teams, and they can use the case studies as one tool for providing professional development (PD) to these teams. This guide can help. Who might be interested in it?

- paraprofessionals,
- teacher-paraprofessional teams,
- general education teachers and intervention specialists, and
- administrators who hire paraprofessionals or who evaluate the work of teachers and paraprofessionals.

Purpose of the Guide

This guide describes ways to use the OPEPP case studies to support the development of PD opportunities. Teaching cases are most helpful when those using them see their content as real and even familiar. The OPEPP cases are based in real Ohio schools, and they were *designed*



to be used for PD. They provide an occasion for educators to begin exploring the challenges of real-world classrooms in light of what some school districts in Ohio are doing to make things better. They are useful as learning tools because they prompt educators to *think together* and participate in conversations about important problems of practice.

Because the focus of the case studies is on improving instructional practice, people who serve as members of Ohio’s leadership and instructional teams (TBTs, BLTs, DLTs, and IEP teams) might especially value the reflection prompted by a systematic review of the OPEPP cases. This kind of reflection can help educators figure out ways to improve their work, develop strategies to address challenges, and make sensible changes. The teaching cases can be used by individual paraprofessionals or teachers, by teacher-paraprofessional teams, or by cohorts in formal PD settings. The guide describes two ways to create PD opportunities from the cases: (1) informal, independent or small-group study and (2) facilitated training.

Using the Case Studies for Professional Development

Independent learners who study the cases and people who build PD experiences based on them might want some guidance. The table below summarizes ideas for using the cases in two ways—that is, for informal, independent learning and for formal, facilitated learning. The discussion below the table provides more detail.

PD Concern	Informal	Formal
Purpose	1) To improve your practice now. 2) To see how your school compares with others. 3) To understand issues relating to effective paraprofessional-teacher collaborations.	1) To build paraprofessionals’ instructional capacity. 2) To implement planned changes in the paraprofessional role. 3) To foster inclusive practice schoolwide or systemwide.



		4) To help you plan more formal training for yourself.	4) To expand the work and deepen the knowledge of instructional teams.
Audience		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Paraprofessionals 2) Teachers 3) Teacher-paraprofessional teams 4) Administrators 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Cohorts of paraprofessionals 2) Cohorts of teacher-paraprofessional teams 3) Teacher-based Teams 4) Building Leadership Teams 5) District Leadership Teams
Activities	Using focusing questions to guide reflection or discussion	<p><i>After reading the case studies ask yourself questions and jot down answers. Questions might include:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How can we find time to debrief our day together? 2) How can our collaborative approach to classroom work be improved to provide greater benefit to students? 3) How can I (or we) bring issues related to paraprofessionals to the TBT, BLT, or DLT? 4) How can we approach “fading” in our situation? 	<p><i>After presenting the case studies pose discussion questions such as:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What kinds of additional training might benefit your teacher-paraprofessional teams? 2) What is your team, school, or district already doing well? 3) Where do your team’s, school’s, or district’s practices fall short? 4) What changes to paraprofessional-teacher partnerships would enable them to provide greater benefit to students?
	Applying ideas from the case studies to instructional improvement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Make a personal plan to learn more about best practice with paraprofessionals. 2) Volunteer for membership on a TBT or BLT. 3) Invite a paraprofessional to join the BLT or DLT. 4) Develop an evidence-based proposal to improve paraprofessional’s work as instructional helpers. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Develop a list of goals for improving the paraprofessional role in your team, school, or district. 2) Implement, review, or develop a job description for paraprofessionals. 3) Interview teacher-paraprofessional teams about their instructional collaboration. 4) Complete an equity audit focused on the instructional support provided by paraprofessionals.



Instructional Formats	Face-to-face	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Two paraprofessionals read case materials and meet on their own. 2) Two or more paraprofessionals meet with a teacher at their school to focus on a single case-study issue. 3) The teacher-paraprofessional team reads the take-aways and discusses one or more questions. 4) Two district leaders read cases and identify local strengths and needs. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Provide a PD awareness session (for a local district) featuring case-study resources. 2) Provide a multi-session PD series adapting several resources (e.g., OPEPP case studies and related products). 3) Engage a local district in developing its own PD by adapting case-study resources. 4) Develop a comprehensive job-embedded PD series (with coaching) that incorporates case-study resources.
	On-line	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Review case study materials online at the OPEPP site. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Use an online teaching platform (e.g., Google Classroom) to share case study materials and related discussion questions. 2) Build the OPEPP case studies into on-line modules.
	Blended	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Read the case-study resources on the OPEPP site and discuss them in face-to-face conversations with a colleague. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Ask participants to read the case studies online and then later discuss them in face-to-face meetings. 2) Provide long-term job-embedded PD that includes virtual coaching.



Feedback	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reflect on what you have learned from the case studies. 2) Have a conversation about the case studies with a colleague. 3) Make changes in your practice and evaluate the effects of the changes. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Use a rubric to help PD participants evaluate one or more of their practices at the beginning and the end of a long-term job-embedded PD series. 2) Provide an observation tool that instructional teams can use for peer-coaching. 3) Provide debriefing feedback following role-plays of instructional conversations between paraprofessionals and teachers.
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Purpose

Professional development using case studies (sometimes called teaching cases) helps educators learn by examining the experiences, dilemmas, and insights of other educators. Because it involves reflective and critical thinking, PD with teaching cases offers rich opportunities for illuminating linkages between theory and practice. It also provides educators with a vantage from which to examine their own practices as well as the cultures of their classrooms, schools, and districts. This type of PD is especially valuable for educators who are motivated to learn and test out improvement strategies.

Audience

“Audience” refers to the people who will be taking part in the PD. It could be paraprofessionals only, teachers only, or teacher-paraprofessional teams. Or it might include principals or central office staff. The audience could even be administrators only. Each audience brings with it experiences



that reflect distinct expectations and typical ways of engaging the issues that the case studies raise.

Activities

Each audience's different experiences, expectations, and ways of engaging the case-study materials have implications for the design of activities and possible applications of ideas from the case studies. The table illustrates a few possibilities.

Activities involving reading and discussion are featured prominently on the list. These types of activities are often used to promote reflective and critical thinking, so they fit well with PD using case studies. Planning is needed in order to ensure that discussions will be focused and productive. Often planning involves the development of focusing questions (that is, the set of questions used to guide the discussion). Appendix A presents a list of focusing questions relevant to issues and Appendix B presents a list of focusing questions relevant to each of the case studies. But these lists are simply illustrative. Dozens (even hundreds) of questions might be relevant, depending on the audience and its particular circumstances.

Instructional Formats

Whatever the audience, the PD will take place using one type of format or another. At present, the typical formats are face-to-face, online, and blended. For more intensive and extensive efforts (widely acknowledged as PD of the highest quality), face-to-face and blended formats are common. Online options are convenient, however, and they can offer good production values. Nevertheless, online platforms sometimes curtail rich discussion among participants. Discussion boards, blogs, and other communication methods available on-line can,



under ideal circumstances, promote deep engagement. But they rely on the self-motivation of participants: to read learning materials such as case studies, to read and think carefully about one another's messages, and to write extensive and thoughtful responses.

Feedback

Good teacher-parapro teams confront problems by giving feedback to themselves and others. Team effectiveness, in fact, depends on the ability of team members to give, receive, and take action on the basis of feedback. The more that PD involves participants in activities that surface important dilemmas and problems of practice (case studies, for instance), the greater the opportunity to provide feedback. Providing relevant feedback is, in fact, a requirement of high-quality PD.

Often the best feedback takes the form of one or more reflective questions. Such questions give PD participants a chance to think about and refine their own practice. Because they encourage participants to think about and plan the changes they will make in their own classrooms, schools, and districts, reflective questions work much better than prescriptions. Whereas prescriptions typically elicit compliance (or, worse yet, resistance), reflective questions more often elicit commitment and productive action.



Appendix A

Focusing Questions Based on Issues

Issue 1: Professional preparation of paraprofessionals

- What actions of supervising teachers scaffold the instructional role of paraprofessionals?
- What initiatives of BLTs support teachers in their partnership with paraprofessionals?
- What provisions by DLTs support the success of teacher-paraprofessional teams?
- What issues of district culture affect the preparation of and support for paraprofessionals at present? How might district cultures change in ways to improve the preparation of and support for paraprofessionals and paraprofessional-teacher teams?

Issue 2: Continuity and quality of the teacher-paraprofessional partnership

- What conditions describe the existing state of your teacher-paraprofessional relationship? Has it been of long duration? How has it evolved over time? What steps did each person take to build trust?
- What impediments to the development of effective teacher-paraprofessional partnerships prevail at your school or in your district? What steps might be taken to remove these impediments?

Issue 3: Effective communication

- What communication practices work well for your paraprofessional-teacher team? What communication practices work less well?
- What is the character (or quality) of teacher-paraprofessional communication in your school and district? How can it be improved?



- What sorts of communication practices do the best teacher-parapro teams in your school and district use? How can these practices be shared with other teacher-parapro teams?

Issue 4: Establishing a climate that professionalizes the role of parapro

- What is the status of inclusive practice in your school and district?
- How does assignment of parapro contribute to inclusive practice in your school and district? How does the assignment of parapro impede inclusive practice?
- To what extent are parapro represented on TBTs, BLTs, and the DLT? Why? What steps might your school and district take to involve parapro more fully in the work of instructional teams?
- How do practices that include all *adults* (e.g., involving parapro on TBTs) help schools foster inclusive practices for all *students*?



Appendix B

Focusing Questions with a Case Focus

The following material illustrates how the case studies might be used, particularly in formal PD. But the ideas can also be adapted by anyone working solo. The ideas are also useful for instructors in colleges and universities. After all, research done in Ohio¹ shows that teachers get very little information about working with paraprofessionals in their preparation programs.

Case Study 1: A Teacher's Experience with Paraprofessionals at An Ohio Middle School

1. Most of the paraprofessionals at this school have not had post-secondary education, paraprofessional training, or prior professional experience working with children. What core understandings and competencies do paraprofessionals need to effectively support classroom instruction?
2. When a district's paraprofessionals are provided by an outside agency, how might school administrators encourage paraprofessionals to participate in professional development opportunities and assume greater responsibilities in the classroom? How might teachers and administrators help paraprofessionals feel invested in the school community?
3. Many teachers have had little training and experience in working with paraprofessionals. What skills and tools might help teachers establish and sustain effective teacher-paraprofessional partnerships? What structures might support teachers in instructing, supervising, and collaborating with their paraprofessionals?

¹ Howley, C., Howley, A., & Telfer, D. (2017). Special education paraprofessionals in district context. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 29(2), 136-165. Retrieved from <http://www.mwera.org/MWER>



4. This case study cites the importance of good communication between teachers and paraprofessionals. What processes might help paraprofessional-teacher teams resolve conflicts, share feedback, and voice concerns in a respectful and productive manner?

Case Study 2: A Teacher’s Experience with Paraprofessionals at an Ohio County Board of Developmental Disabilities School

1. Paraprofessionals often must provide classroom coverage while teachers attend meetings at which educators discuss curriculum, instruction, and assessment (e.g., IEP meetings, TBT meetings). This practice makes it difficult for paraprofessionals to be fully included as members of students’ instructional teams. How might instructional teams benefit from the involvement of paraprofessionals? What structures could be put in place to facilitate paraprofessionals’ involvement in meetings with an instructional focus?
2. Some school settings and structures impede opportunities for students with disabilities to be included with peers in general education classrooms. The resource room in this case study is located offsite from district schools. Which practices might the leaders at this school put in place to facilitate inclusion opportunities for students?

Case Study 3: A Special Education Teacher’s Experience with Paraprofessionals at a Rural Ohio High School

1. How does the teacher communicate with her paraprofessionals about students’ needs and goals? In what ways does communication contribute to the effectiveness of the teacher-paraprofessional partnerships in this classroom?



2. What structures enable the paraprofessionals in this case study to function independently? In what ways does their independence facilitate student learning? How might the paraprofessionals' independent responsibilities contribute to their job satisfaction?
3. Paraprofessionals at this school are allowed to bid on open positions each year. How might this approach to human resource management affect teacher-paraprofessional partnerships? What might be the effects on paraprofessionals' performance and job satisfaction when they have a voice in decisions about their own school and district assignments?
4. The paraprofessionals in this case study facilitate students' participation in an in-school jobs program that takes them out of the resource room for a significant part of each day. What other approaches might be used at this school to involve students with disabilities in the general education program or in other activities with general-education peers?

Case Study 4: A Teacher-Paraprofessional Team Shares their Experiences at a Rural Ohio Elementary School that Has Just Begun the OPEPP Process

1. The teacher-paraprofessional partners in this case study recently changed from providing services primarily in a resource room to providing services in general education classrooms, a transition they both describe as successful. What qualities of the teacher, of the paraprofessional, and of their partnership, seem to play the biggest role in the success of their new work arrangements? In what ways might the new teaching arrangements create challenges for the teacher and the paraprofessional?



2. Job descriptions and performance evaluations for paraprofessionals have recently been introduced at this school. How might these changes affect teacher-paraprofessional partnerships? How might they affect paraprofessionals' perceptions of their working conditions and job satisfaction?
3. In what ways do you think leaders in this school and district may already have contributed to effective paraprofessional-teacher partnerships? What ongoing actions might school and district leaders need to take to sustain and strengthen teacher-paraprofessional partnerships over the long term?