



A TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE WITH PARAPROS AT AN OHIO COUNTY BOARD OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES SCHOOL

The Ohio County Boards of Developmental Disabilities (CBDD) schools provide services to students who have multiple disabilities. Gilbert DeVille is an intervention specialist at a CBDD school located in a rural area of southern Ohio. The school serves approximately 35 students from ages 3 through 21. Gilbert and his team of four paraprofessional educators work with six to ten students in the high school through young adult range.

The students in Gilbert’s classroom have IEPs addressing their physical, motor, communication, and cognitive difficulties. Several students also have behavioral and mental health challenges. The school draws students from four counties and is separate from the area’s public schools. Therefore, Gilbert’s students have limited opportunities for “push-in” or inclusion arrangements. Their engagement with the general education curriculum occurs through the instruction that Gilbert provides. Some of the students spend part of their day in community job placements or studying at a nearby vocational school. Most of Gilbert’s students receive one-on-one services from a paraprofessional.

Gilbert has worked in the classroom with paraprofessionals for two years. In his classroom, most parapros are assigned to specific students, sometimes accompanying them to the vocational school or to other community activities. The parapros go in and out of the classroom throughout the day, guiding students to and from buses, accompanying them to therapy sessions (occupational, physical, and speech), and sometimes assisting in other classrooms. When parapros are out of the room, the other parapros work as a team to cover their colleagues’ classroom responsibilities. Gilbert frequently divides his students into instructional groups.



While he works with one group, one or more paraprofessionals work with the other groups. The paraprofessionals also pitch in to help during group instruction.

Members of the research team interviewed Gilbert about his job responsibilities and experiences, focusing especially on his experiences working with paraprofessionals. A team member also spent a day observing in Gilbert's classroom. The interviews and classroom observations provide insights into several arrangements promoting a successful working partnership between teacher and paraprofessional(s) providing personal and educational support in traditional settings. These arrangements would quite likely contribute to working successfully with paraprofessionals in many other educational settings as well. They include:

- **preparation of paraprofessionals,**
- **paraprofessionals' sense of ownership in the enterprise, and**
- **quality of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship.**

Preparation of Paraprofessionals

The paraprofessionals at Gilbert's school are County Board of Developmental Disabilities employees. In order to work with students with developmental disabilities, paraprofessionals must be certified as Registered Service Providers. Among the requirements for this designation are a high school diploma or general education development (GED) certificate; certification in first aid, CPR, and AED; and training in health, safety, and provision of services and support to persons with developmental disabilities. At the CBDD school, the paraprofessionals receive some additional on-the-job training from the physical therapist, occupational therapist, and speech therapist.

Gilbert believes that, while this level of preparation may equip service providers to support the basic needs of students, paraprofessionals need additional preparation to become true "partners" in facilitating the students' education. He begins each school year by giving the



paraprofessionals who work with him have a comprehensive understanding of the students in the class, including their abilities, learning challenges, family and home backgrounds, and previous years' experience at the school, when applicable. He summarizes each student's IEP and meets with the paraprofessionals to discuss the students' needs and learning goals. By encouraging paraprofessionals to see each student as a "whole person," Gilbert empowers them to take responsibility for meeting students' educational needs.

Enabling paraprofessionals to function effectively as providers of educational support and instruction requires ongoing efforts. Gilbert trains the paraprofessionals with whom he works in methods to deliver and support instruction for each student. He meets with the paraprofessionals each day to go over the activities, materials, and supports they will be using, and he reflects with them at the end of the school day on student progress and ongoing learning needs. "[We're] constantly talking about where our kids are...what's going on with them. ...We tweak [the program] and address [issues] the next day." Fortunately, the paraprofessionals' schedule contains at least a half hour at the end of each school day for discussing students, planning instruction, and preparing for the next day's activities. Gilbert believes the time invested in equipping paraprofessionals to be "educational partners" is time well spent. The paraprofessionals can deliver a higher level of service to the students, and they can more effectively cover each other's job responsibilities when needed. Furthermore, the paraprofessionals experience greater satisfaction from their work. Gilbert, the paraprofessionals, and the students, all benefit from the collegial and smooth-functioning classroom environment.

Paraprofessionals' Sense of Ownership in the Enterprise

Preparing paraprofessionals to deliver instruction and educational support to students goes hand in hand with promoting paraprofessionals' sense of ownership in the enterprise. Under Gilbert's supervision, the paraprofessionals learn to provide instruction and educational support to the students. He maintains



responsibility for what goes on in the classroom, but he encourages the paraprofessionals to use their own initiative in choosing books, materials, and even teaching strategies to use with the students. As the paraprofessionals' skills increase, Gilbert transfers more responsibility to them. This leads to greater paraprofessional "buy-in," and cultivates a climate of mutual trust between Gilbert and the paraprofessionals in his class. "I think it's really important that they feel invested. Really important!" he emphasizes. "[U]nder my supervision ...I give them a lot of power and freedom, and I think it's one of the reasons that our [classroom] chemistry is so good."

Gilbert also elevates parents' perceptions of the work being done by the paraprofessionals. By highlighting the important role that paraprofessionals play in the students' learning and development, he helps parents view paraprofessionals as professional educators. He encourages regular communication between paraprofessionals and the parents of students in the class, both at school and by phone, and he supports the practice of including paraprofessionals as part of students' IEP teams when parents are amenable. "I've been trying to get that going more, because nobody knows [the students] better than [the paraprofessionals] do. ...[S]ometimes parents are receptive to that..., some are not. ...I get [the paraprofessionals] more and more involved, because I think ...they're the boots on the ground, so to speak. I think the more involved they can be, the better it is... And I think it's... part of [paraprofessionals'] ownership...I think it's part of the process."

Quality of the Teacher-Paraprofessional Relationship

Gilbert credits much of his success in working with paraprofessionals to the relationship he cultivates with them. He never asks paraprofessionals to do anything that he himself doesn't do. He holds high expectations for performance and behavior, and inspires others to meet those standards by demonstrating them in his own actions. Gilbert builds a climate of cooperation and teamwork by cross-training paraprofessionals so they can effectively cover for each other and for him, when necessary.



He gets to know his paraprofessionals as people, making an effort to learn about their families, their interests, and their concerns. The paraprofessionals in Gilbert's room recognize his investment in them, and respond in kind.

Gilbert, to a greater extent than many teachers, invites the paraprofessionals to participate fully and equally in the business of the classroom. He shares with them the reasoning underlying his instructional, administrative, and classroom management decisions. He invites their questions and suggestions, even going so far as to solicit from his paraprofessionals an informal "annual review" of his performance. "I want to know if there are things that we can...that I can do better as the leader of this classroom, to help our environment. ... And, so, they opened up, and made a couple of suggestions... And you know what? ... [W]e implemented those suggestions..."

Above all, Gilbert prizes open communication between himself and his paraprofessionals. He describes the atmosphere of openness and rapport in his classroom as "transparency." Without compromising his leadership authority, he sets a tone of professionalism that empowers the paraprofessionals to work as partners in the educational mission of the classroom.