



A TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE WITH PARAPROS AT AN OHIO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Ellen Kates is an intervention specialist at a middle school in Ohio. The school serves grades 6 – 8. Each grade is divided into teams of core subject teachers (English, math, social studies and science). Ellen has worked with the same team of subject area teachers for more than 10 years, providing special education intervention and support. Her students have IEPs related to mild to moderate specific learning disabilities, autism, and/or other health impairments such as ADHD or physical disability. For the most part, her students participate in general education classes, to which she and her paraprofessional push in. Ellen also teaches two self-contained (pull-out) resource classes, one for math and the other for reading and work on students' IEP goals. Students at the school who have more severe learning difficulties spend most of their day in a self-contained resource classroom. Most of these students have one-on-one paraprofessionals.

Ellen has many years of experience working successfully with paraprofessionals. At her school, some paraprofessionals are assigned to specific students and some work with multiple students. In past years, Ellen has had more than one paraprofessional providing services to her students, but this year she has just one, Wendy Johnson, assigned to work with two of her students. Ellen and Wendy have worked together for three years.

A researcher interviewed Ellen about her experiences working with paraprofessionals and observed her and her paraprofessional Wendy on a typical school day. The interviews and classroom observations brought to light several factors that likely contribute to the successful use of paraprofessionals in providing educational support and instruction at this school, and perhaps in schools in general. These factors include:

- **professional preparation of paraprofessionals,**
- **continuity of the teacher-paraprofessional partnership,**
- **effective communication, and**
- **a climate of professional respect for the work of paraprofessionals.**

Professional Preparation of Paraprofessionals

This school district currently obtains its paraprofessionals through contract with an outside agency. Prior to this arrangement, the district hired its own paraprofessionals. The district's standard qualification for employment as a paraprofessional, both currently and in the past, is a high school diploma and satisfactory background check. Previous training or experience working with children may be helpful, but it is not required for employment. Although community colleges in the area offer two-year programs to train paraprofessionals, most paraprofessionals working in this district have not had additional education. There is no difference in job description and pay scale between paraprofessionals who have received the associate's degree (or post-high school professional training) and those who have not.

Before being hired to work in this school district, Wendy studied paraprofessional education for two years at a community college, and received an associate's degree. Her courses included instruction in child development, lesson planning, and classroom methods. Both Ellen and Wendy believe this professional preparation plays a big role in Wendy's performance of her job as a paraprofessional, giving her a deeper and more nuanced understanding of her professional responsibilities and enhancing her ability to provide educational support to students. Ellen can count on Wendy to provide a high level of service and support to students. Ellen also places a high degree of confidence in the feedback she receives from Wendy about students' learning, behavior, and needs.

As Ellen explained, "Unlike most of the paraprofessionals, [she] does have an associate's degree...So I think that...she has much more background in child development and things like that. ...And she's the only paraprofessional that I've ever worked with that has had more advanced training. So I think it makes a lot of difference with her."

Wendy also believes that her community college courses have better prepared her to work with students and have equipped her to provide more services than paraprofessionals who have not had professional training.

Continuity of the Teacher-Paraprofessional Partnership

The length of the partnership between teachers and their paraprofessionals also contributes to the successful use of paraprofessionals in supporting student learning. Wendy has worked with Ellen and the same group of core subject teachers for three years. Ellen believes this plays a significant role in Wendy's ability to support student learning and interact with teachers. "...It's her third year with us which helps tremendously with...continuity...[S]he knows...all my team of teachers because she's been with them for three years. It gets...easier because she knows what to expect from them and [t]hey're familiar with her."

Throughout the school day, Wendy's familiarity with the curriculum, lessons, materials, technology, routines, and expectations in her students' classes enable her to provide meaningful educational support in an unobtrusive way. She works with students without needing specific direction or assistance from the teachers. There appears to be a high degree of trust and respect between the core subject teachers, the intervention specialists (Ellen and a second intervention specialist), and Wendy. The teachers trust Wendy to use her own judgement and skills in working with the students, and they listen to her input and answer her questions in a manner respecting her role as a fellow educator. The teachers value the information Wendy provides regarding student needs, teacher expectations, and student behavior.

According to Ellen, it can be difficult to achieve continuity in a teacher-paraprofessional partnership. Turnover is typically high among paraprofessionals for reasons that include low pay, inadequate preparation, and job dissatisfaction. Fortunately, at Ellen's school, certain procedures

promote the establishment of longer-standing teacher-parapro partnerships. At the end of each school year, teachers evaluate the performance of their parapro(s). Parapros who receive favorable ratings are often given some choice in their placement for the next school year, including the possibility of staying with the same teacher they worked with previously. Ellen believes that this practice at her school helps keep together effective teacher-parapro partnerships and contributes to parapros experiencing greater job satisfaction. When teachers work with the same parapro(s) for an extended period of time, the parapro(s) can provide students with a higher level of service and support.

Effective Communication

Interviews with Ellen, supported by observation in the school, reveal what seems to be a mutually respectful, trusting, and professional relationship between Ellen and her parapro, Wendy. Effective communication has played a key role in enabling them to work together so successfully. Ellen explains that she works from the start to establish good communication between herself and her parapro(s). At the beginning of the school year Ellen meets with her parapro, goes over students' IEPs, their backgrounds, and their needs. She explains her expectations for what the parapro will do. She encourages her parapro to feel comfortable discussing ideas, questions, and concerns. Each week she and her parapro discuss the needs of the students, touching base as needed at the start of each school day. Ellen also gives informal performance feedback to her parapro. She credits Wendy for being open to suggestions and constructive criticism.

Not all teacher-parapro pairings at the school, however, have functioned as effectively. According to Ellen, communication difficulties between some teachers and their parapros have led to less-than-successful partnerships. Ellen feels that teachers would benefit from professional

development regarding ways to more fully involve paraprofessionals in supporting instruction, effective means of communicating and building positive working partnerships, and strategies for addressing difficulties that might arise. Similarly, new paraprofessionals could benefit from introductory professional development to help them become acquainted with the school, the code of conduct, and the tasks and expectations of their jobs.

A Climate of Professional Respect for the Work of Paraprofessionals

The teachers and students at Ellen's school accord Wendy professional respect. Teachers seem to trust, and rely on, her work supporting students in their classes. Wendy's experience working with this same team of teachers has established confidence in her ability to exercise initiative and independence in carrying out her duties. Because teachers treat her as a professional colleague, the students also view her as an educator rather than as a helper or friend. Ellen considers it important to establish a climate of respect for her paraprofessional, right from the start. "I...declare at the beginning to the students that 'Ms. Wendy... is here to help you. You need to listen to her. If she tells you something it's like me telling you something. And if you don't listen to what she's telling you, she's going to let me know, and you and I are going to have a talk...'"

Ellen takes sole responsibility for handling behavior issues with students. She makes sure paraprofessionals know to report such issues to her or to the classroom teacher, and she upholds the expectation that paraprofessionals be treated respectfully. This helps Wendy maintain rapport with the students and insulates her from the process of deciding on, and implementing, behavioral consequences.