



A TEACHER-PARAPRO TEAM SHARES ITS EXPERIENCES AT A RURAL OHIO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL THAT HAS JUST BEGUN THE OPEPP PROCESS

Melissa Ferguson, K-3 Intervention Specialist, and Susan Woodhall, Parapro, have worked together since 2016-17 at an elementary school in a rural district bordering the Ohio River. Until recently, their mornings were spent working together in the resource room with kindergarten through third grade students who have IEPs for learning disabilities or behavioral issues. These students would return to their homeroom classes periodically during the day to attend lunch, recess, specials, and social studies/science lessons with their peers. In the afternoons, Melissa would continue to work with these students in the resource room. Susan, after an hour of assigned lunchroom duty, would pull out at-risk K-3 students identified by their teachers as being in need of additional targeted support in reading or math and would bring these groups to the resource room to work on assignments provided by their classroom teachers. Sometimes, Melissa and Susan would combine their students and work together on the afternoon lessons, making use of centers and computers to meet students' individual needs.

Susan's daily responsibilities also include morning arrival and afternoon dismissal duty, and from time to time she is assigned to assist in absent teachers' classrooms. Occasionally, Susan supervises all the students in the resource room while Melissa attends IEP meetings.

There are four intervention specialists at the K-6 school, but Melissa is the only one with a parapro partner. In addition to Susan, there are two other district-employed parapro at the school. One is assigned to the computer lab, and the other works exclusively in the pre-K classroom. The school also has several parapro provided by the local Educational Service Center who work one-to-one with specific students.

This school year, the district became involved with the OPEPP process. A few weeks into the fall semester, the decision was made to change the way special education services are



provided to students in the early grades. Between one week and the next, Melissa and Susan’s schedules and responsibilities changed as their students moved to an inclusion model. Adjustments were made in students’ placements so that, in each grade level, all students in need of intervention support would be assigned to the same homeroom. Melissa now spends her mornings “pushing in” to her first and third grade students’ classrooms, while Susan pushes in to work with the second graders. They work with the students with disabilities, as well as with the other students in the classrooms. In the afternoons, Melissa and Susan return to the resource room where Melissa continues to work with the students with IEPs and Susan provides additional targeted support to the pull-out at-risk groups sent by the homeroom teachers, much as she did previously. Melissa sometimes joins Susan in working with the at-risk groups before heading back to work with her students in their second and third grade classrooms.

Melissa and Susan are excited by the changes in their work arrangements. Their students have adjusted quickly to the new system, and some have already demonstrated remarkable progress. The students seem to be highly motivated, both by the grade level work and by interactions with their classroom peers. Melissa finds co-planning and co-teaching with the classroom teachers to be helpful and rewarding. With two teachers in the room, it is easier to make use of centers, flexible grouping, and other strategies to meet students’ individual needs. Susan enjoys co-teaching with the second grade teacher and the opportunity to work with all the students in the room. Both Melissa and Susan find it very useful to observe the instructional strategies, terminology, and materials that the general education classroom teachers are using. Co-teaching in the general education classrooms enables Melissa and Susan to use an aligned set of strategies, vocabulary, and materials when they work with students in the resource room.



The new arrangements have presented some challenges. The schedule makes it difficult for Melissa to provide adequate support to her second-grade students and ensure their IEP goals are being met. She plans to modify the schedule slightly, swapping roles with Susan some of the time in order to spend more time in the second-grade classroom. Susan, who until recently has worked exclusively with Melissa as her supervising teacher, now spends a considerable part of the day working under the supervision of general education teachers. This new arrangement requires collaboration between Susan and the teachers, but Susan has found that the new schedule provides little time to collaborate with Melissa. And, of course, not all of the classroom teachers have had prior experience working collaboratively with a parapro. Melissa and Susan are constantly “on the go,” and they must quickly familiarize themselves with the students, teaching styles, classroom routines, and curricular content in the general education classrooms. For both of them, however, the biggest adjustment has been having less time together to plan activities, discuss student progress and needs, and share ideas.

Being a parapro is Susan’s second career after many years of employment in retail administration. She has earned her parapro credential and continues to study toward a degree in education leading to dual licensure as an early childhood teacher and an intervention specialist. After working together for several years, Melissa and Susan have formed a strong bond that extends beyond professional collaboration and mutual trust into the realm of friendship. A researcher interviewed Melissa and Susan about their experiences working together as a teacher-parapro team. A researcher also observed them at their school over the course of two days as they followed their original schedule. After the observations, a researcher interviewed them again to discuss the effects of the program’s changes on their work, their students, and their teacher-parapro partnership. The interviews and observations surfaced 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 and quality of the teacher-paraprofessional relationship, and
- establishment of a school environment that professionalizes the role of paraprofessionals.

Professional Preparation of Paraprofessionals

When Susan was hired as a paraprofessional, she brought skills and confidence acquired through years of experience in the business world and as a parent. She was pursuing college-level coursework in child development and pedagogy, and she was already familiar with the school community from years of involvement as the mother (and now grandmother) of enrolled students. Susan's prior life experiences gave her the background knowledge, communication skills, confidence, and understanding of the school to instruct and support students; identify and address student needs; communicate effectively with teachers, parents, and administrators; provide on-the-spot assistance; and seek feedback from others in order to be as professionally effective as possible. These qualities have made Susan a tremendous asset to Melissa, her students, and to the school as a whole, and have contributed significantly to the success of their new teaching arrangements. As described by Melissa:

I would trust her to give any assessment in my classroom. ... She and I are both certified to give the alternate assessment. ... She helps with grading. ... Anything I need, she provides. I mean...anything from helping me instruct...a group of children, to sitting with one child when they need extra help, to, ...like if I say, "Oh my gosh, I have to do this IEP, ...can you work with this group of kids?" Yes, she does it. I can't say enough good things about her. ... She's...taking college courses to become an intervention



specialist, so...she helps me tremendously with what's new...like what new things are happening, what new strategies we could use.... She's a big help when planning.

Paraprofessional preparation programs and coursework at post-secondary institutions help equip paraprofessionals with the knowledge and skills to provide instruction and support to students. The OPEPP process, currently getting underway in this district, provides paraprofessionals with opportunities for study, reflection, and professional collaboration to build expertise and confidence in providing instructional support. Additionally, paraprofessionals at Melissa and Susan's school can further their learning by attending the professional development sessions provided to teachers.

Continuity and Quality of the Teacher-Paraprofessional Relationship

Melissa and Susan—in their third year of working together as a team—are so bonded they finish each other's sentences. They have evolved a style of working together seamlessly, stepping in to assist each other when needed, conferring, giving feedback, getting materials, and offering support to each other. Melissa meets with Susan briefly at the start of each day, outlining what needs to be done and how they will divide up the tasks. Melissa might suggest activities and materials to use, or Susan might rely on her own experience, checking back with Melissa for comments or suggestions. Later, they touch base to review student progress and needs. With their new teaching schedule, Melissa and Susan have to communicate “on the fly,” and the “verbal shorthand” they've developed over the years enables them to do that.

When Susan pushes in to a general education classroom, the classroom teacher functions as her supervising teacher. Susan supports the students with disabilities and ensures they use the scaffolds and instructional accommodations that work best for them. Additionally, she might assist other students, co-teach, work with a small group, supervise a center, or provide



administrative support (such as logging students onto computer programs). These arrangements are new, and it will take time for Susan and the general education teachers with whom she works to develop optimally effective partnerships.

The continuity of the partnership between teachers and their paraprofessionals contributes to the successful involvement of paraprofessionals in providing instructional support to students. As a paraprofessional gets to know a teacher's style, expectations, and routines—and as the teacher learns the paraprofessional's capabilities and preferences—the team's ability to support student learning grows. Melissa and Susan's school and district appear to recognize the benefits of keeping effective teacher-paraprofessional teams together over the long term. The OPEPP process also can contribute to the continuity of teacher-paraprofessional partnerships by providing teachers and paraprofessionals with tools and skills to promote effective collaboration. During the OPEPP process, job descriptions and the process used to employ and evaluate paraprofessionals typically are developed. These tools lead to better understanding of teachers' and paraprofessionals' roles and responsibilities, and they make it easier for school and district leaders to provide feedback that helps teachers and paraprofessionals to refine their instructional routines and the ways they interact.

Melissa and Susan each describes their relationship as close, trusting, mutually respectful, and professional. "I would not survive without her!" Melissa insists. Effective communication plays a key role in building mutual understanding and trust. As Susan explains:

You don't have to be best friends outside of the work world, but inside you need to be best work friends, and talk about what needs to be done.... The paraprofessionals may see things that the teacher doesn't. The teacher may need to make the paraprofessional aware of something. So you need to have that little bit of communication, and trust...



Mutual respect is essential for collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals. Susan describes how this plays out in her relationships with Melissa and the other teachers. “I totally value and respect the teachers. And I think when you give that respect, ...it's reciprocated.”

Melissa concurs that respect is key to forming a positive working relationship:

I think that you need to build a relationship and you have to trust each other. You... have to look at [a paraprofessional] as...your equal. ... I look at [Susan] as my equal. So I trust that she can do anything that I would be able to do.... And if she needed help, she would ask me.

Time spent together also leads to productive teacher-paraprofessional partnerships. Melissa explains how schools can help: “Give them time to work together. Give them time to plan together. Give them time to try new things together, ...time to figure things out together. And I think that will help them build a stronger relationship.” Melissa believes the longevity of her partnership with Susan has enriched their relationship. “We've been in the same room together. This is...our third year. We worked so closely together that we've definitely built that relationship over the years.”

Establishment of a School Environment that Professionalizes the Role of Paraprofessionals

The conditions of a paraprofessional's work life and the nature of his or her job responsibilities affect work performance, satisfaction, and tenure. Paraprofessionals' work conditions are largely shaped by school and district structures. At Melissa and Susan's school, the paraprofessionals responsible for providing instructional support to multiple students in multiple settings are hired by the district. Paraprofessionals who are assigned to work one-to-one with specific children are employed by the local Educational Service Center. Clearly, the responsibilities and employment conditions of these two groups of paraprofessionals differ markedly. Even among the paraprofessionals employed by the school district, tasks, supervision, and working conditions vary: Some paraprofessionals are assigned to assist all students



at a specific location (e.g., the computer lab or library) and some are assigned to a teacher or classroom primarily to support students affected by learning, developmental, behavioral, or physical challenges.

A paraprofessional's daily responsibilities are determined in part by school leaders (e.g., noninstructional tasks such as lunchroom duty, arrival/dismissal duty, and office duty) and in part by the supervising teacher, who assigns tasks, evaluates performance, and holds the ultimate responsibility for student learning. Paraprofessionals can make a significant contribution to student instruction and support if they have expertise and experience in the field, administrators and supervising teachers who make use of their strengths and abilities, and a school environment that professionalizes the working conditions and role of paraprofessionals and provides the training and resources they need.

Melissa believes that Susan's knowledge, experience, and approach have demonstrated what paraprofessionals can offer, and make her an invaluable resource at their school. Susan clearly appreciates being considered an important member of her students' educational team. "[Melissa] has never made me feel like an aide. The other teachers have never made me feel like [that]. They have always valued what I can bring, either to them or what I bring to the kids.... I think that is the key to success." Both Melissa and Susan anticipate that the school's OPEPP trainings will help teachers work effectively with their paraprofessionals. According to Susan,

Teachers need to know how to use the paraprofessional, but the paraprofessional also will learn what to expect from the teacher.... A paraprofessional is your greatest tool. You know, and our principal has said, that person is not your copier person, they're not your stapler person.... They are there to help you with your students in the classroom.



That Melissa and Susan have worked together as a team for three years seems to indicate the school's recognition of the importance of continuity in the teacher-parapro relationship. The prioritizing of Susan's time on instruction-related tasks suggests that the school values Susan's contributions as an educator more than as an administrative or non-teaching assistant. Most notably, the district's recent engagement in the OPEPP process demonstrates a commitment to providing educational resources and support in order to boost the role of parapro in supporting student learning. Professional development through the OPEPP project likely will contribute to the professionalization of parapro's jobs and working conditions, and will help schools and teachers engender effective teacher-parapro partnerships.