



A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE WITH PARAPROS AT A RURAL OHIO HIGH SCHOOL

Pamela Novak teaches in a special education resource room at a rural high school in northeastern Ohio. Her class comprises 13 students in grades nine through twelve-plus¹ who have been identified as having multiple disabilities and/or autism. Pamela has two paraprofessionals in her classroom, Chris and Becky, both of whom have worked with her for more than five years.

The students in Pamela's class spend about 85% of their school day in her room and the rest of the time in non-academic classes such as physical education, art, and computers, or performing volunteer jobs in the school. A few students are bused to a nearby vocational school for part of the day. Pamela teaches the core academic curriculum (aligned with Ohio's extended academic content standards) as well as vocational skills. A significant part of the students' vocational training comes from the in-school jobs program Pamela has set up, which includes tasks such as shelving library books, selling snacks, delivering and storing supplies, and making photocopies. Pamela's students also participate in a variety of social service projects.

Pamela spends most of each day in the classroom delivering academic instruction and vocational training according to students' individual IEP goals. Her paraprofessionals, Chris and Becky, spend part of the school day in the classroom supporting students with assignments, assisting with non-core curricular projects such as crafts and cooking, and helping with benchmark assessments and progress monitoring. The rest of the day, they follow a carefully choreographed schedule accompanying the students to their various

¹ A few students in the 18-21 age range, who have completed grade 12, are included in the classroom so they can address goals specified in their IEPs.



elective classes and jobs within the school building. When Pamela needs to go with a student to another location in the building, one of the paraprofessionals will monitor the independent work of the students in Pamela's classroom.

Many of the school's paraprofessionals work with individual students to provide one-on-one support, but Pamela's paraprofessionals are assigned to work with all the students in her class. When Chris and Becky accompany students to elective classes, they also help other students in the room, as needed. The paraprofessionals do not go with the students who are bused to the vocational school. That school provides its own paraprofessional to assist the students.

During their first several years in Pamela's classroom, students focus on the academic curriculum. As academic goals are met, students spend more of their time building vocational skills and preparing for the transition out of school. Students in the Twelve-Plus Program study at the high school for more than four years (that is, up until their 22nd birthday), which gives them additional time to work on life skills, communication, and occupational skills. Pamela tries to relate the instruction in her classroom to the real world circumstances her students will encounter. She works closely with families and outside agencies to smooth students' transition from high school to post-secondary endeavors.

A member of the research team interviewed Pamela about her current teaching situation, background, and experiences working with paraprofessionals. The researcher also spent a day observing in Pamela's classroom. These interactions revealed several arrangements that likely promote the ability of the paraprofessionals working with Pamela to provide educational support and instruction to students. These arrangements, listed below, might contribute as well to the successful use of paraprofessionals in other school settings.



- **Independent job responsibilities**
- **Continuity of the teacher-parapro relationship**
- **Quality of the teacher-parapro relationship**

Independent Job Responsibilities

Pamela maintains responsibility for the entirety of her students' educational programs. On most school days she focuses on classroom instruction, working with students on core academics, communication, and occupational and life skills. However, Pamela's students spend part of each day out of the classroom, attending elective classes and taking part in the school jobs program Pamela created to promote development of students' communication and vocational skills and to provide increased opportunities for her students to interact with their peers. Pamela's paraprofessionals are responsible for facilitating the out-of-classroom portion of students' days. As Pamela explains, "[U]sing the paraprofessionals to work with the students outside of the classroom allows me to give the students more opportunities to be a part of the whole school and not just in the classroom environment."

At the beginning of the school year, Pamela and her paraprofessionals discuss students' IEP goals, needs, and schedules. Pamela assigns tasks and sets up a schedule for her paraprofessionals, which is adjusted as needed throughout the year. She explains the requirements of each of the jobs in the student job program, as well as the skills and support structures the students will need. At the start of each day, Pamela goes over the job list with Chris and Becky, and at the end of the day she talks with them about the students' performance and on-going needs.

With Pamela's oversight, the paraprofessionals are entrusted to use their own initiative, familiarity with the students, and knowledge of the school staff and programs to



supervise, safeguard, and support the students in their activities outside the resource room. Chris and Becky collaborate with teachers in elective classes to implement modifications and accommodations for students, sometimes co-teaching and sometimes working to support individual students or small groups. The paraprofessionals accompany students to their various in-school jobs, scaffold tasks to address student needs and IEP goals, and ensure that assignments are completed satisfactorily. To support their students' independence, Chris and Becky often "stake out" school locations in order to discreetly monitor that on-the-job students move effectively from place to place and perform tasks successfully. The paraprofessionals play the roles of job coach and supervisor as the students acquire vocational training, build functional life skills, and develop increased independence.

Chris and Becky play a vital role in the students' educational program: Without the paraprofessionals' support during activities outside the resource room, the students' opportunities for interacting with peers, improving communication, and practicing vocational skills would be limited. The paraprofessionals also provide feedback about students' extracurricular experiences that helps Pamela ensure each student's needs are met. In giving Chris and Becky considerable independent responsibility for facilitating students' out-of-classroom learning activities, Pamela communicates trust in her paraprofessionals' professionalism and judgment.

Continuity of the Teacher-Paraprofessional Relationship

The paraprofessionals at Pamela's school are allowed each school year to bid on open positions. Yet Chris and Becky have chosen to remain with Pamela year after year. Clearly, Pamela and her paraprofessionals have found their professional relationship and work



structure to be effective and rewarding. Moreover, the longevity of Pamela's and her paraprofessionals' association seems to indicate that school and/or district structures support the preservation of effective teacher-paraprofessional partnerships. Pamela believes that her paraprofessionals' years of experience and familiarity with the school and the resource-room program have enabled her to enlarge and enhance the educational opportunities available for her students. She feels confident entrusting Chris and Becky with meaningful and considerably self-directed responsibilities.

Quality of the Teacher-Paraprofessional Relationship

Pamela describes the dynamic between herself and her paraprofessionals as one of open communication, trust, and respect. Over the years, she has provided her paraprofessionals with training and included them as valued members of students' instructional teams. She has given Chris and Becky increasing autonomy in supporting students' out-of-classroom activities. Pamela can depend on her paraprofessionals to inform her if they see something that needs addressing, and to implement appropriate modifications and accommodations with students.

The effectiveness of the partnership between Pamela and her paraprofessionals has contributed to the longevity of their association, which in turn has engendered increased effectiveness. "I am very lucky to have a great relationship with the paraprofessionals I work with!" Pamela states unequivocally.