



Athens City School District and OPEPP: A Profile

The Profile. This profile reports on the work Athens City School District has accomplished in collaboration with the Ohio Partnership for Excellence in Paraprofessional Preparation (OPEPP). The district's strategies for building collective capacity on behalf of student learning are shared here. The data used to develop the profile came from telephone and email interviews with three district educators and the OPEPP Consultant for the district, as well as from the Ohio Department of Education's *Ohio School Report Cards* (<https://reportcard.education.ohio.gov>).

Demographics. Athens City is a suburban district with an enrollment of about 2,400, and a 37% student poverty rate. The district comprises five schools: East-West Elementary (K-6), Morrison-Gordon Elementary (K-6), The Plains Elementary (K-6), Athens Middle School (7-8), and Athens High School (9-12). The district includes the Athens City Schools Early Learning Center, a preschool program that uses the *Step Up to Quality* system and aligns its curriculum to the Ohio Early Learning Standards. The district employs about 125 general educators, 40 special services educators, two vocational educators, and 48 paraprofessionals.

Context. In the 2016-2017 school year a new Director of Special Services joined the district. At the time, the district did not engage a formal program of professional development for paraprofessionals. However, the District Leadership Team (DLT) recognized at this time the need for paraprofessional active engagement in our in-service opportunities. As a first step, the district committed to include paraprofessionals in the 2016-17 end-of-year professional development. The Director of Special Services reached out to the OPEPP staff for assistance, and with the help of an SST consultant was able to provide three days of professional development.

The SST consultant and Director of Special Services realized that the district's efforts to support paraprofessional growth signaled its readiness for a more formal approach to building district capacity to deploy and provide support to its paraprofessionals. The SST consultant invited the Athens City Schools to join the OPEPP program, and at the outset of the 2017-2018 school year, the partnership began. At the same time, the SST consultant became an OPEPP consultant—a role that enables her to provide strong and ongoing support to the paraprofessionals in the Athens City Schools. She reports that conversations with paraprofessionals during professional development sessions in the spring of 2017



helped paraprofessionals voice their needs. Those powerful insights helped the Director of Special Services and the OPEPP consultant focus on areas important to paraprofessionals as they began planning and implementing.

Integrating OPEPP. The district uses OPEPP tools and resources to help build a district culture in which paraprofessionals are included, respected, and supported in ways that promote continuous growth. The district began by establishing a committee with the Director of Special Services, three paraprofessionals, a general education teacher, an intervention specialist, a principal, and the SST/OPEPP consultant. Also, one paraprofessional on the OPEPP team is the AFSCME union president. Her involvement has helped the committee remain sensitive to finding ways to meet paraprofessional needs that fit with the terms of the contract.

In the beginning, the OPEPP consultant provided guidance that included developing the agenda and running the meetings. The agenda template she developed is an online, collaborative document that gives opportunities to meeting participants to provide relevant input. The template allows all members of the OPEPP committee to feel ownership for its processes. Additionally, the online template can be tailored (through revision and elaboration) to structure each committee meeting. In this way, the agenda becomes a catalyst for action, a reminder of priorities, and a celebration of work accomplished.

One lesson learned through the OPEPP work thus far concerns the importance of hearing from staff about their understanding of paraprofessional roles. An OPEPP survey adapted for use in the Athens City Schools revealed confusion about paraprofessional roles and responsibilities. In fact, the process of adapting the survey gave the committee an opportunity to clarify their own perceptions of and perspectives on the roles. The process led to improved relationships, planning, and collaboration.

Using the survey and structured follow-up discussions, the committee focused in 2017-18 on developing a Paraprofessional Roles and Responsibilities document to clarify and focus their work. For example, some paraprofessionals had training in providing personal services to students, including administering medication and helping with feeding and toileting. Others were experienced in helping students with



Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. It became clear that among paraprofessionals, many took on specialized responsibilities. This understanding represented a sea change in the organizational culture because it made the expertise of paraprofessionals visible to teachers, administrators, and other educators in the system. They realized that degrees and titles are far from the only indicators of expertise. Experience and local knowledge are powerful assets and essential tools. The committee has also helped the district identify two areas of paraprofessional development to focus on for the future: communication and behavioral supports. Athens reports early progress in both areas as paraprofessionals build skills.

Ongoing Opportunities. Working with OPEPP has helped Athens chart a path toward growth and instructional improvement. The District Leadership Team’s ongoing support continues to bolster this professional-led initiative, both in momentum and in sustainability. The paraprofessional educator we spoke with, now in her 24th year of service in the district, reports that Athens’ efforts have helped her as well as her paraprofessional colleagues understand their contribution to the district and share ideas relevant to improvement.

The district plans to use OPEPP services in coming years. They will continue to tap into resources and services such as the OPEPP academies, which give them opportunities to learn from other districts. And district educators plan to incorporate other tools, as well. For example, the OPEPP team has identified which OPEPP modules are most salient for paraprofessional development in their district. Athens wants to support paraprofessionals to engage in the learning deliberately and collaboratively. Their aims include fostering deep learning among paraprofessionals and enriching teacher-paraprofessional communication. Better communication among educators will improve instructional planning and delivery, contributing to the use of high-leverage practices that improve outcomes for all students.

Plans and Prospects for the Future. In the 2019-2020 school year, the committee is focusing on developing a decision-making matrix to help determine the paraprofessional services that will add the most value for each student. It will specify what those services will be, when they will be used, how long they will last, and when they will be phased out.

The OPEPP committee, to help with the development of its services decision-making matrix, has rotated its paraprofessional membership to include input from two paraprofessionals who have experience in



unique, specific assignments that include communications devices and other supports. The district is also looking at developing a paraprofessional self-assessment tool to support self-reflection and collaborative learning conversations. And the district is exploring ways to use OPEPP instructional modules to support paraprofessionals' learning.

In the Athens City Schools, paraprofessionals ask questions, take part in instructional conversations, and receive relevant professional development. Going forward, the district will leverage these assets to enrich the work of instructional teams and improve the precision of support provided to students.