

# The OPEPP Practice Continuum: A Guide for Integrating Paraprofessional Educators into the Work of a School District

OPEPP has prepared this guide to help districts, educational service centers, state support team members, and employment agencies quickly understand key issues for best practices in organizational deployment of paraprofessionals: paraprofessionals' responsibilities; paraprofessionals' assignments to students; paraprofessionals' involvement in educator teams; and suggestions for integrating paraprofessionals into the work of schools and districts.

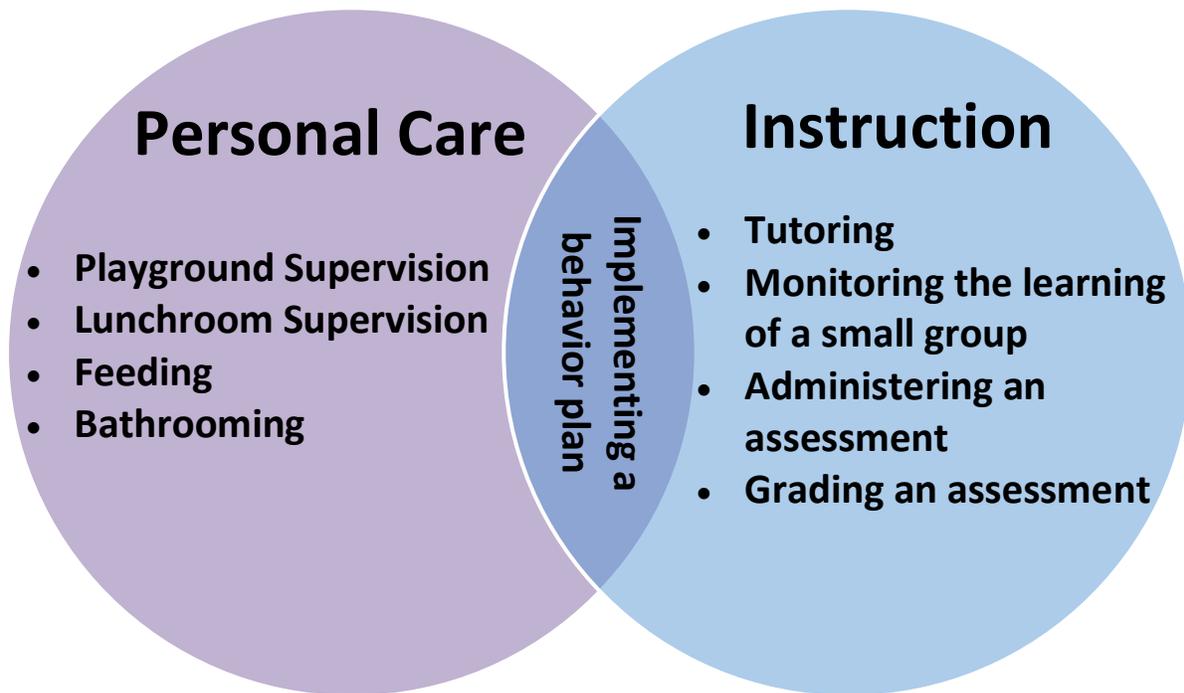
## Rationale

Paraprofessional educators (paraprofessionals) work alongside teachers, related services personnel, and other employees of school districts. They provide work “as needed” to ensure that students receive good care and high-quality instruction. Paraprofessionals can work with many different types of students: those with disabilities and those without disabilities.

*Some students with disabilities* receive special education services and have individualized education programs (IEPs). *Other students with disabilities* do *not* get special education services, however. In order to do well in their general education classrooms, these students often have “504 plans,” which specify academic, behavioral, or medical accommodations they may need. And a student can have both an IEP and a 504 plan.

Many paraprofessionals work with students who *do not have disabilities*. Paraprofessionals may be assigned to work with students who need help in general education classrooms: individual students, small groups, or larger groups. Some paraprofessionals provide supervision to students before or after school, on the playground, or in the cafeteria.

The work that paraprofessionals do sometimes involves personal care and sometimes involves instruction. And in some cases, there’s an overlap. The Venn diagram below illustrates the overlap.



As you see with the different duties on the Venn diagram, things can get complicated fast. “Implementing a behavior plan”—something many paraprofessionals do—usually involves overlap. That’s because students’ behavior involves everything they do at school. The tasks listed are just illustrations. There is much more that some paraprofessionals do, but the things on the list are typical.

### What Does “Continuum” Mean?

Another way to show the relationship among tasks paraprofessionals do is with a “continuum.” What’s that? It’s a sequence that moves from one extreme to another. The example below shows a continuum of paraprofessional tasks that runs from basic personal care to focused academic support. (By the way, the plural of continuum is continua. The word comes from Latin.)



Other continua also relate to paraprofessionals. For example, paraprofessionals sometimes work alone (one extreme) and sometimes as part of an instructional team (other extreme). They sometimes work with one student (one extreme), sometimes with a small group of students (middle of the continuum), and sometimes with a large group of students (other extreme).

## Making Sense of Parapro Assignments with Continua

A continuum can *organize* the things we do at work. It can identify the responsibilities that fit with particular roles--the role of the teacher and the role of the parapro, for instance. The assignment of work to parapro and teachers needs organization so that everyone can understand what is involved. For a long time, there has been confusion about the roles and responsibilities of parapro. Teachers' roles and responsibilities may seem clearer, but they also need to be better defined, particularly when teachers start to work in pairs (e.g., as co-teachers) or teams.

OPEPP believes that two continua are particularly helpful for clarifying the work of parapro: (1) the number of students a parapro works with and (2) the opportunity a parapro has to work as part of an instructional team.

### The Continuum of Working with One to Working with Many Students

The first of these continua relates to the number of students with whom parapro *typically* work. Does the parapro work with just one student or with many students? It's an important question because many parapro are assigned to just one student.

Unfortunately, in almost all cases, this common practice *is not educationally effective*. Why? It cultivates dependency, isolates the student from his or her peers, and keeps the parapro from providing support to others who may need it. The following diagram illustrates the continuum.



### The Continuum from Working in Isolation to Working on an Instructional Team

According to lot of recent research, instruction is better when educators work collaboratively. Parapro who work with a highly functional instructional team are fortunate. In such a team everyone works together to find ways to help all students learn well and achieve at high levels.

Somewhere in the middle of the continuum is the practice of co-teaching with one other educator—often the general or special educator to whose classroom a parapro is assigned. At the less effective end of the continuum is isolated work in which a parapro performs assigned tasks with little direction, support, or feedback—and no collaboration at all.

In Ohio districts, there are parapro who work at either end of the continuum and many who work in the middle. This is the continuum:



## The Intersection Between the Two Continua

The continua are a way to think about practice. But in reality, paraprofessionals are assigned a variety of jobs, and the assignment isn't usually guided by the kinds of thinking the continua illustrate.

For instance, paraprofessionals might be assigned to work on an instructional team but serve just one or two students. So their membership in the team is more on paper than real. Or a paraprofessional might co-teach all students in a general education classroom but work in a school where instructional teams haven't been established.

Because of this reality, it's helpful to identify (1) several common assignments that paraprofessionals have, (2) what functions the assignments indicate, and (3) what paraprofessionals need to do in those assignments. The table below provides this information.

| Assignment                                   | Functions Served in the Assignment  | What the Assignment Requires of the Parapro   |
|--|---|---|
| Co-teaching in a general education classroom | Differentiation and enrichment for each student; Tier 1 MTSS; reinforcement and practice; IEP goal-attainment | <p>Observing students' behavior and academic performance.</p> <p>Teaching concepts and skills using a set of procedural notes.</p> <p>Directing students in the performance of practice activities.</p> <p>Providing feedback to students using a rubric.</p> <p>Providing support for IEP modifications, goals.</p> <p>Implementing interventions (e.g., associated with Tier 2 or 3 supports).</p> <p>Collaborating with the general education teacher.</p> |

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|---|--|--|
| <p>Co-teaching in a special education classroom</p>             | <p>Differentiation and enrichment for each student; reinforcement and practice; Tier 1 and Tier 2 MTSS; IEP goal-attainment</p>      | <p>Observing students' behavior and academic performance.<br/> Teaching concepts and skills using a set of procedural notes.<br/> Directing students in the performance of practice activities.<br/> Providing feedback to students using a rubric.<br/> Providing support in light of IEP modifications and goals.<br/> Implementing interventions (e.g., associated with Tier 2 or 3 supports).<br/> Collaborating with the intervention specialist and general educators (as appropriate)</p> |
| <p>One-on-one supported academic practice and reinforcement</p> | <p>Reinforcement and practice; Tier 3 MTSS; IEP goal-attainment</p>  | <p>Observing students' behavior and academic performance.<br/> Teaching concepts and skills using a set of procedural notes.<br/> Directing students in the performance of practice activities.<br/> Providing feedback to students using a rubric.<br/> Providing support in light of IEP modifications and goals.<br/> Implementing interventions (e.g., associated with Tier 3 supports).<br/> Collaborating with the intervention specialist and general educators (as appropriate).</p>     |
| <p>Behavioral support</p>                                       | <p>Behavior plan goal-attainment; functional well-being and social-emotional development; fading support to promote independence</p> | <p>Using positive interventions and supports to accomplish the goals of a behavior plan.<br/> Collecting data systematically (e.g., observing behavior using a checklist).<br/> Teaching pro-social behaviors.<br/> Providing support for increasing levels of independence.<br/> Collaborating with teachers and the educational team.</p>  |
| <p>One-on-one caretaking</p>                                    | <p>Care-taking; teaching social skills and functional skills; fading support to promote independence</p>                             | <p>Performing specific care-taking tasks.<br/> Respecting the dignity of every student.<br/> Teaching self-care skills.<br/> Providing support for increasing levels of independence.</p>  |

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|                               |  | Collaborating with the intervention specialist and general educators (as appropriate).  |
| Clerical support for teachers | Instructional differentiation, enrichment, and support | Performing specific clerical tasks.<br>Following directions.<br>Working efficiently.<br>Interacting with students in positive ways.<br>Collaborating with the intervention specialist and general educators (as appropriate). |

### Integrating Paraprofessionals Into the Work of the District

This table is a starting point for conversations and planning. For instance, it can help you decide about the training needs of paraprofessionals and teachers. And these kinds of conversations relating to planning and training can help the school and district make better use of paraprofessionals.

Whatever their assignments, and however the district ultimately decides to define the role and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, the work of paraprofessionals *enlarges the capacity* of school districts to address the needs of all students. That’s why it’s important to structure the work of paraprofessionals with care: when the role is well-structured, paraprofessionals help a district accomplish its most important educational goals.

And part of a well-structured role is to include paraprofessionals on leadership teams. In Ohio, these teams notably include Teacher-based Teams (TBTs), Building Leadership Teams (BLTs), and District Leadership Teams (DLTs). These teams use data to improve instructional practices and student outcomes. The experiences and insights of paraprofessionals are part of the data that these teams consider, and their voices are needed in the meetings of leadership teams. Districts that want to use paraprofessionals well make sure they play active roles on teams, especially TBTs.

### Useful Terms

**504 Plan:** A plan specifying accommodations (academic, behavioral, or medical) for a student with learning needs.

**Academic accommodations:** Modifications of standard instructional materials, equipment, or procedures to meet the individual learning needs of students. Examples include large print books, specialized use of computer technologies, and arrangements for changing location from the classroom to another location (e.g., a sensory room).

**Behavior plan:** A written document specifying goals for a child’s behavior and strategies for helping the child reach those goals. The strategies might involve (1) one or more changes in the classroom environment, (2) the use of specific rewards, or (3) a sequence of scaffolds to help the child learn new (pro-social) behaviors.

**Co-teaching:** An approach to providing instruction in which two or more educators collaborate to present content in ways that meet the needs of all students. Sometimes the co-teaching arrangement includes a general educator and an intervention specialist. Sometimes a parapro is part of the co-teaching team. The phrase “co-plan to co-serve” emphasizes the need for careful planning whenever educators use co-teaching.

**Differentiation:** Instructional strategies that tailor classroom instruction to the various preferences and levels of readiness of different students.

**Enrichment:** Instructional strategies that extend or deepen a student’s knowledge and skills.

**Fading support:** Instructional techniques and activities designed to promote independence. One example involves “prompting,” in which an educator prompts a student to make correct responses to a question or activity. Over time, as the child learns the correct steps or responses, prompts become less specific, and the child completes tasks more independently. The ultimate outcome of fading is that the student no longer needs support for a particular task.

**Functional skills:** Practical or “life” skills. They include self-care, personal decision-making, communicative competence, social competence, self-advocacy, and work-related skills.

**IEP (Individualized Education Program):** A written agreement between a school district and a child’s parent or guardian to specify special educational goals and services for the child.

**IEP goal:** A learning target for an outcome a student is working to attain.

**Pro-social behavior:** Ways of acting that promote positive interchanges with other people.

**Reinforcement and practice:** Any activity that uses repetition of content or steps in a process to help students learn and retain new knowledge and skills.

**MTSS :** Acronym for “multi-tiered system of supports.” MTSS uses ongoing assessment to determine the support a student needs in order to meet academic standards. Typically, MTSS specifies three levels of support: Tiers 1, 2, and 3. In some states and districts, MTSS is used synonymously with Rtl (Response to Intervention). In Ohio, MTSS is the more generic term.

**Tier 1:** Curriculum materials and instructional strategies that are used with an entire class of students. They are known as “universal” supports, and, under the best circumstances, they provide students with multiple ways to access, process, and respond to information.

**Tier 2:** Instructional strategies and activities provided to students in supplemental or small-group settings. Often Tier 2 strategies are used in general education classrooms, but sometimes grouping for Tier 2 instruction relies on “pull-out.”

**Tier 3:** Intensive strategies and supports that typically are so specialized that they require professionals to work one-on-one with a student. Tier 3 strategies and supports can readily be incorporated into the instructional plans for general education classrooms. Nevertheless, some school districts assign students to resource rooms or separate classrooms in order to receive intensive types of help.