



## Westfall Local School District and OPEPP: A Profile

**The Profile.** This profile reports on the work Westfall Local School District has accomplished through its 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 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.** Westfall is a rural district with an enrollment of about 1,432, a 3% minority rate, and a 45% student poverty rate. The district comprises four schools: Westfall Elementary School (PreK-5), Westfall Middle School (6-8), and Westfall High School (9-12). Also counted in the district but not tracked for accountability purposes is Brooks Yates School, a Pickaway County Board of Developmental Disabilities school serving all four school districts in the county. The district employs about 18 paraprofessionals, according to the Ohio Department of Education. The site also lists the general education teacher count at 69, and the special education teacher count at 12.

**Context.** Five years ago, a new Special Education Coordinator began working in the district. She noticed that the paraprofessionals had limited opportunities for communication and began to look for professional development programs and products that could help build structures to support communication and collaboration, improve professional capacity, and help paraprofessionals gain voice. Three years ago, when the State Support Team in Westfall's region sent out an email inviting districts to participate in OPEPP, the Special Education Coordinator recognized the alignment between collaborative work in the district and the OPEPP mission. She followed up and initiated the partnership.

**Integrating OPEPP.** Since then, the district has used OPEPP tools and resources to continue its work to build an inclusive culture, increase collaboration, and improve professional capacity. This work centers on providing professional development (PD) based on shared district concerns, using collaborative team structures, and providing support for paraprofessional training and collective learning through the use of [OPEPP Professional Development Modules](#) and other OPEPP resources.

The Westfall Local School District formed a committee called the Westfall OPEPP team. The team includes paraprofessionals, the OPEPP consultant, a general educator, a principal, and central office administrators. It systematically solicits perspectives and ideas from educators and service providers across schools and grade levels. Balanced representation helps increase understanding and compassion across the district. It also means that paraprofessionals are beginning to be included as members of other important teams such as Building Leadership Teams and Teacher-based Teams. Now, educators and paraprofessionals regularly communicate with one another to extend knowledge and implement improvements.

One of the first tasks of the Westfall OPEPP Team was to develop a district-wide document detailing roles and responsibilities for actors within the district. To develop this document, the committee



solicited and integrated input from many perspectives. This concerted effort has helped empower the educators in the district who used to refer to themselves disparagingly as “teachers’ aides.”

The document, carefully crafted over the first year of Westfall’s partnership with OPEPP, is called [A Guide for Understanding the Roles of Westfall Local School District’s Paraprofessionals and the Educators, Related Service Providers, and Administrators Who Guide Them](#). District leaders share this guide with paraprofessionals and others during in-service sessions at the start of each school year, and the document is modified based on input from district staff. This document aligns the work of different types of educators in the district while also communicating expectations and describing responsibilities. It also shares information about the district’s communicative and collaborative structures.

In addition to serving as a communication tool, the guide also helps leaders expand the district’s inclusive culture and build collaboration among educators (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel) in Westfall by clarifying and elevating the paraprofessional role. It communicates to all that the paraprofessional is, “not just a teacher’s aide...you’re working with students; you’re supporting them. ...paraprofessionals know what their role is, and they’re ready to share that with teachers.”

Another outcome of collaborative work through OPEPP was the creation of a PD crosswalk based on findings from surveys of Westfall educators. The crosswalk identified PD relevant to the needs of both teachers and paraprofessionals. One notable area of need related to the development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The PD on IEPs that the district provided has enabled general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals to work together to support students with IEPs more effectively and efficiently.

Moreover, each interviewee who shared information about the Westfall-OPEPP partnership talked about the important role played by the OPEPP consultant. Her guidance and collaboration facilitated the creation of the PD Crosswalk and the Roles and Responsibilities document. The commitment of the entire district, in concert with the consultant, has resulted in a culture in which all educators are empowered to voice ideas and concerns, take responsibility, commit time to improvement, and listen to one another.

Lastly, everyone who was interviewed praised the learning opportunities that district collaborations and OPEPP events provide. Attendees report learning new perspectives and strategies to integrate into their work with students.

**Ongoing Opportunities.** The Westfall OPEPP team itself represents an ongoing opportunity for continued development. District support for the team signifies the ongoing value of the work. The team’s commitment to representative membership ensures balanced approaches to data-driven improvement. The consultant’s responsiveness communicates that feedback is valued and acted upon.



As a result of Westfall’s partnership with OPEPP, paraprofessionals now know that other educators welcome them as colleagues: “...our paras are looked at as part of the staff and the community here within the building, not just as a support person to make copies or cut or laminate.” Now that paraprofessionals have joined other educators as members of district teams, they share “here’s what I’m noticing,” rather than staying quiet. Everyone knows the district leaders and staff members are there to support one another. Work to connect educators, including paraprofessionals, through focused teamwork has helped Westfall build a culture of empowerment over the past three years. Drawing on this culture to improve adult and student learning is an ongoing opportunity.

Another ongoing opportunity centers around the use of [OPEPP Professional Development Modules](#) as a way to expand communication strategies and the use of evidence-based instructional strategies. Paraprofessionals can now learn side-by-side with teachers, related services personnel, and other paraprofessionals. This collaborative type of learning encourages all personnel to ask questions, share effective strategies, and support one another.

**Plans and Prospects for the Future.** Going forward, Westfall will continue to survey teachers and paraprofessionals to identify needs, and will continue to refine its orientation and alignment document. The district is also looking for ways to expand the document to include information pertinent to parents and guardians.

Additionally, the County Board of Developmental Disabilities has begun to communicate with the district about integrating OPEPP resources into its new monthly paraprofessional collaboration. This collaboration will provide new opportunities for expanding professional dialog, sharing resources, and empowering a wider network of educators.

Interviewees from the Westfall Local School District say they are not yet done with efforts to build capacity and empower paraprofessionals. They are working to plan a paraprofessional mentor program, so that new hires can get immediate support from another, more experienced paraprofessional. In addition, the Westfall OPEPP Team is addressing new areas of need by providing PD to help paraprofessionals understand and implement supports for students. District leaders are also working at the organizational level to carve out more time within daily schedules to enable paraprofessionals to co-plan with teachers.

The Special Education Coordinator shared this snapshot of how working with OPEPP has helped the district transform paraprofessional perspective, culture, and capacity:

...when we started the work, my paraprofessional was like, “Oh, I’m just a maid, I don’t really know this, I can’t help you, I’m not comfortable doing this.” And, we’re at the start of our third year, and she refers to herself as a paraprofessional now...she makes her voice heard, and she has an opinion...it’s just great to see them valuing themselves, because they truly are valued here in our district.