

Pickerington Local School District and OPEPP: A Profile

The Profile. This profile reports on the work Pickerington 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. Pickerington is a suburban district with an enrollment of about 10,739, a 44% minority rate, and a 28% economically disadvantaged rate. The district comprises 15 schools: Fairfield Elementary School (K-4), Heritage Elementary (K-4), Pickerington Elementary (K-4), Sycamore Creek Elementary (K-4), Toll Gate Elementary (K-4), Tussing Elementary (K-4), Violet Elementary (K-4), Diley Middle (5-6), Harmon Middle (5-6), Pickerington Lakeview Junior High (7-8), Pickerington Ridgeview Junior High (7-8), Toll Gate Middle (5-6), Pickerington High School Central (9-12), Pickerington High School North (9-12), and Pickerington Alternative School. The district employs about 75 paraprofessionals, 405 general education teachers, and 110 special education teachers, according to the Ohio Department of Education.

Context. In the 2017-18 school year—three years ago—the Pickerington district formed its OPEPP team to improve paraprofessional training using OPEPP resources, including instructional modules, face-to-face learning and ongoing support from a consultant; online resources; and the opportunity to share expertise and experience with other participating districts. Pickerington's Director of Special Education initiated the partnership. She was aware that paraprofessionals had limited opportunities for training and communicating with other educators. She saw the need to define and clarify the role of the paraprofessional, get paras more involved with academic instruction, and support collaborative learning between teachers and paras.

The chief focus, initially, was on finding high-quality professional development (PD) content and delivery methods. Soon the focus expanded to broader shifts in culture. The aim was to build a collaborative culture that capitalized on the experience and expertise of paraprofessionals, enabling them to help with classroom instruction and promote students' well-being. A tactic for supporting this cultural shift was to involve paraprofessionals in planning, goal setting, and professional and community outreach. Participation in OPEPP seemed likely to result in better professional development opportunities and content for the district as well as support for the desired cultural shift.

Last year, the team focused on building paraprofessionals' skills in working with students on the autism spectrum, and this year the OPEPP team is focusing on helping paraprofessionals in mastery of the use of an online diagnostic assessment tool. The team also works to respond to paraprofessionals' input about needed training. Paraprofessionals in Pickerington believe it important to learn alongside teachers as well as to engage in their own PD. Their goal is to become classroom partners with other educators (e.g., teachers).

Integrating OPEPP. Since joining the partnership, the district has used OPEPP tools and resources in its work to build inclusive culture, increase collaboration, and improve professional capacity. This work centers on delivering PD to address 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 current OPEPP consultant reports that face-to-face OPEPP team meetings have yielded payoffs in terms of what the team has accomplished thus far and will be able to accomplish in the future. She sees this feature of the project as one of its biggest assets. The team has recently examined district paraprofessional growth—noting both successes and ongoing opportunities for continued paraprofessional learning. They also have added an Academic/Behavior Coach to the OPEPP team to adopt a leadership role in facilitating paraprofessional PD. In addition, the team includes the OPEPP consultant, Director of Special Education, Director of HR, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, and English Learner Coordinator.

In the first year of Pickerington’s partnership with OPEPP, a teacher-paraprofessional exemplar team was also formed. Its on-going work is to support other paraprofessionals and teachers and share its methods of support across the district. OPEPP resources are used by this team in paraprofessional training and in helping others across the district build a culture in which paraprofessionals are valued and recognized for their contributions. Including two or three speakers a year in paraprofessional PD has also been valuable.

In sharing perspectives about the nature and impact of the work, several OPEPP team members noted “ah-ha” moments. One member’s “ah-ha” moment came with “realizing how lacking...that we’ve been with this wonderful group of folks that we have—not utilizing them in the best way we could.” Some previously taken-for-granted views and practices now are changing. Notably, Pickerington teachers and administrators report that their attitudes toward paraprofessionals have changed. They now recognize the expertise of paraprofessionals and the contributions these educators can make to the instructional work of the district.

A second OPEPP team member noted,

What we were doing in the beginning is becoming routine for our district, because we see the need, and we’re seeing the results. And, with paras...we need to stay the course. So that has become more of a focus.

Another change in customary practice relates to the training of paraprofessionals. In the past, teachers had by default been expected to train paraprofessionals. Now, the district takes responsibility for providing appropriate PD to them. From the district’s current perspective, both teachers and paraprofessionals should receive high-quality, systemized PD that goes beyond the mechanics of the job (e.g., rules, routines, paperwork, and so on). Rather than focusing primarily on these mechanics, PD in the district now focuses on activities that build the instructional capacity of teachers and paras.

In August of each year, the Pickerington district creates a paraprofessional development plan for the year. An important feature of the plan—one the district hopes to incorporate for the long-term—involves surveying paraprofessionals to learn about their needs. Paraprofessionals, who participate on a voluntary basis, have expressed appreciation for having PD sessions that address their needs. According to the paras, these sessions make them feel valued and included. The sessions help them grow professionally and provide them with the tools they need to do their jobs well. They appreciate that the PD is organized intentionally, not as an afterthought.

The OPEPP team reports that the consultant is a critical resource for the team as it works to assist paraprofessionals in learning to provide more academically focused help to teachers. The consultant assists with planning and organizing the face-to-face OPEPP team meetings; shares focused, relevant information and resources; offers valuable learning opportunities; and helps the team coordinate its efforts.

Another benefit to the district has been the opportunity to confer with other OPEPP partner districts. Of particular interest has been what other districts have found useful for developing the capacities of their paraprofessionals. According to one interviewee: “Bringing us together with other districts has enhanced our professional development and benefitted our staff and students.”

A third benefit has been the opportunity to present at OPEPP conferences about what is being accomplished in Pickerington. The OPEPP consultant also encourages team members to present work to the school board to help them become aware of the impact of the OPEPP partnership. According to an OPEPP team member:

It’s important, when you have initiatives, that everybody is aware of what is going on. Often people have no idea of what goes on in a school, what kinds of things are happening to help students. There’s a great benefit in investing in paraprofessionals. I think that’s one of the things the program, working with OPEPP, has done. These are valuable employees that we often haven’t invested as much in them as we could have. And so therefore we haven’t reaped the benefits that we could have. So, it’s pretty important work.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of the OPEPP partnership has been for paraprofessionals themselves. For paras, *recognition as valued members of the instructional team* has been a critical change. By valuing these educators, the district has been able to clarify their roles, provide needed support and encouragement, and begin a systematic process for expanding their capacity as members of instructional teams.

Ongoing Opportunities. Through the OPEPP partnership, paraprofessionals benefit from new opportunities to share their expertise with others by supporting other paras in the district and by presenting at conferences. The project is also providing opportunities for paraprofessionals to participate in career development that enables them to learn new skills—through collaborative study groups and peer-to-peer networks. A paraprofessional book study group using the OPEPP textbook, *Helping with Instruction* is in the works. The OPEPP consultant is offering face-to-face sessions with hands-on activities to help paras learn to perform the skills presented in the

book. The district is also seeking ways to extend higher education opportunities to those paraprofessionals who are working towards a teaching degree or specialist license.

Pickerington leaders are also committed to including paraprofessionals on leadership teams, starting at the district level. They believe participation in the work of the Ohio Improvement Process will help ensure that paraprofessionals' voices are heard and their suggestions honored. A current district goal is to include paraprofessionals on Building Leadership Teams and Teacher-based Teams. This year, the district is supporting paraprofessional participation in TBT meetings at one school. The plan is to learn from this pilot as a basis for scaling up the practice at all schools.

Another new approach for Pickerington is making sure a district-level PD professional meets with the paraprofessionals at their schools in order to support them in their new position. During this time there is dialog and/or questions with the paraprofessional. In addition, there are plans afoot for "Shadow Day." The idea is to invite substitute paras to shadow experienced paras who are currently working in the schools. The team plans to use this event to build skills among its substitute paraprofessionals as well as encouraging them to consider full-time employment.

Plans and Prospects for the Future. PD for paraprofessionals has already included bringing in a trainer with expertise in social-emotional learning to help paras gain information about trauma-informed care. Building on this work in a pilot initiative, a paraprofessional has been added to the district's PBIS team. The district also hopes to experiment with adding a paraprofessional as an instructional assistant in a high school elective class.

Pickerington leaders gather data from pilot efforts and surveys to support continuous improvement of their staffing practices, including the deployment of paraprofessionals. They take their commitment to learning seriously and believe that all educators in the district benefit from participation in a culture of inquiry. With respect to paras, Pickerington wants "...to make sure [they] feel part of the whole culture of the district."

In keeping with these positive changes in organizational culture, Pickerington is considering additional ways to support paraprofessionals. These initiatives include (1) providing coaching to newly employed paraprofessionals, (2) expanding the types of paraprofessionals who are offered and receive training, and (3) developing mid-range in addition to short-term plans for improving the district's support for paraprofessionals.

Through its partnership with OPEPP, Pickerington is working systematically to build the capacity of its paraprofessionals. Valuing the contributions of paraprofessionals and offering them relevant PD were the first steps. Additional steps are now underway. In the words of a Pickerington OPEPP Team member: "...to make one [paraprofessional] feel valued and to help their growth is one of the greatest gifts...They're not in a silo; they know what their purpose is."