

Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools

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- **Though the utilization of special education paraprofessionals has increased, contemporary literature and research highlight a series of concerns about the field's continuing reliance on this approach.**
- **This article presents a three-component administrative model for effective utilization of paraprofessionals that includes paraprofessional supports, decision-making, and alternatives.**
- **The bulk of the article provides composite descriptions about seven alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals based on reports from school personnel who have implemented these alternatives.**
- **School leaders are encouraged to explore alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals as a way to improve their special education service delivery to meet the educational needs of students with a full range of disabilities within the context of general education classrooms.**

Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools

A key challenge facing both principals and special education administrators is designing and implementing special education service delivery models that meet the educational needs of students with a full range of disabilities within the context of general education classrooms. Nationally, as more students with low incidence disabilities (e.g., autism, severe behavior disorders, intellectual impairments, multiple disabilities) receive their education in general education classrooms, one of the most common service delivery responses has been to hire and assign more paraprofessionals. This has contributed to the burgeoning numbers of paraprofessionals in American schools and corresponding costs. Simultaneously, the wisdom of proliferating a service delivery model that is highly dependent on paraprofessionals for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities has been questioned conceptually (Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight, & Ross, 1999; Giangreco & Broer, 2003b; Mueller 2002) and a variety of concerns have been illustrated in the research literature (Downing,

Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003; Marks, Shrader & Levine, 1999; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay & Stahl, 2001). These concerns include:

- The least qualified group of staff members, paraprofessionals, sometimes have primary or extensive responsibilities for teaching students with the most complex learning characteristics.
- Special education paraprofessionals remain untrained or under-trained for their roles, which at times are questionable (e.g., making curricular decisions, planning lessons, designing adaptations, serving as a liaison with families).
- Similarly, many teachers and special educators remain untrained or under-trained to direct and supervise paraprofessionals; some remain hesitant to undertake this role.
- Inappropriate utilization or excessive proximity of paraprofessionals has been linked to inadvertent detrimental effects (e.g., dependence, interference with peer interactions, insular relationships, stigmatization, provocation of behavior problems).
- Assignment of individual paraprofessionals has been linked to lower levels of teacher

involvement with students who have disabilities, a key factor for successful inclusion in general education classrooms.

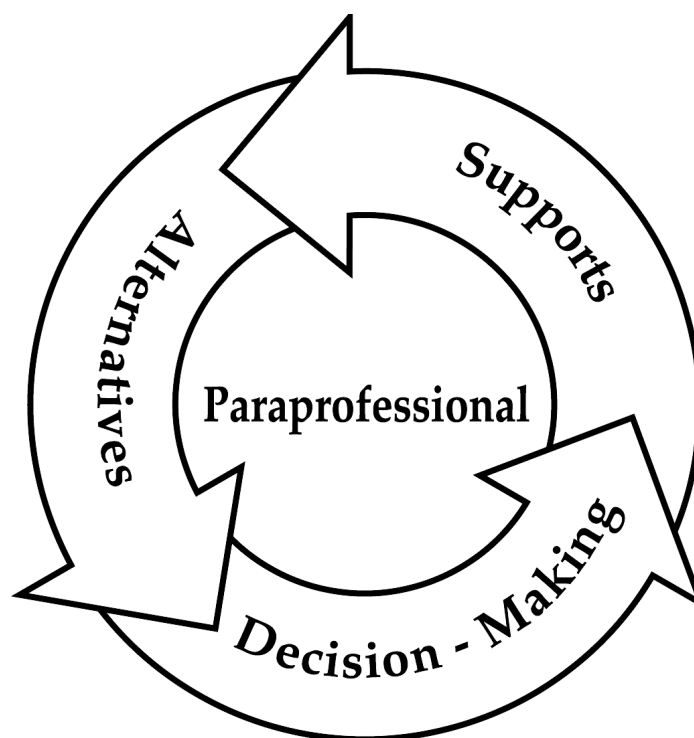
- Shifting responsibilities to paraprofessionals may temporarily relieve certain types of pressures on general and special educators that delay attention to needed changes in schools such as: (a) improving classroom teacher ownership of students with disabilities; (b) addressing special educator working conditions (e.g., caseload, paperwork); or (c) building capacity within general education to design curriculum and instruction for mixed-ability groups that include students with disabilities.

Administrators are faced with addressing these points of concern while simultaneously: (a) acknowledging the valuable work of paraprofessionals as respected members of the school community, (b) utilizing existing paraprofessional resources effectively, (c) ensuring that future decisions about the use of paraprofessionals are appropriate and judicious, and (d) exploring alternatives so that schools are not limited to relying on paraprofessionals as the exclusive or primary mechanism for supporting the educational needs of students with disabilities in general education classes. This article addresses these challenges by first briefly presenting a three-component model for the effective utilization of paraprofessionals to assist in providing special education under the direction of qualified professionals. Second, the focus of the text is on one of the three components of the model, *alternatives* to overreliance on paraprofessionals, because it has been afforded minimal attention in the professional literature and is uniquely important to administrators who are in a position to effect systemic change.

Three-Component Administrative Model for Effective Utilization of Paraprofessionals

As depicted in Figure 1, paraprofessional *supports* represent one of three interrelated components that form a sound administrative foundation for ensuring the appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals in inclusive schools. Though important, *supports* designed to clarify and strengthen the work of paraprofessionals (e.g., role clarification, hiring, orientation, training, supervision) are not the focus of this article because a large volume of contemporary

Figure 1: Three-component administrative model for effective utilization of paraprofessionals.



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literature and research is presently available on this topic (Doyle, 2002; French, 2003; Gerlach, 2001; Ghere, York-Barr, & Sommerness, 2002; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001; Minondo, Meyer, & Xin, 2001; Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001).

A second component, *decision making*, refers to making decisions about the need for paraprofessional supports. Professional literature pertaining to *decision-making* guidelines and processes about the utilization of paraprofessionals is scant. It consists of a small set of conceptual articles (Freshi, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 1999), one programmatic description of a school-based decision-making process (Mueller & Murphy, 2001), and no research data. Though this topic is in dire need of attention, more process options along with an initial set of descriptive and evaluation research studies are

required prior to making generalizations that extend beyond the existing published literature.

The third component, *alternatives*, refers to a variety of actions school leaders can encourage to involve paraprofessionals, general and special educators, parents, and students with and without disabilities, in ways that reduce unnecessary utilization and potential overuse of paraprofessionals. These actions are designed to reduce the problematic, though unintended, effects of excessive or unnecessary paraprofessional utilization. It is our contention that students with disabilities are best served when schools attend to all three components, by: (a) providing appropriate supports for their existing paraprofessionals (e.g., respect, role clarification, orientation, training, supervision); (b) establishing logical and equitable *decision-making* practices for the assignment and utilization of paraprofessionals; and (c) selecting individually appropriate *alternatives* designed to increase student access to instruction from qualified teachers and special educators, facilitate development of peer interactions, and promote self-determination in inclusive classrooms.

Selected Alternatives

The following descriptions of seven alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals are composites based primarily on the self-reports of individuals in inclusive schools across the country. They include a subset of possibilities we consider among those most readily able to be implemented in schools. Additional possibilities (e.g., co-teaching, creative use of dual-certified general/special educators, differentiated teacher roles/positions) also hold promise as alternatives, though likely require more extensive planning to enact than the suggestions presented in this article.

The professional literature offers virtually no student outcome or related data on the impact of these or other alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals. Given the paucity of available information, having descriptions based on first-hand experiences of school-based professionals and parents is an appropriate starting point for administrators to consider as this important area of study emerges. The reader is cautioned that applicability of the ideas presented in this document will vary based on local factors (e.g., collective bargaining agreements, state regulations, policies, special education funding).

Alternative #1: Resource Reallocation—Trading Paraprofessional Positions for Special Educators

Designed as a cost-neutral reallocation of resources, some schools have chosen to shift existing funds from the hiring of paraprofessionals to the hiring of special educators. The number of paraprofessional positions that equal one special educator will, of course, vary depending on a variety of compensation factors; typically three to four paraprofessional positions equals one special educator position. For sake of example, if it costs \$50,000 for salary and fringe benefits to hire one special educator, it might require the resources currently directed toward four paraprofessional positions at \$12,500 per year, based on 30 hours per week at \$9.00/hour with some benefits. The number of paraprofessional positions might be closer to three if the paraprofessionals are paid more, or if early career teachers are hired.

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Schools that reallocated resources in this manner increased the number of highly qualified faculty without increasing costs and improved working conditions for special educators by reducing their caseload size. Lower caseload size can have a series of positive ripple effects, such as: (a) correspondingly less paperwork; (b) fewer paraprofessionals to supervise; (c) more instructional contact time between special educators and students with disabilities; (d) more opportunities for special educators and teachers to collaborate within the classroom; and (e) opportunities to narrow the range of grade levels special educators are asked to support (e.g., assigned to one or two grade levels). Such effects can contribute to job satisfaction and retention of faculty. Retention of faculty also saves time and money spent on hiring and orientation.

A potential challenge of this alternative can be an insufficient supply of certified and qualified special educators, especially in regions with acute shortages. Additionally, some paraprofessionals report anxiety

when resource reallocation is considered, fearing job losses. Job loss can be avoided in cases where the extent of proposed resource reallocation is less than the projected turnover rate for paraprofessionals—though remaining paraprofessionals may be reassigned to different schools or classrooms, or have their roles redefined (e.g., assigned as classroom paraprofessional rather than individual). Classroom teachers may be concerned that common scenarios (e.g., behavioral incidents) will disrupt special educators’ scheduled times to work in the classroom. Since such unexpected scenarios will undoubtedly occur, relying on other alternatives, in combination, can reduce this concern.

Alternative #2: Increasing Ownership of General Educators and Building Their Capacity

In order for students with disabilities to be successfully included in general education classes, it is vital that the classroom teacher play a substantive role. In part, this means establishing teacher attitudes that are welcoming toward the inclusion of students with disabilities and building professional capacity to support the educational needs of mixed-ability groups, which include students with disabilities.

In order for students with disabilities to be successfully included in general education classes, it is vital that the classroom teacher play a substantive role.

In schools committed to greater levels of ownership and teacher capacity, leadership teams of general and special education administrators began by establishing an expectation that classroom teachers should be directly involved in teaching students with disabilities in their classes. It wasn’t enough to be a “host” and have the paraprofessional function as the primary teacher. This notion was embedded in hiring practices, staff development, and supervision until it became part of the culture. Teachers weren’t expected to go it alone; collaborative teams were formed with other teachers, special educators, related services providers, and families to encourage mutual support and learning. In addition, the teachers were provided with ongoing staff development in critical areas (e.g., lit-

eracy, positive behavior supports, inclusive education). One of the most common areas of staff development focused on teachers’ abilities to differentiate curriculum and instruction for mixed-ability groups.

Increased ownership and capacity-building are designed to: (a) increase the amount and quality of instructional time students with disabilities receive from classroom teachers; (b) encourage more integrated delivery of special education services; (c) decrease reliance on paraprofessionals; (d) encourage utilization of classroom paraprofessionals to support *all* students; and (e) facilitate membership of students with disabilities in the classroom. Though it is not unusual for schools to establish collaborative teams or pursue ongoing staff development, what was unique in these examples was that the administrative leadership teams specifically initiated capacity-building for the general education teachers, at least in part, to address the burgeoning numbers of paraprofessionals in their school system. More broadly, the effort was made to ensure that the general education system had sufficient capacity so that students would avoid unnecessary referrals for special education. Some schools reported a decrease in the percent of students labeled “disabled,” which they attributed, in part, to bolstering their schoolwide educational support system for all students.

Alternative #3: Transitional Paraprofessional Pool

One strategy with potential for dealing with both anticipated and unanticipated events that require short-term paraprofessional support is to establish a pool of trained paraprofessionals that can be centrally deployed by a principal or special education administrator as floaters. This group of paraprofessionals would be recruited, hired, assigned, and trained under the direction of a qualified professional (e.g., special educator, teacher, related services provider) for time-limited roles supporting students and classrooms with specific needs where paraprofessional support has been determined to be appropriate and necessary by the IEP team. For example, a student transitioning to high school might receive support in getting from class to class following a schedule. This support would be systematically faded and replaced by an individualized combination of newly learned student skills and natural supports (e.g., walking

between classes with peers). Similarly, the introduction of a new augmentative communication system or a positive behavioral support plan might require consistent, intensive, initial support on a time-limited basis as determined by individual student progress. Pooled paraprofessional resources provide administrative flexibility, encourage student independence, and establish an expectation among professionals and families that the assignment of a paraprofessional doesn't mean it is, or should be, permanent.

The school or district size, characteristics and needs of the student population, and requests for paraprofessional support will help determine the number of paraprofessionals in the pool. Establishing a protocol and procedures for requesting pooled paraprofessional resources is essential for judicious use. Any such procedures will more likely be effective if a cross-stakeholder group (e.g., principals, general and special educators, paraprofessionals, parents) assists in their development.

Additionally, pooled paraprofessionals can be utilized as substitutes for absent paraprofessionals and be called upon to fill in when a special educator is pulled away to deal with unusual situations or other unanticipated problems (e.g., behavior incident). The variety and breadth of activities of pooled paraprofessionals may mean that this group needs to include some of the most skilled paraprofessionals whose personal characteristics allow them to quickly adjust and contribute in new situations. During periods of lower demand, pooled paraprofessionals can be utilized to free up other paraprofessionals for training or be utilized for other valued-added purposes (e.g., assisting with special projects).

Alternative #4: Clerical/Paperwork Paraprofessional

In an effort to alleviate some of the paperwork burden on special educators, an existing paraprofessional position can be re-conceptualized from working with students to doing logistical and clerical tasks that were being done by special educators. Examples include: (a) sending notifications to families; (b) scheduling IEP and team meetings; (c) making scheduling contacts with related services providers; (d) maintaining student databases; (e) maintaining student files; (g) tracking important dates (e.g., triennial reviews, IEP dates); and (h) general clerical work

(e.g., photocopying, laminating, ordering supplies). The paperwork paraprofessional can also be available to help out in classes if the position is defined in that way. Like any of the listed alternatives, the extent of implementation varies; in one school the paperwork paraprofessional is a full-time position, whereas in another 10 hours a week is sufficient.

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Shifting appropriate clerical and paperwork responsibilities from special educators to paraprofessionals may be part of a package of alternatives to re-establish the role of the special educator as a professional who works directly with students who have disabilities. It can improve working conditions for special educators and raise their morale by reallocating their paperwork responsibilities and creating more time for teaching. In some school districts, the role of the special educator has become almost exclusively that of case manager and supervisor of paraprofessionals. Many special educators express dissatisfaction with this role because their professional passion is to work with students, not push paper. Administratively, having a paperwork paraprofessional can save time by centralizing the organization of required paperwork and contributing to state and federal compliance.

Alternative #5: Lowering Caseloads of Special Educators

In an era when general education is concerned about reducing class size, it is ironic that many special educators have caseloads of students with disabilities that nearly match and sometimes exceed the number of students without disabilities that classroom teachers are expected to teach. Special educators often work across a range of grade levels and subject matter that typically would not be expected of general educators. In addition to students on IEPs, many special educators have an additional caseload of students on 504 Plans or those considered "at risk."

When we take into account the increased numbers of adults a special educator collaborates with to address student needs, is it any wonder that so many special educators are leaving the field?

The main component of this alternative is simple and straightforward: to limit the caseload size of special educators so they can actually work with students and colleagues. In the schools that reported this alternative they purposely limited the caseloads of special educators to 10 or under and attempted to minimize the number of grade levels and individual teachers with whom the special educator interacted. Lowering caseloads was designed to: (a) increase instructional time between special educators and students with disabilities; (b) increase time for collaboration with teachers, related services providers, and families; (c) increase time available to provide sufficient training and supervision to paraprofessionals; and (d) increase the likelihood of special educators remaining in the field.

Alternative #6: Peer Support Strategies

Peer supports have a solid record in the literature and include a variety of examples (Snell & Janney, 2000), though few existing peer support models have been developed specifically to address overreliance on paraprofessionals. Schools can start by examining roles that paraprofessionals currently play that might be appropriately carried out by peers, keeping in mind that some of the same problems that exist with paraprofessionals can exist with peers (e.g., overdependence); so merely changing one set of people for another is not sufficient. Plans must be made to ensure the quality of natural supports; here are two.

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An approach used in one high school as an alternative to traditional study hall, was a "Learning Lab." It was offered as a schoolwide support where any student, with or without disabilities, who needs extra support can get individual or group tutoring

from an adult or peer. Although this approach was not initiated to address paraprofessional issues, it is presented because it can. The Lab, which is general education staffed and funded, is centrally located and equipped with current technology in an effort to make it a desirable and valued place for students and faculty. Students attend during study halls, before and after school, or at other agreed-upon times.

An important aspect of the Lab is that it supports the academic success of students across a range of abilities. For example, the Lab can support a student having difficulty with basic literacy or computation, as well as a group of advanced calculus students working through a particularly challenging problem, or others preparing for SAT exams. By ensuring service to a heterogeneous group of students, it can offer some students constructive models of academic behavior by peers while avoiding a common problem of "Learning Labs," namely stigmatization associated with serving only students at risk or with disabilities. Additionally, the Lab can serve as an important support for early career teachers.

Running this type of Learning Lab is not without its challenges. It can be difficult keeping up with the demand for the services. There are logistical and managerial challenges associated with scheduling peer tutors. Senior privileges (e.g., permission to be off campus when not in class) decrease the availability of tutors. Some peers can be overly helpful, create dependencies, or be "too bossy," so ongoing adult supervision is necessary. Peers can be underused or find it challenging to deal with situations where paraprofessionals are unwilling to relinquish a sufficient level of involvement or control.

A second alternative is a peer-to-peer support system that pairs a student with a disability with a classmate who does not have a disability. In some secondary programs, peers are eligible to receive course or community service credit. For example, in one school this was an elective course for seventh- and eighth-grade students. Often paired peers are the same age; sometimes they are cross-age (e.g., high school students assisting middle school students). In another case, the use of peer supports in combination with the rotating use of paraprofessionals was utilized explicitly to address overreliance on paraprofessionals.

Support peers receive systematic orientation and ongoing adult monitoring and support. They assist their classmates who have disabilities in social and

academic ways. This approach is designed to provide reciprocal benefits to students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Students with disabilities benefit from peer modeling, relationship building, and academic support as well as expanded opportunities to socialize, communicate, and demonstrate learning competencies. Peer supports can assist students with disabilities to feel accepted and build confidence. Peer support programs can also create and extend “hidden safety supports” in the schools. They can be a positive force to counteract bullying and, in general, encourage students to look out for each other. Peers without disabilities benefit in the areas of empathy, respect for diversity, responsibility, leadership, communication, and development of valued relationships with students who previously may have been outside their circle of friends. Through tutoring, students without disabilities often deepen or extend their own academic development because the act of teaching requires them to function on different and higher levels of understanding with the subject matter.

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Other benefits of peer supports are well known. Peers tend to be less intrusive and stigmatizing in general education settings. Some general education teachers find it easier and are more comfortable directing the activities of students rather than those of another adult (e.g., paraprofessional). Having peer, rather than paraprofessional, support can increase teacher involvement with students who have disabilities. Sometimes students with disabilities will do things with peers that they won't do for an adult. Peers are a good source of information on “what's cool” and what's not; they also often come up with creative and useful ideas.

Alternative #7: Involving Students With Disabilities in Making Decisions About Their Own Supports

Though self-determination is well established in the professional literature as a vital practice, we have not identified any real life examples where schools have systematically included students with disabilities in contributing to decisions about their own supports, specifically whether they need or want paraprofessional supports, when, how, or from whom. Our experiences, particularly with teenagers and young adults who have had paraprofessional supports, lead us to believe that there are a variety of factors and issues important to at least some students with disabilities, that simply are not adequately taken into account when consumers are not integrally involved in the decision-making. Some of these considerations include the impact of age, gender, proximity, chronological age-appropriateness, choice-making, and levels of control/freedom. Though presently we have little of practical significance to offer under this alternative, we have included it because we hope it will spur school personnel to explore ways to include their students in decision-making about their paraprofessional supports.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that any single alternative will be sufficient to affect substantial change. Therefore, consider enacting an individually determined package of alternatives, in combination with attention to the two other major components (i.e., supports, decision making) of the three-component administrative model for effective utilization of paraprofessionals. A school self-assessment and planning process, currently undergoing field-testing in 26 schools in six states (Giangreco & Broer, 2003a), can assist your selections.

When considering whether to act on the information in this article, keep in mind that some people perceive local factors mentioned earlier in this article (e.g., collective bargaining agreements, state regulations, policies, special education funding), as insurmountable barriers to innovation and quality education. It is likely that school personnel will encounter elements of these factors or other barriers that seemingly make it more difficult for schools to pursue sound educational practices. The

good news is that all attitudes, practices, collective bargaining agreements, regulations, policies, funding approaches, or other perceived barriers are subject to change.

As schools or districts identify alternatives that they believe would be beneficial, we encourage them to move forward. Avoid the temptation to say too quickly, "We can't do that because it's against the regulations" or "We can't do that because it won't be reimbursed as a special education cost by our state." By their very nature, laws like the IDEA have a great deal of flexibility built into them. Similarly, IEP teams formed to address the needs of students with disabilities can be very influential in affecting change, especially when you consider that states and school districts are not allowed to make policies or rules that interfere with the IEP team's individual decision-making authority. Administrative, principle-based leadership can assist professionals and families working together to make the best use of whatever flexibility currently is available within our systems. By deferring judgment, sticking to ethical principles, adhering to the guiding values embedded in our laws, and doing what we think is appropriate for students, each of us has the potential to affect some real change in our schools and communities. If we don't do it, who will?

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