



# Paraeducators: Guidance on documenting services and implementing an Individualized Education Program (IEP)

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# Paraeducators

## ***Background***

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that meets the needs of the students, addressing the impact of their disability on learning. As the IEP is developed, the IEP team will determine what specially designed instruction (SDI) and related services are necessary to address the barriers of the disability that impact the student’s access and progress in general education. All SDI will be developed, supervised, and monitored by an appropriately endorsed special education teacher or related service provider. Instruction may be provided by a non-certified or classified support staff, such as a paraeducator, working under the direct supervision of the endorsed professional. It is the responsibility of the licensed professional to ensure the paraeducator is trained, supported, and appropriately supervised when assigned to support IEP services.

This guide is designed to:

- provide a definition for non-certified staff that support students with disabilities,
- provide guidance on how to help IEP teams document the services needed in the IEP, and
- provide guidance and best practices for the implementation of the IEP.

## ***Definitions***

**Paraprofessional:** Paraprofessionals are individuals who assist a licensed professional. Paraprofessionals must work under the supervision of a licensed professional. In schools, a paraprofessional is a paraeducator.

**Paraeducator:** A paraprofessional is an individual who is employed in a preschool, elementary school, or secondary school support staff under the supervision of a certified or licensed teacher. 20 U.S.C. § 7011(11). The term “paraeducator” is often used as an umbrella title for all individuals who are supporting students with disabilities as an extension of the licensed special education teacher. Paraeducators working under the

direct supervision of the special education teacher or related service provider may provide one-on-one special education services, provide special education services to small groups of students with disabilities or within a general education setting, assist with classroom management, facilitate parental involvement activities, act as translators or interpreters to provide the student access to the instruction, and provide instructional support services.

In Tennessee, paraeducators who work with a student one-to-one are referred to as “ancillary aides” when they are supporting the services of a student with a disability **in the general education setting**, as indicated in the student’s IEP, for a minimum of four hours per day. For the purposes of instructional planning and delivery of services, we will use the term “paraeducator” to refer to all non-licensed personnel that are supporting students with disabilities, including those who meet the former definition of “ancillary aides.”)

### ***IEP Implementation***

Implementation of an IEP requires coordination, collaboration, and communication among all adults supporting the student. When the services include a paraeducator, the team must also determine who will provide the necessary professional development opportunities, supervise the paraeducator, and provide oversight of the services provided to ensure the IEP is implemented as written.

Paraeducators’ knowledge and experience may range from no experience working with students with disabilities or within a school setting, to multiple years of experience, training, and professional development, to professionals with an endorsement in education other than special education. Understanding the experience and professional development of the paraeducator is critical for the success of the students. A paraeducator also needs to understand the IEP for every student they are supporting fully. As a school support staff member providing special education services and supports, it is imperative that the supervising educator intentionally collaborate and communicate with the paraeducator to ensure clarity about the student’s IEP and decisions made by the

IEP team. Maintaining notes from the collaborative meetings can support the implementation of the plan and provide a reference for all team members.

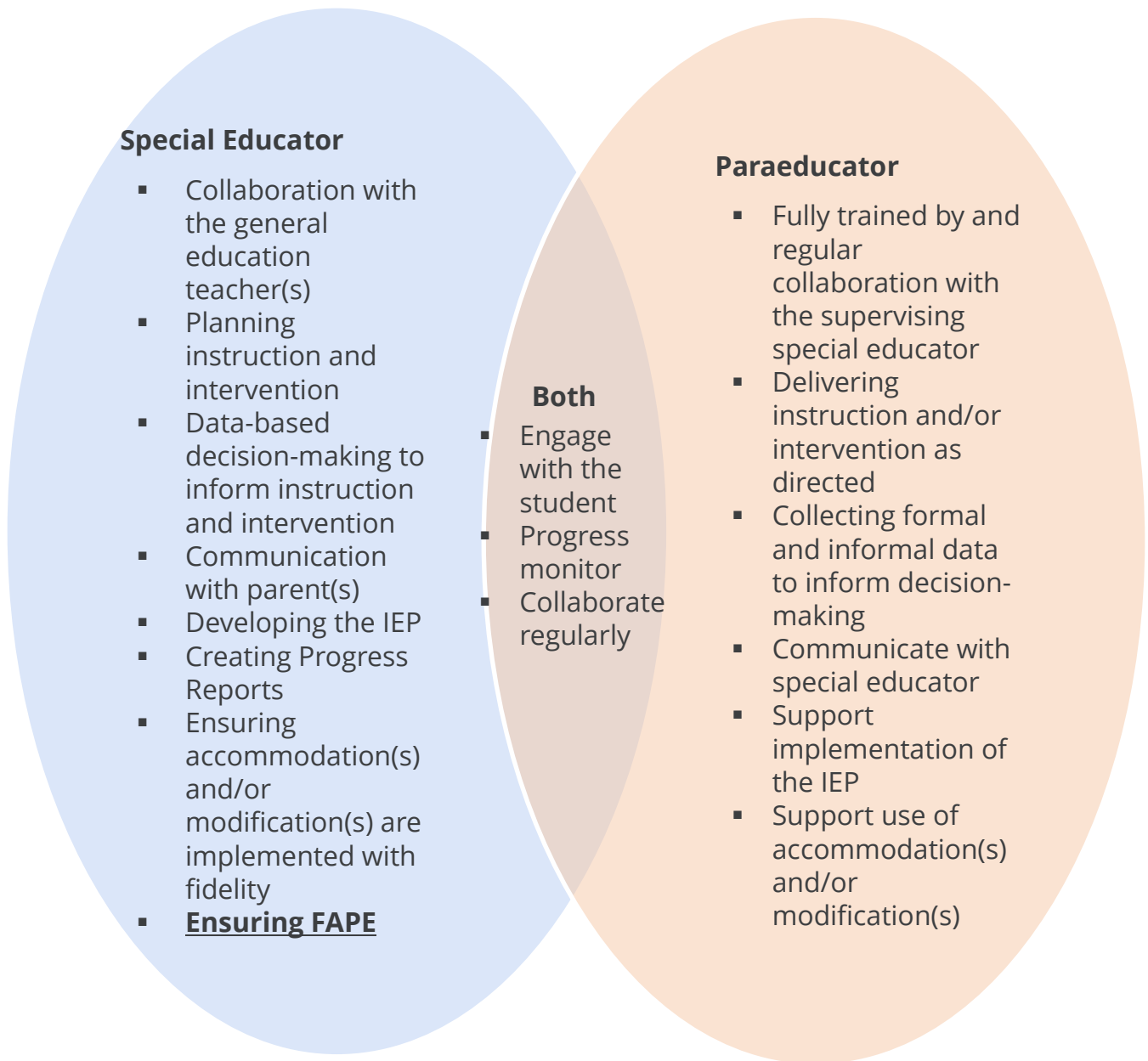
*Paraeducators must work under the supervision of a certified or licensed educator. Together they provide the student with the supports and services needed to increase their outcomes and access to instruction.*

**Regardless of the paraeducator’s knowledge, experience, and understanding of the IEP, they must provide services under the supervision of a certified or licensed educator.** This means the paraeducator should not be the person making educational decisions or communicating with parents and educators on behalf of the student unless directed to do so by the licensed professional who is supervising them. The licensed special educator or related service provider is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the services and support(s) meet the student’s needs. They are also the ones who must ensure the student makes progress appropriate “in light of the child’s circumstances.” (Endrew F. vs. Douglas County School District).

*The primary role of special education teachers and paraeducators is to help students become as independent as possible, and whenever possible, no longer require special education support.*

The special educator or related service provider leads the student's individual program, the paraeducator supports the program. Together, they provide the student with the support(s) and service(s) needed to increase the student’s outcomes and access to instruction. See Figure 2 for a general summary of the relationship between the licensed special educator or related service professional and the paraeducator.

*Figure 1: Relationship of Licensed Personnel (Special Educators and Related Services Personnel) and Paraeducators*



***Considerations for Paraeducator Professional Development and Training***

Providing paraeducators with professional development and training opportunities can increase their effectiveness and efficacy. Professional development or training can be provided within the district or school, online, at a conference, or through other available resources. While the needs of students are individualized, there are several topics that will benefit most paraeducators. The following are a few examples:

- an overview of special education law,
- how to read and understand an IEP,
- implementation and use of accommodations and modifications,
- strategies to increase collaborative planning,
- conflict resolution strategies,
- understanding and implementation of behavior intervention plans,
- using positive behavior strategies,
- supporting social skills with peers,
- progress monitoring data collection, and
- fading supports to increase independence.

For professional development resources, visit the [Tennessee Technical Assistance Network](#) or the [TRIAD Training Opportunities](#).

### ***Strategies to Increase the Effectiveness of One-to-One Paraeducators***

Paraeducators sometimes provide a unique service, working directly with a student one-on-one. This is an intensive service, reserved only for students whose IEP team determines they need constant or frequent support. For example:

- continuous behavioral support, prompting, and reinforcement,
- prompting and teaching the student to use their communication system,
- prompting and guiding the student through each step of a learning activity to sustain engagement and minimize frustration,
- providing additional instruction, vocabulary support, demonstration, or modeling to support learning while the teacher engages the class in a whole group,
- monitoring and prompting for self-regulation,
- supporting physical engagement through hand-under-hand or other prompting, and/or
- providing modifications to work to increase engagement and independence.

The role of the one-to-one paraeducator requires in-depth knowledge and skills related to the student's needs, but also independence to make decisions in the moment. In short,

the paraeducator assists in doing the tasks of an educator, and therefore, they hold a great deal of responsibility for the student. A common pitfall of school teams is to assume the paraeducator can do their job without regular supervision, collaboration, or training. ***Paraeducators are not licensed special education teachers***, and by law (20 U.S.C. § 7011(11)), they are an extension of the licensed educator or related service personnel. The paraeducator is responsible for providing services as directed and trained by the licensed professional who supervises them, and/or is responsible for the student’s IEP. There are strategies schools can use to increase the effectiveness of the paraeducator’s services, which will also increase job satisfaction, independence, and commitment. A few of these strategies are highlighted below. School teams should feel free to customize any of these suggestions to meet the needs of their staff and population.

*Table 1: Suggestions to Increase the Effectiveness of One-to-One Paraeducators*

Topic Area	Suggestion
<b>Master Schedule</b>	Plan the master schedule with a shared planning/preparation time for the special educator, paraeducator, and when possible, general education teacher. A shared planned time supports planning, analysis of the student's progress, and common expectations.
<b>Clear Roles</b>	Prior to the start of the school year or when there is a change of setting/team members, it is important to establish roles. A few areas that need to be clearly outlined to prevent programmatic issues later include grading, preparing instructional materials modifications, communication with parents, co-planning/prepping with general education, discipline, and progress monitoring.

<p><b>Share the Job</b></p>	<p>To provide necessary professional development opportunities and support to the paraeducator, it is important that the special educator understand the student's skills and needs within each environment. Planning for the special educator and paraeducator to "switch places" on a regular basis is one solution. This can be as infrequently as once or twice a month.</p>
<p><b>Professional Development</b></p>	<p>Including the paraeducator in the professional development provided to the educators will increase the paraeducator's skills and knowledge, while providing shared learning between the educators and paraeducator. Flexing time, reducing the workday by a few minutes daily, or a stipend are a few of the strategies schools have used to pay the paraeducator for attending typically, non-contract days.</p>
<p><b>Coach More Than One Paraeducator</b></p>	<p>Paraeducators who work one-on-one may need a day off for illness, personal reasons, or to care for their family. Coaching additional paraeducators to support the student ensures the student's services are continuous, even when there is an adult absent. Also, this will increase the team's capacity to support more students in a myriad of ways.</p>

***Strategies to Increase Effectiveness of Paraeducators Who Support the Classroom***

***Paraeducators who support the classroom or more than one student with disabilities include two main categories of support:***

- special education services within the general education classroom as a part of the students' IEPs, or
- classroom support within the special education setting to reduce the teacher/student ratio or increase direct instruction time for the learners.

### ***Special Education Services***

One strategy to meet the needs of students with disabilities is to have a paraeducator provide services to groups of students whose least restrictive environment (LRE) is the general education classroom. Paraeducators work as an extension of the teacher, making it possible to support several classrooms at the same time of day. As with all paraeducators, regardless of the setting, **they should only provide services under the supervision of a certified or licensed teacher.**

While paraeducators work more as classroom assistants, focusing on the needs of students with disabilities, they will still require training and knowledge to be successful. A few strategies that can support the successful use of paraeducators are summarized below.

*Table 1: Suggestions to Increase Effectiveness of Paraeducators Who Support the Classroom*

<b>Topic Area</b>	<b>Suggestion</b>
<b>Clear Responsibilities</b>	At the beginning of the school year or when a paraeducator is supporting in a new classroom, set up a meeting with the special education teacher, general education teacher, and paraeducator to establish each person's responsibilities including grading, discipline, accommodations, and progress monitoring.
<b>Communication</b>	Classrooms are dynamic and need to flex as students' needs shift. Establishing a plan for communication between the paraeducators and the general education

	and special educator is essential. The team may choose to establish a 5-minute check-in moment a few times a day, or an end of the day debrief. There should also be a plan for urgent communication.
<b>Coaching and Modeling</b>	Coaching and modeling expectations is the best way to ensure the paraeducators is providing special education services in the manner described in the student's IEP. Setting up a regular schedule for the special educator to observe, model, and coach with a plan to cover the special educator's class/group is best when it is a part of the school master schedule.
<b>Job Titles</b>	Using the job title "paraeducators" indicates that the adult's primary role is as a special education service provider in general education. Paraeducators duty to provide a service limits their ability to provide general support to the teacher's preparation of instructional materials, universal screening, or grading.

***Final Thoughts***

Paraeducators are important members of the school staff. Each role is specific and aligned to the variety of needs of students. Once the IEP is finalized, using strategies that support the individual will benefit the general education teacher, special education teacher, and ultimately, the student. Understanding the depth and breadth of each role, (one-to-one paraeducators, paraeducators providing special education services to more than one student with a disability) can inform recruitment and retention strategies such as differentiated pay, differentiated calendar (total paid workdays), and differentiated work hours.

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