



## Training paraprofessionals to effectively work with all students

Charlene Cobb

Many schools and districts use paraprofessionals. In some districts, funding for these paraprofessionals comes from Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Districts that do not receive Title I funding may still have paraprofessionals, funded through their general education funds. Paraprofessionals can serve a vital role in supporting the literacy achievement of all students. However, many times their services are underutilized due to a variety of situations.

Title I defines a paraprofessional as “an employee of an LEA (local educational agency) who provides instructional support” (*Title I Paraprofessionals Non-Regulatory Guidance*, 2004). This instructional support must be under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher and may include one-on-one tutoring, assistance with classroom management, or other instructional services. Title I further stipulates that paraprofessionals working in funded programs must have at least an associate’s degree or have passed a state or local assessment that determines their knowledge and ability to work with students in the areas of reading and writing.

In 2003, the International Reading Association (IRA) published *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2004). These standards delineate expectations for reading professionals, including paraprofessionals, along five standards. These standards encompass foundational knowledge; instructional strategies and curriculum materials; assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation; the creation a literate environment; and professional development. These standards are designed for use by institutions of higher education and state departments of education in order to plan programs of prepara-

tion for all reading professionals. As with Title I regulations, IRA standards describe a paraprofessional as a person who assists with reading and writing in the classroom and holds a two-year post-secondary degree. Many school districts also use these standards to develop job criteria for paraprofessionals, as well as teachers, reading specialists, and reading coaches.

### What happens when a paraprofessional begins working in a school?

Paraprofessionals may be assigned to a specific teacher, to an entire grade level, or to a grade-level cluster such as primary or intermediate. Principals frequently make up the schedules for paraprofessionals. It is then generally up to the individual teacher, or group of teachers, to decide how to make the best use of the time that they have with the paraprofessional. Best-case scenarios have paraprofessionals working with one teacher within the classroom. The paraprofessional has time to observe the teacher during reading and writing instruction. There are multiple opportunities for the teacher and paraprofessional to work with students in tandem. During small-group instruction, the teacher and paraprofessional are both working with students to meet their instructional needs.

Best-case scenarios, however, always occur in “school heaven.” We live and work in schools here on earth, frequently in circumstances that are less than ideal. In many schools, paraprofessionals are assigned to teachers at a specific time of day, one or

more times each week. Paraprofessionals go from one room to the next, coming into the classroom and hoping that they can jump in and help. Teachers are working harder than ever to ensure that all students make adequate yearly progress. Planning for the multiple needs in their classrooms leaves little time for teachers to plan for meaningful small-group work with a paraprofessional that comes and goes from the classroom. It's little wonder that paraprofessionals sometimes simply help teachers get caught up on copying materials, putting up bulletin boards, and scoring assignments.

## Paraprofessional training

As instructional leaders in a school, the principal and reading specialist can facilitate training for paraprofessionals that supports classroom instruction. The following is one form of training that is cost effective and relatively simple to implement.

This type of training begins with a needs assessment, continues with paraprofessional training, and concludes with follow-up consultations.

### Step 1: Needs assessment

Explain to the teachers in your building, either during a staff meeting or through written communication (e-mail or memo), that you are hoping to help them use the services of their paraprofessionals more effectively. Share a list of instructional strategies related to the essential components of reading. Ask teachers to indicate their use of these strategies in their classroom. This will provide you with valuable information not only for planning the trainings but also to discover potential areas of professional development for teachers. Strategies that are reported as never used, or requests to know more, can provide opportunities for professional development with teachers. The list may look something like Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**List of instructional strategies**

We are planning a series of workshops to train the paraprofessionals in our building. We need to know what type of help is most needed in your classroom. Please indicate which of the following strategies you currently use with your students.

If there is a strategy that you don't use but would like more information on it, please indicate this in the last column.

	Frequently	Occasionally	Never	Would like to know more
<b>Fluency strategies</b>				
Echo reading				
Choral reading				
Preview, pause, prompt, praise				
Structured repeated reading				
Phrased reading				
<b>Word study strategies</b>				
Picture sorts				
Word sorts (open and closed)				
Written sorts				
Content area word sorts (open and closed)				
<b>Comprehension strategies</b>				
Summarizing				
Asking questions				
Inferring				
Guided discussion				

Please return this form to the reading specialist by \_\_\_\_\_.

## Step 2: Plan training sessions

Once you have feedback from teachers, you can begin planning the training. Plan a series of sessions that last 45–60 minutes each. The number of sessions is dependent upon how many strategies you plan to introduce, how much time the paraprofessionals can spend out of the classroom, and how much time you can devote to the project. Start small and build on success.

As you plan your sessions, develop an agenda for introducing the strategies that includes background information, an explanation, practical applications, and opportunities for participants to practice. Focus on one topic at a time, such as fluency. Don't try to do too many strategies in one session. If necessary, hold multiple sessions on each topic.

As you begin each session, provide the paraprofessionals with a rationale for each strategy. Keep the research short and user friendly. A simple list entitled "Questions and answers about fluency" or "Fluency: Frequently asked questions" that is not more than one page will suffice. You may want to include information that answers the following questions: What is fluency? What are the components of fluency? What are the basic principles of fluency? Then briefly explain one or two strategies, such as echo reading and choral reading. Explain each strategy systematically, providing ex-

PLICIT steps when possible. Explain what a strategy would look like with a small group or one on one with a student. Discuss how it might look different for at-risk readers, second-language learners, or gifted students. Allow time for paraprofessionals to question and clarify their thinking.

Next, make sure to allow time for paraprofessionals to practice the strategies. Have them practice in pairs and in small groups using materials that they would typically use in their classrooms. As the paraprofessionals practice, move around the room and monitor their implementation. Following the practice, debrief and discuss celebrations and challenges. Ask the paraprofessionals to share how they think they could use these strategies in the classroom.

Be sure to provide participants with a handout that includes all information shared in the presentation. Encourage them to maintain a strategy folder or notebook. Remind them that sometimes it's helpful to go back and review information after they have been working with the strategies for several weeks.

## Step 3: Provide follow up and consultation

Immediately following the session, provide teachers with a brief explanation of what was covered in the session as well as a copy of the handout. Your letter to the teachers may look something like Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**Follow-up letter**

Dear Teachers:

This morning, I provided the first training session for the school paraprofessionals. The topic of this session was fluency. Following an explanation of reading fluency, I provided training on three simple strategies that they can do with students in your classroom.

These strategies are

- echo reading,
- choral reading, and
- preview, pause, prompt, praise.

These strategies can be used with fiction, but work extremely well with content area materials. A copy of the handout given at the session is attached. I also have materials that can provide additional information on fluency.

Please provide some time for your paraprofessional to practice these strategies. This will help to solidify the learning and provide an opportunity to develop greater confidence. My hope is that the paraprofessionals will be better able to assist you and the children in your classroom. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Your Reading Specialist

During subsequent training sessions gather feedback from the paraprofessionals on how they have been using the strategies in their classrooms. Use this information as you plan additional sessions. Decide when and how you will gather feedback from teachers. This can be done in the form of another survey at the end of each quarter or semester. Consider collecting qualitative information by sending a simple e-mail or memo asking the teachers two questions: What is working well as a result of the paraprofessional training? and, What would help us to improve the training?

This form of training for paraprofessionals is embedded in the work they are doing in classrooms. It is also ongoing and customized to meet the needs of your particular school and student population. There are no packaged programs that need to be purchased. It simply requires sharing the tremendous knowledge you hold as a reading specialist. The results are a more knowledgeable and

qualified staff and more students with access to effective instruction. Give it a try.

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#### **References**

*Title I Paraprofessionals Non-Regulatory Guidance.* (2004, March 4). Retrieved September 15, 2006, from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/tchrqual/qual/paraprofessional.html>

*Standards for Reading Professionals—Revised 2003.* (2004). Retrieved November 28, 2006, from <http://www.reading.org/downloads/resources/545standards2003/index.html>

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