



Classroom Partners: How Paraprofessionals Can Support All Students to Meet New Standards

SUMMARY

School-Related Professionals are important team members in every educational endeavor, including implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards. This author presents steps that teachers can take to build stronger partnerships with teaching assistants as the team engages with the Instructional Shifts and new Standards.

Ms. Rodriguez is a veteran fifth-grade teacher who — along with her colleague and friend, Ms. Kassab, a literacy specialist — faces the challenges of addressing the *New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (CCLS/ELA)*. She was notified that she would be working with a paraprofessional this year. When Ms. Rodriguez shares the information, Ms. Kassab smiles broadly and informs her that now she is not alone. She has a classroom partner to help her students succeed with the new Standards — she and her students are lucky!

The Hidden Skills of the Paraprofessional

What Ms. Kassab knows is that School-Related Professionals such as teaching assistants are quite varied in

their backgrounds and talents. You will find some who are licensed science, medical, and engineering specialists in their native countries; others have business backgrounds. One may coach a student soccer team and another Little League Baseball. In my work with paraprofessionals, I have met individuals with 20 years of newspaper production technology expertise, as well as individuals who speak several languages. These are talents and skills that can benefit the students and the teacher.

Building a Classroom Partnership

Teaching assistants provide support to individual students or groups of students. Oftentimes they are utilized in supporting students with disabilities, but are also of great benefit to all students, including English language learners and students who have difficulties with learning but may not be

Barbara Carter Ellis is an adjunct instructor at Empire State College in New York City.

**Barbara Carter Ellis,
United University Professions**

receiving special education services. This may include re-teaching a previously learned skill; providing academic, social and emotional support; and helping students with personal care. This article offers suggestions to consider as you and your paraprofessional partner focus on the Standards and build a stronger classroom partnership in the process:

1. Get to know your classroom paraprofessional partner.

Have a conversation with the paraprofessional. What is the person's background? You may learn that the person is pursuing a teaching certificate, and holds an advanced degree in the Ukraine. Share your goals and ideas for units, lesson plans and projects. Develop a shared mission. Express how you look forward to working as a team. This is just the beginning to the discussion of how you can work together to help students meet the Standards.

2. Advocate that your paraprofessional partner have access to professional development activities that are offered to teachers — particularly those related to the CCLS.

From NEA Today

What's the Secret Behind Successful Teacher-Para Relationships?

"Mutual respect.

Teamwork.

Common goals.

When *NEA Today* asked three experienced paraeducators to comment on what makes teacher-para relationships click, these factors were mentioned by each. And there was one more: student success."

(Rosales, 2009, p. 1)

As noted by a 2012 American Federation of Teachers Resolution addressing the role of paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) with the Common Core State Standards, "the CCSS necessitate in-service training and professional development for teachers; likewise, the CCSS necessitate the same for PSRPs... so that they are able to responsibly provide assistance to students and teachers..." In addition, this resolution notes the role that technology will play in common core assessments (as well as in teaching and learning), and that this will require new levels of expertise for many school personnel (http://www.aft.org/about/resolution_detail.cfm?articleid=1646).

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Here are some specific ideas for you to consider:

- Ask whether professional development activities at the district, school, or team level will include paraprofessionals. Remember, your paraprofessional partner is a member of your professional learning community.
- When CCLS materials are disseminated, make sure your paraprofessional partner receives a set.
- When possible, let those facilitating professional development activities know that paraprofessionals are in attendance, and that their expertise and perspective can be elicited.
- If you are not able to attend as a classroom team, inquire about whether attendance can be staggered if activities are offered more than once.

3. Explore the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a classroom team.

According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative website, under *Application to Students with Disabilities*, the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are described as necessary for success (2012).

UDL principles focus on students being provided 1) multiple ways of accessing content, 2) multiple ways of expressing what they know or create, and 3) multiple ways of engaging with content. UDL is a model applicable to all students, and can be particularly helpful for students with disabilities, English language learners, and students with unique gifts and talents. Information regarding the principles for Universal Design for Learning can be found at National Center On Universal Design for Learning (<http://www.udlcenter.org/>).

Using the UDL guidelines, discuss how you might use each team member's individual talents (e.g., the arts, drama, movement) to provide all students with options related to the principles above. For example, work together on illustrations and graphic organizers that can clarify and support learning of key vocabulary.

Good Communication + Teamwork = Student Success

- All education professionals must work together for student success.
- Everyone plays a vital role.
- Paraprofessionals are essential team members.
- Respect and communication are crucial.

— *AFT School Tips: Creating a Classroom Team*, p. 2

Use multiple approaches to foster student interest in activities related to the Standards and ownership of learning projects. Tap into the paraprofessional's ability to circulate around the room and support individuals as the classroom teacher initially leads and models the task. Discuss how you and your partner can conference with students as they self-assess and reflect on their work.

4. Make sure that all team members know about student accommodations and modifications, and are fully aware of annual goals included in each student Individualized Education Program (IEP). Many of these goals will now be based on the CCLS.

Paraprofessionals need to be aware of goals, modifications, and accommodations for students with disabilities with whom they work directly. As with all team members, they also need to clearly understand the critical confidentiality requirements for such information. Special education teachers, in particular, can advocate for their paraprofessional team members to attend ongoing professional development opportunities related to students with disabilities (e.g., unique learning characteristics, suggested strategies). This will help these individuals understand

Get To Know Each Other

"Set aside time to get to know each other. This could include each of you discussing your background, experience, special interests, and even strengths and weaknesses.

Together, you should set goals for your class.

Understanding the other teachers and paraprofessionals you work with will make your work easier and ultimately more successful for your students."

— *AFT School Tips: Creating a Classroom Team*, p. 2

the instructional supports that will be critical to success with the Standards.

5. Develop tools that you and your paraprofessional partner can routinely use with students, and discuss them together — even if it's only for 2 minutes at the end of a busy day.

A range of tools and strategies that are directly related to the Instructional Shifts and the Standards can be used *routinely*. Here are three examples:

■ **Academic Vocabulary**

As noted by the International Reading Association, "Implementation of the CCSS requires that teachers identify academic vocabulary and phrases in instructional texts and support students' learning of such vocabulary" (p. 3). Paraprofessional partners can

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be encouraged to focus on the specific vocabulary you have identified from a particular text as they rotate around the classroom or work with groups or individual students.

Using the insights of Allen (2007), vocabulary can be addressed in context by demonstrating and modeling for students. Students can be directed to use background knowledge, word parts knowledge (prefixes, suffixes, and root words) and text clues (surrounding words, visuals, tone, endnotes/footnotes/sidebars).

■ Text-Dependent Questions

Paraprofessionals can assist you by working with students to continually reference back to the text in

responding to your text-dependent questions. As a team, you can develop your own set of tools that you use with groups or individuals: “Where do you see that in what you read? Could you point to it?”; “That’s a good point. Where’s the evidence for that? Is that in your reading?” Reciprocal teaching can be a helpful strategy for teaching students to focus on the text. Reciprocal teaching is a structured dialogue between students and teacher, each taking a turn in the role of dialogue leader. Strategies include questioning, summarizing, clarifying and predicting (Palinscar & Brown, 1984).

■ Use of Graphic Organizers

You can provide templates for graphic organizers and your paraprofessional partner can use them as needed with groups or individual students. These could be related to Shifts, such as *Writing from Sources* and *Text-based Answers*. Graphic organizers are available in many of the materials found on the New York State Education Department EngageNY website, such as the *Paragraph Writing Graphic Organizer* or the *Topic Expansion Graphic Organizer* (<http://engageny.org/resource/grades-3-5-ela-curriculum-appendix-2-graphic-organizers>). Other organizers that are helpful with many CCLS-related projects would be timelines, calendars (highlighted

Active Listening Strategies

“Encourage — Being encouraging shows you’re interested in what the other person is saying and keeps the other person talking when he or she might be shy or reluctant...”

“Clarify — Clarifying includes asking who, what, why, when and where questions. Clarifying helps you get clear information from the other person and understand his or her point of view, so you can find a solution that works for both of you. Ask questions if you don’t understand what the other person is saying or if you need more details.”

“Validate — Validating recognizes the other person’s dignity, efforts and opinions.”

— *AFT School Tips: Creating a Classroom Team*, p. 2

with project dates), and double entry journals (a note-taking technique with two columns — information from the text on the left and notes such as questions, reactions and predictions on the right).

6. Acknowledge the contributions of all team members.

It is critical to recognize every member of the team for what she or he has contributed to the classroom learning community and increasing student achievement. In addition to acknowledging all team members (in casual conversation as well as in meetings), it is important to help members connect to others. If a paraprofessional is new to your team, help her or him connect to other members who are key to student achievement in English language arts — in particular, speech language therapists, reading specialists, and librarians.

Final Thoughts

Former American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker (1985) noted proudly:

Interviewers often ask what I'm proudest of. There are many things that come to mind — helping to build a great union... helping teachers win a solid voice in their own destiny, playing a role in the American labor movement, speaking for freedom here and everywhere in the world.

But if I had to pick one thing, I'd say it's this: organizing classroom paraprofessionals and negotiating for them not only better salaries and benefits (including, finally, pensions) but a career ladder that enables each of them to go to college and, by virtue of their own hard work, to become teachers... and join the struggle of teachers to improve their profession.

Shanker passed away long before the development of the CCLS, yet his prescience in recognizing the vast untapped capacities of paraprofessionals is testimony to the accuracy of his vision for teacher and paraprofessional partnerships. Paraprofessionals can be a tremendous asset in our common mission to ensure that all students meet new and more challenging Standards.

Plan Together

“Planning together keeps you productive and motivated.

While the teacher may be the person to initiate a plan, the paraprofessional should feel free to give input and suggestions.

Planning weekly schedules and daily activities can make both your lives easier.”

— *AFT School Tips: Creating a Classroom Team*, pp. 4-5

Share Feedback

“Feedback builds a working team. While the teacher takes the lead in the classroom, both teacher and paraprofessional should have the chance to share feedback. Feedback cuts down on confusion, duplicating tasks and resentment between paraprofessional and teacher. You may find a ‘tune-up’ checklist like the one below to be helpful.

Sample Tune-Up Checklist:

- Are we meeting frequently enough?
- Are we sharing information about student performance, behavior and growth?
- Do we need to work further on defining job roles, setting goals and evaluating students?
- What areas would we like to see improved?
- What areas can we congratulate ourselves on?
- Are we treating each other as co-workers rather than supervisor and subordinate?
- Do we each feel free to offer suggestions or bring up problems?
- Are we both fulfilling our job descriptions so that neither of us is overburdened or underutilized?”

— *AFT School Tips: Creating a Classroom Team*, p. 7

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