



Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan

Stephanie Geddes

The purpose of my entry plan was not only to outline my priorities as the newly hired Director of Pupil Services, but also to provide an opportunity for me to learn about Uxbridge, including its history, values, traditions, and norms and how each of those have influenced the district. The summary of findings outlined within detail themes that emerged regarding the strengths, challenges, and potential goals for the department.

UXBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Department of Pupil Services

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Table of Contents

<u>ENTRY PLAN THEMES</u>	3
<u>INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE</u>	4
<u>ENTRY PLAN PROCESS</u>	5
<u>THEMATIC FINDINGS</u>	6
COMMUNICATION & TRUST BETWEEN ALL STAKEHOLDERS	6
ACCESS TO DISTRICT LEADERSHIP	6
INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR ALL STUDENTS	7
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION	8
<u>CHANGES IN MOTION</u>	9
<u>STRATEGIC PLAN</u>	10
STAFF ENGAGEMENT	
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT	
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017



Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

January, 2017

To: Uxbridge School Committee
From: Stephanie L. Geddes, Director of Pupil Services
Re: Entry Plan Summary of Findings

I have been honored and excited to join Uxbridge Public Schools as the new Director of Pupil Services. As the new director it is my goal to work together to help our students as they travel the path in becoming independent, self-sufficient, and self-reliant learners. Uxbridge Public Schools is teeming with the potential to exceed expectations and to produce learners and leaders who strive for continuous growth.

As I join the Uxbridge Public Schools, I am personally motivated to help our staff work with every student based on their unique learning profiles. The Entry Plan was crafted as a tool to communicate my commitment to listen and learn.

I welcome and desire any and all feedback. It is imperative that we, as a community, put the students first as we strive to provide all students with opportunities to grow academically, emotionally, and socially throughout the course of their education. With district and community commitment we can ensure that the students of Uxbridge are afforded the best education possible.

Please find my initial entry plan goals outlined below.

GOALS:

1. Establish and nurture positive and productive relationships with the members of the Uxbridge Public School community in order to better understand the history, norms, values, and traditions of the school community.
2. Create a common vision for the future of the Uxbridge Public Schools Pupil Services Department, within the scope of the district's goals, which will sustain the current strengths and attends to the identified areas of needed growth and improvement.
3. Serve as the gatekeeper for pupil services, responsible for balancing student needs and fiscal restraint, while providing leadership regarding development and continuous assessment of our instructional practices, inclusive of program expansion.

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

Entry Plan Process

GOAL #1

Establish and nurture positive and productive relationships with the members of the Uxbridge Public School community in order to better understand the history, norms, values, and traditions of the school community.

Actions:

1. Met with the Superintendent
2. Met with former Director of Pupil Services
3. Created a calendar of meetings for the year with the following groups and/or individuals:
 - a. Team Chairs
 - b. 504 Coordinators
 - c. BCBAs
 - d. Speech and Language Pathologists
 - e. Occupational Therapist/Physical Therapist
 - f. School specific Sped Management Meetings
 - g. School Psychologists
 - h. Each Building Administrator
 - i. ELL Teachers
4. Attend all Administrative meetings and USEPAC meetings that were established prior to my arrival
5. Sent an introductory letter to staff and families
6. Began sending quarterly newsletter to families and staff

GOAL #2

Create a common vision for the future of the Uxbridge Public Schools Pupil Services Department, within the scope of the district's goals, which will sustain the current strengths and attends to the identified areas of needed growth and improvement.

Actions:

1. Conducted site visits to each school
2. Completed a department document review
3. Crafted and distributed a staff and family survey
4. Met with select families and staff members to discuss areas of strength & identified areas of growth
5. Created a restructuring plan for staffing

GOAL #3

Serve as the gatekeeper for pupil services, responsible for striking a balance between student needs and fiscal restraint, while providing leadership regarding development and continuous assessment of our instructional practices, inclusive of program expansion.

Actions:

1. Met with the entire Special Education Department prior to the start of school
2. Posted, interviewed, and subsequently filled all vacancies upon my arrival
3. Conducted two trainings for all paraprofessional/ABA Tech staff
4. Performed ongoing observations of classrooms and Team meetings
5. Created a Paraprofessional Protocol group charged with creating entry/exit criteria for supports
6. Working with the Director of Curriculum to create a long-term professional development plan

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

Thematic Findings

COMMUNICATION & TRUST BETWEEN ALL STAKEHOLDERS

Consistently in meeting with families, there were those throughout the district who felt that they have been afforded exemplary services and support. In fact, one of the themes that became apparent throughout the entry plan process was how dedicated and caring the Uxbridge staff is. Staff members truly care about the children with whom they work and strive to provide them a top-notch education.

However, it should also be noted that there appears to be a perceived communication lapse in pockets across the district. This is by no means a district-wide issue; however, there were several staff and families who indicated surprise by district decisions as well as limited communication in their dealings with Special Education. Families who are a part of the special education community often have many questions and concerns as their child is first identified, regardless of their child's age, and it is incumbent upon our staff to ensure that they not only feel supported and heard, but are also informed regarding the special education process. In conversations with select parents, it became apparent that they did not always feel that their opinions were valued within the IEP process, nor did they feel that they were given all the pertinent information regarding their child.

Streamlining and updating the department website as well as providing for greater opportunities for parent feedback were identified as areas of need. In addition, working with the Team Chairs to provide greater consistency in how Team meetings are facilitated was a challenge is already being addressed. Further, we are working to ensure that we provide families with all of the information at our disposal and greater inclusion for families within the Team process. With greater transparency, improved consistency, PreK-12+, and increase opportunities for feedback, it is our hope and expectation that trust both within and for the department as a whole will grow.

ACCESS TO DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Through my entry plan process in meeting with all of the stakeholders, I consistently heard that they were grateful to have set meeting times with administration. In addition, several times, I was told that they were excited to see me in their classrooms on a more consistent basis. Most of the staff members in Uxbridge are dedicated professionals who want to ensure that they are delivering exemplary services and have the most up to date information possible with regards to best practices, regulations, and trends in the field.

In order to ensure that all staff members have current information, they do require regular access to the special education administrator. In the past few years, this has become increasingly difficult, as the ever-changing demands of this position and in this field have precluded the Director from being able to engage to a level that would most benefit all Special Education students. Thus, access to a special education administrator was identified as an area of need. Both staff and parents have felt, in the past, that they have been unable to consistently collaborate with the Director of Pupil Services.

Currently, the Director of Pupil Services job description encompasses the following roles:

1. Special Education Director
2. 504 Coordinator
3. ELL Coordinator
4. Out of District Coordinator
5. Pre-School Coordinator
6. McKinney-Vento Liaison
7. Home-Hospital Tutoring Coordinator

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

With the current responsibilities that fall under the purview of this position, it has been challenging to ensure that all voices are heard and feel valued. As part of my entry plan, I scheduled meetings on a regular basis with all of the staff members with whom I work closely. These meetings include:

1. Central Office Administration – once weekly
2. Each Building Administrator – once monthly
3. Team Chairs – one or two times a month
4. 504 Coordinators – once every 6 weeks
5. ELL Teachers – once every 6 weeks
6. OT/PT – once every 6 weeks
7. Speech and Language Pathologists – once every 6 weeks
8. BCBAs – once every 6 weeks
9. School Psychologists – once every 6 weeks
10. Special Education Teachers – once per month, per building

The meetings outlined above do not include the administrative walkthroughs and weekly administration meetings we have as a district nor does it include monthly meetings with USEPAC and School Committee. In addition, when I began working in Uxbridge, I had 26 Out of District students for whom I was listed as case manager. Through working with one of the district's BCBAs and the Team Chair recently hired at the High School, I have shifted the responsibility of a portion of case load management to others, who can support the management of some Out of District cases. In addition, the Director of Curriculum and I have recently decided to work together to ensure the needs are met with regards to our ELL population. While translation and interpretation services will continue to run through the Pupil Services office, the curriculum and instruction aspects of our English Language Learning educators and program will be coordinated and supervised through the Curriculum office and building principals.

A need was identified for Special Education Administration to have greater visibility within the schools and be able to assist when challenges arise for both families and staff. In order to appropriately plan for the overarching needs of the district, Special Education Administration must have a greater understanding of the day-to-day happenings as well as provide needed information, knowledge, and expertise when the situation warrants it. The steps taken already and outlined herein support that need.

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR ALL STUDENTS

Through my entry plan process, it became apparent that there is a continuum of services being offered to students. There are co-taught classrooms and subjects happening throughout the district, as well as supported classrooms/subjects and small group, pull out classrooms/subjects. With a variety of offerings, Uxbridge is able to offer students what the Team determines is needed at any given moment. I specifically want to commend our Pre-School for their inclusive practices and the efforts that they make to ensure students are provided with the services they need as well as time with peer models.

That being said, across the district, there appears to be a significant number of pull-out services being provided to our students. On a walkthrough of our elementary schools earlier this year, 33 pull out spaces were identified. Our recent MCAS scores indicate that our special education students are not consistently being taught the same material and/or are not being taught how to demonstrate their knowledge to the same extent as general education peers. Again, this does not reflect the experience of every special education student, but the rate of students identified as having learning disabilities who fall within the warning and needs improvement range warrants concern.

In addition, we are charged by the federal and state government to provide instruction within the *least restrictive environment*. It seems that at times Teams recommend pull-out services as the first

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

intervention rather than working up to a more restrictive environment. Further, paraprofessional access and 1:1 services are quite high for a district this size. We currently have 13 1:1 paraprofessionals/ABA Techs and 29.9 paraprofessionals/ABA Techs in Uxbridge. That is a ratio of 1 paraprofessional/ABA Tech for every 6 children on IEPs. DESE came out with guidance regarding the use of paraprofessional support in 2014, which I have included in this document. It indicates that they had noted a significant increase in the use of paraprofessional support. While warranted for some students, the use of paraprofessionals (specifically 1:1 staff) can significantly limit our over-arching goal of promoting student independence. I have also included an article by Kathie Snow, *When Less is More*, which provides concrete examples of how support is sometimes provided before we allow students the opportunity to perform tasks for themselves and how it can hinder friendships and natural supports within the classroom.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Related to the above thematic finding, there appears to be a divide between some of our general educators and our special educators. Not unique to Uxbridge, there is a sense of “us” and “them” for many educators. For some, working with special education students is regarded as a hardship and something that they would rather not undertake, if given the choice. It is important to note that for some, this tension results from a lack of training, not a lack of willingness on their part. Further, there are some general educators throughout the district who embrace all of the students in their classrooms and work to create an inclusive and collaborative environment.

As we work as a district to provide education to all students, our educators must develop, or hone, their collaboration skills in order to facilitate cooperative planning and instructional activities. Increasing our inclusive practices for students with disabilities requires “teachers in general education learn about special education” as was recommended by the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) and as has been supported by the Special Education endorsement now required by DESE. Further the National Association of State Directors of Special Education also stated, “the success of all children is dependent on the quality of both special education and general education...and that special education is not a place apart, but an integral part of education” (2002).

Our ultimate goal is for observers to walk into a room and have a difficult time discerning who is the special educator or support staff and who is the teacher; for all students to be engaged in learning in some fashion at any given moment in the day. When our specialists and special educators team with general educators, the learning can be very powerful, for both students and staff. That “marriage” of staff is considered to be best practice for many students, as it provides general educators who are content specialists working alongside our special educators who bring a variety of instructional strategies and tools to the classroom.

As part of the plan moving forward, I am working with our Director of Curriculum to identify areas of professional development as well as looking at scheduling in order to provide dedicated collaboration time to our general and special educators. As we work to build the relationships between our general and special education staff, we need to ensure proper training and time for change to occur. This will not be an overnight shift in thinking, but in taking those first few steps, I believe we will be on the path of greater achievement for all of our students. Ultimately, the goal is for everyone in the district to believe that all children can learn and all teachers can teach all students. We need to bridge the divide between special and general education in order to ensure that all students achieve growth in their learning.

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

Changes in Motion

ACTION STEPS

In my first four months, I have been collaborating diligently with the Administrative Team, Team Chairs, and Special Education Staff to make some immediate changes/clarifications, work towards some short-term objectives (in the next year), and begin planning for our long-range goals. The immediate changes/clarifications are outlined below:

1. IEP Process
 - a. Consistently speaking as a Team of ESY and bullying at least once a year for each child
 - b. More measurable goals
 - c. Creating more consistent service delivery grids
 - d. Working with Adori (IEP management system) to implement state recommended forms
 - e. Creating a process of sending out formal letters when IEPs have not been returned signed by parents
 - f. Parent feedback forms offered after every IEP meeting (coming in January)
 - g. Restructuring the filing system at Central Office for greater efficiency and ease of use
 - h. Ensuring documents are scanned into Adori for more immediate access
 - i. Implementing common language on N1s, IEPs, and other IEP documents
 - j. Declination of services form was implemented to align with state guidance

2. Programmatic Changes
 - a. Addition of a Social/Emotional classroom at Whitin, based on need
 - b. Addition of a program at the HS level for students who require a home-base due to social/emotional challenges
 - c. Change of current home base programming to be for students who struggle behaviorally and may require disciplinary action in school
 - d. Restructuring High School offerings in order to increase inclusive opportunities and post-secondary options
 - e. Offering an increase of co-taught options at the High School
 - f. Exploring alternative options to 1:1 staffing, when appropriate, to promote student independence
 - g. Becoming a Best Buddies Chapter at the High School level

3. Responsibilities
 - a. Sharing ELL coordination with the Director of Curriculum
 - b. Sharing the Out of District case load management with one of the district BCBA's and the High School Team Chair
 - c. Taking a more active role in scheduling and placement of students to ensure efficient use of district resources and best "fit" for each student
 - d. Increasing the collaboration with building administrators to work towards best possible outcomes for all students

Director of Pupil Services – Entry Plan Summary of Findings January 2017

Uxbridge Public Schools ~ Pupil Services Department ~ Strategy for Improvement 2016-2019

Strategic Objectives

Staff Engagement	Student Engagement	Community Engagement
Examine and adjust, as needed, current departmental procedures to ensure alignment with all regulatory and statutory compliance obligations while being effective and efficient to best meet student and staff needs.	Examine and adjust, as needed, current instructional practices to ensure placement for ALL students within the least restrictive environment which allows for student growth to his/her potential academically, socially, and behaviorally	Examine, support and expand current community endeavors to ensure transparent communication with Uxbridge families to increase public collaboration and trust.
Strategic Priorities/Activities SY 16-17		
IEP Process	Professional Development Plan	Quarterly Newsletters
Central Office Procedures – Hiring, Personnel Management, Budget, etc.	Paraprofessional Protocol & Criteria	Overhaul Website
Strategic Priorities/Activities SY 17-18		
504 Process	Inclusion Program Review	Best Buddies initiative
Align IEP Writing, K-12	Specialized Program Criteria	Increased opportunities for feedback
Strategic Priorities/Activities SY 18-19		
Early Intervening process	Related Services Program Review	Develop & refine interagency relationships
Align Service Delivery K-12, as developmentally appropriate	Specialized Transportation Criteria	Expand our work based learning opportunities

Special Education

Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-3 (revised): Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support

To: Administrators of Special Education, Parents, and Other Interested Parties

From: Marcia Mittnacht, State Director of Special Education

Date: February 26, 2015

The purposes of this advisory are to:

- Advise school districts and parents about concerns regarding inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals.
- Clarify when it may be appropriate to use a paraprofessional, as well as ensuring adequate training and supervision.
- Provide recommended actions and sample tools to increase school district capacity to support students with disabilities.
- Clarify the decision-making process for assigning paraprofessionals to individual students.

A. Introduction: Response to a Cry for Help

When school personnel or parents request a paraprofessional, they are asking for help. Something is amiss. Should a school district respond simply by assigning a paraprofessional to an individual student? Absolutely not.

"If schools respond exclusively to the request for a paraprofessional, without fully understanding the meaning behind the request, it increases the likelihood of masking the underlying issues and delaying attention to them."¹ Instead, "the task is to identify the underlying issues so that they can be addressed."²

The essential premise of this advisory is that the underlying learning needs of each particular student - that is, the root causes of the teacher's or parent's "cry for help" - must first be determined. Then there needs to be consideration of the full array of supports and services that may successfully address the student's unique needs. Districts must not restrict their consideration to use of a paraprofessional.

B. Concerns Regarding Inappropriate Use of Paraprofessionals

Data reflecting substantial increases in the number of special education paraprofessionals raises concerns about whether districts are effectively responding to the educational needs highlighted by requests for a paraprofessional.

The Department is particularly concerned by reports that, in some cases, paraprofessionals have been assigned simply on the basis of a student's educational profile or to provide a teacher with temporary relief from a demanding student. This may leave unaddressed key issues such as (a) improving teacher ability to educate a full range of students with disabilities; (b) building capacity in general education to design curriculum and instruction for mixed ability groups that include students with disabilities; and (c) changing or improving student behavior.

The Department is also concerned that paraprofessionals have been assigned responsibilities that require the skills of a licensed teacher - for example, making curriculum decisions, planning lessons or designing adaptations, as compared with implementing decisions made by the teacher. There have also been reports of inadequate training and supervision, making it impossible for a paraprofessional to be effective. And, paraprofessionals may continue to be assigned even though other services or supports could more appropriately address the student's learning needs. Inappropriate use of paraprofessionals may have detrimental consequences such as over-dependence, interference with peer interactions, insular relationships, stigmatization, provocation of behavior problems, or diminished student-teacher interactions.

This is not to say that paraprofessional services should never be used.³ As with any other special education service, paraprofessionals are inherently neither appropriate nor inappropriate for a particular student. Appropriate use of paraprofessionals depends, to a large extent, on whether the paraprofessional has the requisite skills to address effectively one or more aspects of a student's unique needs and whether the paraprofessional is adequately trained and supervised to be effective. Importantly, appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals also depends on consideration of whether there are other service or support options that would be a better choice because they would address effectively these same learning needs and offer additional advantages such as fostering greater independence. The process for weighing these considerations and making a decision as to whether a paraprofessional should be assigned to a particular student, will be discussed in section E of this Advisory.

C. Over-Arching Goal of Promoting Students' Independence

It is the essential mission of elementary and secondary education to prepare all students for successful adult life, which may include independent living, competitive employment, further postsecondary education or training, and participation in the life of their community. State and federal special education laws recognize that independence is a key factor of adulthood and our public schools must always strive to build independence in our students, particularly as they begin to approach adult life.⁴

In order for these core educational principles to be realized, decisions regarding special education and related services (and, in particular, decisions regarding paraprofessional services) must be made in a way that allows the unique learning needs of each student to be met and that, at the same time, allows each student to become as independent as possible, particularly in preparation for the end of secondary education.

The following recommended actions are intended to respect and promote these essential principles.

D. Recommended Actions: School District Level

Whole school approach. School districts can develop greater regular education capacity to effectively serve diverse learners. School district leaders should review the use of paraprofessionals within the context of the whole school environment and consider adopting a tiered model of supports such as [Massachusetts' Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#). Data gathered in the analyses of students' needs can be compiled into a chart or matrix, and reviewed by school-based teams to make decisions regarding system-wide allocation of services and supports. Effective use of school-based student support teams (SSTs) may reduce the number of retentions, suspensions/expulsions, and referrals to special education. SSTs may also assist in reducing the inappropriate use of paraprofessionals. See the [MTSS quick reference guide for student support teams](#).

District culture. Some may unconsciously believe that a one-to-one paraprofessional is always needed for a student with a particular kind of educational profile. It is important for the district community to examine its own assumptions and to challenge those that perpetuate a status quo that can result in unintended negative consequences. District leaders may find it fruitful to share data on the use of paraprofessionals and to discuss with students, their families and special educators together how to achieve the best instructional services, and aim for the best academic and non-academic outcomes for students. Involving families in this discussion will assist in fully considering how the community as a whole, not just the school, can help to achieve successful adult life outcomes for all students.

E. Recommended Actions: Individual Students

The IEP decision-making process. State and federal special education law require an IEP Team to make all decisions regarding the assignment of a paraprofessional to a particular student. The Team makes this decision solely on the basis of whether paraprofessional services are appropriate to meet the unique learning needs of the particular student so that he or she will have the opportunity to receive FAPE in the least restrictive environment and at the same time prepare for "further education, employment, and independent living."¹

Breaking down the IEP Team decision-making into a three-step process, that considers use of paraprofessionals within a broader context, may substantially increase the likelihood of using paraprofessionals appropriately and effectively. First, at least one member of the Team should be fully informed about the general education environment and the expectations that typical students are expected to meet in the coming year. In that context, the Team examines information available from evaluations and other information which may include concerns of the parent, and previous progress with earlier IEPs. The Team then identifies all of a student's *special education needs* arising from the disability and presenting barriers to the student's learning. The Team must differentiate among needs that can and should be met in the general education environment with accommodations or minor modifications and needs that that must be met through the delivery of specially designed instruction² so that the student receives FAPE.

Second, the IEP Team considers the goals that are most important for the student to accomplish during the upcoming year and considers these goals in the context of the general curriculum, it's available support services as well as the *entire range of specially designed instruction, related services and accommodations* that can meet the student's particular needs.

Finally, the Team then determines the extent to which needed services can be delivered in the general education classroom and which services may require removal from the classroom. Research supports that most students with disabilities have better outcomes when they are fully included in the general education classroom, and the Team is tasked with carefully considering the risks and benefits to the student when removal appears to be necessary. It is at the intersection of these two important priorities -- the least restrictive environment (the general education classroom) and the promotion of independence, that the Team may consider the use of a one to one paraprofessional. If a one to one paraprofessional can increase the student's access to the general education environment or assist in moving toward more independence, then generally the Team should identify use of the paraprofessional.

This decision-making process offers the following advantages: (1) it assists the Team to assign paraprofessionals when necessary to meet the individual student's unique special education needs, (2) precludes assignment of a paraprofessional based on limited information - for example, solely on the basis of a student's diagnosis or the needs of a teacher, and (3) seeks to ensure that service or support options (other than a paraprofessional) are also considered and utilized if they would address effectively a student's learning needs and offer additional advantages such as fostering greater independence.³

Training and supervision. School districts have an affirmative obligation to ensure that all paraprofessionals are trained and supervised so that they will be able to provide the services for which they are responsible, as reflected in federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) policy guidance. Therefore, once an IEP Team decides that a paraprofessional is needed for a student, the Team has a responsibility to determine the means by which a paraprofessional will have sufficient training and supervision. This may occasionally require additional services or consultation in the IEP.

Develop a plan for fading paraprofessional support. It is important that paraprofessional services continue in amount and duration only as needed. For many students, other services or supports can be substituted for some or all of a student's paraprofessional services. Therefore, whenever an assignment of paraprofessional services is initially made, the Team should discuss and develop a plan for reviewing the continued need for these services, including a process to review and monitor the student's progress and determine whether the student's need can be met with other services or supports. The Team may establish criteria which, if met by the student, will trigger initiation of the IEP amendment process to consider a change in services. The family is a critical partner in the planning process, with the family made well aware of any potential changes in the student's program and engaged throughout the process. There is no "standard" plan for fading paraprofessional services—each will be individually tailored for the particular student.





Anchor district policies and procedures with best-practices for student leadership. Depending on the age of the student involved, the student may be a "driver" but at all times will be a participant in whatever actions are taken. Keep the student's needs and desires at the center of discussions and to the extent possible, involve the student in the planning and actions taken. If, after all, the purpose is to promote independence, then the student should be able to take pride in actively working toward his/her increased independence and full participation in the life of the school. With the student central to the process, educators and families alike must remember that each student is different and may need different approaches, and different amounts of time to respond to different actions. Anticipate that some students may need paraprofessional support in one or more areas for years, while others may move forward in leaps and bounds toward independence.

F. Conclusion

Paraprofessionals may be an essential service for some disabled students. Yet, their inappropriate use can waste resources, limit a student's potential for independence, and leave key issues unaddressed. To respond to these potential challenges, system-wide changes can substantially increase the capacity of a school district to respond appropriately to a wide range of learners, and consideration of paraprofessional services for an individual student must be integrated into the IEP decision-making process for determining all of the student's unique special education needs and how they should be met.

The cause is important. The goal is the right one: successful adult life!

Attachment:

-  Examples
-  Student Needs Analysis (sample 1)
-  Student Needs Analysis (sample 2)
-  Student School Day Analysis (sample)

¹ A Giangreco, M.F., Doyle, M.B., Suter, J.C., *Constructively Responding to Requests for Paraprofessionals: We Keep Asking the Wrong Questions*. Remedial and Special Education 33(6), October 2012, 362-373.

² Giangreco, M.F., Halvorsen, A.T., Doyle, M.B., Broer, S.M., *Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools*. Journal of Special Education Leadership 17(2), October 2004, 82-90.

"My son needs a one-on-one aide in school," Lori said. "Without an aide, Rob couldn't do anything—he'd sit there and do nothing."

"How do you know," she was asked. Lori responded with information about Rob's disability, the "facts" of what he can/can't do, details of school policy (kids with certain conditions can be included in regular classes *only* if they have a one-on-one), and more. Her reply *did not* answer the how-do-you-know question. Lori could have answered the question accurately only if Rob had been permitted to be in the classroom *without* a one-on-one, and if we had observed what he was capable of doing on his own, with curriculum modifications, assistive technology, and/or the natural support of his classmates and teacher. Maybe Rob can't do much for himself because *he's never been allowed to!* Duh!

Rob *is* learning, however. He's becoming proficient in *learned helplessness*. And in the minds of many, the constant presence of the paraeducator is—in and of itself—"proof" that Rob is essentially incompetent. How in the world can we *expect* Rob's spirit to shine when it's surrounded by a shadow?

Rob is caught in a vicious cycle: he's not allowed to do much on his own, so he never learns to do much for himself, we continue to think he can't do much on his own, so we make sure he has as much help as possible, which prevents him from doing for himself, and on and on and on.

Similar outcomes occur when parents, professionals, job coaches, or others are always "helping" individuals with disabilities. Again, the simple *presence* of so much help can reinforce the (erroneous) belief that a person is *unable* and needs all this help. Thus, a self-fulfilling prophecy is realized—to the detriment of the person with a disability!

The "Dub!" Factor

WHEN LESS IS MORE

Revolutionary Common Sense
by Kathie Snow
www.disabilityisnatural.com

It seems we often believe the "worst" about a person (what he can't do), and then try to do *our* "best" by providing large amounts of help, services, interventions, and so forth. In the process, many children and adults with disabilities *learn helplessness*. And this situation can be remedied when we adopt a "less is more" strategy!

When I make the gravy that accompanies a pot roast, I know what ingredients I'll use: butter, flour, pan drippings, salt, pepper, and some herbs and spices. As I'm making it, I don't dump everything in the skillet at the same time—I could ruin my creation! Instead, I add a bit of this and that, stir and

taste, let it simmer, add a bit of this and that again, let it simmer some more, stir and taste again, and so on. This process is repeated until the gravy is *just right*. I don't want to put too much of anything in the gravy—adding a little at a time works best. The same is true when an artist paints, a hairdresser cuts hair, and in other creative endeavors. This "a-little-at-a-time" strategy can lead to more positive outcomes for individuals with disabilities!

Instead of automatically putting the *most* support in place (a one-on-one, job coach, etc.), what if we started with little or no support, and paused to give the "ingredients" (a person's abilities, the natural support of the people around him, and the environment) time to blend? Then we could add a little here and a little there, in the right amounts, so we don't interfere with (and possibly ruin) the creation that's developing.

For example, what if a child began the school year *without* a paraeducator? What if we allowed the child to explore his new environment, to see what he can do on his own? What if, when the student requires assistance, we consider: assistive technology (computer, communication device, etc.), alternate methods of

2 - *When Less is More*

learning/curriculum modifications (activities in lieu of reading, using a calculator instead of doing math with a pencil, etc.), natural supports from classmates and the classroom teacher, and/or other methods that meet the student's needs *and* promote autonomy, self-direction, and inclusion? Specific assistance could be added in increments, and then we could let the new ingredients "simmer" before adding more.

If the services of a paraeducator are absolutely necessary, the help can be added after trying other methods first, and the para's help would be limited to specific activities/times, and would be "student-driven:" the paraeducator would follow the student's lead and "support" instead of "direct." We would expect success, and would also be prepared for struggles and even some failures. (After all, kids who don't have disabilities experience success and failure as they learn and grow.)

This strategy could be applied to children and adults with disabilities in the home, on the job, during community or recreational activities, and everywhere else. *Less* assistance can have a greater, more positive impact on a person's life than *more*.

What if, when a person tries to do something new and she struggles, we wait for her to *ask* for help instead of jumping in unasked? And what if we *asked* her what she wanted to learn or do instead of making those decisions for her? *Consider the possibilities!*

Too much help can have many unintended negative consequences. Again, children and adults with disabilities are treated as if they're incompetent and they often acquire learned helplessness—a terrible condition that may last a lifetime! In addition, many children and adults chafe against the presence of a "shadow" or a "coach" who's attached to them at the hip. Would *you* like someone next to you all the time, watching over you, helping you, keeping you "on task"? Most of us would resist this intrusion. And when children or adults with disabilities resist,

we don't recognize their actions as a desire to be more independent. Instead, we use words like "non-compliant," "aggressive," "manipulative," "behavior problems," etc. And instead of *decreasing* the help, we *increase* it, making the situation even worse!

The constant presence of a "helper" also gets in the way of friendships and natural supports. In a classroom, for example, a child with a disability might do just fine with help from classmates. But they'll never offer to help if a one-on-one aide is always

present! Worse, who will want to be friends with a kid who's "so different" that he needs a grown-up with him all the time? In many general ed class-

rooms, if the student with a disability has a full-time aide, the classroom teacher takes no responsibility for this student. The student might be physically integrated in the classroom, but he's certainly not *included*—he and the aide are "doing their thing" and are not part of the whole. These less than desirable outcomes can also occur when a job coach or other helper is attached to an adult with a disability.

In a classroom, community activity, church environment, etc., an aide should always belong to the classroom/activity, not to the person with a disability. This will enable the teacher (or leader of the activity) and the aide to share responsibility for all, instead of singling out the person with a disability. And in the employment arena, wouldn't it be nice if a person with a disability could go to co-workers for help, just like others do? There might be some situations when a designated aide *is* needed—like helping a person with a disability in the bathroom, for example. But most of the help needed by a person with a disability can be provided by a variety of people, in the most natural way.

Isn't it time to replace learned helplessness, social stigma, and "special treatment" with self-direction and competence, real inclusion, and naturally-occurring assistance from friends, classmates, and co-workers? *Less* really can be more!

The more help a person has in his garden, the less it belongs to him.

William H. Davies