Ensure paraprofessionals don't overstep role in remote learning

As many districts have been in fully remote or hybrid learning models this year, the paraprofessional's role in assisting students has manifested differently. Paraprofessionals are still working to support students and teachers in virtual learning through interactions via platforms such as Zoom. But as they do, how can districts ensure that paraprofessionals are not delivering instruction when they shouldn't be?

"I worry those situations could be misconstrued as a paraprofessional delivering instruction when they're only reinforcing skills," said Christina Sepiol, assistant superintendent for student services at Indian Prairie School District 204 in Naperville, Ill. "I don't want anyone to think those count for [students'] minutes. Minutes are minutes," she said, referring to minutes of students' services.

Here's how to ensure that paraprofessionals do not overstep their roles when working with students during remote learning.

• **Know your state regulations.** Be aware of state-specific rules and special regulations regarding instructional time and the paraprofessional's role, said Anne Littlefield, a school attorney at Shipman & Goodwin LLP in Hartford, Conn. Not every state has them, but if your state does, then you need to know what they are.

In Connecticut, for example, special education regulations are very specific on this point, Littlefield said. Paraprofessionals are to work under the supervision of a licensed or certified person. They can carry out certain activities, but they can't design them or determine their efficacy, she said. For example, paraprofessionals cannot design instruction, make up lesson plans and activities, or make up and design assessment activities to determine how a student is progressing.

Connecticut regulations also state that a paraprofessional has to work within close, frequent proximity of a teacher or licensed person, Littlefield said. "That's a little challenging in COVID," she said. "We're interpreting that to mean under the supervision of [a] licensed, certified person. If you're under the supervision of someone in terms of best practices, if you have a paraprofessional in a Zoom room who doesn't know who she is reporting to, that's a problem."

• **Document training time.** "If I'm supervising someone, I need to be able to demonstrate I spoke with them about an activity, that I trained them," Littlefield said. Documenting the interaction is the way to do this.

Make sure the teacher or other licensed person keeps track of and documents any consultation time he spends with a paraprofessional. One example would be when the teacher watches an activity that a paraprofessional conducts with a student to ensure that it is carried out with fidelity.

"Encourage the teacher to directly supervise some of the paraprofessional's interactions with the student, whether virtually or in person, and then document that she did so," Littlefield said.

• **Ensure paraprofessional understanding.** At a minimum, the paraprofessional should be able to say, "Right now I'm working on this goal, this objective. The person who designed the [task] I'm doing is my partner teacher, who will look at the assessment activity to determine if the student is making progress," she said.

If the paraprofessional can't answer questions about what her goal in working with the student is and who designed the activity she is doing with the student, then more supervision and training of the paraprofessional is in order, Littlefield said.

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