April 2011 Update for District Contacts for Paraprofessional Issues

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), established the District Contacts for Paraprofessional Issues to disseminate information of importance to paraprofessionals and their supervisors. The focus of this newsletter is to provide resources for more effective teacher and paraprofessional collaboration.

SERC

Save the Date!

November 16, 2011

SERC's 16th Annual Statewide Paraprofessionals as Partners Conference

*If you have any questions regarding this conference, feel free to contact **Stefanie Carbone, Consultant at SERC 860-632-1485 X 306.***

Educational Testing Service (ETS) Internet Based ParaPro Assessment is being offered by LEARN at Southwest Computer Lab:

April 5, 2011, 1:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.

$25.00 registration fee

$45.00 test fee

For more information and to register, please contact Irma Wilhelm by email at:

iwilhelm@learn.k12.ct.us

or go online:

http://www.escweb.net/ct_learn/catalog/event.aspx?mode=subject&order=asc&scheduled=1&id=349&eventId=45298&referrer=browse.aspx

Creating a Classroom Team

Respect and communication. That's what teachers and paraprofessionals say makes an effective classroom team.

In speaking with paraprofessionals and teachers, these are some of the tips American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has gathered about how to make working together work.

1. **Create a healthy, open relationship between teacher and paraprofessional.** Set aside time to get to know each other. That could include discussing each other's background, experience, special interests, and strengths and weaknesses. It also includes setting goals together for your class. The better you understand your co-worker, the easier your day-to-day life together will be.
2. **Active listening is the key to true communication.** Active listening is a way to really get to know another person and to understand their side of a problem or issue. Active listening helps the person you're talking with speak freely, explain his/her side of a problem, and work out a solution. It includes the following elements:
   - **Clarifying:** Clarifying includes asking who, what, why, when, and where questions, such as "When did this happen?" "Can you tell me exactly what the student said to you?" "How did you feel about the principal's comments in front of the class?" Clarifying helps you get clear information from the other person and understand his/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.
   - **Reflecting:** In reflecting, you describe the other person's feelings: "You seem very upset about what happened today," or "You sound angry about playground duty." Reflecting shows you understand how the other person feels and brings those feelings out into the open.
   - **Summarizing:** Review the problem or issue you've discussed and how you'll handle it: "I'm glad you're willing to offer me more input in what we do in the classroom. It will make me feel more excited and productive. We've agreed to coordinate our planning periods so that we can sit down together and exchange ideas." Summing up pulls together your entire conversation and sets the stage for further discussions.
   - V**alidating:** Validating recognizes the other person's dignity, efforts and opinions. Validating phrases include: "I really appreciate your willingness to help solve this problem," or "I know it took courage for you to bring this up. I'm glad we talked about it."
3. **Avoid communication barriers.** Roadblocks to communication include:
   - **Destructive criticism and name calling**
     Examples of criticisms or put-downs include: "How could you be so insensitive to that student?" "You really went about that the wrong way," or "That's typical of your lousy attitude." This approach puts the other person on the defensive. They may be so hurt or angry that they can only hear the insult or putdown, not the problem you're trying to solve.
   - **Diagnosing or mindreading**
     This includes second guessing the other person with phrases such as: "I know you just did that to annoy me," or "It's obvious you have a self-confidence problem. That's why you can't deal with rowdy kids." Like destructive criticism, mindreading keeps the other on the defensive and may keeps you from getting what you want from them, which is a solution or approach to your common problem.
4. **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 his/her input and suggestions. Planning weekly schedules and daily activities can make both your lives easier. You may want to use a daily "things to do" list that assigns a priority to each task. You could also work together to create bulletin board displays, instructional games, and special activities.

Taken from, "Creating a Classroom Team: How teachers and paraprofessionals can make working together work" AFT.

A Problem-Solving Exercise: Each month, we will provide a case study and discussion questions to facilitate discussion among teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators.

Paraprofessional-Sara

I am Sara and I have been a paraprofessional for almost 25 years. I started working in an elementary school and did lunchroom duty, monitored the playground and helped the teacher in the classroom. About 15 years ago, the principal asked me how I would feel about working in a special education program. I've worked in several special education classes-everything from programs for kids with severe and multiple disabilities to resource rooms. I've seen teachers come and I've seen them go.

This year I've been assigned to work with a new teacher fresh out of college with no experience and a lot of new theories and bright ideas. On the first day of school, we had a conference and she outlined what she wanted me to do. Basically, as I see it, she expects me to return to the status that I had when I first started 20 years ago. I am supposed to escort the children to the lunchroom, the playground, speech therapy, etc., keep the attendance records, do the toileting, keep the room neat and generally stay out of her way. She does let me play records and tell stories during the rest period.

Now she has developed a "new" program plan for James, and all of a sudden has asked me to help implement it. I do not think it's going to work because Mrs. Adams tried something similar last year and we had to change it several times. By the way, Mrs. Adams was one of the best teachers I've ever worked with. She had a great sense of humor, always included me in on the fun things, changed diapers herself once in a while because she believed that toilet training was part of the instructional process, asked me what I thought about her ideas and what was going on in the class and when I talked, she listened.

I'd like to talk to Ms. Brown about James-but I've got a couple of problems. She hasn't asked me about what I think and she really seems more interested in trying out her theories than she is in hearing from me. In fact, if I had to describe her I'd say she is very dictatorial. Besides, the older I get the nicer it is to just do my job and go home rather than taking orders from someone who doesn't know half as much as I do about teaching special education kids. On the other hand-with a few minor changes the goals and activities she has planned to James would probably work-maybe.

Teacher-Anne

My name is Anne and this is my first teaching job. My undergraduate degree is in Special Education and I have a Master's as well. I have had some teaching experience, but only as a student teacher. I've really been looking forward to being in charge of my own classroom, and putting the techniques I've worked so hard to learn to work. There was one, thing, however that not one prepared me for when I was in college-that is that I would be expected to supervise someone old enough to be my mother who has more than 25 years experience. But I do think I'm lucky to have an aide to help out with all of the little things that have to be done in the classroom so I can spend a lot of individual time with students.

I really feel that as a teacher, I am the person who is responsible for what goes on in the classroom and that I will be held accountable for the good and the bad. Besides, since Sara is so much older that I am and really has a lot of experience, I decided that it was very important to establish myself as the authority figure. This isn't always easy because working with Sara can be a little intimidating. She really gets along well with the other teachers in the building, and they all rave about her and tell me how lucky I am to have her.

There is a child in the class who seems to fit an almost textbook picture of a syndrome that I've read about but never seen. I'm sure that he will benefit from a new technique that has been developed to cope with such a youngster and his behavior. I have laid out, in great detail, the type of interventions that I want to use and have started to follow the program. I've decided, however, that if it is going to work, Sara is going to have to be involved as well because everything has to be done consistently and systematically.

When I asked her to implement the program, she didn't ask any questions or say anything-she just smiled a Mona Lisa smile. Later that day she started telling me about how terrific Mrs. Adams was and what a terrific teacher she was. She's done this before and I'm getting a little tired of it. In any event, I'm really more concerned about James and meeting his needs. I'd like to talk to Sara about it. But I don't want her to think I don't know what I'm doing and I certainly don't want to diminish my authority in the classroom. What can I do?

Discussion questions:

1. Describe the problem from the paraprofessional's point of view (This may include attitudes, actions, and other factors described in the case study).
2. Describe the problem from the teacher's point of view.

What behavior(s) does the teacher need to change?

What behavior(s) does the paraprofessional need to change?

Discuss and list desired goal(s) for the team.

How can they work together to achieve the goal and to be a better instructional team? What additional information, skills, or other resources will they need to achieve the goal?

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