

# Paraeducators: Understanding their Role

Heather Hansen

01/23/2024



Laura Lema and Marilyn Likins

An all-things-paraeducator virtual conference will be hosted by the National Resource Center for Paraeducators (NRCP) from January 25th - 27th.

A national shortage in teachers has driven the need for paraeducators, but what exactly is a "paraeducator?" Laura Lema, Program Coordinator at NRCP, says, "There is a huge variety in definitions across states, districts, and schools. One definition of a paraeducator is someone working under the direction of a teacher or team to serve the needs of students." Paraeducators work in a school environment. Paraeducators can be known by different names and titles, paraprofessional, teacher assistants, inclusion assistant, classroom reduction assistant, teacher aide, etc.

One of the main differences between a paraeducator and a teacher is their level of training, certification and/or licensure. Marilyn Likins, the Executive Director of NRCP, explains, "Special ed teachers [have] a teaching license, which requires them to take many college classes ... to successfully complete license requirements. Paraeducators do not. ... They may have some community college training, they may not." Requirements to become a paraeducator vary from state to state, depends on state standards and what position the paraeducator is assigned to in the classroom.

Regardless of their title, they are key members of the instructional team in a classroom."

Because the roles and qualifications of a paraeducator can vary so widely from state to state, it can sometimes be confusing for principals, teachers, parents, and even paraeducators to understand what their roles and responsibilities are. For this reason, the NRCP hopes to provide role clarification to their conference attendees.

"The conference is really designed for *all things paraeducator*," Likins said. "So paraeducator training, hands-on training for those that are providing the service, teacher trainings, hands-on training for teachers who are directing and guiding the work of paraeducators. [It's looking at the question of,] What does effective assessment and evaluation look like for paraeducators? How do you retain quality paraeducators?"

"The conference will also clarify the role of local administrators, such as district principals. Principals will learn how to support effective teacher-paraeducator teams? ... Principals are taught how to build school-wide teams, how to build a budget, but they're often not taught how to specifically support planning time for teacher-paraeducator teams and how to make sure that things are running smoothly," Likins said.

The conference begins on January twenty-fifth with special guests Valerie Williams, the Director of the Office of Special Education Programs, Glenna Gallo, Assistant Secretary of OSERs, and Laurie VanderPloeg from the Council for Exceptional Children, CEC, to kick off a discussion. It will then break into sessions with keynote speakers, such as Expert Panel discussion on "Paraeducators' Journey to Teacher Licensure," Matthew Wappett on "Beyond Disability: Understanding and Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Disabilities" and Jo Mascaro on "We CAN Work it Out Through De-escalation with Dignity" and 20 other breakout sessions. "You can find paraeducators in special ed and general ed classrooms, lunch rooms, playgrounds," Likins said. "They really are the beating heart of the school," Likins said, "so it is vital that they receive the support and guidance they need for themselves and to improve outcomes for students".

The conference is past, but you can learn more about [current NRCP offerings](#) on their website.