Jen is a new special education teacher at an urban high school. She and four paraeducators work with a diverse group of students in predominately inclusive settings. One of the paraeducators is new, one is not performing satisfactorily, and the other two paraeducators, though willing, don’t seem to know how to support students without doing things for them. Jen’s initial challenge is to improve the learning environment for her students by increasing paraeducators’ skills. After discussing her ideas with her building administrator, Jen meets with the paraeducators to discuss their training needs. Together they begin to build a plan for on-the-job training for paraeducators.

Characters and Roles

- Jen, Special Education Teacher
- Claire, Friend of Jen’s
- Ken, Marsha, Maria, and Donna, Paraeducators
- Sue Miller, Special Education Teacher
- Don, Building Administrator
- Raymond, District Physical Therapist
- Steven, Student Receiving Services

Tools

- On-The-Job Training for Paraeducators

Artifacts:

- Paraeducator Task Preparation/Confidence Inventory
- Training Plan Form
- Individualized Job Description

Glossary Terms:

- Special Education Generalists
- On-The-Job Training
- Line Supervisor
- Licensed Staff
- Personalized Job Description
- Paraeducator Task Preparation/Confidence Inventory
Discussion Points:

- Orientation and initial staff training are critical for the success of new staff. Some teachers believe that their responsibility to train staff ends once initial training activities have been completed. What do you think? Is there a need for on-going staff training? What are some ways that staff training needs can be identified and met?

- Due to large case loads, special educators don’t always work directly with students. Thus, a special educator might feel that the paraeducator “knows” the student better than the special educator does. One’s knowledge of a student is different from knowing how to implement appropriate instructional practices, behavior management, and social skills development programs. How might a teacher provide training in these areas in situations where the teacher has little direct knowledge of students?

- Imagine a situation where a paraeducator asked a peer helper to put a student into the time-out area. During this process, the peer helper was hit by the student before the peer forcibly pushed the student into time-out. The following day, the principal receives a call from both students’ parents. One parent wants to know why his son was hit. The other parent is asking about the bruises on her son’s arms. Imagine the principal confronting the paraeducator. The paraeducator acknowledges the situation, and then she says, “Well, the student is much bigger than I am and I couldn’t get him to go into time-out. No one told me it wasn’t okay for me to ask a peer helper to do this.” The principal then comes to you and asks about your training. What are you going to say?

Activities:

- Discuss critical areas where all paraeducators need to be competent.
- List areas where you feel comfortable training paraeducators and areas where you will need someone else’s help.
- Role-play a situation where a student was hurt because a paraeducator did not use a safety belt on the wheel chair. Have one person play a building administrator who is trying to establish what happened and why it happened. Another person will play the teacher. Note that the teacher is aware that the paraeducator hasn’t always used equipment safely in the past. The third person will play the role of the paraeducator. Part of the paraeducator’s defense is that the teacher knew that the paraeducator wasn’t using a safety belt and hadn’t said anything.
Reflective Question: Scene 3, Question 1: How might the fact that Jen discussed her concerns with Don help to prevent later difficulties? How do you think that Don perceives Jen? Do administrators expect that new teachers in a building will need assistance in performing their jobs? How should a teacher approach their administrator with a problem? Sometimes a new teacher feels too intimidated to address performance issues with paraeducators who are well established in the building. This is because the teacher is aware that the paraeducator can use his connections in the building to make trouble for the teacher. As a way to shift power, the teacher can form connections with key building staff including administrators and influential teachers. Working with these staff will help the new teacher to become one of the team. Further, because key staff is aware of what’s happening, the paraeducator with performance problems is less likely to be supported by staff.