

Empowering Paraprofessionals for Student Success in Employment Settings Through Effective Coaching and Support Practices

Paraprofessionals frequently provide job support to students participating in school and community work-based learning experiences while receiving little formal preparation for this important role. They spend considerable time working with students on vital work skills to prepare them for future adult employment. Many educators lack formal training on job coaching and don't know how to adequately prepare paraprofessionals to provide work support. Review the following information on the practical strategies for preparing, supporting, and coaching paraprofessionals who assist students with disabilities in employment settings.

Preparation

What happens prior to starting the job coaching process impacts the student experience and outcome almost as much as what happens during job coaching. Preparation starts with selection, but also includes clear expectations, communication strategies, and effective training on topics such as understanding work-based learning and supporting a student's independence on the job site.

Selection

When selecting paraprofessionals for job coaching in school and community settings, seek candidates with a variety of skills. These skills include being professional and able to work with businesses, understanding workplace culture, promoting independence, flexibility, and the ability to adapt to changes in the work setting.

Expectations and Communication

Discuss expectations and communication preferences and methods either before formal paraprofessional training or as a part of formal training. Explain the expectations for both the job coaches and the students, as well as the expectations for handling situations. For example, address both common situations, such as being late to the workplace, and student-specific situations, such as a health or workplace crisis. Engage in these conversations prior to job coaching and revisit the expectations on a regular basis.

Training

Job coaching training is vital to the success of the workplace relationship and future student success. Training provides the cooperating teacher with the opportunity to help paraprofessionals understand work-based learning, how to support students, promote independence, safety, and crisis management strategies. Data collection and documents for the workplace should be included in a binder so that paraprofessionals have them for reference in the work setting.

Job Coaching and Ongoing Support

Making the Match

All stakeholders thrive within a solid partnership. This starts by matching the student to the job site and matching the job coach with the student. Evaluate the job site and match students to their interests and in worksites that support their needs. Think about a person the student responds well to and match them with a job coach who has some of the same qualities.

Coaching the Coach

Coach the paraprofessional through regular communication and observations. Observation should not be an evaluation, but an opportunity to praise strengths and provide feedback. This feedback will help paraprofessionals reflect on challenges and encourage them to brainstorm solutions. The job coach is supporting an entire partnership, and both initial and ongoing coaching help sustain it.

Conclusion

Developing paraprofessionals to job coach students with disabilities takes time, effort, and an ongoing commitment to the school, student, and business partnership. This consistent investment builds confidence, strengthens professional practice, and creates lasting success for students. Through careful selection, training, and sustained coaching support, you set a strong foundation for further programming and student successes.