The teaching profession faces new challenges as personnel must ensure that students meet high testing requirements and that educators teach new curricular standards. This book is written for the new generation of paraprofessionals who have more advanced qualifications and greater awareness of the need to seek professional supervision. To be the most effective in their jobs, paraprofessionals must know the roles and requirements of the job—beyond the mere job description. Teachers must provide systematic and sustained leadership to paraprofessionals to ensure quality pedagogical practices.

In this introductory section, we set the stage for the journey you will take through the book. Chapter 1 defines the term paraprofessional and looks at the various titles and roles assumed by paraprofessionals. Understanding how roles and responsibilities are assigned and defined is vital to your success so you will learn about role clarification and distinction.

Chapter 2 is all about instructional supervision. We give an analogy to illustrate the vital nature of the roles of paraprofessionals and the roles of teachers. Knowing who is assigned to supervise you and how that person supervises is critical to your success. The chapter focuses on the importance of seeking supervision, which is vital even for new teachers directing veteran paraprofessionals and veteran teachers supervising new paraprofessionals.

Each of these chapters contributes to building a picture of the context for your work as a successful paraprofessional working in an educational setting. All around the world, the rewards of supporting students as they learn and seeing them achieve are the job benefits that continually motivate educators.
This chapter discusses the employment of paraprofessionals and provides a context to help you better understand the requirements and expectations of the job. By the end of the chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What are the various titles used when referring to paraprofessionals?
- What are the various definitions of paraprofessional—including the federal definition?
- What are some of the attributes of paraprofessionals employed in the U.S. education system?
- What are the written guidelines of your job description?
- What are your specific roles and responsibilities in your own assignment?
- What are some of the current trends and issues in the field of paraprofessionals in education?

If you are currently employed as a paraprofessional, you already have information related to your job and the local conditions associated with your profession. Knowledge of the variety of titles and assignments given to paraprofessionals across the country will give you a broader perspective of the work. Understanding the importance of having a clearly defined job will help you better support student learning. Knowing what you are expected to do and what you are restricted from doing is vital to your continuing employment and good relationships with your supervisors.

**Paraprofessional Titles: A Rose by Any Other Name**

Across the United States, at least fifteen different titles are used for paraprofessionals who work in education (see the following box). Some of them may be considered very dated or politically incorrect in your school district or state, but most of them are still in use. Aide is probably one of the earliest titles, and paraeducator is one of the most recent. The term paraprofessional has been in use for some time, particularly in federal legislation.

Other paraprofessional assignments include Section 504 aide, gifted/talented enrichment paraprofessional, in-school suspension monitor, computer lab technician, and bus aide, among others. You may know of additional titles that are not listed here.
Defining the Term: Paraprofessional

So what is a paraprofessional? This may seem a strange question to ask at the beginning of a book written for paraprofessionals whose readers probably are paraprofessionals. But it is a question that needs a clear answer so that you understand the rest of this book in its proper context. Typically, when we try to define someone who is a member of a group, we resort to describing what that person does. “What is a parent?” “A parent is someone who...” and then we list all the things a parent does. Listing what a paraprofessional does is a useful way of defining a paraprofessional, and in this introductory chapter we look at some of the official definitions of paraprofessionals and their roles, as well as asking you to consider your own definition. In fact, let’s start with your definition. Imagine that someone has come from a different country or culture, where there are no paraprofessionals. In the Chinese education system, for example, there are only professional teachers, no paraprofessionals. So if someone from China asked what your job was and you told him or her you were a paraprofessional, he or she would probably say, “I don’t know that word. What is a paraprofessional?” What would you say to him or her?

A paraprofessional is someone who

Did you manage to define a paraprofessional without just describing what you do? How else could you define a paraprofessional?

Some Titles by Which Paraprofessionals Are Known

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paraeducator</th>
<th>School assistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home visitor</td>
<td>Aide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational technician</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (TA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job coach</td>
<td>Learning support assistant (LSA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para</td>
<td>Support staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher aide</td>
<td>Technical Aide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional assistant (IA)</td>
<td>Transition trainer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Try getting a second opinion on this question of defining a paraprofessional. Ask another paraprofessional—one in your class or who works in the same school as you—to define the term. Write the definition here.

Are there differences between your definition and the definition your colleague gave? What points did your definitions have in common? What new insights did your colleague’s definition offer?

Because there is so much variety in the work that paraprofessionals do, there are different definitions of roles and what different paraprofessionals actually do on a day-to-day basis. So in order to get a more universal answer to the question “What is a paraprofessional?” let’s first take a look at the word itself. It has two parts: *para-* and *professional*. We know a professional is someone who has a recognized set of qualifications for a particular job or profession. The word *professional* probably conjures up images of doctors, lawyers, dentists, and engineers. In the context of education, professional educators include teachers and administrators, as well as school psychologists and counselors, and a variety of therapists who may work with individual students. The prefix *para-* means “alongside of.” So a paraprofessional is literally someone who works alongside a professional.

If we only interpret the word *paraprofessional* in this way, our definition is still not very enlightening: A paraprofessional is someone who works alongside a professional. It gives no indication of what sort of work a paraprofessional might do and leads to another question: What sort of a professional? Paraprofessionals work in all sorts of settings—nursing, the health professions, and the law—not just in education. Many of these have more descriptive titles that tell us exactly what sort of profession they are connected with, for example, paramedic and paralegal. We know a paramedic works with the medical profession and a paralegal works within a legal context. The term *paraeducator* is sometimes used for paraprofessionals working in education settings, as a more descriptive term, and many of the terms we listed earlier in the chapter do help define the role that may have been assigned (e.g., teaching assistant or job coach). However, the federal government has adopted the more general term *paraprofessional*, rather than *paraeducator*.

**A Federal Definition**

The federal government has also provided us with a definition for the term paraprofessional, and you can find it in the nearby box.
Paraprofessional? What's That?

The No Child Left Behind Act (now the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) defines a *paraprofessional* as "an individual who is employed in a preschool, elementary school or secondary school under the supervision of a certified or licensed teacher, including individuals employed in language instruction educational programs, special education, or migrant education."

Notice that this definition is a restatement of the translation of the word *paraprofessional* that we referred to earlier: a person who works alongside a professional. But the definition also clarifies the nature of the relationship between the paraprofessional and the professional. They are not merely working companionably side by side. There is a very definite difference in their roles. The paraprofessional is to be supervised, and the teacher (the professional) is to be the supervisor.

**Attributes Required of Paraprofessionals**

Because of this collaborative classroom relationship, which we will be discussing at greater length in the next chapter, paraprofessionals ideally possess certain attributes. Among other things, they should:

- Enjoy working with children who have a wide range of abilities and come from different cultural backgrounds.
- Be able to handle classroom situations with fairness and patience.
- Demonstrate initiative and a willingness to follow a teacher’s directions.
- Possess good writing and communication skills.
- Understand basic numeracy and literacy.

**Nature of the Work**

In keeping with their many and diverse titles and abilities, paraprofessionals take on a wide variety of roles, some of which are listed in the box.

**Typical Roles of Paraprofessionals**

- Support teachers in their efforts to help struggling students by collecting data or providing additional instructional help.
- Provide clerical support for classroom teachers such as health and attendance records.
You may also be interested to know that:

■ Even among full-time workers, nearly 40 percent of paraprofessionals work less than eight hours per day.

■ Most paraprofessionals who provide educational instruction work the traditional nine- to ten-month school year.

■ Paraprofessionals work in a variety of settings, including private homes, preschools, and local government offices, but the majority work in classrooms in elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

■ Paraprofessionals can spend much of their time standing, walking, or kneeling. Those who work with students in special education settings often perform more strenuous tasks, including lifting, as they help students with their daily routines.

■ The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts there will be 1,447,600 paraprofessionals in the United States by the year 2018. Today nearly 40 percent work part-time and three-fourths work in education institutions at the state and local level; private schools, day-care centers, and religious organizations hire most of the remainder.

■ Many schools require previous experience in working with children, a valid driver’s license, and/or a background check.

■ Those who tutor and review lessons with students must have a thorough understanding of class materials and instructional methods, and they should be familiar with the organization and operation of a school.

■ Paraprofessionals must know how to keep records, operate audiovisual equipment, prepare instructional materials, and have adequate computer skills.

### Your Job Description as a Paraprofessional

Written guidelines at the school and school-district level, likely quite generalized, state what types of responsibilities should and should not be assigned to paraprofessionals. In addition, you should have an individual written job description that details what is expected of...
you personally. Some groups of paraprofessionals have a common job description (e.g., those working for Title I programs, with duties that include supporting basic literacy and numeracy in the school). But all paraprofessionals should have a copy of their own job descriptions. If you do not, ask for one from your supervising teacher or if necessary from the school building administrator or the school-district office. Check one of the two boxes here to indicate you have a written job description.

☐ Yes, I already have a written job description.

☐ No, I did not have a written job description, but I have since obtained one from my school or school district.

You will need a copy of your job description in order to complete My Responsibilities as a Paraprofessional, so make every effort to obtain a copy as soon as possible.

This is a good point to begin looking more closely at your own assigned roles. In the space provided, list the duties you have been assigned, as you understand them. If you have a written job description, refer to it, but add any duties you feel you carry out, even if they are not mentioned in the job description. Most people have a clause in their contract that states “and other duties as assigned,” which allows individual teachers and administrators to ask you to take on additional responsibilities as needed. However, most of your regular assigned duties should be listed on your job description. Make sure you include any behavior management responsibilities that have been assigned to you. Even if nothing specific is listed on your job description about managing student behavior, everyone who works with students has some responsibility for student behavior. After all, if you are not actively managing their behavior, they are probably managing yours! So make sure you add something about your behavior management responsibilities as you see them.

**My Responsibilities as a Paraprofessional**

These are my duties as a paraprofessional:

1. _______________________________________
2. _______________________________________
3. _______________________________________
4. _______________________________________
5. _______________________________________
6. _______________________________________

In the box we have included information about a role which many paraprofessionals assume, but on which we would urge caution—substituting for a teacher. You must follow the direction of your school administrators with regard to this role, but we would recommend that you read the information in the box and give it careful consideration.
Defining of Roles and Responsibilities

With such a variety of departments and agencies that employ paraprofessionals, it can be difficult to balance each staff member’s responsibilities against tight schedules and the need for supervision. However, the importance of establishing clear expectations as a foundation for effective collaboration between paraprofessionals and their professional supervisors cannot be overemphasized. The point that many authors have made is: paraprofessionals need to know exactly what is expected of them. It almost seems too simple to be so important. But the truth is, because it seems so obvious, this sort of clarification of roles and expectations often does not happen. Time and energy are wasted as paraprofessionals guess and interpret a teacher’s requirements, and of course they do not always get it right because paraprofessionals are no better at mind reading than anyone else.

Is It OK to Ask?

You may feel it is inappropriate for a paraprofessional to insist on some sort of framework or formal description of her responsibilities. However, we can assure you that it is perfectly reasonable for you, as a paraprofessional, to ask your supervisor for clarification about your role. Your teacher should provide a clear definition of your roles and what is expected of you.

A Special Case: Substitute Teaching

We would like to add a cautionary note here about substitute teaching. Many paraprofessionals tell us they substitute regularly for their teacher. Paraprofessionals know the students and the current curriculum. The students know them and know what is expected. They say it provides continuity, and it saves the time of bringing a substitute teacher up to speed. There are apparently many good arguments for paraprofessionals working as substitutes. However, we have also talked to administrators in the schools and school districts where these paraprofessionals work, and they often tell us their paraprofessionals do not substitute for teachers because it is against school or district policy. This mismatch between the theory, or policy, and the classroom practice is of serious concern. It could mean paraprofessionals are performing duties (in this case substitute teaching) that are not allowed by school-district policy, which is obviously inappropriate, but if the policy is based on state law, it is also illegal for a paraprofessional to assume that duty.

We strongly recommend you clarify your position regarding substitute teaching in your school district because it is a very common practice for paraprofessionals to be asked to substitute, often at short notice. If you discover school-district policy or state law does not allow paraprofessionals to substitute teach, approach your administrator and give notice that you will no longer be able to undertake this responsibility and when you did so previously, you were unaware it was disallowed. It may cause inconvenience and some ill feeling if it is a common practice in your school, but you have the force of the law behind you, and ethically you must refuse if you know local policy does not allow you to perform that particular duty. If you have teaching qualifications but are working as a paraprofessional, this caution may not apply to you.
but if this does not happen, you must ask—for your own peace of mind and to avoid future conflict and even legal vulnerability. Very few teachers have received training on supervising paraprofessionals, and they may therefore not appreciate the importance of first establishing your duties. There is nothing inappropriate about your prompting this first step.

**The Devil Is in the Details**

When people say, “The devil is in the details,” they mean that the small things that are often overlooked can cause serious problems later. You may feel your duties are clear, and writing a list of your responsibilities in general terms may not have been difficult. However, it is a good idea to take this exercise a step further, and list your duties in finer detail, rather than just in general terms. This is particularly important, because if you overstep the bounds of your responsibilities there can be negative consequences for your relationship with your supervisor or other adults with whom you work. They may see you as taking too much initiative or encroaching on their roles, and the worst case scenario would be that you could be legally vulnerable if you carried out duties that strictly belong to a professional rather than a paraprofessional. Likewise, if you do less than what is expected of you, you can jeopardize your working relationship and be perceived as lacking in commitment and accuracy in your work.

The next step in defining your responsibilities is to break down, or dissect, each general role or responsibility into its component parts. Below we have provided three examples of roles common to paraprofessionals and the possible components of each. The questions we

### Example 1  Role: Assist in maintaining an orderly classroom

Does this mean …

- Keeping the teacher’s desk clear? Or would your supervising teacher consider the desk to be outside of your responsibility?
- Reorganizing the classroom closets and drawers? Or would your supervisor be somewhat surprised and even irritated at not finding things where they used to be?
- Taking down bulletin boards you think are badly designed or have been there long enough, and replacing them with your own displays?
- Gathering together a small group of children to play a game or read a story if they have finished an assignment and seem to be at loose ends?
- Moving chairs and tables to what you think is a more efficient classroom layout?
- Sending a student to time-out for disrupting other students’ work?
- Calling a parent about a student’s lack of homework?
- Redesigning a worksheet the teacher has written because you think your group of students would find it difficult to use?
- Taking a child aside to read through a passage he obviously cannot understand?
ask about each of the roles might be answered differently by individual paraprofessionals because each situation is different. Only you and your supervising teacher can answer for your own situation. But if any of these roles are part of your assignment, ask yourself the questions. They will help you clarify exactly what your supervising teacher expects of you.

All of the tasks listed in the previous example 1, and the next examples 2 and 3 would be appropriate tasks for a paraprofessional, but only if the supervising teacher had assigned them. Some teachers would be horrified if you were to interpret that role in some of these ways. Other teachers would be delighted. Some teachers would not object, provided you cleared it with them first; others would be happy to see you taking the initiative and assisting in so many helpful and innovative ways. One paraprofessional thought she was being helpful by cleaning off the teacher’s desk that was covered with bits of paper of all different sizes. It turns out the teacher was saving odd scraps of paper in the interests of recycling and because of the limited budget the school had allocated for paper that semester.

You can apply this same type of analysis to any of your own roles and responsibilities—and we would strongly recommend that you do so. As you can see, there are two parts to this issue:

---

**Example 2  Role: Assisting with student reading**

Does this mean . . .

- You decide when the student is to move on to the next reading book? Or is that the teacher’s responsibility?
- You administer mastery tests at the end of each basal reader?
- You record the results of the tests in the teacher’s grade book? Or should you just pass the results on for the teacher to record?
- If parents ask you how their child is progressing in reading, you let them know the results of the tests? Or do you refer any such questions to the teacher?

---

**Example 3  Role: Assist in classroom behavior management**

Does this mean . . .

- Giving students tokens or rewards for good work and/or appropriate behavior?
- Imposing sanctions or consequences for inappropriate student behavior or poor standards of work?
- Reporting serious behavior problems to a school administrator?
- Reporting or discussing serious behavior problems with the student’s parent(s)?
- Monitoring student behavior plans?
Paraprofessional? What’s That?

First, what exactly is your role? Second, to what extent should you take initiative and interpret your teacher’s instructions? The first part is essential. You must be proactive and seek clarification of your responsibilities. The second part of the question may only be answered with time.

As you see things that need to be done, check with your supervisor whether it is OK for you to go ahead and do them, and judge by the response whether you interpreted their expectations and instructions accurately. As time goes on, you are likely to have to make many small adjustments to your work as you become better acquainted with your supervisor and the way they manage the classroom. However, an initial proactive approach of seeking a clear understanding of your role and your teacher’s expectations will help establish a good relationship between the two of you, which will make any future changes easier to handle for both of you.

Crystallizing Understanding of Your Roles and Responsibilities

In the following form, take time to explore the extent and limits of your own roles and responsibilities. List in the left-hand column each of the roles you have already identified, and then list in one of the two right-hand columns the possible components of each of those roles, according to whether you believe that component is or is not included within your area of responsibility. We have included an example to start you off. If this particular role is applicable to you, make adjustments as necessary to the components that are or are not part of your responsibility.

Avoid Overstepping Your Responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles I have been assigned</th>
<th>This does include …</th>
<th>This does not include …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: Supporting student in ninth-grade math class</td>
<td>Helping him to keep track of where the teacher is in the text. Reading text-based practice sessions in class.</td>
<td>Giving him the answers to questions Writing the answers on the worksheet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When you have completed this exercise and feel confident you have carefully examined and analyzed the various roles and responsibilities you have been assigned, ask your supervising teacher to review what you have written. Explain the purpose of the exercise, and then ask your supervisor to check whether your interpretation of your roles is accurate. You need to know:

1. If your supervisor feels any roles or responsibilities are missing from the list (i.e., in the left-hand column),
2. Whether your supervisor feels the components you have identified for each role are accurately placed in the middle or right-hand column, according to whether they are part of your role or not, and
3. Whether your supervisor feels there are other components of any of the roles you have not identified but should be included.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter we have considered some of the different titles, definitions, and roles assigned to paraprofessionals, the nature of the work paraprofessionals perform, and the attributes considered desirable in a paraprofessional. You know the importance of understanding exactly what your assigned roles and duties are, so that you are confident that you are working according to your teacher’s expectations and not going beyond what is required or proper for a paraprofessional in your work setting. This information should help you to be more effective in providing for student needs. It will enhance your working relationship with your supervising teacher and give you confidence that you are carrying out the duties assigned to you.

**Extending Your Learning**

**Paraprofessionals in Other Countries**

Paraprofessionals work in the education systems of many other countries around the world, most notably in Great Britain and Canada, where the circumstances are remarkably similar to the United States. They are also widely employed in Australia and Finland. Using a search engine such as Google or Yahoo, conduct an Internet search for information on paraprofessionals in other countries, including the roles they can legally assume. You can use some of the titles listed in the first part of this chapter as you conduct your search. In Great Britain, paraprofessionals are now known as teaching assistants (TAs) but were formerly called LSAs, or learning support assistants. In Canada, the most common terms are classroom assistant or teaching assistant.
You will find the following websites helpful for further information relating to paraprofessionals in the United States.

- The National Education Association (NEA) includes paraprofessionals under Education Support Professionals (ESP). The website can be found at www.nea.org.

- The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) refers to paraprofessionals as Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel (PSRP). The website can be found at www.aft.org.

- Your state’s Department of Education will have a website of its own. It may be known as a state Office/Department of Education/Instruction. If you do not know the URL, you should be able to find it quite easily using a search engine. The same is true for Departments of Education in neighboring states.
Being supervised means knowing who your supervisor is; it is the ability to identify different forms of supervision and to recognize the importance of seeking supervision, especially in the form of modeling and training. In this chapter we will consider the following questions:

- Why is it important to receive instructional supervision?
- Who is my supervisor?
- What are the different forms that supervision can take?
- How can I seek supervision?

First we will consider what we mean by the term supervision.

**Defining Supervision**

The term *supervision* has many different definitions. Some authors emphasize control and management, which ensure the effective and economical use of personnel. Others define it as orientation and in-service training. And others see it as guiding and mentoring staff to improve their performance in an instructional setting. The particular situation in which you work may emphasize one of these views more than another, but we believe all of these definitions are valid: The teacher is responsible for orientation and in-service training of paraprofessionals so the best possible use can be made of their time and skills, in order to help students succeed. You will notice that we use the term *instructional supervision*. This is because your role as a paraprofessional is to support the instructional process, even if you are not directly involved in providing instruction to students.

Let’s focus on your role in the supervision process: that of being supervised. We explore this through a metaphor—which you can read in the box.

---

As a child, one of the authors remembers regular summer visits to sheepdog trials in her native Wales. She was fascinated by the skill displayed by the border collie sheepdogs as they gathered up the scattered sheep and herded them into a pen. The shepherd controlled the dogs using just a few short words or whistling sounds. On command, the
sheepdogs would lie down or dash around the sheep, keeping them in a close group, until they were safely penned. Many years later in New England, the same author attended sheepdog trials that included a demonstration using a young border collie puppy. The shepherd explained that the puppy had had no training in herding sheep but showed a natural inclination to gather the sheep. Indeed, at a gesture from the shepherd, the puppy, who had been sitting quietly beside the shepherd, dashed off toward the sheep, who were quietly grazing on the other side of the field. Although they scattered at the puppy’s exuberant approach, the sheep were soon gathered up into a corner of the field, with the puppy standing guard—and looking very pleased with himself.

Why do we tell you this story? It seems to us that the metaphor paraprofessional as sheepdog may serve a useful purpose for our discussion of supervision. You may protest on reading this, “I’m no sheepdog!” but the metaphor is actually very complimentary:

- Even the young, untrained puppy was able to gather and herd the sheep—as a newly hired paraprofessional will be able to perform some assigned tasks extremely well even without training.
- A paraprofessional may possess some innate abilities, may have prior experience as a parent, or may have other experience of children or teaching—any of which can contribute to making her a good teacher.
- On the surface, it is often difficult to distinguish between an experienced and an inexperienced paraprofessional, in the same way that both sheepdogs were able to gather and herd the sheep.

As you can see, the metaphor offers useful and positive insights into the ways in which even newly hired paraprofessionals can contribute to the classroom. As with the sheepdogs, however, the difference between the newly appointed and the veteran paraprofessional would become evident as soon as some more complicated or expert role was required. If, for example, the shepherd had given the puppy a specific instruction—such as which direction to herd the sheep—the puppy’s lack of training would have quickly been very obvious. Trained and experienced sheepdogs not only can move sheep around but also can respond to a wide variety of commands given by the shepherd, such as separating individual sheep from the flock or working as a team with other sheepdogs. They can also be left on their own to watch sheep. However, all of these skills require lengthy training and a relationship of trust and harmony with the shepherd. In similar fashion, experience and training make excellent paraprofessionals, who have the skills needed for their assigned responsibilities and know how, and when to use them under the supervision of a professional. Even innate skills are improved by training and supervision.

Like all metaphors, this parallel between the roles of paraprofessionals and sheepdogs obviously has its limitations, but it offers insight into important principles which we further discuss through this chapter. Consider these points:

- There is nothing negative about the important role that the collie sheepdog serves, even though it serves under the direction of the shepherd.
The shepherd and the teacher also have crucial roles in their respective teams.

- The shepherd could probably round up the sheep and move them, but it may take him or her away from other important duties. The teacher can also do many of the same tasks as the paraprofessional, but that, too, takes him or her away from other important tasks that might require his or her particular expertise.

- Each role is vital to the effective function of the whole.

### The Importance of Instructional Supervision

If you are like many paraprofessionals, you have already worked in education for a number of years. You may figure you already know what you are doing, so why would instructional supervision be important? You do not feel like a paraprofessional puppy, as it were, anymore, and you have herded enough sheep to know how it works. However, the teacher is in charge of the classroom, just as the shepherd is in charge of the sheep. It is particularly important to note that much more is involved in shepherding sheep than just rounding them up and moving them from field to field. There is the purchasing of other sheep, marketing, ensuring that supplies (grass and fields) are adequate, and many other dimensions that make raising livestock a viable livelihood.

Teachers also have responsibilities to ensure that the classroom is adequately resourced, sometimes even negotiating with the school administrator for a classroom better suited to the needs of the students (e.g., closer to the playground or counselor’s office, on the main level with no stairs for students in wheelchairs to negotiate, etc.). Teachers also report to parents and complete report cards. In short, their responsibilities go far beyond merely keeping students under control and moving in the right direction. Under federal law, the teacher holds the ultimate responsibility for everything that happens in the classroom. And, by law, paraprofessionals are required to be supervised by a certified teacher. In addition, the teacher’s basic responsibilities include increasingly sophisticated tasks and teaching strategies as successive classes of students require the teacher to make adjustments and demonstrate considerable flexibility in some of the classroom arrangements, so as to cater to the individual needs of each year group.

### How Are You Supervised?

Let’s look at the actual techniques and activities that are involved in instructional supervision, and those that occur in your particular situation. On the following page you will find a form that lists various supervisory activities teachers might carry out in relation to their paraprofessional. Check those that you believe apply to your situation by marking the “yes” or “no” column. If you have been a paraprofessional for longer than a year, you have likely been exposed to various types of supervision from different teachers and therefore could mark all of the items. However, for this activity, only think of your current situation and mark the form according to how you are supervised now. At the bottom of the form, add any additional ways in which you feel you receive supervision.
### Supervisory Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Activities</th>
<th>Applies to my situation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teacher gives me a list of tasks to do each day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher has me keep a log or record of my work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We discuss students’ progress or needs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We (paraprofessional and supervisor) keep a record of training I receive, including informal training and meetings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher asks for my input on students’ progress.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor allows me to observe his or her teaching.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor and I discuss my observations of his or her teaching.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher observes what I do and grades or scores it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher discusses her observations with me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school administrator (principal or assistant principal) evaluates me once each year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor conducts a formal evaluation of my work once each year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My supervisor recommends training I could attend.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional supervision my teacher provides:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are the areas in which I would like more active supervision from my supervising teacher:
1.  
2.  
3. 

These are the ways in which I think I could offer better supervision to those I supervise as a paraprofessional:
1.  
2.  
3.
Note that we do not ask how often some of these activities occur. They constitute supervision whether they occur frequently or not. However, your daily work obviously needs more frequent supervision than just annual evaluation and feedback from your supervisor. Having completed the first part of the form, identify in the next space provided the areas in which you would like to receive more help or support from your supervisor. This may include the need for more frequent supervision activities, or it may be you feel the need for additional activities that your supervisor currently does not provide.

**Who Is Your Supervisor?**

When paraprofessionals’ roles are well-conceived and appropriately designed, you know what is expected of you. But many paraprofessionals find themselves assigned to serve in several different classrooms under the direction of different teachers. Some of you are even assigned to more than one school in a day. This can present a potential dilemma if your supervisors—whether they are teachers or principals—are unclear about their expectations or if there are conflicting expectations.

So what happens when you find yourself in a situation in which you have been left alone, without supervision, to carry out your responsibilities? You must know who your supervisor is and what type of supervision you may expect from him or her. At first glance, this may appear too obvious. Yet we surveyed more than four hundred school administrators and found that although they often hired paraprofessionals, they did not supervise or evaluate them. That responsibility fell to someone else.

According to the setting in which you work, it may not be immediately obvious to you who is your supervisor. So the best way to find out is to ask. If you do not work closely with any particular teacher, then refer your questions to a member of the school administration—at departmental level, or according to the department or group you support if you work in a secondary school setting.

**Actively Seek Supervision**

Lack of clarity or coordination among several supervisors could cause you to feel that you have no guidance or support, but there are several things you can do to seek supervisory clarification. First, you can take the Supervisory Activities form to your supervisor. Ask for help by telling the teacher that you understand you must be supervised and this form is one way to identify how you are being supervised. Seek the teacher’s help in completing the form. Another way is to ask the person who hired you to give you the name of the person assigned to supervise you.

We note that some paraprofessionals actually serve as supervisors to other paraprofessionals and may be given the title of teacher, even if they are hired (and technically are) a paraprofessional. If you find yourself in a position where you supervise other paraprofessionals—as many paraprofessionals do—complete the form twice, first in relation to the supervision you receive (i.e., activities your supervisor provides for you) and then in relation to supervisory activities you provide for those you supervise.

Whatever your precise title or assignments (including that of a supervisor of other paraprofessionals), you need to know who your supervisor is. You should seek guidance and supervision from that individual if it is not already provided. Whenever there is a question, ask! But first you need to know whose responsibility it is and know the name of the person who can answer your questions.
The following are suggestions for ways in which you can gain the additional support you feel you need. We strongly recommend that you consider the items that you checked as "no" on the earlier form, as well as the areas you identified for additional support, and take action using the suggestions, as appropriate.

Here is a brief list of ways in which to increase the supervision you receive from your supervisor and other professionals:

■ If you are assigned to different teachers each year, perhaps at short notice, opportunities for training and supervision or for meeting together to give or receive feedback are limited. **If training is not offered to you, it is appropriate for you to request it.** Call your supervisor or the staff development director, write them a letter or brief note, or make the request in a personal conversation.

■ A helpful proactive strategy was developed in a rural school district where some twenty-five paraprofessionals got together to discuss their own training and supervision needs. They chose representatives, who approached the school building administrator and requested the formation of a study group to review training materials, discuss training issues, and develop training objectives. The administrator and superintendent were especially pleased with their proactive attitudes and offered to provide or facilitate training in the areas identified. Thus the administrative infrastructure needed to provide regular ongoing training was developed in the district because these paraprofessionals took the initiative.

■ Training is most often delivered to groups of paraprofessionals or teachers, rather than to teacher-paraprofessional teams, even when the course content would also be suitable for both. This is not ideal because teachers and paraprofessionals must then find time to exchange the information. **If you are not receiving training alongside the teacher (or teachers) with whom you work, ask your supervisor for time to discuss the information you have gained.** You and your supervisor could also put in a request to attend future courses together. Staff development trainers usually have no difficulty with paraprofessionals requesting training and may be willing to accommodate the request if space is available in the training sessions.

■ In some schools, the school administrator allocates paid joint planning time for teachers and paraprofessionals. They use this time to delineate tasks, discuss student progress, assess instructional skills and performance, and share information in the mode of on-the-job training. Such planning time should not come out of your pay. If the school administration cannot reimburse you for additional time for instructional planning, **ask your supervisor to consider arranging a time during working hours when the two of you can meet.** This could occur while students are completing activities that do not require your direct input and supervision.

■ Finally, we strongly recommend that you **carefully document all activities related to the training and supervision you receive.** This is critical. Such documentation need not be extensive or time consuming, but both teachers and paraprofessionals should be encouraged to keep notes of training provided or received. Such documentation can be used to demonstrate that a school is giving proper attention to its responsibilities in providing appropriate education services to students.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have briefly raised the issue of instructional supervision and considered not only why it is important but also the precise nature of the supervision you currently receive. Specifically we have helped you to answer the following questions:

- Why is it important to receive instructional supervision?
- What is meant by instructional supervision?
- How can I identify my supervisor?
- What are the different forms supervision may take?

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), formerly named the No Child Left Behind Act, specifies that “paraprofessionals may not provide instructional support services except under the direct supervision of a teacher” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), and the IDEA only allows paraprofessionals who are appropriately supervised to assist with special education and related services. The importance of supervision cannot be underestimated. Now that you have read the chapter and participated in the activities, you should be able to identify your supervisor and how (and when) you receive supervision. You should be able to state this information clearly, even in a court of law, if needed. As an adult who is seeking to learn and improve, make a habit of accessing the supervision that is available so your concerns and questions can be addressed. Assert your right to know who is supervising you and seek access to training. Paraprofessionals may have to take action and be more proactive in order to receive appropriate training and supervision.

Extending Your Learning

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are popular in schools across the country. Through the use of PLCs, educators come together toward a shared purpose of improving student learning. The authors believe that paraprofessionals should participate in the school learning community. More than a decade ago, Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed the notion of Legitimate Peripheral Participation to denote the position of a newcomer whose presence may be justified and who may participate in practices fundamental to a situation or profession, but whose participation has nevertheless been peripheral. This is not to suggest any form of marginalization but rather the justifiable position of the newcomer who is as yet unable to participate as an expert. In a classroom community of practice, paraprofessionals legitimately participate in and contribute to the process of teaching and learning. Paraprofessionals are members of the community and have a wealth of knowledge about both the school and the community.

Teachers and administrators must advocate for paraprofessionals as legitimate participants with a shared purpose of improving student learning—and enhancing teaching. Paraprofessionals can be an important influence for student learning as they legitimately participate in the learning process.