JENNIFER GOLDBLOOM: Hello, my name is Jen Goldbloom and I’m an educational consultant at PaTTAN in King of Prussia. I want to welcome you to this final section of the considerations for administrators in supporting and supervising special education paraprofessionals. This section will focus on when and how we use paraprofessionals.

I’d like you to make sure you have the PowerPoint slides available and that you’ve printed out the article, The Golden Rule of Providing Support in Inclusive Classrooms, because we will be doing an activity related to that.

In section one, Shatarupa Podder talked about regulations and laws related to qualifications for paraprofessionals. And in section two, Susan Zeiders covered supervision policies, team roles, and ethical considerations. In this section, we’re going to talk about when and how we use paraprofessionals in classrooms, and I’d like to bring you back to the federal law as a base. IDEA 2004 allows for paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities. And in this section, we are focusing on the nature of the use of instructional special education paraprofessionals.

I want to talk a little bit about who decides when a paraprofessional’s needed here on this slide. There actually is no regulatory guidance in either IDEA 2004 or in Chapter 14 that specifically spells out how we make that decision, when or how to use a paraprofessional. It really does come down to the IEP team to decide when that support is used and how that support should be used. Paraprofessionals are often thought of as the obvious choice when it’s determined that a student with disabilities needs some sort of support. Sometimes paraprofessionals are assigned as a whole class support; other times they may be assigned as one-to-one supports for a particular student.

Now the IEP team, which includes, as you know, the parent, a general ed teacher, a special education teacher, and a local education agency representative, decides what help the student needs to develop social, behavioral, and academic skills. And their discussion should be starting with the student’s strengths and needs to make those decisions about where the goals are. The team sets yearly goals for the student, and then the team needs to discuss what specially-designed instruction and specially -- and supplementary aids and services are needed to make sure the student meets those academic, social, or behavioral goals.
Very often, members of the team come to the IEP team meeting with a preconceived notion that a paraprofessional is going to be needed, a one-to-one paraprofessional is going to be needed to help a student function in the classroom, whichever placement is determined to be appropriate for the student, whether that’s a self-contained classroom or an inclusive setting in a general ed classroom. This idea of that preconceived notion, “If my student needs something in the way of supports, that I have to use a paraprofessional to provide that support,” this may not be the most effective support option to move a student towards that goal of -- their own particular goals or that overarching goal towards independence.

Certainly there are times when a student requires the support and assistance of an adult to appropriately engage in activities within the classroom and also to possibly meet some of their activities of daily living, but it truly is the rare occasion that a student needs full-time, dedicated support of one adult throughout the course of the day to meet their needs. The research has not supported this notion that students will achieve more and do better academically or socially if assigned one-to-one support. So it’s really essential for the IEP team to look at other options. Consider alternatives to that adult paraprofessional support on a one-on-one basis that can support the educational progress of the student.

There are an infinite number of possibilities to consider when looking at supplementary aids and supports that include adaptations to the environment, supports for social-behavioral needs, instructional strategy, and adaptations to support a variety of diverse learning needs. I want you to take a minute and hear what Jen Peszek from Abington School District had to say about the use of paraprofessionals.

[VIDEO BEGINS]

JENNIFER PESZEK: We have a large student population, and we’ve been able to support our students within the building based on building resources. So we employ a lot of paraprofessionals, but it is usually at the class level, and we’ve -- haven’t had to use a lot of one-on-ones based on building collaboration and brainstorming and problem solving in how we can support the students with the resources that we have. So utilizing one-on-ones is something that we haven’t -- isn’t something that we go to right away. It would be a last kind of option after we’ve exhausted all other alternatives.

[VIDEO ENDS]
JENNIFER GOLDBLOOM: While IDEA does not provide great detail about specific supplementary aids and services, the concept has been discussed in the professional literature, and we have adopted the framework design by Etscheidt and Bartlett to organize what we think of as the full range of supplementary aids and services. And as you can see here on your screen, supports fall within four areas that include direct services to students, things that might be considered specially-designed instruction or related services, and these things might be outlined in the student’s IEP, but go beyond direct services to encompass other types of support that are intended to enable a student to benefit from instruction in general education class environments as well as other educational placements. This highlights the unique and critical role of supplementary aids and supports in supporting access to the general education curriculum. And we’re going to look at each one of these categories a little bit more closely.

Paraprofessionals might be placed in the collaborative category as one type of support for a student. Paraprofessionals, while being a support, also play a role in implementing many of the supports that might be listed or considered in these four different categories. The handout in your training materials titled Supplementary Aids and Services Fact Sheet will give you a little bit more information than we’re going to discuss here. The next few slides that we’re going to go through provide just a few examples of types of services that might be available underneath each category.

So the four categories are collaborative, where we’re talking about adults working together to support students; instructional, where we’re looking at making changes to the types of supports in the development and delivery of instruction that addresses diverse learning needs. We might need to provide aids or services related to physical aspect or the environment that the child is learning in, so adapting or modifying something related to the environment. And then looking at social and behavioral supports. These are supports and services to increase appropriate behavior and the skill building of a particular student.

So on this slide, we have a few examples of collaborative supports that we might provide for a student. We might be looking at providing professional development to the staff related to collaboration, how we can collaborate as a team. So maybe there are trainings related to the teacher and paraprofessional, as well as other certified staff working together to plan around supports for a student. Collaborative examples may have to do with scheduled time for co-planning and team meetings, and we might be looking at how do the administrators and
team members build in dedicated planning time for paras and teachers and the other certified staff to plan and make changes to the curriculum for the particular student?

Co-teaching and classroom consultation, scheduled opportunities for parental collaboration. When do we have ongoing communication with parents to make sure that they understand what’s going on and that they have input to what’s happening for their child in the classroom? And then looking at mentor teachers, teachers mentoring other teachers. This can happen for reasons of learning new academic skills. It can also be teachers serving as mentors to paraprofessionals. We can also have paraprofessionals serving as mentors to other paraprofessionals, and these types of things can happen -- this is just a small listing of some of the collaborative examples. The paraprofessional is one member of the team and should fall -- and be considered as only one of a number of possible options.

As far as instructional examples, you see on your screen that there are really a multitude of types of things that could be provided here. But as far as supplementary aids and supports, some examples for you: thinking about the use of the keyboard, word prediction software. For a student, they may need text-to-speech or other digital alternatives for accessing text, providing guided notes, using scaffolded -- scaffolding to plan for written work for a student, providing visual cues or modifying curricular goals.

While the modifications and the decision-making relating some of these instructional changes might happen at the teacher level or the related services level, implementation of some of these supports happens at the paraprofessional level or the teacher para level. And so we need to make sure that a paraprofessional has the skills to help a student if they are learning how to use word prediction software, or how to access a text-to-speech feature on a particular computer for a student. They need to know which types of cues to use for a student. So while we’re building the actual adaptations or service, the supplementary support, at the team level in the decision-making process, and the paraprofessional may have input on what is working with the student and what a student struggles with, the teacher and the administrator and the team, the IEP team, may make the decisions about which changes. The paraprofessional may be a support that helps to implement those changes.

As far as physical examples, here are just some ideas, that we may need to arrange furniture differently for a student, there may be certain sensory characteristics that we have to attend to, temperature, sound, hunger, endurance, those kinds of things, access to specific
areas of the classroom or other settings outside of the classroom as need be, whether it’s for a medical or health need or for a behavioral need, allowing for a water bottle or some sensory object to help a student stay on task. Those are just some ideas.

And then looking at some social-behavioral examples, there may be a need to modify goals or expectations temporarily for a student while a child is building skills around certain behavioral targets. There may be a need or a benefit to use peer supports throughout the day at different points of the day to help a student stay on task. But peers are not being used as instructors or teachers. They can be used as a support. Instructional -- individual behavior plan may be in place, skills training, counseling supports. Those are all additional ideas that could be used as supports that a team might consider.

Now you must know that are an infinite, infinite number of specific supports that could be used and put in place. These are just to get you thinking. That IEP needs to move away from the idea of, oh, this student’s going into a general ed classroom. They’re going to need an adult to support them. All students need the support of a teacher, and many students need the support of a paraprofessional from time to time, but it’s really rare that one student needs one dedicated person all day long. So we want to make sure that you’re looking at the broader picture and have some other options in mind. I’d like you to take a moment to view Jen Peszek talking about the changing role of the paraprofessional in their district.

[VIDEO BEGINS]

JENNIFER PESZEK: One of the biggest challenges I feel that we face as a district is, as we’ve increased our inclusion efforts, the role of para-educator is constantly changing. And I think it’s very important to keep providing ongoing development, professional development, and collaboration. And all those things will work, but I think it’s also important with mindset change. The culture has to change with the general education teacher, the special education teacher, and the para-educator that the students can participate meaningfully in the classroom, not just socially or behaviorally. They can meaningfully participate academically as well. And I think one of the challenges is giving the skill set to the para-educators on how to do that, not just sitting next to the child and helping them and reading to them, but like how to give them -- how to move in and out when you need to appropriately, and provide those supports as needed, and not just kind of hovering.
JENNIFER GOLDBLOOM: So we don’t want you to get the idea that paraprofessionals are not an important support for students in a classroom. They are important, and like I said before, they are being used in great numbers across the state to support students. We just want to make sure that we are not providing too much support for students that thwarts their progress over time throughout their school career and as they approach the transition to adulthood.

But there are many times when paraprofessional support is indicated and is appropriate. And so when the team decides that, okay, yes, we believe that a paraprofessional would be an appropriate support here, we want to make sure some things are in place. And you want to be, as a school leader, encouraging and making sure that the expectation is in place, that supports are not determined based on a student’s disability category. We want to make sure supports are determined based on the student’s needs and the setting, not the disability category.

So for example, the student has autism, therefore needs a one-to-one assistant. That can just not be necessarily appropriate. Some students who have autism might need a one-to-one assistant maybe for parts of the day. There may be some students who need a one-to-one assistant for all of the day. But great -- the great percentage of students will not need an assistant one-to-one all day long. So a student might need support for only one activity or one task throughout the day, and the type and level of supports for students should match the educational need that has been determined by the team for that particular student.

The other thing you want to keep in mind is that we want to have a clear plan for when and how paraprofessional support is to be provided. So when the IEP team is indicating those supports, we want to make sure that they have a plan. It’s going to be in this particular subject area or this particular time of day where we need that heavier support for a student. Maybe the child is learning how to use a communication device and really does need that one-to-one support for that particular part of getting that skill building for the student.

We want to make sure that we have the student’s main source of instruction coming from certified teachers. Special education teachers, general education teachers, and other certified staff should be providing the bulk of the child’s instruction, all right? And we want to make sure that the classroom discipline is being implemented under the guidance of the teacher.
and the school team, following school policies. And so if a child has behavioral issues and a behavior plan, we want to make sure that the paraprofessional understands what’s to happen and when, and that everybody’s on the same page with that.

In addition, we want to make sure that there is a plan in place to fade paraprofessional supports over time. It’s very easy to put a support in place for a student and just have it be there over time. We want to make sure that the IEP team, led by the school administrator, is considering the nature of those supports at each IEP meeting, and that there is a plan over time to try and fade those supports to build in those independence and the more natural supports, if possible.

We want to make sure that the teacher is making the majority of day-to-day curricular decisions and instructional decisions that affect that student. So many times, a paraprofessional has to make an on-the-spot decision. We know that’s the case, so we’re going to work on these words or that word today, or, there’s not enough time. You know, our time has been shortened. I’m going to do this particular piece for the student. There’s day-to-day -- there’s minute-to-minute decisions that have to happen throughout the day. We’re aware of that. But we want to make sure that the majority of the day-to-day curricular decisions are being made by the classroom teacher, not the paraprofessional.

There is a nice resource in your handout that was developed by the PEAL Center out of Pittsburgh. And the PEAL Center is the resource that the -- that families of students with disabilities have as a resource for them out in the west. And they developed this nice resource that talks about some of these decision-making points and the resources that are available. So you might want to access that when you get a chance.

I’d like you to look at a video clip from Becky Chadwick who’s talking about paraprofessionals needing support, even with training.

[VIDEO BEGINS]

REBECCA CHADWICK: What I’ve run into is people think once they get -- the paras get some training, that, oh good, we’ve done our part and they’re all set. And they’re paraprofessionals. They’re hired as paraprofessionals. And they can only do the job of a paraprofessional. And so we still have to make sure that that partner teacher is there and involved in that child’s
program, how that child is being instructed, and what’s happening on a regular basis with that child.

[VIDEO ENDS]

**JENNIFER GOLDBLOOM:** And just to summarize what Becky was saying, it’s very important that the school leader understands and that the partner teachers understand that even though we want to provide ongoing training for paraprofessionals, paraprofessionals we know come to a classroom with very different skill sets. We want to make sure that we don’t inadvertently relegate the role of the teacher as the main provider of instruction to the paraprofessional. It’s very easy for teachers to have that paraprofessional in the classroom and sort of relegate their duties as teacher to that paraprofessional.

Sometimes a general education teacher feels that the paraprofessional knows more about that student than the general ed teacher does, and so can leave some of the decision-making to that paraprofessional. Other times, it may be just that there’s a lot going on in a classroom, and if you have 24 or 25 students or however many students in a classroom that you’re trying to provide services to, sometimes it may be inadvertent that a teacher takes a backseat as the driver of the instruction for the student and relegates responsibility to the paraprofessional. It’s very important that when a paraprofessional is providing services to a student, they are in support of the general and/or special education teacher and that they need to stay in that role of support.

Moving on, a little bit more of that when paraprofessional support is indicated. Many paraprofessionals come to the idea that to be an efficient and effective paraprofessional and to fulfill their role, that they need to be on top of that student at all times. So if they’re working with one student, one-to-one, or if they’re working with several students who have disabilities across a classroom, sometimes they feel like they always have to be in there, doing stuff for the child in order to be not seen as slacking off or not doing their job. And many times, you know, it’s just because we haven’t talked about it out loud that it’s okay to step back and let the child try it on their own.

Being a paraprofessional and guiding the use of paraprofessionals does take some finesse, so when paraprofessionals are used inappropriately or when they think, well, I’m hired to support this student, I need to do things for this student, sometimes not knowing when to
step back in the background and allow the student independence, that can actually have some unwanted effects. And school leaders need to be aware of some of the problems that can occur through the use of paraprofessional supports. And you see some of these on your screen. You really need to be aware of these unintended negative effects. So Giangreco in 2010 and other of his articles has listed some of these effects, as well as Julia Cross, Cynthia O’Harris, and other researchers have talked about some of these unintended negative effects.

We can have students becoming over-dependent on the paraprofessional. That paraprofessional is willing to do things for me, and I think I’m okay with that. So they can have that sort of learned helplessness over time. Students with disabilities can inadvertently become separated from their classmates by the paraprofessional. So if the paraprofessional’s always running interference and doing things for the student, they can become separated. They can become interference with peer interactions. So the paraprofessional can actually work in opposition of a student forming relationships with their friends and their peers. They can actually become a barrier to students becoming friends in classrooms.

Students with disabilities can have feelings of being stigmatized because they have a paraprofessional working with them or sitting by their side at all times. The paraprofessional, and we don’t always think about this, but they can interfere with the teacher’s engagement with that student. So when a paraprofessional’s always there next to the child, many times the teacher, the general education teacher, or even the special education teacher may spend more time with the other students in the other classroom, but may not approach that student because the paraprofessional has it under control, and may not actually call on that student or engage the student directly, and may just leave it to the paraprofessional. And there’s a real danger in losing engagement with the teacher of record in the classroom.

The child can actually lose a feeling of personal control, so everything I do in the classroom or at school is led by this adult person. So really I don’t have a whole lot to say about it. So sometimes they can just engaging or lose motivation to try to do things on their own because things are being done for them. Sometimes a student who may not have had problem behaviors in the past may develop problem behavior because of the use of a paraprofessional. There’s many different reasons why this might occur. It may be because of a personal -- personality conflict with the paraprofessional, it may be because of the lack of control, or maybe they’re not getting enough attention and the right kind of attention. Lots of different reasons.
And then finally on this list, and this is not every possible unintended negative effect, but finally is that students who -- or have disabilities have a risk of being bullied because they have this adult at their side all the time. One, because they are vulnerable from the start because they are a child with disability. They’re separated from their classroom peers and they’re -- again, they’re not developing those relationships. So they may become alienated from the other students. So we want to make sure that we’re thinking about those things.

Now the effects can be counterbalanced through appropriate training of teachers, appropriate training of paraprofessionals in how to best to facilitate the learning and socialization of students while fostering independence and creativity. And like I said before, this requires some finesse. There really is a balance that we need to strike. The team has determined that paraprofessional support is needed, so we want to be clear about what types of supports to provide. So get in there, scaffold that instruction, give the amount of support that’s needed, but pull back and allow the student to be a child in the classroom first and a member of a classroom community first also. So we need some education around that for both the general and special ed teacher, as well as the paraprofessional.

So during the day, for example, the student needs to spend the majority of his or her social time at lunch, at recess, during clubs, with classmates, not the paraprofessional, okay? The paraprofessional may be present during those times, but they should not be a play partner for the student. If a student is learning about social interactions or learning to use a communication device, the paraprofessional should facilitate the use of those devices or facilitate those interactions, but needs to stay in the background. And this is something that may be learned over time.

We thought it would be helpful to have you read this article and discuss it to further explore the ideas that I just talked about in trying to alleviate some of those unwanted effects. And I want to read the introduction to the article to pique your interest in actually reading the article offline. Consider for a moment that the school system pays someone to be with you, supporting you eight hours a day, five days a week. Now imagine that you had no say over who that support person was, or how she or he supported you. Or imagine that someone regularly stopped into your place of employment to provide you with one-on-one support. This person was present for all your interactions, escorted you to the restroom, and sometimes, at times,
supported you by touching your back or shoulder, or manipulating your hands, head, or other parts of your body. This support person might also give you oral directions for upcoming tasks.

Think how you might react. Would you become more independent or more dependent? How would the support your relationships with your peers? Would you notice a loss of privacy or freedom? Would this person’s presence affect your creativity? At times, would you feel self-conscious about having someone supporting you? What would happen if you didn’t want him or her to touch you? Do you think you might develop negative behaviors?

I’d like you at this point in time to stop the video and take time to break the article into sections to read, jigsaw-style. If you are working in a group, you can read it jigsaw style, and I’d like you to get back together to discuss the various sections of the article. If you are reading the article on your own, I’d like you to read the whole article and consider those questions, and consider how you might alleviate those problem issues. This article has application for all adults working with students, not only professionals, and it really is well worth the read.

I hope you had a chance to read through the article, The Golden Rule of Providing Supports for Students in Inclusive Settings. I’d like you to take a moment to watch this video from Cheryl Wise from IU23. And she talks about three key components paraprofessionals need to understand in order to be effective in their work with students.

[VIDEO BEGINS]

CHERYL WISE: The three key components that are important for all para-educators to understand in their role is collaboration and their ability to communicate effectively with not only the special education teacher, but as importantly the regular education teacher. Secondly, it’s very important that they clearly understand what fostering independence is, and that is enabling the students to be more successful and more independent even though they play a clear role in supporting that student. And third is also the communication piece, and that is for them to understand that the communication ability of the student may be with assistive technology, augmentative device, or verbal communication. And what their role is in allowing that child or student to be successful in communicating with their peers, with staff members, and throughout their school environment.

[VIDEO ENDS]
JENNIFER GOLDBLOOM: We’ve talked about some of the considerations for best practice of paraprofessionals and things we need to consider relating to what might be barriers for paraprofessionals, and what we need to think about as far as how to have a paraprofessional be a facilitator or support. I want you to think, as a school leader and knowing what you know about your particular building or setting, do we provide support to our paraprofessionals to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to follow plans that are developed by the educational team, to carry out instructional tasks, data-recording, et cetera, and to collaborate with educational team members?

So when the team determines that, yes, additional adult support is needed, there really is a lot more planning that needs to happen. And we need to decide how we’re providing the support to paraprofessionals in our local areas. Are the paraprofessionals aware of the daily planning for students that he or she supports? And are they able to follow the plan of support that is developed by the educational team? Paraprofessionals need to be a support in that collaboration process, so they can be providing input to the teacher and the team, but again, we want to make sure that they are not making educational decisions on a regular basis, but that they can provide input to the team.

Additionally, do we provide support to our paras to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to allow students to be as independent as possible, to provide supports, but fade that support over time? So do we know that the student can get in -- that the paraprofessional can get in there and support the student to be successful in whatever the task is at the time, or whatever educational setting they’re in, but that they’re not overdoing it? They know when to step back, they know what supports to provide according to the plan, but know when it’s appropriate to fade those supports and to try to let the student be as independent as possible?

Can the paraprofessional use the types of cues and prompts that are specific to that particular child? Sometimes when you’re working with a multitude of students, you find a strategy that’s very helpful with one particular child, but really not all students need the same supports. So there needs to be that ongoing discussion and support of the general and special educators to make sure that the paraprofessional’s providing the correct prompts and cues to the appropriate students and that the support -- that paraprofessionals have the support to learn the use of specialized equipment devices and communication systems. So particular students need specific digital tools, technology tools. There may be certain wheelchair devices.
Every single piece of equipment has its own set of do’s and don’ts, and we want to make sure that the general ed teacher, the special ed teacher, any adults who are working with the particular child who needs supports, and the paraprofessional has the information they need in order to support the child to use whatever tools they’re using.

And I’d like you to listen to Susan Sams, who discusses how they support paraprofessional skill growth and provide opportunities for observation in other classrooms.

[VIDEO BEGINS]

SUSAN SAMS: We also send staff to training if we feel that it’s needed. We will also send them to other classrooms if we think it would be beneficial for them to see what other paraprofessionals are doing. For example, like on data collection, some classroom teams do a great job with that, and so sometimes we use them as an example and send other paraprofessionals over to that classroom to see how do they organize and manage that piece of it.

[VIDEO ENDS]

JENNIFER GOLDBLOOM: Some additional considerations for the school leader. I want you to think back. If you had a chance to view section two of this training packet, you were interested to the administrator’s review of systems tool, as well as the paraprofessional training needs tool. These are two items that can assist you in determining where your needs are related to the concepts we’ve been discussing.

So how do we use paraprofessionals in our school? Are we using them as whole class supports? Are we using them only as one-to-one supports for students? How does the school leadership promote the use of paraprofessional supports throughout the school? How are we getting information to our school teams, school leaders, parents, teachers on how to foster supports of paraprofessionals across the building?

What skills do teachers need to guide paraprofessionals in their classrooms? If a teacher doesn’t understand the nature of the role of the paraprofessional, if a general education teacher doesn’t feel comfortable guiding the work of the paraprofessional, then we need to develop some skill building around that. And you can use those two tools that are in your packet to think about those considerations and go through And you can do a walk-through through your building, you can think about the particular teacher-para teams and how they are working
together. And you want to think about, what skills do paraprofessionals need to support students in general ed classrooms? So we said before, very often paraprofessionals come to the work and are hired with minimal skills. We want to make sure that they have what they need in order to support students.

Some additional considerations. We might need to think about what similarities and differences are there in the types of paraprofessional supports across educational placements? Are there differences in the types of supports that paraprofessionals need to provide to students in a self-contained class, in a general education class, elementary, middle school, high school level, in career and technical education settings? What types of training might be needed to make sure that the paraprofessional has the skills that they need, and that teachers have the skills that they need to support students with disabilities in those settings? Can a paraprofessional be used as a support to the entire classroom in any one of those settings? And what would that look like in our particular district or school?

These are things that we want you to be considering, and you can use the Review of Systems tool. That can be very helpful in thinking about, are there some changes that we need to be making at the systems level at our school or district in supporting the work of paraprofessionals who work with students who have disabilities? Are there some academic needs for paraprofessionals that we want to have them pair up with mentor teachers to gain the academic knowledge? Or can we direct them to particular professional development that is needed? An additional resource that you may be interested in, PaTTAN has developed a training package that you might want to use in your district or school that is designed to be used for paraprofessional and general special education teams to be thinking about how they work together, how their roles are the same, and how their roles are different on different areas, and how they collaborate. And so that might be a training piece that you might be interested in.

In summary for this whole series, the special education paraprofessional can be an invaluable resource as part of the educational team. The role of the paraprofessional in the classroom continues to evolve, just like it evolves for teachers over time and special education teachers over time. School leaders can be proactive in ensuring structures that support student achievement through the effective use of paraprofessionals. And we hope you get a chance to go through some of the resources that we’ve provided for you. Ask questions, talk to each other
about what changes might need to happen and occur in your particular school or district. And we hope you’ve found this series helpful.