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## Strengthening Paraprofessional Effectiveness Through Mentoring

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**Strengthening Paraprofessional Effectiveness Through Mentoring**  
**A School Improvement Plan**

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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**Abstract**

According to research, mentoring programs in schools have been inconsistent and unaccountable, putting new or existing paraprofessionals behind and ill-prepared in providing instruction to at-risk students. Paraprofessionals work with at-risk students to improve learning and assist them in achieving their goals while being supervised by professional and trained staff. Previous studies have shown that paraprofessionals play an important role in the support of at-risk students and training is needed but most times is not feasible for every school district to implement for each paraprofessional that is employed in their school. A school improvement plan was created to put in place a mentoring program to help paraprofessional become more equipped and increase understanding of instructional and behavioral intervention strategies that support student achievement.

*Keywords:* paraprofessional, mentoring, at-risk students, mentoring program, equipped, intervention

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### **Strengthening Paraprofessional Effectiveness Through Mentoring**

When thinking about the individuals that make up the school system, paraprofessionals are a group that are most time overlooked, yet paraprofessionals perform some of the most vital roles in education and contribute to many inclusive classrooms. Paraprofessionals provide a extra level of assistance in the classroom that allows, for some students to receive more one-on-one instruction when further intervention is needed. A substantial challenge confronting public education systems across the world is the employment and retention of high-quality paraprofessionals (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017). Paraprofessionals frequently lack proper educational qualifications and background information about kids and teaching techniques. The need for qualified paraprofessionals has grown significantly over the past decade due to the number of children with disabilities that are currently attending public schools, where teachers are not available to assist. Paraprofessionals play an important role in student academic achievement, social advancement, and classroom control (Tarry and Cox, 2013). Sadly, mentoring programs for paraprofessionals in the education system have been inconsistent and unaccountable, putting new or existing paraprofessionals behind and ill-prepared. The practice of mentoring in education as an approach for learning and developing teaching practice is one which is commonly practiced to assist both newly qualified teachers and pre-service teachers to develop and enter the profession as critical inquirers and knowledgeable practitioners (Edwards-groves, 2014). Just like educators, paraprofessionals deserve to receive mentoring that can assist them in effectively dealing with pupils. There are many responsibilities that paraprofessionals carry out when employed by a school district. Paraprofessional job responsibilities are like teachers but change depending on the context or setting (Brown & Stanton-chapman, 2017). Meaning that paraprofessionals are often performing the same task as educators but with way

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less educating and training than educators. Understanding how different educators can build and strengthen positive working relationships with one another is critically important to ensuring students receive a high-quality education (Biggs et al., 2016). When paraprofessionals have access to acquire the needed skills during professional development opportunities and continual training, they can be more productive. Effective professional relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals are critical to ensuring students with severe disabilities receive high-quality educational experiences (Biggs et al., 2016). Research suggests that when trained well, paraeducators can effectively perform educational tasks with a high degree of fidelity (Brock & Carter, 2016) and that further training for paraeducators is crucial to the education of students with disabilities (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017).

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to address the importance of implementing a mentoring program to help empower and strengthen paraprofessionals techniques, communication, and confidence. Educators and paraprofessionals work together daily as a team to help students with disabilities and other learning obstacles succeed. It is the author's goal that this school improvement project will provide the correct guidance for Westwood school district and similar schools to put into place to help mentor paraprofessionals.

Research for this project's literature review was conducted using journals available through the Dewitt Library at Northwestern College. All the articles were peer-reviewed, and a majority were published within the last ten years. The author focused on articles that showed the impact of mentoring and teamwork that assisted paraprofessionals in doing their job more adequately. Due to the limited number of studies focused solely on the importance of paraprofessional mentoring, studies of teacher mentoring were included. By including the

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research, the importance of strengthening a mentoring program for paraprofessionals in all grade levels was able to be considered.

The belief is that paraprofessionals at Westwood school will make advancement in their positions by receiving the correct mentoring and support from classroom teachers and other paraprofessionals that have mastered the required skills to help all students. From the information gathered, schools across the nation have had trouble hiring and keeping paraprofessionals within their schools. Something as simple as implementing a mentoring program can help paraprofessionals become more qualified and feel confident while not only working with students but also the educator of the classroom.

This literature review will first touch on the importance of paraprofessionals within the school system. Highlighting paraprofessional roles in the classroom compared to the educator in the classroom. Then the literature review will touch on the importance of teamwork/communication between individuals involved in a classroom. Lastly the literature review will turn its focus to the implementation of a successful mentoring program that will highlight strategies that have proven their effectiveness.



## **Review of the Literature**

### **Paraprofessional importance and roles:**

Due to the growth of school enrollment, paraprofessionals are a very important component of the educational system that supports students with developmental disabilities. Brown & Stanton-chapman (2017) conducted a study on the importance of paraprofessionals and the factors impacting experiences in their employment by interviewing and observing 20 different paraprofessionals in seven different classrooms. The researchers revealed that paraprofessionals are important factors in the educational, social, and emotional development of children. According to findings paraprofessionals have felt that they received little to no training before starting their jobs, and if training was in place, paraprofessionals felt that the training was not adequate to their job. Moreover, “paraprofessionals overwhelmingly reported they were underpaid, did not feel there was opportunity for advancement and were not generally satisfied both monetarily and emotionally in their current placement” (Brown & Stanton-chapman, 2017). This phenomenon, discovered by Brown and Chapman, seems to indicate that paraprofessional job responsibilities are like teachers’ obligations but change depending on the context or setting. The impact of paraprofessionals on student success has been researched more heavily over the past few years as numbers increase due to students needing more intervention. Sadly, this trend, discovered by Brown & Stanton-Chapman, highlights that professionals in the study feel there is no opportunity for advancement and are not generally satisfied monetarily and emotionally in their current placement.

Correspondingly, Sobeck et al. (2019) studied paraprofessionals and their positions in inclusive settings along with training they receive. Researchers found that many paraeducators have no formal education beyond high school and are provided with minimal training once on

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the job. After conducting screenings, observations, and interviews with four paras, the findings were not a shock. Paraprofessionals that receive performance feedback and training applied more effort and completed their job at a higher quality.

Similar findings were later uncovered by Frantz et al. (2020) when researching the training experiences and needs of inclusive teachers and paraeducators. In this study, 15 paraprofessionals and 14 teachers completed interviews about their roles and experiences in their school. The result of the research revealed that paraprofessionals may take on roles appropriate for the teacher such as lesson planning, adapting educational activities, assessment, and communicating with families. Moreover, researchers found no major differences between paraeducators and teachers when it comes to roles and responsibilities, just that the training for paraeducators was insufficient (Frantz et al, 2020).

Currently, there is “A substantial challenge confronting public education systems across the world is the employment and retention of high-quality paraprofessionals” (Brown & Stanton-chapman, 2017). Furthermore, Strait et al. (2020) discovered many schools use paraprofessionals to implement and monitor interventions. Strait conducted a study to research why schools are using paraprofessionals to implement interventions, leading to the finding that “Using paraprofessionals capitalizes on cost-efficiency: paraprofessionals... due to lacking professional licensure and educational degrees in most cases” (Strait et al., 2020). In other words, paraprofessionals are highly important when it comes to assisting educators in a special education inclusive setting.

### **Teamwork & Communication:**

When educators and paraprofessionals collaborate to deliver a high-quality education for students with severe disabilities, it is crucial to build and maintain strong collaborative relationships. In the study by Biggs et al. (2016), nine educators and 13 paraprofessionals participated in purposeful sampling, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews to find out what the influences of quality between educator and paraprofessional. The study analyzed across teachers and paraprofessionals who worked with one another, as well as across different schools and districts. Working as a team and communicating successfully involves taking into account a wide range of factors such as, teacher influences, paraprofessional influences, shared influences, administrative influences, and underlying influences. According to the findings, professional relationships with teachers are necessary for paraprofessionals to receive high quality support and leadership (Biggs et al., 2016). Biggs et al. (2016) throughout the study did indicate that many paraprofessionals who had varied backgrounds, minimal pre-service training, and limited professional development did not fully equip them for their jobs. Overall, the study highlighted the perspectives of participants and illustrated how the interplay of mindsets, characteristics, and actions of key stakeholders—teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators—shape the nature and quality of these professional relationships (Biggs et al., 2016). Moreover, teachers' attitudes, flexibility, organization, and leadership characteristics were salient influences on the professional relationships that formed between paraprofessionals and teachers. Paraprofessionals' effectiveness in their job, including their skills and knowledge, willingness to learn, and professionalism, can influence the teamwork between teachers and paraprofessionals. Sadly, this study has shown that understanding the nature and quality of working relationships between teachers and paraprofessionals has received less emphasis. Identifying the various factors that

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encourage or hinder these interactions can help educators better understand how to build and maintain good professional relationships with one another. In comparison, Widmann and Mulder (2019) established that educators and paraprofessionals become a key resource for schools to successfully overcome different student challenges (Widmann & Mulder, 2019). The study showed that both efficiency and effectiveness are important for teacher and paraprofessional teams. To work efficiently, it is most important that teams must select the most appropriate work tasks for attaining their goals.

Similar findings were discovered by Fortner et al. (2015) when researching the differences in the characteristics, effectiveness, and persistence of teachers who work as teaching assistants prior to entering the classroom as regular classroom teachers. The study emphasized the importance of teacher assistants, also known as paraprofessionals, associates, or instructional aides, who provide instructional and clerical support for class-room teachers (Fortner et al., 2015). Paraprofessionals are typically found in primary school classrooms where they help lead teachers complete a variety of activities, improve direct student support, and decrease student-teacher ratios. Additionally, the study emphasized the importance of the clerical support, directed teaching, and apprentice which is when the paraprofessional and teacher communicate about lesson development, execution, and assessment along with working side by side to deliver instruction. In contrast, Reitman & Karge, (2019) researched the significant effects that supports can help teachers remain in teaching. Just like teachers can support one another, teachers can support paraprofessionals. Within the study, 60 teachers were surveyed and 10 teachers were interviewed, all of which received significant support in their first years of teaching experience. Throughout the study the significance was found that “when beginning teachers receive structured support and professional development in key areas of need addressed by their

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employers (lesson planning, cultural diversity, differentiation) during the first five years of teaching, there is a greater tendency to remain in the profession” (Reitman & Karge, 2019). This provided that greater support does go a long way not just for teachers but can also benefit paraprofessionals. Reitman & Kage (2019) discovered that the support that was offered for teachers could be something as simple as dealing with a challenge with a student, an issue with parent communication, or a relationship with a colleague, to lesson planning and writing IEPs. Sometimes just a listening ear was needed. In other words, to guarantee that students with learning disabilities obtain high-quality educational experiences, effective professional relationships between special education instructors and paraprofessionals are essential and can be established by simply providing necessary support.

### **Mentoring program & how to implement successfully:**

In this literature review so far we learned of the importance of paraprofessionals in school systems today and why teamwork and communication is important when it comes to teachers and paraprofessionals. Next, we will review mentoring programs and how to implement them successfully. In the study Adamson et al., (2023), 27 participants were interviewed and found that trainings are usually created without the inclusion of special education teachers or co-teachers. Training that is offered is not focused on specific jobs and responsibilities paraprofessionals are completing, and when or if training is offered, individuals are not compensated for their time or effort, meaning trainings are not mandatory. Adamson et al., (2023) highlighted that many paraprofessionals feel unsupported, frustrated, and overwhelmed by their positions because of the lack training and the variety of settings in which they carry out their fundamental job duties. According to the findings, a stronger skill set and training is needed

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for working with students who have challenging behaviors and for working with students who have some of the most challenging behaviors.

In contrast, Edward-Groves conducted a study that discovered the practice of mentoring in education as an approach for learning and developing teaching. This practice is one which is commonly practiced assisting both newly qualified teachers and pre-service teachers to develop and enter the profession as critical inquirers and knowledgeable practitioners. (Edwards-Groves, 2014). Just like Edward-Groves (2014), Bagawan et al., (2022) conducted research to provide an approach to paraeducator supervision and training to help teachers create meaningful and authentic learning opportunities for paraprofessionals. Comparable to other studies Bagawan et al., found paraprofessionals hold an important role in students' academic development although they often receive limited training in evidence-based practice. Bagawan's study suggests a few tips for implementing a mentoring program and ways to successfully support the program. First, there needs to be effective and meaningful supervision that occurs when the supervising teacher promotes continuous learning opportunities. Secondly, the teacher needs to be a strong leader who fosters positive classroom/team culture, and practices clear communication. This can be done by providing opportunities for growth in a safe place for paraprofessionals to try new skills, self-reflect and receive positive/constructive feedback, and treat all team members with respect. Teachers should also be responsive to the needs and concerns of the paraprofessionals by being active listeners, which can help teachers gain a clear understanding of the paraprofessional's ideas and challenges. Thirdly, teachers should set up regular meetings or check-ins with paraprofessionals to discuss ideas, ask questions and provide suggestions/feedback. Lastly, the teacher and paraprofessional should develop personal goals and class goals they want to see developed. By involving paraeducators in this process, the goals and supervision become more

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meaningful and the paraeducator will likely be more engaged and responsive to the supervision. In Bagawan et al., (2022) study, a checklist is put in place to help keep teachers and paraprofessionals accountable. Bagawan highlights four steps that will help teachers implement mentoring successfully, schedule regular observations, support paraeducator implementation of EBP, provide consultation with performance feedback, and create a community to ensure accountability (Bagawan et al., 2022). Biggs et al. (2016) study showed the importance of thanking paraprofessionals, showing them appreciation for the quality of their work, and conveying the importance of their roles.

When looking at the studies, one can note that there is a lack in training and mentoring when it comes to paraprofessionals starting new positions. Their lack of training becomes a problem when paraprofessionals are expected to have the needed skills to help students with learning disabilities or behavior difficulties. For teachers, paraprofessionals, and students to all be successful, there needs to be a mentoring program or training put in place. This can be done through a school improvement plan focusing on helping paraprofessionals through mentoring and training to increase their knowledge and skills when assisting students.

### **School Profile**

Located in northwestern Iowa, Westwood Community School District (WCSD) serves approximately 603 students and ranks in the top 50% of all 1,221 schools in Iowa (Public School Review,2023). The school has grades PK-12, which is all located in one building. Students attend WCSD from the surrounding cities of Sloan, Whiting, Salix, Smithland, Hornick and other surrounding areas. At WCSD there are a total of 43 teachers, providing a student-teacher ratio of 14 to 1, and around 30 paraprofessionals. The Westwood School paraprofessionals are the focus of this school improvement plan.

### **Student & Community Characteristics**

Students at WCSD are 88% White; 6% Hispanic; 2% American Indian; and 4% are two or more races (Public School Review,2022). Approximately 28.5% of the students are on free-and reduced lunch, 13.7% have an individualized education plan, .5% are English learners, and 35.2% have a Low Socio-Economic status (Demographics, 2022). The school district's graduation rate of 90% has stayed relatively flat over five school years.

The city of Sloan, which is where WCSD is located, has a population of 1,159 (Census Reporter, 2021). In Sloan, there are 410 houses with a median household income of \$83,571, leaving 12.4% below the poverty line. The median age of individuals falls around 31.9 with a number of 2.8 persons per household.

Sloan and the surrounding communities offer many recreational and family involved activities including a splash pad, cities parks, tennis courts, four different campgrounds, a golf course, public ball fields, hiking and biking trails, two public libraries, and two museums. There is a wide range of churches throughout the school district along with many different places to eat and conversate with family and friends.

### **Mission and Purpose**

WCDS mission is “to provide the environment and curriculum necessary to assist all students in achieving their fullest potential” (Westwood District, 2022). “The purpose of the Westwood Community School is to provide opportunities for each person to become a secure, self-reliant individual who recognizes the significance of his own life and his ability to contribute to the lives of others. Personalized programs must be developed which identify and accommodate the person's abilities, interest, needs, and creative potential. The dignity, worth,



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and uniqueness of each individual and this heritage will be preserved.” (Westwood District, 2022).

### **Student Performance**

Approximately 603 students make up the WCSD school system, which is the entire district. The data being presented for the school improvement project is based on overall school academic achievement over many different growth and percentage areas. WCSD in the assessment for Participation in English Language Arts is above the state average of 98.51 by 99.05, and in the assessment for Participation in Mathematics WCSD is above the state average of 98.37 by 99.05. In average school achievement for English Language Arts, the state average was 50 and WCSD scored 51.83, and in the average school achievement for math, WCSD scored above the state average of 50 by 50.31. The state average for Conditions for Learning Composite is 49.27, and WCSD scored right below at 49.13.

### **Parent Involvement**

It is recommended that parents participate as fully as possible in their children's education. Through the district website and the social media profiles for each school, parents may remain informed about events taking place throughout the district. Parents can also stay involved in their students' academic achievement through JMC, a student information system. Parents are encouraged to attend an open house night at the beginning of each year and attend conferences twice a year.

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

WCSD has created student outcomes to help students learn to the best of their ability by putting students first and establishing positive learning environments. Students should be able to

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communicate effectively (read, write, speak, listen), to apply technology competently, utilize problem solving and decision-making skills, exhibit good citizenship by acting responsibly for the public good, to work together in a group, and students should be self-directed learners.

### **Curriculum, Instructional Strategies, Assessment Practices, & Professional Development**

Along with learner outcomes, WCSD has long range goals that they encourage also. They are: all students will be proficient in reading comprehension, all students will be proficient in mathematics, all students will be proficient in science, and all students will feel safe and connected at school. WCSD cares about the safety and well-being of our students, and they want to ensure that Westwood is a great place for all students to learn and grow. Highschool teachers at WCSD uses a 4.0 GPA (grade point average) system: A+, A, A- = 4.00; B+, B, B- = 3.00; C+, C, C- = 2.00; D+, D, D- =1.00; F = 0.00. Elementary teachers at WCSD use the grading system that follows “E” (exemplary), “S” (satisfactory), “N” (needs improvement), and “U” (unsatisfactory).

To help students meet the goals and grades above, WCSD implements many different programs. One is called “Rebel Time”, which is a multi-component approach involving individuals, classrooms, entire schools, as well as parents and communities to successfully address bullying and increase peer relationships in schools. The Rebel Time program seeks to reduce bullying in schools and also helps to make school a safer, more positive place where students can achieve their greatest potential. The theme and rules of the program are as follows:

#### Theme

R - Respect

E - Encourage

B - Bully-Free

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E - Empower

L - Lead

S - Serve

### Rules

1. We will treat others with respect.
2. We will help students who are not treated with respect.
3. We will include students who are left out.
4. If we know that somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home.

WCSD implements a Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Program that has a mission to promote excellence for all students in the areas of academic, career, and personal/social development. Within the program, counselors work together to organize direct and indirect activities and services which include the direct counselor services of guidance curriculum, individual planning and responsive services, and the indirect services of system support. To help encourage student success, WCSD encourages the use of "Good News Notes," which is when students do outstanding work. WCSD teachers try their best to catch students being "good." When this happens, teachers will have an opportunity to send home a Good News Note.

WCSD is a district that offers many different opportunities for professional development for teachers. Every Monday, the school has an hour late start, where teachers are offered professional development and can collaborate by grade teams. Data meetings take place weekly at both elementary and high school levels. Along with professional development for teachers, WCSD is always looking for ways to help teachers expand their learning and enroll in furthering their education.

### **Needs Assessment**

Even though school administrators in most school districts expect teachers to monitor and train their paraprofessionals, teachers rarely receive specialized training on how to do so and frequently express lack of confidence in their capacity to effectively train classroom staff. Currently, paraprofessionals have many different roles to help not only students but also teachers at WCSD. Paraprofessionals at WCSD serve as teacher assistants/classroom aides, one-on-one for students that need extra intervention and guidance, and assist with behavior dilemmas. Currently at WCSD, job turnover for paraprofessionals is very high due to many aspects, some that can be controlled by WCSD and others that are not within their control. A mentoring program is one efficient way for WCSD to fulfill the needs of new and existing paraeducators.

In previous years, WCSD did have a program in place to help train and guide paraprofessionals that were new to their positions or transferring within the school. The program involved the new hire or transfer paraprofessional shadowing of a paraprofessional who was proficient in their position for at least 3 days or until comfortable. The goal of this school improvement plan is to provide a higher quality training, mentoring and guidance once again for paraprofessionals at WCSD.

Many details come into play when creating a training for professionals that has a wide range of implantations for Pre-k through 12 grade. This training will focus on job description and support, fostering and maintaining professional relationships, safety of self and students, instructional strategies, and behavior management. For all paraeducators, but particularly for those who are just hired, overcoming these obstacles is a difficult endeavor. At the same time, fostering and maintaining strong collaborative relationships are critically important for paraprofessionals and special education teachers working together to provide a high-quality education for students with severe disabilities (Biggs et al., 2016). This school improvement plan

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will have many benefits not just for the district but for the paraprofessional, mentors, and student learning. For our at-risk students to receive the most effective educational services available, qualified paraprofessionals are crucial. Mentoring provides new paraeducators and existing with the guidance they need to effectively handle the variety of demands of students.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **How Do We Know?**

Paraprofessionals at Westwood Schools are expected to be respectful, professional, and well-rounded for their positions. At the same time, paraprofessionals and the teacher of the classroom are to work together to help students succeed to the best of their ability. Teams become a key resource for organizations to meet different challenges (Widmann & Mulder, 2019). Below in figure 1 is a graph that shows the entire number of paraprofessionals at WCSD and the amount of paraprofessionals who have para certification training and the amount that have no paraprofessional certification training. The figure shows that 5 paraprofessionals (17%), currently are para certified, leaving 25 paraprofessionals (83%) without certification or working toward.

#### **Figure 1**

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### Strength

WCSD has a wonderful selection of paraprofessional ranging from 21 to 60 years old, some with many years of experience and others just starting out. Paras do have the opportunity to go to their head teacher and express any concerns they may have. At the beginning of the year, each paraprofessional is given a check-in list that is to be completed.

1. Have you exchanged telephone numbers with secretary, teacher, or immediate coworkers?	11. Do you understand the school's policy regarding reporting suspected cases of child abuse or neglect?
2. Have you learned emergency procedures in case of such events as fire or weather conditions?	12. Have you reviewed or discussed educational and medical student information with the teacher?
3. Are you familiar with a daily classroom schedule?	13. Are you familiar with the district's policy and procedures?
4. Do you understand your job description?	14. Do you have a substitute folder of instructions and job duties?
5. Do you understand how to divide your time among tasks?	15. Do you know how to report self-absences?
6. Do you understand the teacher's discipline methods?	16. Have you read the district's policy on leaves and absences?
7. Do you know what activities you are responsible for outside the classroom?	17. Do you know how to access the Westwood website to find district

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	information, questions and answers, forums, policy, and employee information?
8. Do you know where supplies are kept?	18. Have you read, and do you understand district policy and procedures regarding confidentiality of records and information for both students and employee?
9. Do you know where to obtain necessary equipment?	
10. Are you familiar with the school's policy concerning releasing a child to a parent or other adult who comes to pick up that child early?	

### **Weaknesses**

For all paraprofessionals, there is a beginning of the year check-in along with an end of the year check-in in which all paraprofessionals are sat down for a formal end of the year evaluation by the principal. One weakness is that there is no check-in or evaluation throughout the year to hold paraprofessionals accountable or on track with their position. The ongoing support is there if necessary, but a mid-year check-in could be beneficial for many reasons.

### **Assessment Needs**

To develop a complete mentoring program, there needs to be more interviews and surveys done among teachers and paraprofessionals. The surveys could measure what the staff feels is lacking in supporting paraprofessionals in their jobs at WCSD and could measure how the paraprofessionals feel about their positions and support they receive from the school.

Future research could look at the pattern of paraprofessionals before and after mentor training. Data could look over if participants found the training useful or worth their time and

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give room for comments that they think would improve the training or what they didn't like about the training. Also, another valid point would be to consider the turnover in paraprofessionals over the past few years and consider reaching out to interview the individuals to see the reasoning for the job change.

### **Action Plan**

#### **Strategies**

The relevant literature highlighted three important themes when it comes to implementing a paraprofessional mentoring training/program. These themes are the importance of paraprofessionals within the school system, the importance of teamwork/communication between individuals involved in a classroom, and the implementation of a successful mentoring program. Paraprofessionals play an important role in student academic achievement, social advancement, and classroom control (Tarry and Cox, 2013). All school districts need to take stronger action assuring paraprofessionals receive the correct and supporting training to do their jobs efficiently. Research in the literature revealed that paraprofessionals are important actors in the educational, social, and emotional development of children. But, at the same time, researchers found that many paraeducators have no formal education beyond high school and are provided minimal training once on the job. Another aspect of the literature focused on fostering and maintaining strong collaborative relationships that are critically important for paraprofessionals and special education teachers working together to provide a high-quality education for students with severe disabilities (Biggs et al., 2016). Teamwork and mentoring are about forming professional relationships and offering support along with encouragement. Opportunities for teamwork, skill development, knowledge expansion, and confidence building



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are crucial for success. By offering those few things, paraprofessionals can receive the guidance they need from mentors to properly meet the variety of requirements of students.

### **Steps To Solve the Problem**

The following steps describe how to fully implement a paraprofessional mentoring program at WCSD. Starting in August 2023, the plan must be approved and supported by administration and school board members.

When offering a paraprofessional mentoring program, there are many benefits for the school district, new or existing paraprofessionals, mentors, and students. For the school district, a mentoring program can provide help to paraprofessionals to meet state competencies, help communicate information and strategies to paraprofessionals more efficiently, increase students' learning, and help with the employment and retention of qualified staff. Such program will also encourage staff to be professional and help paraprofessionals feel valued and a part of the school and help paraprofessionals to understand the classroom procedures along with building and district policies. For the paraprofessionals, a mentoring program benefits include, outlines of strategies to help assist in meeting requirements, a clear set of expectations and roles related to their positions, a platform for questions and answer when resources are needed, and access to encouragement and emotional support when needed. They will also help new and experienced staff feel valued and have a sense of belonging, provided with modeling and useful strategies. As for mentors or teachers, it can increase job satisfaction, motivate professionalism, provide pride and appreciation, establish rapport with co-workers, and can expand career opportunities. Lastly, for students, this mentoring program can increase students' success by working with a trained paraprofessional, more consistency with lower staff turnover, enhances students safety with my staff available, more opportunities for students to work with a skilled adult.

## Mentoring Paraprofessional Effectiveness

When offering a paraprofessional mentoring program, the WCSD will need clear, set goals in place to make the program run smoothly; there needs to be goals set in place to make that possible.

1. To support new paraeducators in the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to meet district and state goals.
2. To increase knowledge of instructional and behavioral intervention strategies that promote student achievement.
3. To increase collaboration and employee job satisfaction and decrease isolation of paraeducators.
4. To maximize the recruitment and retention of quality paraeducators.

A mentor's responsibility is to help and encourage the paraprofessional. Having a mentor can make new paraprofessionals feel valued and a part of the team. They assist by serving as role models for professionalism, ongoing education, innovation, and adaptability. They assist brand-new paraeducators by supporting them in becoming acquainted with other members of the faculty and where to find supplies. Mentors can model and share useful strategies along with current knowledge regarding on-going training as well as model and discuss helpful practices. Peer mentoring programs that are well-organized and closely supervised will increase collaboration and decrease isolation between paraprofessionals. Mentoring will improve the quality of paraprofessionals' work with both students and teachers, assisting paraprofessionals feel and be more confident and skilled. The success of pupils depends heavily on paraprofessionals receiving ongoing training and assistance.

There are many components of a successful mentoring program for paraprofessionals, selection of mentors, team time, and mentor meetings. The definition of a mentor for a

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successful program is a paraprofessional who is established and has a great amount of experience that is willing to share and coach newly hired or existing paraprofessionals who need assistance. Team time for paraprofessionals and mentors will be a time set aside every week for the teams to address school concerns, exchange necessary information, discuss topics, problem solve, develop strategies, and plan. Meetings will be held quarterly throughout the year for mentors to share information and strategies that have been successful. Information that is shared during those meetings can be put into place with the paraprofessionals.

### **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

#### **How Will We Know It Worked?**

This school improvement plan can be implemented as soon as the resources become accessible and are ready to be put into action. Paraprofessionals are hired by the school board of WCSD, then are brought on board by HR. The plan will take 3 months to take effect, essentially the summer months of 2023 school year, so the program can be put into place for the 23-24 school year to benefit all paras that need mentoring. Below in figure 2 is a timeline which lays out the steps in getting the school improvement plan into place. The allotted time will be used for school board members, administrators/HR, mentors, and paraprofessionals to become familiar with the program. The mentoring training will begin in 2023-2034.

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**Figure 2**

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Who:</b>	<b>Process:</b>
June 2023	WCSD School board	Plan receives necessary approval
	Administration & HR	Hiring of new paras
July 2023	Administration & HR	Selection Mentors
	Mentors	Mentors trained
August 2023	New paras or existing that want mentored	Welcomed and introduced to mentor
	Mentors	Start mentoring
September 2023 – May 2024	Mentors and paraprofessionals	Attend meetings and trainings when necessary
	Administration	Evaluate with both mentos and paraprofessional on how they believe the program is profess

### **Resources**

Everyone will get the attached schedule and meeting calendar when it is created. This training will allow for success and understanding of what is expected of paraprofessionals at WCSD. Each team member will have a computer and work email if they need access in communicating to each other or administration. Obviously, duties of paraprofessionals will differentiate between where the individual is placed, and resources that are needed for that position will be available to the paraprofessional.

### **Responsibilities**

There are many different individuals that come into play when putting this school improvement plan into place successfully. The school board will be responsible for approving the plan and mentoring program, administrators and HR of WCSD are responsible for selection of mentors and new/existing paras that want training, as well as setting up a calendar for weekly meetings between teams, monthly meetings between mentors, and evaluating throughout the year

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to hold all members more accountable. Mentors are responsible for learning and implementing of the training, while paraprofessionals are responsible for learning and implementing the training strategies. Each person will be held to a large expectation, which will allow for the program to be successful within itself and will hopefully prove its successfulness for future years.

### Monitoring Success and Failures

The paraprofessional training is designed to improve overall paraprofessional culture and performance at WCSD. All the individuals in the program/training must be in open communication with each other for this plan to successfully work. Teachers that are mentors must meet monthly to discuss other strategies that are working and are not. Team members, meaning mentor and paraprofessionals, must meet weekly to discuss how the week went, what help they need, what strategies they would like to learn, and what is not working. Documentation of all meetings will be recorded and so will any questions or discussions so valid points can be reviewed and evaluated for the following year's training. Administrators will meet quarterly with teams to discuss progress, answer any questions or issues arising within the mentoring/training. In figure three is a survey for paraprofessionals/mentors to fill out.

**Figure 3**

Questions	Response to Questions		
How well do your colleagues at school understand you as a person?	Do not understand at all	Understand somewhat	Completely understand
How much respect do colleagues in your school show you?	No respect at all	Some respect	A tremendous amount of respect
Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?	Do not belong at all	Belong somewhat	Completely belong

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How often is your work evaluated?	Almost never	Sometimes	Almost all the time
How effective is your school's evaluation system at helping you improve?	Not at all effective	Somewhat effective	Extremely effective
How much feedback do you receive on your work?	No feedback	Some feedback	A tremendous amount of feedback
How often do you receive feedback on your work?	Almost never	Sometimes	Almost all the time
Overall, how supportive has the school been of your professional growth?	Not at all supportive	Somewhat supportive	Extremely supportive
Through working at your school, how many new strategies for your job have you learned?	Almost no strategies	Some strategies	A great number of strategies
Has the mentoring program helped you succeed in your position? Why or why not please give an example below	Not helpful	Somewhat helpful	Extremely helpful

### Barriers and Challenges

Possible barriers and challenges can arise from this school improvement plan. The first challenge would be to address when mentors or professionals are not holding up their part of the training. This program is crucial to help benefit not all paraprofessionals but also the teachers and students. The solution is to make sure at weekly meetings that documentation is taken, if the individual continues to not participate the administration will step in. Each individual is important and puts in a lot of time and effort when it comes to helping others succeed; if one individual is not pulling their weight it makes it hard for the program to work successfully.

Another barrier would be the stress and lack of time that everyone has. Teachers already spend a lot of their time attending professional development and other training, along with what

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else is placed in their busy schedule. Taking on a role like mentoring can be a heavy load. The solution could be to support those teachers that take on the role of mentoring in a special incentive such as leaving right away on Mondays instead of staying till contract time.

Along with the above barriers and challenges, another setback could be that WCSD has seen a big range of job turnover for paraprofessionals in the last few years. Some of the causes of this high turnover are lower pay, finding a better job elsewhere, not feeling supported or valued enough. The solution to this is to offer a raise for the following year to the paraprofessionals that complete the training successfully as long as they stay with the district. Overall, the lack of support from all staff will portray the mentor program useless, which defeats the idea of improving the school district for all individuals.

### **Conclusion**

This school improvement plan is a process to improve the quality of paraprofessional training and work effort at Westwood Community School. When additional one-on-one instruction is required, paraprofessionals offer an extra level of support in the classroom, allowing more students to benefit from it. Paraprofessionals frequently lack proper educational qualifications and background information about kids and teaching techniques. It is important that teachers and paraprofessionals collaborate as a team to deliver high-quality education for all students, especially those with learning disabilities. Not only is the mentoring program about working together, but this program will help form relationships and provide support and encouragement. Through intensifying the training and support for all paraprofessionals, the job turnover of paraprofessionals is intended to decrease. Although there are not many programs out there for guidance on mentoring for paraprofessionals, this school improvement plan is a step towards the right direction for school success.

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The outcome of this project will impact many important individuals at WCSD in a variety of ways. This school improvement plan when successfully implemented will be manageable and will help empower and strengthen paraprofessionals techniques, communication, and confidence. Teachers will support paraeducators through weekly meetings and attending their own monthly meetings, passing along needed information and supervision. This school improvement is a way to give our students the greatest education possible to be prepared for college, the workforce, and everyday life.



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