



# 10 Ways Educators Can Partner with Paraeducators on Behalf of ELLs

*Learn how classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and other educators can collaborate effectively with paraeducators on behalf of ELLs. This article is adapted from the [original version](#) on [Colorín Colorado](#).*

Paraeducators and education support professionals (ESPs) play a critical role in supporting English language learners (ELLs) in schools across the country. This support can have even more of an impact when it is part of a collaborative, positive partnership with classroom teachers, ELL specialists, and other educators in the school community.

However, sometimes that support is overlooked, misunderstood, or underutilized. When other educators don't take the time to get to know paraeducators' skills and strengths, they miss out on a valuable resource. Here are some ideas for how educators can build partnerships with paraeducators on behalf of ELLs in different settings, compiled from the following veteran educators:

- Joni Anderson, ELL Paraeducator
- Ingrid Miera, ELL Paraeducator
- Michelle Lawrence Biggar, ELL Educator

See more in the related article, [15 ELL Strategies for Paraeducators](#).

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## Creating Strong Partnerships

### 1. Build positive relationships from the beginning

Relationships are the foundation of collaboration. Get to know the paraeducators with whom you will be working by introducing yourself (ideally before instruction has started) and sharing a bit about yourself. You may also wish to talk a little bit about your experience with ELLs and why you enjoy working with ELLs. If this is your first time working with a paraeducator, let them know you are new to this kind of collaboration and ask them what has worked well in other classrooms they have supported. In addition, look for ways to make sure paraeducators feel welcome in your classroom or work space.



## 2. Get to know paraeducators' strengths

Paraeducators often bring important strengths to their work with ELLs. These may include strong student and family relationships, experience in providing targeted academic support and differentiation, behavior management skills, advocacy skills, and language skills.

## 3. Discuss what classroom support will look like

Discuss how paraeducators will be supporting students. Will the support be one-on-one or in small groups? Will paraeducators be walking around the room? If paraeducators are bilingual, how and when will they be providing language support? Ensure all educators in the classroom have the opportunity to share prior arrangements that have worked well in the past.

## 4. Invite paraeducators' input

Paraeducators are a resource, especially if they have ELL experience. In fact, they may have more ELL experience than some colleagues. Invite their suggestions and let them know that their input is welcome; they are more likely to share their suggestions if they feel comfortable doing so.

## 5. Clarify how paraeducators will communicate with families

Clarify how and when paraeducators are expected to communicate with families/caregivers, especially if they are bilingual. Keep in mind that while paraeducators may speak multiple languages and may be communicating with families, they should not be relied upon for translation or interpretation if that is not part of their official job description and training. If you find that others are calling upon paraeducators for interpretation and it's interrupting their work/student time, look for ways to curb that practice and establish boundaries that protect paraeducators' time.

**Note:** See more in this helpful chart about the difference between [bilingual staff and interpreters](#). Also keep in mind that schools are legally required to provide families with information in their languages. If you feel that appropriate language access is not being provided, bring your concern to an administrator.

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# Communication and Planning

## 6. Establish clear communication procedures

Establishing open and clear communication is crucial to any kind of partnership. Some things you might wish to discuss early are how you prefer to communicate and how to handle ongoing communication, feedback, and adjustments that might be needed. In addition, keep in mind that paraeducators may have other roles and responsibilities; respect those commitments and work together to find solutions to any scheduling challenges. (Include all educators working in your classroom in these conversations about communication and schedules.)



## 7. Include paraeducators in planning, collaboration, and meetings

When possible, include paraeducators in lesson planning so that you are able to align instruction and support. If it's not possible to meet together, collaborate by sharing lesson plans and materials for review during their approved contractual hours. You may also wish to consider if paraeducators' schedules and/or contract allows for them to attend grade-level, department, or team meetings. If you need to make a case for this kind of participation, collaborate with paraeducators to gather data and examples of how their participation supports students.

Finally, keep in mind that paraeducators who are supporting special education students should be included in student meetings and conversations with families. They are likely to have valuable insights and information, and they may have important information from families.

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## Advocacy and Professional Growth

### 8. Attend professional learning and training as teams

Paraeducators will benefit from ELL professional learning. When possible, ensure that they are included in school-wide training (including paid training) so that everyone is on the same page. Paraeducators, classroom teachers, administrators, and ELL specialists can all play a role in advocating for these opportunities. Paraeducators can also benefit from attending district, state, or national conferences.

Finally, keep in mind that paraeducators who work frequently with ELLs may also be in a position to lead training for colleagues, which can spotlight their expertise and offer them leadership opportunities.

### 9. Lift up paraeducators' strengths

Paraeducators are a critical part of school communities. Lift up their contributions by showing your appreciation, sharing their strengths and successes with others, highlighting examples of your collaboration, ensuring that they are included in key meetings, and advocating for their fair treatment in different settings.

### 10. Advocate for a culture of respect

All educators and staff members have a part to play in creating a culture of respect within a school community. Talk with paraeducators about how they feel within the community, and bring any issues to the attention of administrators so they can be addressed.



## Voices of educators

“ I have been fortunate to have worked under a principal that valued all staff as educators, and our students know that all adults are teachers/educators. We have an important role in the school system. ESPs are some of the most flexible people I know. Their schedules can change daily and they are able to adapt to new situations. We build relationships, are caregivers, and always do what is best for our students.

— Joni Anderson, ELL paraeducator

“ My teachers were great and I've always been very involved in their lesson planning and IEP writing. As a para, I was new to IEP writing at first, but I was always asked about my student's goals, what he was achieving, what his strengths were, and what his weaknesses were. And I was the only one who knew the answers to those questions. After a few years, I realized, 'I can write this IEP because I know my student.'

— Genesis Gonzalez, Special Education teacher and former paraeducator

### ▶ **Video: How I provided tech support to multilingual families during COVID-19**

Carla Fernandes, a multilingual paraeducator in Brockton Public Schools (MA), speaks Cape Verdean Creole and Portuguese. In this interview clip, she describes how she helped families navigate new technology during COVID-19 and how the word spread that she could provide important support. [Watch video »](#)

### ▶ **Video: Engaging the whole school staff in trauma-informed practice**

Every person who works in a school makes an impact on a child's life. Ricky Robertson explores why a whole-school approach is needed to address the impact of adverse childhood experiences and trauma. He also discusses the valuable roles that Education Support Professionals (e.g., paraeducators, transportation staff, etc.) and Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (e.g., school counselors, nurses, etc.) play in creating supportive learning communities. In this episode, Mr. Robertson highlights ways that all faculty and staff can make sure that every student is known by name and by need. [Watch video »](#)