

From Overlooked to Essential: The Power of Investing in Paraprofessionals

THE CHALLENGE

Before joining SPED Strategies, Brittney Robins, now Senior Director of Implementation, worked as a leader in New Orleans charter schools, identifying critical gaps in special education support. While dedicated paraprofessionals worked closely with vulnerable students daily, they rarely received coaching or professional development designed for their role. The pattern was familiar: during PD days, paraprofessionals made copies, passed out lunch, or handled operations, treated as logistical support rather than essential educators deserving their own learning space. Meanwhile, teachers felt frustrated that paraprofessionals could be doing more to support student learning with effective strategies, rather than simply helping students find answers. Brittney asked a transformative question:

What if paraprofessionals had professional development designed specifically for them, their own place to think deeply about their work and develop their practice?

We saw the same problem surface again and again in schools across the country. In our exciting projects, school leaders consistently told us, "We need more staff. We need more support." But the untapped potential was already there. Paraprofessionals were working directly with students who needed the most support, but without the development to maximize their impact. The narrative needed to shift. Instead of asking for more staff or support, schools needed to invest in this essential, underutilized role.

“As a school leader, I watched paraprofessionals show up every single day for our most vulnerable students, then saw them sent to make copies during professional development. That disconnect became impossible to ignore. I kept thinking: **what would happen if we invested in them the way we invest in teachers?**

-Brittney Robins
SPED Strategies, Senior Director of Implementation

Paraprofessionals represent 13.3% of school staff,¹ yet according to the National Center for Education Statistics, fewer than

1 in 10
hold an education credential.²

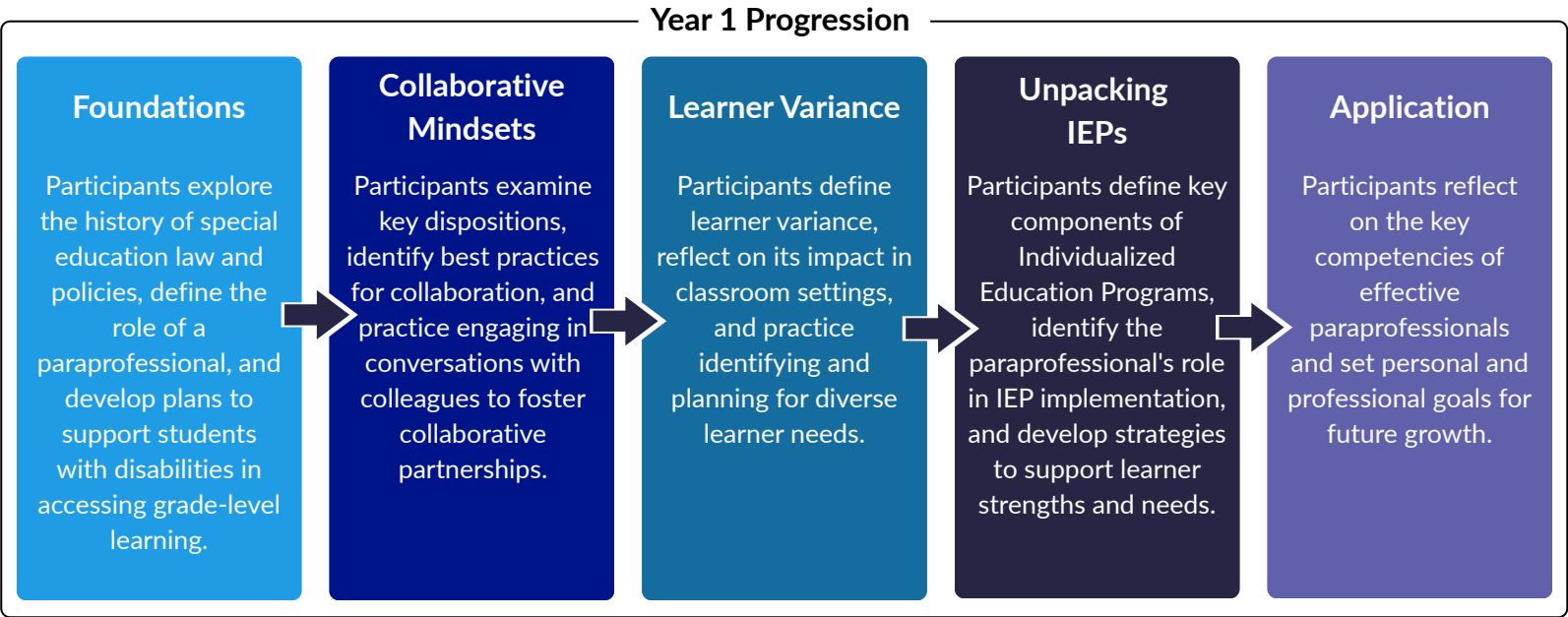
¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Staff employed in public elementary and secondary school systems, by type of assignment: Selected school years, 1949-50 through fall 2022 (Table 213.10). Digest of Education Statistics 2023. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/d23/tables/dt23_213.10.asp

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). Educational attainment for workers 25 years and older by detailed occupation (Table 5.3). Employment Projections. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Staff employed in public elementary and secondary school systems, by type of assignment: Selected school years, 1949-50 through fall 2022 (Table 213.10). Digest of Education Statistics 2023. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/d23/tables/dt23_213.10.asp



THE SOLUTION

In Fall 2022, Brittney brought a bold proposal to the SPED Strategies internal content team: develop a comprehensive professional learning series specifically for paraprofessionals. By Spring 2023, they had secured three networks in New Orleans— ReNEW Schools, KIPP New Orleans, and Bricolage Academy—as founding partners to help build the content. Brittney worked with the content team to research best practices and develop a comprehensive scope and sequence for what would become an intentional, multi-year training sequence designed specifically for paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. The Paraprofessional Series launched in Fall 2023 with a carefully sequenced progression designed to be implemented over a school year. Each three-hour session was designed to be delivered as half or full days to fit a school community's unique schedule and priorities.



THE IMPACT

The results exceeded expectations from the very first session. The Paraprofessional Series quickly became our highest-rated offering, with **95% of participants agreeing that the session will positively impact their ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities.** Teachers and school leaders noticed the difference immediately. Paraprofessionals weren't just attending another professional development session; they were growing as educators, bringing new strategies, language, and confidence back to the classrooms they support. Perhaps most significantly, paraprofessionals reported feeling valued as essential members of their school communities for the first time. The series didn't just build their skills; it transformed how they saw themselves and how others saw their role.

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The Paraprofessional Series session gave me so many ideas for how I can collaborate with the lead teacher in my classroom.

-Series Participant

I now have a stronger understanding of how I can best support my students in meeting their IEP goals.

-Series Participant

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