

# Paraeducators in SMMUSD: Frequently Asked Questions

*Paraeducators play a vital role in our classrooms. They work closely with teachers and specialists to support students' academic, social, and emotional success. Below are answers to common questions families have about para support in our schools.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This document was prepared by committee members of the SMMUSD Special Education District Advisory Committee (SEDAC).

# 1. Overview of Paraeducators

## ***Q1. What do paraeducators do in the classroom?***

**A1.** Paraeducators (sometimes called “paras”) support students with special needs in all school settings - general education classrooms, special day classes, specialized programs, recess, lunch, transitions, and even on the bus. They help with academics, behavior, safety, and personal care, always under the direction of a teacher.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Q2. What qualifications are Paraeducators required to have, and what training do they receive?***

**A2.** Paraeducator positions are entry-level. Candidates must have either an associate’s degree (or equivalent) or pass the District’s Instructional Assistance exam.

Paraeducators receive ongoing professional development, including five days of training before the school year begins, monthly sessions with behaviorists, and Nonviolent Crisis Prevention and Intervention training. They also receive continuous on-the-job coaching from the certificated teachers and specialists they collaborate with.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Q3. What is the difference between Paraeducator Levels (e.g., Level 1–3)?***

**A3.** SMMUSD has three types of paraeducators, each with different areas of focus<sup>4</sup>:

- **Paraeducator 1 (Instructional Support):** Provides academic, behavioral, and functional support to students in the classroom and across school settings.
- **Paraeducator 2 (Medical Support):** Provides academic, behavioral, functional, and specialized healthcare support to students in the classroom and across school settings. These paras work with students who require ongoing specialized medical care, such as feeding through a gastrostomy tube or support with tracheotomy or colostomy care.
- **Paraeducator 3 (Behavioral Support):** Provides academic, behavioral, and functional support to students in the classroom and across school settings. These paras may provide support to students who require intensive behavior intervention services, such as students demonstrating behaviors that may pose a safety risk to themselves or others.

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## 2. Assignment, Staffing, & Consistency

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<sup>2</sup> From SMMUSD Paraeducator Role & Professional Expectations: Paraeducators “provide instructional support... in cognitive, gross/fine motor, adaptive daily living, vocational, social and leisure skills, and physical development and fitness, according to state standards, classroom objectives, and the Individualized Education Program (IEP)”

<sup>3</sup> Example job descriptions for all three levels of paraeducator: [Para Level 1](#); [Para Level 2](#); [Para Level 3](#)

<sup>4</sup> Descriptions taken from parahandbook

#### ***Q4. How are paras assigned to students or classrooms?***

A4: Assignments are based on each student's IEP or classroom needs. The school's special education team and administrators determine para assignments at each school.

#### ***Q5. What criteria are used to decide when a child gets a 1:1 para?***

A5. When determining the level of para support, an independent facilitator assessment will occur. This includes observations and team interviews, and is used to understand the student's strengths and weaknesses, and design interventions and supports.

#### ***Q6. Why do some students have a 1:1 para while others are supported as part of a small group or classroom cohort? How do I request a 1:1 para for my child?***

A6. The type and level of paraeducator support are determined through each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Some students require a 1:1 para when their IEP team determines that close, individualized support is necessary for safety, behavior, or access to learning. Others benefit from shared or classroom-based support, which promotes independence and social experiences. A request for a 1:1 Para can be initiated by contacting your child's IEP team. An assessment is then conducted which analyzes the support needed in different circumstances throughout the day. The report, called an IFA or Independent Facilitator Assessment, is reviewed at an IEP meeting and any changes based on the assessment will be reflected in the IEP.

#### ***Q7. Will my child's para stay with them consistently?***

A7. Not always. While a paraeducator may primarily support a particular student, their position is assigned to the school site rather than to a single child. If that student is absent, working with a service provider, or does not need support at a given time, the para may be reassigned to assist elsewhere on campus.<sup>5</sup>

Assignments are also designed to be flexible in order to foster student independence and generalization of skills. Paraeducators may rotate between students, classrooms, or programs, and may sometimes be directed to work with multiple students throughout the school day.<sup>6</sup>

In practice, this means a para may work closely with your child for much of the day, but their schedule can shift to cover other students or settings. This approach ensures that staffing

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<sup>5</sup> From *parahandbook*: "Your position is assigned to a school; consequently, if the child with whom you normally work is not there, doesn't need support or is working with a service provider, you may be assigned to help somewhere else on that school site."

<sup>6</sup> From *SMMUSD Paraeducator Role & Professional Expectations*: "Paraeducators are assigned to support one or more designated students, classrooms, or special education programs... To support student independence and generalization of skills, paraeducators may be directed to rotate with other staff members to provide support to multiple students throughout the school day."

supports the needs of the entire school and helps students avoid over-reliance on one individual adult.

***Q8. Can paraeducators travel with my child from one school to another or home?***

**A8.** No. In SMMUSD, paraeducators are assigned to a school site and do not travel with students outside of that setting. This means they do not accompany students home, and they do not “follow” an individual child from one school to the next (for example, from elementary to middle school). Paraeducators are kept at their assigned school to build consistency and familiarity with that school’s students, teachers, and routines. Their role is designed to support the overall school site, not to serve as a dedicated aide who transitions with an individual child.

***Q9. Who relieves the Paraeducators for breaks and lunch and how can the student be comfortable with the relief Paraeducator?***

**A9.** Paraeducators are entitled to a 15-minute break after 4 hours of work and a 30-minute lunch after 5 hours. Break coverage is arranged by the school site and may be provided by another paraeducator, the teacher, or a service provider. In some cases, coverage isn’t needed if the student doesn’t require direct support at that time. Schools aim to ensure consistency so students feel comfortable with any relief paraeducator who steps in.

***Q10. What happens if my child’s para is absent, reassigned, running late, or leaves early and who communicates this information to the parent.?***

**A10.** Schools arrange coverage using other trained staff, with plans based on student needs. Because these situations are often fluid or short-term, families may not be notified of every change. If there’s a long-term absence or reassignment, families will be informed, and the IEP team will review and adjust support as needed. Each school is encouraged to maintain a clear coverage plan to ensure consistency for students.

***Q11. How do the paraeducators provide support outside the classroom?***

**A11.** A paraeducator’s role is to promote safety, inclusion, and participation. Paraeducators may support students during lunch, recess, assemblies, electives, and field trips. They may also assist with transportation, as well as in the restroom only if the student requires assistance per the child’s IEP (otherwise, adults are not allowed in student restrooms).

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### **3. Communication & Collaboration**

***Q12. Can I communicate directly with my child's para?***

**A12.** No. Paraeducators are part of your child's educational team, but they are not permitted to communicate directly with parents about a student's program or progress. Under California Education Code § 45345<sup>7</sup> communication must go through the teacher of record or case manager. This ensures accurate information is shared by staff who are trained in IEPs and school procedures, and it also protects against misunderstandings or legal issues.

In many classrooms, teachers set up systems such as communication logs, notebooks, or emails to keep families updated. If you'd like to know the best way to receive ongoing information, ask your IEP team about the communication system used in your child's class.

***Q13. Can my child or I meet the paraeducator, and how do they communicate progress or updates?***

**A13.** Teachers of Record (TOR) usually introduce their classroom team - including paraeducators - at the start of the year through a class meeting, "meet and greet," or staff flyer; formats vary by school site. If you haven't been introduced, you can ask your child's teacher for an introduction at any time during the school year.

Paraeducators don't communicate directly with families; updates come through the special education teacher or case manager. Paras collect daily observations that inform those updates. Your IEP team can set a communication plan - like logs or emails - and include it in the IEP if needed.

***Q14. Do paras attend IEP meetings, and are they considered part of the IEP team?***

**A14.** Paraeducators do not typically attend IEP meetings because they are not required members of the IEP team under California Education Code. The law defines the IEP team as including parents/guardians, general and special education teachers, an administrator (LEA representative), and related service providers (such as speech or occupational therapists). Paraeducator observations may be shared with the IEP team through the teacher or case manager and may be reflected in the "Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance" section of the IEP.

***Q15. Do paras collect behavior data or provide input on IEP goals?***

**A15.** Paras often help collect daily behavior or academic data (like tally sheets, observation notes, work samples), but they don't create or set IEP goals. Their role is to implement teacher-directed strategies and provide observations that inform the team.

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<sup>7</sup> California Education Code Section 45345 states: *Notwithstanding the provisions of Section 48950, no instructional aide shall give out any personal information concerning any pupil who is not his own child or ward, except under judicial process, to any person other than a teacher or administrator in the school which the pupil attends. A violation of this section may be a cause for disciplinary action, including dismissal.* ([link](#))

**Q16. How do teachers and paras collaborate? What if the team isn't working well?**

**A16.** Teachers and paraeducators collaborate in various ways: through scheduled check-ins, shared planning time, or tools like Google Drive to coordinate student support. The level and style of collaboration may vary by classroom, but regular communication and teamwork are expected.

If you believe a teacher–para relationship is affecting your child's experience, follow the standard communication process used across all school levels:

1. Start with the Teacher of Record (TOR).
2. If concerns continue, contact the School Psychologist.
3. Next, reach out to the Site Administrator (Principal or Assistant Principal).
4. If needed, escalate to the District Special Education Coordinator, then the Assistant Director or Director of Special Education.

**Q17. At the school level, what is the proper chain of command to follow if I have an issue with my child's paraeducator?**

**A17.** If you have a student concern, the chain of communication should be the Teacher then Teacher of Record, School Psychologist, and then the Site Administrator (Assistant Principal or Principal). After that is your school's Special Education Coordinator, then Assistant Director of Special Education then Director of Special Education.

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## **4. Parent Involvement & Policies**

**Q18. Can I hire my child's paraeducator outside of school?**

**A18.** No. District policy does not allow paraeducators (or other district employees) to be hired privately for after-hours work with students they serve during the school day. Under Board Policy 4136<sup>8</sup>, outside employment is prohibited when it “*entails compensation from an outside source for activities which are part of the employee's regular duties.*”

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<sup>8</sup> Board Policy 4136 (Nonschool Employment) states: *In order to help maintain public trust in the integrity of district operations, the Board of Education expects all employees to give the responsibility of their positions precedence over any other outside employment. ...An outside activity shall be considered inconsistent, incompatible, or inimical to district employment when such activity... entails compensation from an outside source for activities which are part of the employee's regular duties.* ([link](#))

***Q19. What should I do if I am unhappy with my child's para (not a proper match for my child)?***

**A19.** If you have concerns, follow the same communication process used across all school levels: start by sharing with the Teacher of Record (TOR). If the issue continues, contact the School Psychologist, then the Site Administrator (principal or assistant principal), and, if needed, the District Special Education Coordinator.

***Q20. Can I request a different paraeducator for my child?***

**A20.** No. The District assigns a service, not a specific person. While parents are encouraged to share feedback, staffing decisions are made by the school based on availability and student needs. If you feel the current match isn't working well, follow the communication process outlined above.

***Q21: What are some ways to thank my child's paraeducator if we're happy with their support?***

**A21:** Families, guardians, or caregivers can show appreciation with a simple "thank you" note or small gesture of gratitude. Students can also express thanks by writing a note or drawing a picture, which is often especially meaningful to paraeducators.

***Q22: Can I be hired by the District to be my child's paraeducator or work in their school?***

**A22:** No, families cannot be hired to serve as their own child's paraeducator. Some parents, guardians, or caregivers do work at the same school their child attends, but they are not assigned to their own child's classroom.

***Q23. How does a parent request after school support for after school activities, for example, dances, movies, games, school concerts or school plays?***

**A23.** Requests for para support at after-school activities must go through the school's site administrator. Support may be provided, after review of the IEP documents, if the student is actively participating (e.g., performing in a concert), not just attending as a spectator. Support may also be provided at events if deemed appropriate by the school team.