

EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS 101

By Peggy Wolf, DSACT Education Manager

I. **When should I ask for a one-on-one educational assistant?**

There is not a concrete rule because every student is an individual with different needs, strengths, and goals. Personally, I prefer never having the same person work all the time with a student. I also lean towards sufficient classroom staffing as opposed to a one-on-one to foster as much independence in students as possible. The goal is to build confidence, teach students to think for themselves, and problem solve. I have worked with high school staff to teach a student independence because as he left school 1-1 support would not be available on a job that he was perfectly capable of holding without that support. That is not to say that some circumstances may warrant stronger support. ***Here are the points worth considering in making this decision:***

- 1. How does a one-on-one assistant affect interactions with peers?**
Frequently peers will talk to the assistant rather than the student, especially if the student is nonverbal or difficult to understand. A good assistant will redirect the peer to talk to the student and facilitate communication. Sometimes, however, peers are looking for the attention of an adult and will seek that from an assistant and not focus on the student sitting with that adult.
- 2. Who supervises the educational assistant? *A special education teacher will oversee the assistant.***
- 3. Will the student become prompt dependent and less independent?** In many situations ***that is very possible.*** Students tend to listen less to general classroom directions from the teacher when they can rely on the assistant to direct them and provide necessary information. The student also ***relies less on general classroom supports that all students*** use such as asking a peer for help, observing what other students are doing, looking at the agenda on the board or asking the teacher for assistance.
- 4. Why doesn't the student make more progress when an assistant is with him all the time?** Frequently educational assistants are in a very difficult situation. Parents expect a certain rate of progress with the additional help. If a student does not reach that potential, then parents sometimes complain that the assistant is not doing their job. ***This can lead to the assistant doing more of the work than the individual does and then there is a false sense of what can really be accomplished.*** It is a very fine line. Of course, ***other factors that may affect progress are the method of***

delivering the lesson, modifications and accommodations, setting, and behavior, motivation and capability. The educational assistant may just need additional training.

5. **How did my student manage to get hurt/hurt others with an assistant assigned to them?** *No one can prevent every action that another person makes.*

As parents, we certainly cannot prevent all incidents in our children's lives. Neither can school staff. Students can run, pull items down, hit, and throw things in a split second. Not all actions of any student can be prevented all the time.

6. **Should only one assistant work with a student?** In my opinion, *definitely not.*

There are *several advantages for rotating staff* with students.

- a. *Students can become very possessive* of the assistant and show jealousy if they help anyone else or even talk to anyone else.
- b. *The assistants do not become overly frustrated because they are working with just one person.* It is good to have a break even when you enjoy working with someone. Moreover, one adult all day may frustrate students. They need a break also.
- c. *Everyone sees something different in students and has different knowledge* and this opens the door to exploring more approaches to teaching and behavior.
- d. *Students are better prepared for changes in routine* if they have multiple people working with them.
- e. *It teaches students to cooperate and work with multiple people* that model what is typical in our day-to-day life and workplace.
- f. *Some students also tend to begin to treat assistants as their personal attendants there to serve them.* This is less likely with multiple personalities in the mix.

II. General Questions about educational assistants

1. **Who trains the educational assistants?** Training can be provided in a variety of ways but will vary greatly from situation to situation. *Usually districts will provide some training, campuses may provide trainings and special education teachers should provide educational assistants with strategies* on how to work with students for academics and behaviors. The teachers are usually the main source of support for the educational assistants. The amount of training will vary widely. Educational assistants cannot attend any trainings beyond their contract hours without getting paid overtime.

This makes it harder for schools to provide opportunities for them to attend workshops on weekends or during the summer.

2. **Does DSACT have materials that could be helpful to educational assistants?** Yes. Down Syndrome 101 is available to provide basic information and understanding for school staff. Contact the office or Peggy Wolf for specifics.
3. **Who provides instructional materials for educational assistants?** Generally the *special education teacher is responsible for implementing the Individual Education Plan so they provide the materials*. There are times when a class may change plans and the educational assistant will have to make modifications in the moment. Some educational assistants easily grasp how to modify and can do this on their own. With training they may even modify routine work. However, a teacher should be checking the work to be sure it meets expectations. A large number of educational assistants are certified teachers.
4. **Are educational assistants trained to manage behavior? If a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is in place, then the special education teacher will provide training and answer any questions the educational assistant may have about implementing the plan.** That does not mean all behavior will stop. The BIP is a working document that should change if no improvement is seen after weeks of following the document. *For behaviors that do not require a plan, then the special education teacher or general education teacher should be offering suggestions for replacement behaviors*. The educational assistant should be a part of the team coming up with solutions since they may actually spend more time with a student than the teacher.
5. **What is the role of the general education teacher with a special education educational assistant?** Ideally, the general education teacher and the educational assistant work together to improve the classroom for everyone. Both should discipline and help all students so they both have power within the room. The relationship will develop over time as trust is built and skills become apparent. At first, general education teachers may feel awkward with another adult watching their class. They may feel judged for everything that happens in their classroom and not sure what information will be shared with parents and staff. The educational assistant may be nervous because they are not able to obtain total cooperation from their student in the form of behavior or academics. They then feel under the scrutiny of the teacher. They too will feel judged. They may be with that teacher once a day, a couple of times a week or most of the day. *The "roles" will develop depending on the expectations of each, the*

willingness to work together, and the personalities involved. It will also be influenced by expectations of administrators and special education teachers. The general education teacher is not the official evaluator of the educational assistant.

6. Who evaluates educational assistants? *Generally it is a principal or assistant principal with input from a special education teacher.*

7. Who is responsible for communicating with parents? *Ultimately the teacher is responsible for instruction and behavior so the majority of the time communication comes from them with input from the educational assistant.* A teacher will generally want to know what happens during the day so if a parent calls they are aware of any situations or concerns. Sometimes this is difficult depending on where the student is during the day and the teacher's schedule. The teacher and the parent will ultimately decide the form and amount of communication with the parent. The parent can always request information. Please remember that it needs to be relatively easy and fast for a teacher to accomplish.