

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities

[The following are excerpts from the ATA Monograph Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities. For the complete monograph go to <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/> under Quick Links click on Publications, Other Publications, Teachers as Professionals.

The integration into regular classes of an increasing number of students with special needs, behaviour disorders and learning disabilities has not only expanded the duties of teachers but increased the amount of information that they need to carry out those duties effectively. Teachers have welcomed the assistance provided by other professionals, paraprofessionals, untrained personnel and volunteers.

The skills and expertise that teachers' assistants bring to their jobs often enable students who would not otherwise be able to attend school to do so and even to participate in inclusive classrooms. By helping teachers implement activities and make effective decisions, assistants can greatly enrich the educational experience of students. Although the skills and knowledge that teachers' assistants have are of invaluable assistance to teachers, the presence of assistants in the classroom has, at the same time, raised questions about their role and its relation to that of teachers.

Who Are Teachers' Assistants?

Teachers' assistants constitute part of what, in the education community, is known as support staff, a term designating personnel

who help teachers carry out the educational mission of the school and who make the educational experiences of children more rewarding. Some support staff are highly qualified professionals who provide such specialized services to students as diagnostic testing, speech therapy and physical therapy. Others have non-professional credentials earned through college studies. Still others have no post-secondary qualifications at all. The duties that support staff are assigned depend on their qualifications and competencies and on the provisions of the *School Act* and other legislation.

Typical Duties of Teachers' Assistants

Under the direction of a teacher, support staff may work directly with students individually or in small groups to deliver activities that reinforce and advance the educational program. They also provide teachers with advice and suggestions. For example, they may assess how well students are functioning, administer standardized tests (but not make judgments on test results), observe and document behaviours as students participate in learning activities and, where appropriate, help plan the educational program. Together with teachers, teachers' assistants enrich the educational program by helping students gain the knowledge and skills they need to function in the classroom, the school and the larger community.

In making decisions about the educational program, teachers count on input from other



**Become a
possibilitarian.
No matter how
dark things
seem to be or
actually are,
raise your
sights and see
possibilities
—always
see them,
for they're
always there.**

**—Dr. Norman
Vincent Peale**





What Duties Can Be Assigned to Teachers' Assistants?

The Association's Code of Professional Conduct defines the duties for which teachers are responsible. The Code explicitly prohibits teachers from delegating those duties to non-teachers. At the same time, the Code specifies that teachers may delegate "*specific and limited aspects of instructional activity*" to teachers' assistants, provided that teachers supervise and direct those activities. School boards that assign teachers' assistants to tasks for which they are inadequately trained or unqualified not only place students in danger but risk being sued for malpractice on the grounds that students are being denied the right to be taught by qualified professional teachers. Teachers' assistants who are assigned teaching duties should inform their own union or association and should protest any assignment that exceeds their training and experience. Even qualified teachers who are employed as teachers' assistants should be careful not to carry out tasks that fall outside the role for which they were hired.

Educational Needs of Students

In general, teachers should avoid asking teachers' assistants to undertake activities that require them to make professional judgments. For example, it would be inappropriate for a teacher to ask an assistant to plan a student's educational program or to mark short-answer or essay questions that involve an element of interpretation. On the other hand, it *would* be appropriate for

professionals, parents and classroom-based teachers' assistants. Professionals such as psychologists, speech therapists and physical therapists draw on their expertise to provide teachers with specialized reports and suggestions about particular students. Teachers use this input to develop and implement educational programs for which they are ultimately responsible.

There is no definitive list of the duties that support staff is expected to carry out. Instead, their duties are determined by such factors as their qualifications, the needs of the students and the information required by the teacher.

A Question of Accountability

The primary responsibility for the educational program that students receive falls upon teachers, who are expected to maintain a high standard of conduct, care and instruction. These expectations are outlined in the *Teaching Profession Act*, which sets out a mechanism for disciplining teachers who engage in unprofessional conduct, and in the *School Act*. Section 1(1)(i) of the *School Act* defines a teacher, sections 18 and 20 outline the duties of teachers and principals, sections 92(1) and (2) specify the qualifications necessary to teach in the province of Alberta, section 93 explains the qualification necessary to supervise

teachers, and sections 112(1), (2) and (3) prohibit the assigning of teaching duties to non-teachers. The high standards expected of teachers are also described in the Teaching Quality Standard (Ministerial Order #016/97), which states that "*quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students.*"

Section 117 of the *School Act* authorizes school boards to employ non-teaching employees, including teachers' assistants that the board considers necessary for its operation. However, no legislation, not even the *School Act*, defines the duties and responsibilities of non-teaching employees and specifies to whom they are accountable. Although their duties are not defined in legislation, teachers' assistants nevertheless are accountable. The activities/conduct of non-teaching personnel are governed by the employer–employee relationship. Teachers—even those who supervise non-teaching personnel—are not in a position to discipline or terminate the services of such personnel. However, teachers are responsible for evaluating the performance of non-teachers assigned to them and for reporting the results of those evaluations in accordance with board policy and the Code of Professional Conduct.

a teacher to ask an assistant to suggest (subject to the teacher's approval) resources and exercises that might be suitable for a student; to mark tests and exercises that involve multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank and other right-or-wrong kinds of questions; and to photocopy handouts, make displays and create other materials under the teacher's direction.

Health-Care Needs of Students

Many teachers' assistants work with students who have special medical concerns and need health-related care throughout the day. Teachers should develop careful plans detailing what needs to be done in routine and emergency situations and who is responsible for approving and for carrying out each action. The approval for delivering any health-related services including medications to a student must come from a health-care professional, not merely from the parents. In developing these plans, teachers should adhere scrupulously to school board policy. If the school board has no policy or if teachers are asked to attend to a student's health-care needs in a way that violates school board policy, they should register a protest. Furthermore, if they are in a position of responsibility, they should insist that the situation be corrected. If they are not in a position of responsibility, they should distance themselves from the decision.

Meetings

Whether a person working with a student should attend and participate in a school meeting depends on the

purpose of the meeting and who is accountable for the decisions made at it. For example, because teachers are ultimately responsible for developing educational programs for students, teachers would likely attend meetings involving decisions about education programming. The involvement of classroom assistants in the process would be limited to reporting their observations about students to the teacher before the meeting begins. On the other hand, given their professional expertise and responsibility, other teachers' assistants such as psychologists and speech therapists might be asked to attend the meeting.

Making the Relationship Work

Much of the responsibility for making relationships work falls on the principal. As educational leader in the school, the principal must ensure that the integrity of the teaching profession is maintained. Two ways in which the principal can facilitate this process are developing clear job descriptions for all support staff and showing teachers how to evaluate teachers' assistants. Teachers, too, are well placed to improve the effectiveness of those assigned to help and advise them. To ensure that the relationship is as productive as possible, teachers should

- discuss roles with the teachers' assistant;
- establish clear parameters;

- stress the importance of confidentiality;
- discuss their educational philosophy and their approach to teaching and classroom management;
- schedule regular meetings with the assistant to discuss his or her observations about students, obtain feedback and reports, hear concerns and discuss implementation strategies; and
- introduce the assistant to other people in the school, district or community who may be able to provide assistance.

In summary, because current legislation contains little to govern the interaction between teachers and teachers' assistants, the onus is on teachers to make the relationship as effective as possible. To some extent, the ideal relationship between a teacher and a teachers' assistant is always a work in progress. However, the many positive relationships that have been forged throughout the province demonstrate that, when the relationship works—when teachers and assistants are clear about their roles and responsibilities and are working toward a common goal—students can benefit enormously.

Members who have questions about the role and responsibilities of teacher assistants, who need advice about specific situations or who would like a presentation should contact Member Services at Barnett House at 1-800-232-7208 (toll free in Alberta) or 447-9400.

To find archived issues of *Leadership Update* go to www.teachers.ab.ca and click on Resources for School-Based Administrators.

Feedback is welcome. Please contact Konni deGoeij, associate coordinator, administrator assistance, Member Services, at konni.degoeij@ata.ab.ca.



Q & A

GORDON THOMAS,
Executive Secretary

Parent Access to Student Records

Q: A parent of a 6 year old special needs child sent me an email requesting copies of her child’s documents. The child is in a segregated special needs program and due to the specialized programming, the teacher’s lesson plans form the daily documentation for each child: the lesson, the behavior record, the goals etc. Does the parent have a legal right to ask for the teacher’s documents?

A: Section 23 of the *School Act* establishes that students and their parents are entitled to access information contained in a school record. Section 2(1) of the *Student Record Regulation* establishes the type of information that must be included in the student record, including the student’s name, birth date, the results obtained on any diagnostic or achievement tests, and “any action taken as program planning as a result of the assessment, evaluation or interpretive report.” In this case, the teacher’s daily lesson plans likely constitute documents relating to “program planning” for the student. The parent would be entitled to access that part of the daily lesson plan that relates to his or her child.

In addition, the records sought are also governed by the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP). FOIP allows any person a right of access to any record in the custody or control of a public body, subject to the specific exceptions enumerated in FOIP. If the daily lesson plan pertains only to the student whose information is being sought, then it is unlikely that any of the exceptions in FOIP would apply, meaning that the information would also be accessible under FOIP. However, if the lesson plans contain the personal information of other students in the class (such as the names of other students and the daily programming for other students in the class) then s. 17 of FOIP would be applicable. Section 17 provides that a public body must refuse to disclose personal information about a third party if it would be an unreasonable invasion of a third party’s privacy.

In the event that the daily lesson plans relate to more than one student, you may want to refer the request for access to information to the District’s FOIP Coordinator, who will be in the best position to sever any third party information contained in the records before providing it to the parent making the request. Where the request is referred to the FOIP Coordinator, the school should inform the parent (in writing) that the request will be administered under FOIP and a response will be coming from District office.

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About Robert Marzano

Dr Robert Marzano received a bachelor’s degree from Iona College in New York, a master’s degree from Seattle University and a doctorate from the University of Washington. He is cofounder and chief executive officer of the Marzano Research Laboratory in Englewood, Colorado. Throughout his 40 years in the field of education, Dr Marzano has been a speaker, a trainer and the author of more than 30 books and 150 articles on topics such as instruction, assessment, cognition, effective leadership, school intervention, and writing and implementing standards.

Program overview

Sessions will focus on how administrators can improve the instructional practices of their teachers with the goal of enhancing student achievement. Specific topics will include

- general leadership behaviours that provide the foundation for a culture of excellence,
- what to look for regarding effective instructional practices,
- how to give teachers feedback that is focused, respectful and empowering,
- classroom assessment practices that empower students and teachers, and
- closing the achievement gap by building the background knowledge of students.

What is the format?

This is a five-day, in-residence workshop conducted in a retreat setting.

The extensive program emphasizes the direct involvement of all participants. Opportunities will be provided for personal reflection and informal interaction with colleagues. The main topics will be covered through

- presentations;
- individual consultation;
- intensive, practical, hands-on experience; and
- group discussions.

There are still spaces available. For information about how to register contact Leslie Kaun at 780-447-9410 or go to teachers@ata.ab.ca under Resources for School-Based Administrators.

