

BACKGROUND

Noble Elementary is a Title I public elementary school in Golden Valley, Minnesota that opened in 1955.^[8] The school currently has 350 students enrolled in grades kindergarten through fifth grade.^[8] There are four center-based special education classrooms that support students diagnosed with a developmental cognitive delay (DCD) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Each center-based classroom is comprised of one licensed special education teacher and between two to three education assistants (EA).

Robbinsdale District 281 is a public district located in the western suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota. It includes nine elementary schools, four magnet schools, three middle schools, two high schools, and three alternative learning options.^[7] The district also partners with Intermediate District 287 for students that would benefit from one-on-one support and instructors who are experts in special education, mental health, and trauma.^[6]

PROGRAM DETAILS

The program is for paraprofessionals, specifically EAs in special education. In order to hold the position in a Title I school, the following requirements must be met.^[3, 5]

- A high school diploma or the equivalent.
- Initial training in emergency procedures, confidentiality, vulnerability, reporting, discipline, roles/responsibilities, and building orientation.
- Special education specific; general training on student disability and behavioral needs.

The program is an evidence based special education information and ideas packet. The packet sections are titled as followed.

- Common Diagnosis – information regarding the typical signs and symptoms of conditions most likely to be seen in special education classrooms. If the diagnosis has more than one type or comorbidities it is also covered.
- Interventions – a brief synopsis of the targeted skill set and a list of possible interventions. The targeted skill sets include executive functioning, fine motor, gross motor, handwriting, and sensory.
- Development – typical developmental timeline for fine motor skills, grasp, gross motor skills, and speech/language skills.
- Strategies – additional information on the purposes of behavior, the cueing hierarchy, visual strategies and the Wilbarger Brushing Protocol.
- Sample Lessons – detailed with items required, skills addressed, options for grading difficulty, and instructions on how to complete.

METHODS

Development

The program’s initial development began with the completion of a needs assessment of the school district and the elementary school. This assessment consisted of literature reviews, multiple interviews with faculty and staff, and observations of both special education and mainstream classrooms. RISE and WAVE classrooms refer to center-based DCD and ASD rooms, respectively.

Literature Review

- Evidence-based sources – official organization sites for each diagnosis, pediatric OT textbooks, and best practice articles for frequently used OT strategies.

Interviews

- K-2 RISE Special Education Teacher
- First Grade Mainstream Teacher
- District Speech Language Pathologist
- K-2 WAVE Educational Assistant

Observations

- K-2 RISE Special Education Classroom
- K-2 WAVE Special Education Classroom
- 3-5 RISE Special Education Classroom
- First Grade Mainstream Classroom

Service Delivery

- Strengths – peer and administration support among the faculty and staff, well equipped resource room for behavior concerns, and attentive therapy services in special education classrooms.
- Weaknesses – high level of turnover at the district level, lack of training for EAs, and communication difficulties, especially as it relates to final decision reaching all members of the team.

Distribution

The packet was distributed to all center-based EAs and special education teachers at Noble Elementary School via email. Each classroom also received a physical copy.

NEEDS STATEMENT

While current Minnesota state statues concerning EA training and orientation are implemented in the Robbinsdale 281 district, there is a need for additional education concerning student-EA interaction, disabilities, and expectations.

“My first day I was shown to the room and that was the extent of my building orientation. I think that additional training focusing on disabilities and a day of shadowing would make communication between students and EAs better”

WAVE K-2 Education Assistant

RESULTS

According to Carter, O’Rourke, Sisco, and Pelsue (2009) it was found that many paraprofessionals are asked to support students with varied disabilities in a wide range of contexts and instructional methods. When looking at the tasks that are required of special education paraprofessionals, the most common statements made by teachers and paraprofessionals was that more training was needed.^[4] Paraprofessionals also stated that the sessions they felt least comfortable assisting with were speech, occupational, or physical therapy.^[2] Therefore, it is critical that resources are available for paraprofessionals to learn effective strategies when providing academic, social, and behavioral support to students.^[2]

Evaluation

EAs and special education teachers were asked to complete anonymous evaluations consisting of five Likert-type questions and three open-ended questions. Selected comments are listed below.

“I wish I would have had something like this when I first started with the district.” - Respondent Three

“Having the interventions listed out is great for the Educational Assistants.” - Respondent One

“I think I would use this packet on a daily basis”

- Respondent Two

BOTTOM LINE FOR OT

OT early childhood and school-based services include both the evaluation and intervention of limitations that interfere with a student’s participation in meaningful school, family, and community contexts.^[1] OT practitioners are trained to assess and understand these limitations that influence performance^[1];

- Performance skills (e.g. motor skills)
- Performance patterns (e.g. routines)
- Activity demands (e.g. required actions, body functions)
- Contexts and environments
- Client factors (e.g. visual, sensory, mental)

The role of OT in this program is to assist paraprofessionals, or EAs in this district, as they support students in the meaningful occupation of being a student. As evidenced through classroom observation, EAs support students with academic related tasks as well as ADLs and IADLs, with all falling under the OT scope of practice.^[1] OT can be provided as a direct, indirect, or consultative service in school-based practice.^[1] Working as an interprofessional team to best support students is key to their success and special education EAs play a big role in that.^[1] The creation of this OT driven program is based in helping students participate in their meaningful occupations by supporting EAs.

REFERENCES

¹American Occupational Therapy Association. (2011). Occupational therapy services in early childhood and school-based settings. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65, (6), S46-S54. doi:10.5014/ajot.2011.65S46

²Carter, E., O’Rourke, L., Sisco, L.G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(6), 344-359. doi:10.1177/0741932508324399.

³Credential for Education Paraprofessionals, Minn. Stat. 120B.363 (2003 & Supp. 2017).

⁴Frank, A.R., Keith, T.Z., & Steil, D.A. (1988). Training needs of special education paraprofessionals. *Exceptional Children*, 55(3), 252-258.

⁵Individualized Education Programs, Minn. Stat. 125A.08 (1959 & Supp. 2016).

⁶Intermediate District 287. (n.d.). *About Us*. Retrieved from <https://www.district287.org/about-us-2/>

⁷Robbinsdale Area Schools (n.d.). *About Robbinsdale Area Schools*. Retrieved from https://www.rdale.org/about_us/about_robbinsdale_area_schools

⁸Robbinsdale Area Schools. (2019). *Noble elementary school* [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10SLun4is9s-PF2DiXt2DEjckZl-lyxwH/view>