



Each and Every Child



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An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

In praise of paras

Teachers say their colleagues make *the* difference in their students' educations

GREENFIELD – Alice Williams was having a terrible day. OK, a particularly awful day. A parent-teacher meeting went poorly and she was very low, anticipating a tearful drive home.

“Don’t worry, tomorrow will be better,” chimed in one of her paraeducators, or paras. And as the third grade teacher from Nodaway Valley Elementary School recalled this moment two

weeks later, tears formed in her eyes. “They are so loyal, to me and to the students,” Williams said. “I couldn’t do it without them.”



Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

Paraeducators Julie Hartman and Jody Weber work with some of their students.

Williams is but one teacher in the state of Iowa, but resoundingly speaks for all when she says, “We love our paras.”

“They are my left hand, my right hand, my eyes and my ears,” said special education teacher Dayna Jensen. “Those paras jump in and help me and help the students often without being asked. The paras will catch things that I don’t. It’s another adult truly attuned to the classroom. And that dedication goes home where they often study up on things. That is above and beyond.”

Williams, Jensen and third grade teacher Jodi Berlau share their paras – two dynamos by the names of Jody Weber and Julie Hartman – in this west Iowa community.

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"They are selfless," Belau said. "They do so much, including a lot of things they don't get thanked for. They work tirelessly, and come in the next morning and encourage us – despite all of their hard work."

"Julie, for instance, will always say 'it's been a good day, it will be a good day tomorrow.' Julie knows which kids need a bit more help, and she will pull them aside without prompting and say, 'let's go read together.'"

Comments made at Nodaway Valley could be made at any school in Iowa. Educators from all 99 counties attest to the can-do spirits, the grit and determination paras have come to be known for.

"It's amazing the loyalty they show their students," Williams said. "They want the students to be successful. They are wholly dedicated."

Jensen describes her paras as an integral part of the team.

"I often include the paras in the planning," she said. "At the IEP (Individualized Education Programs) meetings, I try to make sure the paras are there. The paras are idea people: they look for material, they scour the building for materials. They fill in the gaps. I even have had paras help me with progress monitoring."

Williams said the paras bring a holistic approach to their work.

"They even look at a kid with no coat and say, 'let's go get a coat,'" she said. "They are a second set of eyes. They see things that maybe I will miss."

"It's common for a para to come up to me and say, 'I was noticing today that So-and-So isn't really reading. Is it OK if I sit with him next time?'" Belau said. "They come up with classroom

management ideas and I will think, 'duh, why didn't I think of that?'"

Perhaps most striking is how the paras rise to the occasion when things go wrong, being especially adept at de-escalating a child who is acting up. But as opposed to resting on laurels – as they certainly could – the paras always reflect upon each problem that arises.

"Jody is like, 'what could I have done to prevent this?'" Belau said. "And then she goes home and reads about a child's behaviors so that she feels she is better equipped to handle problems."

"There are less dramatic examples," Jensen said. "There was a time when a student who was on a restricted diet didn't have any snacks available to him. The para went out and spent her own money to get gluten-free food."

"While there is occasionally big drama, it's the little things, too. The paras just quietly go about their work. We couldn't do it without them."

For their part, the paras are humble about their work, which they both find cathartic in many ways.

"I guess I am particularly drawn to the kids who need the extra help,"



Jody Weber



Jodi Belau



Julie Hartman



Alice Williams



Dayna Jensen

What you think

Ask educators what they think of their paraeducators, they will respond. In force. In fact, over 800 Iowa teachers, principals, superintendents and school board members took time from their busy schedules to respond to the simple inquiry, "Tell us about your paras."

Many said your paras were your extra pair of arms, legs, and heads. Some used sports metaphors, saying the paras were critical members of the team. More than a few said it was impossible to respond to the requested one-sentence response with, yes, just one sentence.

But it's clear if there were a popularity contest, Iowa's paras would be on the short list.

Of the hundreds of responses, it is impossible to include every response. So here is a greatly pared down listing of comments – all randomly picked.

They are the cape-less heroes, the prompting gurus, and the ooey-goey glue that holds my room together.

Megan McCarthy, Waukee

Our paras are one of the most essential elements to our educational programming, as they allow us to reach each and every child in meaningful, appropriate, and life-changing ways.

Grant Hegstad, MOC-FV High School, Orange City

Without my paraeducator, I would not be half the teacher that people think I am. She is the woman behind the scene that keeps this classroom running and keeps all of us calm. Without her, I would be lost.

Brianna Konz, Moore Elementary, Des Moines

Day in and day out our paras can

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Hartman said. "I have a son who has similar problems, and I have lived it for the last 23 years. It is very rewarding that I can actually help. My original goal was to help just one child, now it's much greater."

"Having grown up in a small town, I never liked school because I was bullied a lot," Weber said. "For me, my work is making a difference in my life as well as the students. Bullying tears you down. They deserve to grow up in a safe school environment."

But the paras know their chief function: provide sufficient help to ensure each student is being successful academically.

"I have been working with a student who was struggling in math and then – his scores went up!" Hartman said, pumping her fist into the air. "You could see that light bulb go off."

Weber agreed.

"One of the most important and gratifying things is seeing the kids light up when they get something," she said.

Teacher Williams again wells up with tears.

"Good or bad, Julie is always there," Williams said. "She is always there."

be one of the most important staff members in our children's lives.

Kevin Blunt, Stanton Community Schools, Stanton

The paras at Carter Lake Elementary work hard to build relationships with students and close the learning gaps between our students with learning disabilities and our general education students.

Rena Wilkening, Carter Lake Elementary, Council Bluffs

Para-educators are often times the fuel that makes the vehicle go; you have the vehicle (the students), and the engine (the teacher) but without the para-educators (the fuel) we certainly wouldn't get too far.

Katie Rezac, Estherville Lincoln Central, Estherville

Each and every paraeducator who I work with is like a teacher in my eyes. They deserve the respect like all teachers. They are the ones who go to the general education classroom and see how the students do in the general education classroom. They

are so important with communication between all teachers.

Kelsey Heintz, Shenandoah High School, Shenandoah

My paras are my eyes, ears, hands and presence in the classroom making it possible for the students to succeed and thrive in the general education classroom.

Becky Porter, Interstate 35 Community School District, Truro

We have a fantastic group of para-professionals who are strong advocates for the life-long success of our students.

Patrick Miller, Odebolt-Arthur & Battle Creek-Ida Grove Schools

My paraeducator in my special education classroom is a valuable, precious, hard-working individual who enhances and enriches the education and lives of my special education students daily.

Karen Rosas, Mediapolis Community School, Mediapolis

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Our paras go above and beyond each and every day for our students by doing the homework themselves so they know best how to re-explain classroom concepts for student success.

Barb Foster, Osage Community School District, Osage

Our associates are highly qualified and irreplaceable when it comes to getting our kids the services they need to succeed at high levels.

Brett Nagle, Wapello Community School District, Wapello

Our paras are extraordinary and we could not effectively meet students' needs without them.

Angela Livezey, North Mahaska Community School District, New Sharon

My paras mean the world to me and help me grow as a teacher, along with making my students be the best they can be!

Cara J. Murphy, CAM High School, Anita

My paras are some of the hardest working individuals I know and they always put the kids and their needs first! They level the playing field so ALL students can be successful.

Amber Sly, Grundy Center Elementary, Grundy Center

We are like the sea creature, the octopus. I am the body of the octopus and the paras are the legs. They can go in different directions to reach kids at the same time in different ways, yet are extensions of my thoughts. They support the students in different classrooms at the same time.

Sherry Carlson, Humboldt Community School District, Humboldt

One sentence would be impossible! I made the analogy with one of our

paras the other day that they are like the person who scores the touchdown! I'm just the coach. They are truly the difference makers!!

John Miller, South O'Brien School District, Paullina

Due to the amazing, kind, funny, dependable, motivated, passionate, student focus support staff in my classroom they have made it possible for my students to make social, emotional, and academic progress through building relationships and trust!

Katie Hoover, Jordan Creek Elementary, West Des Moines schools

My paraprofessionals are an integral part of special education. My students would not be successful in the general education classroom without their hard work and dedication.

Dawn Kramer, Spirit Lake Elementary, Spirit Lake

My job as a special education teacher would be utterly impossible without the dedication, hard work, passion, drive to learn, and flexibility of my outstanding associates.

Sadie Terpstra-Schwab, Denver Elementary, Denver

Because she is as invested in my students as I am, my para means that I have a partner

in ensuring that my students' IEPs are followed with fidelity, compassion, and high expectations for student growth and success.

Tabatha L. Commins, Boone High School, Boone

Even with 1,025,109 words in the English Language, as a building administrator I find it difficult to come up with the perfect word(s) to describe the value Douma's paraeducators add to the educational experience of each and every student who attends our school.

Sarah McGlothlen, Douma Elementary, Ottumwa

My 13 paras are my support system, my sounding board, my saving grace and my friends.

Kay Gustin, Bondurant-Farrar Community Schools, Bondurant

Professional, productive, proud paras – priceless!

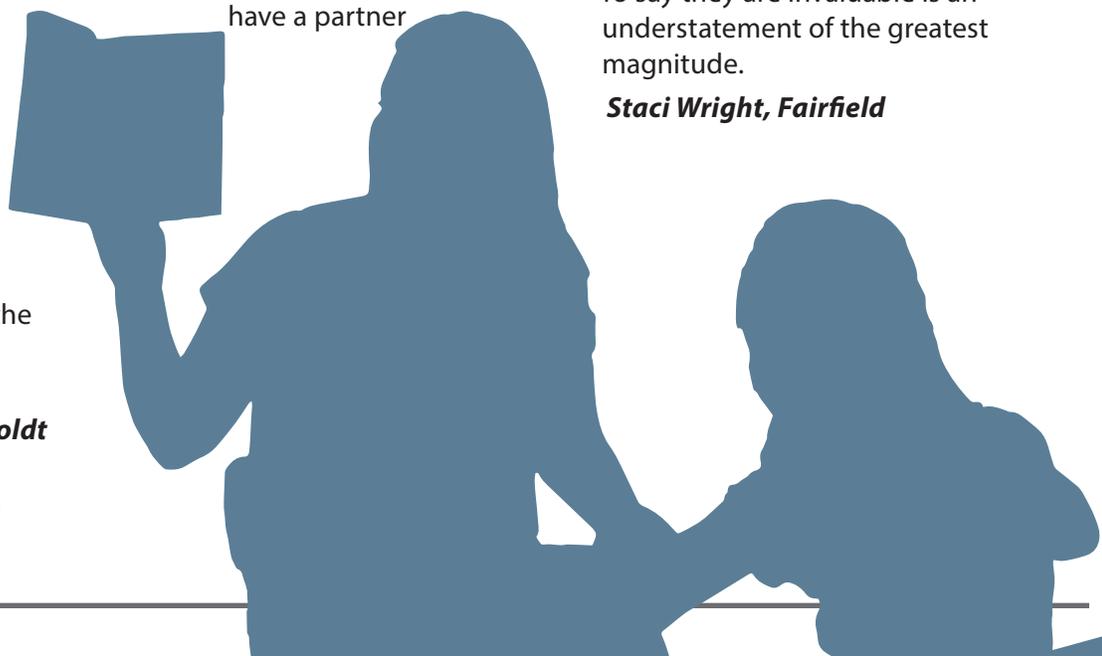
Amy Kaster, Harlan Community Middle School, Harlan

My para lights up my life and uses that light to make the path of learning brighter and easier to follow for all students.

Mary Pat King, Glenwood

To say they are invaluable is an understatement of the greatest magnitude.

Staci Wright, Fairfield



And even more...

Last year, I had the opportunity to have a special needs child move into the district and be placed in my classroom. Irma Terry was assigned as his one-on-one. This child was mostly nonverbal. He was low academically and did not want to exert himself in the classroom. Spanish was the only language spoken in his home. Mrs. Terry was AMAZING with him!!! I am confident that he would not have achieved at the level he did, if she had not been placed with him. Not only did this youngster learn all his letters and numbers, as well as all of the other kindergarten expectations...but he was READING by the completion of kindergarten!!! The skills she helped him attain have followed him into first grade, and he is blossoming into a great student. Irma Terry goes above and beyond the expectations placed on her. Not only does she excel at her job, but she gives children rides to and home from the library in the summer, provides clothing and/or food for needy families, knits scarves for kids so they can be warm at recess, etc. She is an amazing woman, in my opinion, and deserves to be recognized as a role model to all of those who work with children.

**Thank you for your time,
Marne Markwardt, Belmond-Klemme CSD**

As a parent of a child with Down Syndrome, I am fully aware of and appreciate the difference para-educators make in my son's life! As a teacher with a para-educator's support for children with special needs in my classroom, I see her as invaluable not only to my students but also to me. I feel that by supporting each other, we are able to meet all students' needs both educationally and socially/ emotionally much better.

Sue Philby, Missouri Valley Elementary School

As a 21-year Army retired veteran of the Airborne Infantry, I say without hesitation my para-educator is my "Wing-man."

A few times in the Iraq desert or even in the jungles of Central America, my battle buddy would whisper something faint over the radio in my ear piece. Most of the time it was just a heads up, but once in a while, it was life-saving information. That is how I feel about my para-educator, every day we work together.

**Wade C. Fridley
Riceville CSD
9-12 Special Education**

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Nothing Rhymes with Paraprofessionals
A Poem
By Tom Braverman (City High, Iowa City)
Paras are my right and left hand,
Key musicians in the special ed. band
They collect data, keep students engaged,
De-escalate behaviors when a student's enraged.
Escorting to classes, taking notes,
In Foods Class making Ice Cream Floats!
Keeping teachers informed of expectations,
Of a student's performance or ruminations.
An extra set of eyes to see,
The eloping student trying to flee,
The Medicaid gurus; always willing,
To get 'er done for accurate billing.
A shoulder to cry on in tough times,
Tolerating kids; their complaints and whines.
And they do it all for paltry pay,
Showing up at school, most early each day.
A world void of paras is a scary thought,
And without them I would be distraught!

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