

# Partner Spotlight: Cicero School District 99

## Supporting Paras with a Space to Learn, Share, and Collaborate

Cicero District 99 is a 15-school public elementary district located in Cicero, Illinois — a suburb west of Chicago that more than 82,000 residents call home. We've been lucky to partner with this unique district, and had the opportunity to talk to Director of Special Education **Elizabeth Dejewski** about the importance of providing targeted, relevant PD for their paraeducators.



### Setting the Stage: A Snapshot of Cicero School District 99

“District enrollment went down significantly over the last couple of years, from a high of 13,700 students down to a little over 9,000,” explains Dejewski. “It’s important to know this because the number of students in SPED remained relatively consistent - we are currently at 1,476 students, and this number hasn’t changed much. Over 90% of our students are Hispanic - we are a multi-Spanish speaking community.”

### How Personal Experience Inspired a Lifelong Appreciation of Paras

Dejewski’s philosophy on supporting paras came from her own personal experience. “Years ago, my daughter was diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and autism,” she says. “We were desperately looking for tools that would help us work with her. We found a school where the para was wonderful and helped my daughter so much.”

When the school determined it was time to part ways with the para, she was understandably nervous. “The para understood my concerns, but explained that this decision wasn’t about

me, and that it was all about my daughter’s readiness to rely on what she’d learned and take the next step on her own. This experience shaped my philosophy about supporting paras, because the work was so transformative for my daughter.”

### Filling a Critical Need with a Customized Approach to PD

This is Dejewski's fourth year as the Director of SPED, and one of her responsibilities is providing professional development opportunities for staff. “Teachers and other staff were receiving PD, but our paras weren’t getting the kind of customized learning that best supports their roles and the work they do,” she shares. From her point of view, it was critical to prepare paras for the essential role they play in the daily lives of many students. “They are the first ‘hello’ and the last ‘goodbye’ for many students, and that is extremely important. We know that we have to attend to our students’ emotional needs, ensure they are regulated, and make sure they feel safe before we can even begin to help them learn. Our paras are the ones who make this happen. We invest in our staff, and we have high expectations because this is what our students need and deserve. I was looking for a PD provider that works specifically with paras, and 321 Insight offers targeted professional development that is tailored specifically to the role,” she says.

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“Many of the students have experienced significant trauma,” she adds. “For many, learning won’t happen until the trauma is addressed. Paras have to identify with the student, understand their emotions and what they’re feeling, and then know what to do to best help the student.” She wanted the paras to have PD geared to their needs, and to equip them with the job-specific skills to address student trauma and challenging behavior. “With a good para, you can move mountains. That’s why we partnered with 321 Insight - they share the same commitment we have to supporting our paras’ professional growth.”

## Shining a Spotlight on Paras Leads to Positive Results

Cicero partnered with 321 Insight to bring their experienced facilitators in for face-to-face training during scheduled PD days throughout the year. Because PD sessions are in-person, paras have the opportunity to have a dialog



about what they’ve learned, what it means to them, and how it is applicable to their students. One thing Dejewski wanted for the paras was to create a common understanding and vocabulary across the district. “We’re not creating a subculture within a larger culture. We have close to 180 paras and we wanted them to have a standardized approach to how they’re working with students.”

“Providing opportunities to be in the spotlight empowers paras. They want to feel acknowledged, but it can get lost in the business of the work. It is important for my district to invest in PD for paras, celebrate them, respect and appreciate their work. They feel empowered that we have a real partner

in 321 Insight that works exclusively with them, and they’ve been responding really positively,” she shared. “They come to trainings on institute days even though they are not mandated. If you create an environment where people feel they can voice their opinion, it is a very positive, powerful thing. We acknowledge how important paras are, that they matter, and that the work they do is absolutely essential.”

## Continuing Our Work Together

The partnership with Cicero School District 99 has been incredibly beneficial for their paras, who are often on the frontlines of challenging student behavior. “Our work with the 321 Insight team has helped us to create a safe environment where paras can learn, communicate, and collaborate. The 321 Insight team has been extremely well-organized and responsive to our staff’s needs. They present the content during our training sessions in a way that is easy to follow, isn’t overwhelming, and - most importantly - makes sense,” she says.

“Providing our paras with a safe, supportive space to share their challenges and success stories is essential, and our ability to do that is a direct result of our work with the 321 Insight team,” she adds. “We’re excited about our ongoing partnership with 321 Insight, so we can continue to deliver the training and tools our paras need to feel valued, skilled, and effective in the role.”



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