

# One Paraprofessional Makes a Difference

## A Q&A with Nachelly Peña

*For the last four years, paraprofessional Nachelly Peña has worked with English language learners (ELLs) in Volusia County, Florida. A native Spanish speaker with a bachelor's degree in psychology from the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico, Peña moved to Florida in 2011 in search of career opportunities. At the suggestion of a friend, she decided to use her bilingual ability to help students and families in the public school system. Below, she discusses her specific job responsibilities, what she finds rewarding about her career, and the challenges that she and other paraprofessionals face in their work.*

—EDITORS

### **Editors: As a paraprofessional, what does your work entail?**

**Nachelly Peña:** I work with ELLs from kindergarten through fifth grade at Citrus Grove Elementary School in DeLand, Florida. I help them with math, social studies, and science. I basically give them the same lesson the teacher is giving them, but I translate the lesson for them. Citrus Grove enrolls 910 students, making it the largest elementary school in Volusia County Schools.

At Citrus Grove, the class size is around 30 students. The greatest number of ELLs I've ever worked with in a single classroom is 10. Because I typically don't spend more than an hour in each classroom, I must work quickly to see which students are struggling and need my help the most.

The majority of my students come from Mexico and from low-income families. Academically, they are below grade level. It's my job to help them catch up and reach their full potential. Citrus Grove does offer trainings so paraprofessionals can support students, but nothing prepares you like being in the classroom and actually working. The person I have learned the most from is Sandra Garcia, a former ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] teacher here, who retired last year after 44 years. She was an expert I respected and trusted. I could ask her any question I had about how to better serve my students. She was actually my ESOL teacher when my family and I lived here before moving back to Puerto Rico. She taught me when I was in third grade at another Volusia County school, Discovery Elementary School in Deltona, Florida.

Four other paraprofessionals work at Citrus Grove, but I'm the only one who works with ELLs. While the majority of these students speak Spanish, others come from

Bangladesh and countries in Southeast Asia. I wish I had received more training in how to work with students whose languages I don't speak. I try my best, and I use all the strategies I've been taught, but I still feel like there's a gap when I work with students who speak a language other than Spanish at home.

Since I was an ELL student, I know what it feels like to struggle with English. As a result, my own experiences help me relate to my students. In working with them, one of my goals is to make them feel like they're not alone, that there's someone who cares about them, and to let them know I'm their advocate. My main goal is to help them understand the material being taught and not feel like they're falling behind because of their language situation. To that end, I differentiate the lesson and teach it in a way they can understand it.

I currently work with seven teachers in various grades. We communicate well with each other, and we get along great. They tell me what content students are struggling with, what assignments they haven't finished, and where they need help.

I often translate documents into Spanish, such as homework teachers assign or any information they want to send home. I also sometimes call Spanish-speaking parents to remind them of upcoming field trips.

### **Editors: What do you find rewarding about your job?**

**Peña:** Making a family feel like they're heard, making them feel comfortable. Because my mom doesn't speak English, I know how important it is to have someone translate for you, someone you can trust, and someone who translates things correctly. So the relationship I have with the families and the students is very rewarding to me.

Parents confide in me. They tell me how they came to the United States and how hard they work so their children can go to school.

I have so many stories of students who I've helped these last few years. One in particular is now in fifth grade. He has a very rough home life. When I noticed he was struggling to concentrate and behave in class, I arranged for him to receive counseling here at school. I've even visited him at home over the summer to see how he's doing.

### **Editors: What do you find challenging about your job?**

**Peña:** Even though I care deeply about my students and the teachers I work with, my pay is embarrassing. I earn \$8.81 an hour. I have a bachelor's degree, and I am currently getting my master's degree in education from Stetson University, a few minutes away from Citrus Grove. To do what I do—what all paraprofessionals do—takes a lot of knowledge and skill. It's just not right how little we get paid. It's barely more than minimum wage.

To try to fight for better wages, I have gotten involved in my local union, the Volusia Educational Support Organization, which partners with the Volusia Teachers Organization (VTO). And I've gotten to know VTO's president, Andrew Spar. Thanks to him, I had the opportunity to attend the AFT Civil, Human and Women's Rights Conference\* in New Orleans last October, and this year I also served on an internal organizing committee.

To succeed as a paraprofessional, you must be passionate about helping children. For those considering this career, the knowledge that you can change students' lives must be reward enough because people don't get into this line of work for the money.

### **Editors: Tell us about your partnerships with classroom teachers.**

**Peña:** The best classroom teachers treat paraprofessionals like the professionals they are. They are eager to have us work with their students, they acknowledge us when we enter the classroom, and they have everything ready—the students we are going to work with and a designated area of the classroom where we can work.

Classroom teachers know I'll do whatever I can to help. We discuss student learning whenever we can find the time, usually a few minutes after or between classes.

Their respect for me is apparent when I walk into the classroom; teachers are genuinely happy to see me. They will say to the class, "OK, Ms. Peña is here," and then they will direct a few students to sit with me, or they'll say "Ms. Peña, we're working on this." They make me feel like a valuable part of the instructional team. At the end of the day, it's gratifying how much they rely on me.

\*For more on the conference, visit [www.aft.org/news/activists-unite-racial-justice-aft-conference](http://www.aft.org/news/activists-unite-racial-justice-aft-conference).