

Impact

Feature Issue on Paraeducators Supporting Students with Disabilities and At-Risk

Published by the Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD) · Research and Training Center on Community Living

Volume 15 · Number 2 · Fall 2002



Lisa Baldwin (left) and Alayne Pickens (right) are paraeducators who, along with Cynthia Hutten-Eagle, training director, are part of a California program that offers baccalaureate degrees for paraeducators who want to go on to be teachers, particularly in Special Education. See story on page 22.

The Paraeducator's Role on Education Teams: Lessons From Experience

by Chris Harkness

I cannot say that I am entirely comfortable with the title “paraeducator.” In the early days of my career in Winona, Minnesota, that school district stopped calling us “aides” and awarded us the title “instructional support staff.” In Minnesota these days we are typically called “paraprofessionals” or “educational assistants.” Currently in my 19th year of working with educational professionals to facilitate student learning, I do not think of myself as an aide and certainly not as a teacher; nevertheless, I am an educator and I do consider myself a professional. However, this article is not meant to rehash the identity crisis that has plagued our profession. My goal is to offer my perspective on the paraeducator role, and to call attention to some of the logistics of providing qualified non-licensed educational support for students with special needs.

A Common Role in Diverse Settings

One of the reasons it is difficult to choose a one-size-fits-all name for the individuals who help learners learn and teachers teach is the broad array of learner needs and teacher expectations. Found not only in classrooms, paraeducators work in virtually every learning environment from infant care and family respite to adult vocational

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From the Editors

As the educational environment has changed over the past five decades, so have the roles, responsibilities, training, supervision needs, and expectations in relation to those educational personnel originally called “teacher aids” and today referred to as “paraprofessionals” or “paraeducators.” Today’s paraeducators play a much more involved role in instruction than was the case when they were introduced roughly 50 years ago. In addition, with the movement by students with disabilities into inclusive classrooms, paraeducators have become key to the education and participation of those students alongside their nondisabled peers. And paraeducators have become an integral part of school efforts to meet the needs of increasingly diverse learners in a climate of teacher shortages and often-tightening budgets. This issue of *Impact* addresses the growing role of paraeducators by describing some of the challenges to that role and offering some guidance and success stories from around the country in the key areas of training, teamwork, supervision, and professional development. We hope that readers will find ideas and resources in this issue that can help improve the educational infrastructures used to prepare and support paraeducators in their locales, and to enhance the delivery of quality education to our children.

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Paraeducators: The Evolution in Their Roles, Responsibilities, Training, and Supervision

by Anna Lou Pickett

Nationwide there is a growing recognition of the roles of paraeducators as integral members of the instructional process, and the need to develop standards and systems for improving the employment, performance, and preparation of the paraeducator workforce. There are several inter-related reasons for the growing interest in paraeducator issues. In this article, we are focusing on two of the most important issues. The first is the new dimensions that have been

It has been almost 50 years since “teacher aides” were introduced into our nation’s schools to enable teachers to spend more time in planning and implementing instructional activities.

added over the last two decades to the traditionally recognized roles and functions of teachers. The second is the provisions contained in two federal legislative actions. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), includes several sections that impact on paraeducator employment, training, and supervision in Title I. In addition, amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) require states to develop policies and standards to ensure that paraeducators are appropriately trained and supervised. Both of these factors have shaped the evolution in the roles, supervision, and preparation of paraeducators who work in early child-

hood education; elementary, middle, and secondary inclusive general and special education classrooms; Title 1; multi-lingual; and other compensatory programs provided by local education agencies (LEAs) nationwide.

Overview

Paraeducator, paraprofessional, teacher aide/assistant, education technician, transition trainer/job coach, home visitor. These are just a few of the titles assigned to school and other education provider agency employees who have the following characteristics:

- They are supervised by teachers or licensed related services professionals who are responsible for identifying learner needs, designing and implementing programs to meet learner needs, assessing learner performance, and evaluating program effectiveness.
- They assist teachers or related services practitioners with the delivery of instructional or other direct services to children and youth, and/or their families.

It has been almost 50 years since “teacher aides” were introduced into our nation’s schools to enable teachers to spend more time in planning and implementing instructional activities. Initially the duties assigned to teacher aides were primarily routine and included clerical tasks, monitoring learners in non-academic learning environments, maintaining learning centers, duplicating instructional materials, and to a limited extent reinforcing lessons introduced by teachers. Over the last two decades, the work of increasing numbers of researchers has revealed that in contemporary schools the vast majority of paraeducators spend all or part of their time assisting teachers and other licensed

practitioners in different phases of the instructional process or the delivery of other direct services to learners and their parents (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Killoran, Templeman, Peters, & Udell, 2001; Moshoyannis, Pickett, & Granick, 1999; Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Rogan & Held, 1999; Rueda & Monzo, 2000). As a result of these changes in the roles and responsibilities of teacher aides, they have become technicians who are more accurately described as “paraeducators” just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as “paralegals” and “paramedics.”

In addition to amendments to NCLB 2001 and IDEA 1997, there are other issues and trends that have caused policymakers and administrators to increasingly turn to paraeducators to support the program and administrative functions of teachers. They include:

- Continuing efforts to restructure education systems and practices to more effectively serve children and youth with developmental, learning, physical, sensory, and emotional disabilities in general education programs and classrooms (Downing, et al. 2000; Giangreco et al., 1997; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).
- Growing numbers of learners enrolled in LEAs across the country who come from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritages (NCES, 2000; OSEPRS, 2000; Rueda & Monzo, 2000).
- Continuing shortages of licensed/credentialed teachers in virtually all program and subject areas (NCES 1995 & 2000; OSEPRS, 2000).
- Continuing education reform initiatives to empower teachers and redefine their roles to enable them to determine how best to meet the needs of all learners including a) involve-

ment in shared decision making and other school governance activities; b) participation in the alignment of curriculum content with instructional activities to meet higher learning standards for all learners; and c) leadership of multidisciplinary teams with responsibility for planning and implementing education and therapeutic programs for individual learners with disabilities and other special needs (Pickett, in press).

These new program practices and the in-

Paraeducators participate in all aspects of the instructional process and the delivery of related services to children, youth, and families.

creasing team leadership roles for teachers are particularly apparent in the responsibilities of teachers who work in inclusive general and special education classrooms and Title I, multi-lingual, and transition from school to work programs. As a result there has been movement toward differentiated staffing arrangements in various education programs, thus expanding the supervisory functions of teacher (French, 2001; Wallace, et al. 2001).

Teacher and Paraeducator Teams: The Evolving Roles of Paraeducators

The increased reliance on paraeducators and the assignment of more complex responsibilities is inextricably tied to the changes in the program and administrative functions of teachers. Although paraeducators still perform clerical, monitoring, and other routine tasks, in today's schools they participate in all aspects of the instructional process and

the delivery of related services to children, youth, and families. Research conducted by the various investigators cited throughout this article indicates that the vast majority of paraeducators, working under the supervision of teachers and in some cases related services professionals, do the following:

- Engage individual and small groups of learners in instructional activities in classrooms and community-based settings.
- Carry out behavior management and disciplinary plans developed by teachers.
- Assist teachers with functional and other assessment activities.
- Document and provide objective information about learner performance that enables teachers to plan lessons and modify curriculum content and instructional activities to meet needs of individual learners.
- Assist teachers with organizing and maintaining supportive, safe learning environments.
- Assist teachers with involving parents or other caregivers in their child's education.
- Assist nurses, physical and occupational therapists, and speech language pathologists with providing services required by learners with physical, speech, language, and sensory disabilities and chronic health care needs.
- Participate as required in meetings to develop Individual Education Plans, Individual Family Service Plans, and Individual Transition Plans.

The Need for Standards and Infrastructures

Despite the evolution in teacher and paraeducator roles and responsibilities in the delivery of education and other direct services, little attention has been paid to the need for state and local education agencies (SEAs, LEAs) to develop written policies, regulatory procedures,

and systems that will strengthen and improve the performance of education teams. Indeed, until recently opportunities for standardized, continuing training and well-planned supervision linked to on-the-job training for paraeducators have for the most part been afterthoughts in the public policy arena. As a result distinctions in teacher and paraeducator roles are not always clearly defined; paraeducator training, when it is available, is usually unstructured and not competency based, and opportunities for career advancement rarely exist (Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2002). Provisions contained in IDEA 1997 and amendments to the NCLB/ESEA 2001 have caused SEA and LEA policymakers and administrators to begin to develop policies and infrastructures to improve the performance of teacher and paraeducator teams. The next reauthorization of IDEA scheduled for 2003 will in all probability contain similar language to that of the NCLB of 2001, and thus interest in the development of standards for paraeducator roles, preparation, and supervision will continue.

Conclusions

On the surface these new development efforts would appear to be good signs. There are some indications, however, that the approaches being used in many states may not achieve the desired outcomes. In far too many cases, SEAs, feeling under pressure to meet deadlines contained in the NCLB Act of 2001, are rushing to develop standards and systems for paraeducator preparation that may not meet either the letter of the law or its intent, and, perhaps of even greater significance, will not withstand the test of time. Moreover, very few states have started to adequately address the requirements in IDEA of 1997; this is particularly true with regard to the need to develop and implement standards to prepare teachers for their emerging roles as supervisors of paraeducators. Further compounding the problems confronting administrators

[Pickett, continued on page 29]

Federal and State Standards for Paraeducators

by Tish Olshefski

For the past few years, we've struggled through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Now known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the new law includes education standards for paraeducators working in schools that receive Title I funds that go far beyond any previous federal mandate. This is just one example of many federal and state initiatives that hold both promise for increasing the professional stature of

paraeducators" is used here rather than "paraeducator" because it is used in the law) to support instruction in the classroom. For many years, Title I programs mandated training for paraprofessionals. Over the years these mandates were forgotten, overlooked or ignored.

The current incarnation of Title I includes very specific education requirements for paraprofessionals. The education requirements apply to differing groups of paraprofessionals in different ways and on different timelines:

- All paraprofessionals funded by Title I, regardless of their position or responsibilities, must have a high school diploma or GED. The law is silent on a date by which this must be achieved. Paraprofessionals who provide only parent involvement or translation services do not need to meet any requirements beyond this.
- Paraprofessionals working in programs funded by Title I who provide instructional services to students must meet one of three options to ensure ability to provide this service: (1) meet a rigorous standard of quality that demonstrates, through a formal State or local academic assessment, knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing, reading, writing and mathematics (or reading readiness, writing readiness, and mathematics readiness); or (2) have completed at least two years of study at an institution of higher education (the law is silent on content area); or (3) have obtained an associate's or higher degree (again, silent on content area). Paraprofessionals employed after January 8, 2002 must meet one of these three requirements upon employment, while those employed prior to January 8, 2002 have until January 8, 2006 to meet one of these three requirements.

The current law also defines very specific responsibilities paraprofessionals may be assigned. They include providing one-on-one tutoring, assisting with classroom management, providing assistance in a computer lab, conducting parental involvement activities, providing support in a library or media center, acting as a translator, and providing instructional services to students (this specific service must be carried out under the direct supervision of a teacher). Another section of NCLB requires that paraprofessionals working in Even Start Family Literacy Programs must have a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent by December 21, 2004.

Finally, the Department of Education has produced guidance for local education agencies (LEAs) on the scope of the workforce covered by these regulations. Any paraprofessional whose position is directly funded by Title I and who provides instructional support will have to meet these regulations. In a schoolwide project, any paraprofessional providing instructional support services will have to meet these requirements. Neither the nature of the work nor the characteristics of the students served seem to be a mitigating factor for exclusion. This will have an extremely far-reaching impact on paraeducators working with special needs students. There are very few schools in this country that do not receive Title I funds nor many schools that don't provide education to students with special needs.

Another significant piece of legislation for paraeducators is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Reauthorized in 1997, IDEA requires states to establish standards to ensure that paraprofessionals (as well as other personnel) who provide education services to children with disabilities are adequately trained and prepared. Indi-

There are nearly one million paraeducators who do this work simply because of their love of education and their desire to help students learn and grow. All they want is to do the best job possible.

paraeducators and danger of serving as a catalyst for complete elimination of a large portion of the paraeducator workforce. On that dire-sounding note, following is an overview of federal and state regulatory and legislative initiatives that set standards for this important sector of the education workforce.

In Washington

First authorized in 1965, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has gone by various names including Title I, Chapter One, ESEA, and the Improving America's Schools Act. Through all these transformations, this federal legislation has always allowed use of funds for paraprofessionals (the term "paraprofes-

vidual states may have more specific criteria for appropriate roles and responsibilities, but the federal law is not that precise. The current law will go through Congress sometime in the next year, and it is expected that an effort will be made to include education requirements for paraeducators that mirror the language in NCLB.

Lastly, the law establishing Head Start, which serves low-income children from birth to age 5 and their families, though not technically an education program (it is regulated by the Department of Health and Human Services) nevertheless, does set some standards for personnel who support instruction. Staff, specifically content area experts, working with infants and toddlers must obtain a Child Development Associate credential. There are also preservice and inservice training mandates for all staff.

At the State Level

States have always struggled to meet the requirements of the federal mandates described above. Some states established employment and education standards many years ago in response to passage of PL94-142. Others have established standards more recently and for entirely different reasons. Whatever the impetus for their development, the standards themselves are all over the board. It is possible, though, to group them as follows by common factors:¹

- **Standards for Skills/Knowledge, Assignment/Performance, and Training/Education:** Idaho, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Utah, Washington (not mandatory).
- **Standards for Training/Education (*special education only):** Alabama, Arkansas*, Florida (not mandatory), Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii*, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas*, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana*, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina*, Texas, Vermont*, West Virginia, Wisconsin*.

- **Standards for Assignment:** Indiana, New Jersey.
- **Standards in Development:** Oklahoma, Oregon.
- **No Standards Found:** Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, Wyoming.

The standards that exist were developed through a variety of processes – some by enactment of formal legislation, some through the work of task forces and approval of recommendations, still others by issuance of regulations in the absence of a law. Nearly all of them have the driving force of funding issues behind them – funding from the federal or state government to LEAs.

Through Associations

Any synopsis of the range of standards for employment and training of paraeducators wouldn't be complete without a quick look at the standards developed and recommended by various organizations with narrowly defined programmatic or target population interests. They include:

- **International Reading Association.** Provides recommendations on competencies for paraeducators providing support for reading programs (see www.reading.org, or call 302/731-1600).
- **National Association for the Education of Young Children.** Offers Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation (see www.naeyc.org or call 202/328-1846).
- **Council for Exceptional Children/ASPIIRE Project.** Offers recommendations on standards for employment, training, and supervision from its paraprofessional working group report (see <http://www.idea practices.org/resources/index.php> or call 877/232-4332).

- **Education and Training Voluntary Partnership.** Has skill standards that define critical work functions, key activities, performance indicators and related academic, employability and technical/occupational skills and knowledge (see www.etvp.org or call 800/238-1133, x 6326).
- **American Federation of Teachers (AFT).** Distributes *Standards for a Profession*, outlining AFT's views on employment, knowledge, and training criteria for paraprofessionals (see www.aft.org/psrp/standards.html or call 202/879-4400).
- **National Education Association.** Offers resources for improving the working relationships of teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators (see www.nea.org or call 202/833-4000).
- **National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals.** Has criteria for appropriate training for paraeducators, and information on supervision and roles and responsibilities (see www.nrcpara.org or call 435/797-7272).

Conclusion

In my 21 years tracking this issue, I've never seen as much activity and attention paid to paraeducators as in the last two years. Some of it's good, some of it's bad. The federal initiatives driving state (and local) efforts to set standards hold such promise for this profession. There are nearly one million paraeducators who do this work simply because of their love of education and their desire to help students learn and grow. All they want is to do the best job possible.

¹Note: Some state departments of education, when asked, are unaware of the existence of any regulations or recommended policy for paraeducators, even in those states we know have regulations. This list is compiled from various sources, legislative/regulatory searches, and phone surveys. It is as accurate as the information we can track.

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Effective Training for Paraprofessionals

by Marilyn Likins

With the reauthorization of IDEA 97, appropriate training, skill development and supervision of paraprofessionals and teaching assistants⁷ has become a necessity, not an option, for states and school districts. Provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 applied further pressure on states by establishing employment criteria for *all* paraprofessionals working in positions or school-wide programs funded by Title 1. NCLB tied present and future employment of paraprofessionals to a university/community college degree, two years of higher education, or a “rigorous” assessment of knowledge and skills in the areas of reading, writing, math, and readiness skills. Clearly, this most recent round of federal legislation has left states and districts scrambling to assess what personnel development systems they currently have in place, and in most cases, what remains to be developed to ensure their paraprofessional workforce is well-trained, qualified, and effectively supervised. The purpose of this article is to highlight successful training models or options that districts and states might consider as they endeavor to build comprehensive, competency-based systems of personnel development for paraprofessionals and their supervisors.

What Should Be Taught?

When considering training, the first question that must be asked is, “What should be taught?” To be most effective, paraprofessionals should learn knowledge and skills directly related to their job(s). Today, paraprofessionals work with individuals of all ages and in a variety of roles. Their responsibilities may range from instructing learners in individual and small group sessions to assisting with functional assessment activities in the home, classroom, or community. Although paraprofessional responsibilities are role dependent, re-

searchers agree that there exists a common core of knowledge and skill competencies required by all paraprofessionals (Pickett, 1999).

Thanks to federal and state dollars, a number of comprehensive, validated training programs designed specifically for paraprofessionals are now available for districts to purchase and use in individual classrooms, small group sessions, or large inservice workshops. While instructional formats vary, the content in the programs is generally based on a core curriculum that focuses on the specific skills paraeducators must have to work with children and youth of different ages, who have different levels of disabilities, and with different learning needs. Content areas may include:

- Roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals.
- Ethical issues for paraprofessionals.
- Instructional strategies.
- Behavior management practices.
- Basic academic skills (i.e., reading, writing, and math).
- Observing and recording student performance.
- Teaming and communicating with students, teachers, parents, and other colleagues.
- Health issues.
- Working with students with disabilities.

Training packages come in many shapes and sizes but may consist of video/CD-based instruction and vignettes, supported with print materials and student manuals. Other validated, less expensive programs contain instructor and student manuals and supplementary presentation materials such as overheads, handouts, etc. Each of these training options is dependent upon district personnel for implementation and follow-through, although in some cases program developers may be hired as con-

sultants to conduct the training. The following are a few of the resources for further information on validated training programs:

- **National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals.** Web site: www.nrcpara.org. Contacts: Marilyn Likins, Co-Director, 801/599-9708 and Teri Wallace, Co-Director, 612/626-7220.
- **PAR2A Center, University of Colorado.** Web site: <http://paracenter.cudenver.edu>. Contact: Nancy French, Director, 303/556-6464.
- **Project Para Website, University of Nebraska.** Web site: <http://para.unl.edu>. Contact: Stan Vasa, Co-Director, 402/472-5495.
- **Project Impact, TRI-SPED Projects, Utah State University.** Web site: www.trisped.org. Contact: Dave Forbush, Project Director, 435/797-0697.
- **Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium.** Web site: <http://ici2.coled.umn.edu/para/default.html>. Contact: Teri Wallace, 612/626-7220.
- **Paraprofessional Academy, City University of New York (CUNY).** Web site: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/case/paracad/index.htm>. Contact: Thalia Moshoyannia, Project Director, 212/817-1829.
- **Paraeducator Support, Paraeducator and Supervisor Training, University of Vermont.** Web site: www.uvm.edu/~cdci/paraprep/. Contact: Stephen Doll, 802/656-1140.
- **Paraeducator Issues - Washington Education Association.** Web site: www.wa.nea.org/prf_dv/para_edpara.htm. Contact: Jane Robb-Linse, Puget Sound ESD, 206/439-3636.
- **Rhode Island Teaching Assistant Resources.** Web site: www.ric.edu/ritap. Contact: Judith Sccardo, Director, 401/456-4600.

- **Utah Paraprofessional Website.**
Web site: www.utahpara.org. Contact: Marilyn Likins, 801/599-8708.

How is Training Delivered?

Paraprofessional training falls into three categories: on-the-job, inservice, and preservice training. Adequate preservice, inservice, and on-the-job training protects students and maximizes the effectiveness of paraeducators if it is systematically planned and ongoing. Effective training can take many forms such as credit-based courses offered through universities or community colleges, a series of inservice workshops, Web-based training courses, peer mentoring or coaching sessions as well as systematic on-the-job training by a supervisor. However, a word of caution. If paraeducators are to gain knowledge and skills to improve their performance, meaningful training must be much more than a “one-shot, three-hour workshop by a paid consultant.” Such a workshop might be extremely relevant but should be viewed as the first step in a number of coordinated, training efforts that build upon each other in content and follow-up activities.

Several states have created personnel development systems to support training and career development for paraprofessionals. While there are a variety of effective models, Rhode Island’s will be highlighted here. Rhode Island’s teacher assistant training offers a varied, flexible and innovative approach to building personnel development systems for their paraprofessionals or teaching assistants. To become an approved training site for teaching assistants (TAs), a program must meet state standards and be approved by Rhode Island’s State Department of Education (RIDE). To date, RIDE has approved 30 TA training programs operated by districts, community colleges, educational collaboratives, career and technology schools, private agencies, and individuals. A “typical” TA training program is 27 hours across multiple weeks, most include classes and practica, and a num-

ber address portfolio development. The average cost is \$171 although some programs are offered at a reduced cost to employees of the agency or district operating the program. An annual networking session with all approved TA programs helps to keep the content and training consistent and current. The TA programs are surveyed and evaluated yearly to assess consumer satisfaction and assure that training is aligned with the RIDE teaching assistant standards.

What Other Options are Available?

Project Impact, an innovative Webcast network at Utah State University, delivers live, video and audio-based courses nationwide to paraeducators and teachers using Internet technology in a distance education format. Two courses are designed for paraeducators, and a third course is designed to strengthen teams of teachers and paraeducators. Participants can enroll for university credits. The courses are three hours in length, one night a week, for nine weeks of instruction.

Other training options that have emerged for paraprofessional development include independent learning courses that are taught online. One such program is Project PARA developed at the University of Nebraska. Project PARA offers a basic, self-study program for paraprofessionals that can be completed at home, on their own time. Training content is divided into eight units and contains a pre- and post-test, instructional content, and activities that integrate the self-study lessons with application to actual or simulated situations.

Things to Consider

As states and districts explore viable training options for their paraprofessionals, there are a number of questions to be considered, particularly in light of recent federal legislation. For instance, what will the paraprofessional have to show for the training experience? Will there be university or community col-

lege credit offered? If so, can the paraprofessional afford it or are there other funding options available? If training comes in the form of an inservice workshop, is there an agenda, certificate or instructional materials that can become part of a portfolio? Is attendance being documented? In addition, will the training help the paraprofessional to do a better job or is it geared primarily toward teachers? Are there follow-up training sessions or homework assignments linked to the work site? Is the training offered at a time that is practical for the paraprofessional?

Conclusion

In summary, state and local administrators, teachers, and paraeducators must take an active role in determining what works best to meet their unique needs. A “one-size fits all” mentality may not be the answer when designing training programs for paraprofessionals, particularly when faced with their varied backgrounds, experiences and needs. Today’s federal requirements for hiring, training and supervising of paraeducators must also be taken into account when selecting appropriate curriculum and building comprehensive systems of personnel development for paraeducators and their supervisors. Laying the foundation for high quality personnel development requires time and commitment. The end result – better services for students.

*Note: Throughout this article, the terms “paraprofessional,” “paraeducator,” and “teaching assistant” are used interchangeably, and in some cases reflect state preference.

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The Role of Teachers and Administrators in Supervising Paraeducators

by Teri Wallace

“Supervising” is a challenging word to use when referring to teachers and paraeducators and yet, that is exactly what teachers must do – supervise. Policy states it and practice expects it, but still many paraeducators find themselves fairly “unsupervised” and feel a lack of confidence and a lack of job satisfaction because of the uncertainty that exists. One might suggest that the principal or administrator is the supervisor since he or she can hire, terminate, and evaluate. However, the teacher is the person who “directs the day-to-day work” of the paraeducator and, as such provides what some refer to as “instructional supervision.” Whatever the term, it is clear that teachers and administrators have responsibilities when it comes to the supervision of paraeducators in educational settings.

Several studies and opinion pieces have addressed the importance of supervision from as early as 1966, and all agree that given appropriate supervision, paraeducators can perform instructional activities. Currently, legislation emphasizes it and teachers must learn strategies for directing the work of paraeducators. In addition, administrators must promote effective instructional supervisory relationships and create infrastructures that reward teacher-paraeducator teams. We conducted a study in Minnesota to identify and validate competencies needed by teachers who direct the work of paraeducators. This article describes the seven areas within which 30 competencies exist – Communicating with Paraeducators, Managing the Work of Paraeducators, Modeling for Paraeducators, Planning and Scheduling for Paraeducators, Providing Instructional Support for Paraeducators, Public Relations, Training for Paraeducators – and describes the unique role of administrators.

Communicating with Paraeducators

Most people would like a clear understanding of what is expected of them in the workplace, and paraeducators in our nation’s schools are no exception. A busy school professional – especially one with little or no training in supervising paraeducators – could easily be tempted to place a paraeducator with a student, or group of students, with little direction or explanation of expectations or desired outcomes.

To provide the best education or care for students, however, supervisors need to communicate clearly and regularly with the paraeducators. Without clear and regular communication, frustration and disappointment for both the teacher and the paraeducator are likely to result. The problem in a lot of schools is that many school professionals have not learned or been taught the communication skills required to direct the work of another adult. Teachers must know the principles of effective communication, and how to use these communication skills to provide paraeducators with the daily direction they need to do their jobs.

In addition to general communication skills, training teachers in the principles of teamwork and team building would be of great benefit to both the teacher and the paraeducator. With training in communication and team building skills, the teacher can establish a team where the teacher and the paraeducator work together for the benefit of the students they serve.

A team that meets regularly provides the paraeducator with the opportunity to express concerns, offer opinions, and ask for clarification of roles, duties, and goals. Teams with clearly defined roles and regularly scheduled meetings can experience many advantages, not the least of which include increased job

satisfaction, reduced tension, improved job performance, and self-confidence.

Managing the Work of Paraeducators

Few teachers can be placed in a classroom without having learned the classroom management techniques required to develop lessons, deliver instruction, and assess students. Many teachers, however, find themselves ill-equipped to manage the work of another adult – the paraeducator – because they have received little or no formal training in supervisory methods, either as part of their teacher education or from their school or district. Managing or supervising paraeducators involves more than informing them about what needs to be done or how to do it. It involves several key functions, shared between the teacher and the administrator:

- **Orientation.** Supervisors need to arrange for paraeducators to be welcomed and oriented to the school upon arrival.
- **Providing a Job Description and Clarifying Roles.** It is critical that supervisors provide paraeducators with job descriptions and review them with the paraeducators so that they understand their roles and responsibilities. As part of this discussion, supervisors need to clarify that certain activities are to remain the responsibility of the teacher or licensed professional. These include instructional planning, adapting curriculum, designing accommodations, and communicating with families.
- **Evaluating Performance.** Supervisors will be responsible for evaluating paraeducator performance. As part of this, supervisors need to inform paraeducators when they can expect a formal performance review, who

will perform it, and what the likely outcomes of the review will be.

- **Informing Paraeducators of Training Opportunities.** Good supervisors inform paraeducators of training opportunities and encourage them to pursue further training.
- **Providing Ongoing Supervision and Direction.** Supervisors should not expect paraeducators to work independently. It is up to the supervisor to assign activities and responsibilities and to coordinate regular interaction and communication with the paraeducator.

If teachers are not informed of what is expected of them as supervisors, many of these responsibilities could easily be overlooked or fall through the cracks. To ensure that students with disabilities receive the best care and education possible, proper supervision and management of paraeducators is required.

Modeling for Paraeducators

Teachers and others who direct the work of paraeducators serve as models for the paraeducators who work with them. The Minnesota Paraeducator Consortium has identified for educators three competencies for modeling behavior for paraeducators. A teacher demonstrating the first competency models for the paraeducator a caring and respectful manner when interacting with students. The teacher or therapist might not realize that the paraeducator is observing him or her and is, consciously or unconsciously, noting the teacher's actions and attitude as the correct and proper way to interact with students.

The second competency involves modeling behavior that is trustworthy, cooperative, and positive. Not only will the paraeducators observe, and learn from, a teacher's interaction with students, but also the way he or she works with other school specialists and school administrators.

The third competency involves modeling respect, patience, and persistence in carrying out educational objectives.

Teachers are certain to encounter challenges, disruptions, and delays in their day-to-day activities. How they respond to these issues will be observed by others in the classroom. The instructional strategies used by the teachers should be modeled to paraeducators. This is a useful way to provide on-the-job training when appropriately implemented.

Planning and Scheduling for Paraeducators

To effectively work with paraeducators to meet the set educational objectives for students with special needs, school professionals need to know how to plan and schedule the work of the paraeducators who work with them. Delegation is the primary skill involved in planning and scheduling for paraeducators. This can present a problem for many teacher-paraeducator teams since, of all the tasks and responsibilities involved in supervising a paraeducator, directing and delegating are two of the tasks teachers are likely to resist most. Teachers resist delegating for a variety of reasons. Some are uncomfortable being "the boss" and others fear losing control over the tasks for which they are ultimately responsible. Paraeducators working for supervisors who are poorly trained or unskilled in delegating run the risk of feeling like they must prepare their own plans and schedules or they may be assigned tasks that are really the responsibility of the professional. Tasks such as adapting lessons, assessing students, and consulting with other professionals should not fall to the paraeducator simply because the professional failed to plan and delegate appropriately.

Because it is neither effective for school professionals to plan for a paraeducator "on-the-fly," nor appropriate for paraeducators to plan for themselves, school professionals need to acquire the necessary skills to best direct the work of paraeducators. A supervisor who knows how to delegate, plan, and schedule will be best prepared to incorporate the work of a paraeducator into the educational goals of students.

Providing Instructional Support for Paraeducators

In recent years, legislation, tight school budgets, and teacher shortages have caused schools to rely increasingly on the work of paraeducators to assist students with special needs. Paraeducators have seen their responsibilities increasing and changing from general support activities – such as general clerical tasks and monitoring students – to delivering instruction to individual students or groups of students. Although busy school professionals may be tempted to hastily inform paraeducators of daily lesson plans, and may even be tempted to leave paraeducators to design their own work plans, paraeducators, like any other staff member, will be more productive and have increased job satisfaction if they are fully supported in their instructional and therapeutic work.

While teachers and other school professionals may understand that it is their responsibility to plan and schedule for paraeducators, it might not occur to them to make time to provide regular, constructive feedback either in the classroom or in a meeting setting. This is particularly important for those paraeducators who work in independent settings (e.g. job coach). Similarly, teachers might believe it is quicker to do all the instructional planning without seeking the input or assistance of the paraeducator, not realizing that they are overlooking an opportunity to acquire important information that could benefit the student's education, and to make the paraeducator feel more valued.

Likewise, when those directing the work of paraeducators take the time and make the effort to notify other school personnel of the paraeducator role in meeting set educational objectives, they open the door to input and advice from other school specialists who can provide additional support to the paraeducators.

Finally, there is, perhaps, no better way to show respect for the work a paraeducator does than to manage and organize the resources paraeducators need to do their jobs. Planning and

[Wallace, continued on page 30]

Teamwork: Key to Success for Teachers and Paraeducators

by Kent Gerlach

The changing landscape of public education has had a significant impact on the roles of the personnel who serve in our schools. Teacher shortages, increasing numbers of English language learners, and the rising enrollment of students with disabilities and other special needs are just some of the factors that make the need for a dynamic school team more necessary than ever (Gerlach, 2002). To be successful, teachers and paraeducators must view themselves as teams and partners in the educational process.

A common thread across definitions of teams is that teamwork can be defined as a process among partners who share mutual goals and work together to achieve the goals. Teamwork allows people to discuss their work together and, as a result, to grow professionally. Input from all team members needs to be solicited. Questions need to be asked and answered. Ideas need to be shared. Teamwork doesn't happen by accident. It requires effort and commitment, and a willingness to accept the challenges of working together.

Team effectiveness can be achieved by sharing expectations with one another, by allowing the paraeducator to participate in the planning process, by appreciating each other's unique personality traits, by respecting diversity, and by demonstrating a positive attitude toward teamwork. Once a team works well together, the job is less stressful, more enjoyable, more rewarding for all team members, and results in greater benefit to students.

Characteristics of New Teams

According to a review of research on team effectiveness done by Abelson and Woodman (1983), a team that has just formed usually has some or all of the following characteristics:

- There is considerable confusion as to roles that team members must assume.
- There is confusion as to the social and professional relationships among members of the team.
- Individuals have some assets or competencies relative to the team's purpose. However, some people may be unaware of how their skills or knowledge relate to team goals. Perhaps more importantly, some individuals may be unaware of (or may not value) the strengths and competencies of others, or may not appreciate their relationship to team goals.
- While there may be some understanding of short-range goals (e.g., why the team was brought together), understanding of long-range goals is likely to be more elusive.
- In the absence of established norms, rules or policies, there is considerable confusion about how the team will operate, how decisions will be made, and so on.
- Team members (and particularly leaders) do not pay much early attention to social and professional relationships, being more likely to focus initially on the task.

These characteristics are important for us to consider when focusing on the teacher-paraeducator team.

Goals and Effectiveness

If a team is to be effective, all members must have a clear understanding of and agreement on the team goals. The elements of a goal include (a) what is to be achieved; (b) a measure of accomplishment – how we will know when the outcome has been reached; and, (c) the time factor – when we want to have the goal

completed. The goals of the team must be developed with input from all team members, and roles and responsibilities of both teacher and paraeducator in achieving the goals must be clearly defined. Several factors need to be considered in determining these roles and responsibilities. They include experience, training, comfort level, time constraints, and knowledge levels of individual team members. Together, the teacher and other professional practitioners and the paraeducator determine what needs to be done, by whom, and by when, clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

Leadership is a critical factor for team success in achieving goals. The leader is always the teacher or another school professional who has been designated as the paraeducator's supervisor. The supervisor's role is similar to that of a coach. It involves assessing the paraeducator's skills and helping the paraeducator use them to the fullest. Paraeducators contribute more effectively when they are "coached" and encouraged to make optimal use of their strengths and resources. A supervisor provides direction and ideas, helps identify alternatives, raises questions, and supplies feedback. One way to understand that role is through the mentoring model.

The Supervisor as Mentor

The teacher who mentors paraeducators shares invaluable knowledge and skills. Mentoring is a process whereby teachers and paraeducators work together to discover and develop paraeducators' abilities, and to provide paraeducators with knowledge and skills as opportunities and needs arise. The teacher as a supervisor, mentor, and team leader should do the following:

- Set expectations of paraeducator performance.
- Offer challenging plans and ideas.
- Help build self-confidence of the paraeducator.
- Encourage ethical and professional behavior.
- Offer support.
- Actively listen.
- Lead and teach by example.
- Provide growth experiences.
- Ask questions and give explanations.
- Coach the paraeducator.
- Encourage the paraeducator.
- Inspire the paraeducator.
- Share critical knowledge.
- Assist, observe, and demonstrate effective instructional practice.
- Direct and delegate effectively.
- Give clear, concise directions.

Teachers and paraeducators must view themselves as teams and partners in the education process.

A mentor models and demonstrates effective practice; uses good communication strategies, showing both respect and recognition; and lays the foundation for building trust in teams.

Trust and Team Success

Trust between team members is necessary to a productive working environment, and trust is built in teams by promoting open communication, providing fair leadership, and supervising with sensitivity (Pickett & Gerlach, in press).

It is essential for all team members to practice open, honest communication in order to increase awareness and build cooperation. Effective communication expresses a team member's beliefs,

ideas, needs or feelings. Communication must facilitate the free flow or exchange of ideas, information, and instruction that contribute to common understanding. When ideas are shared, there is opportunity for evaluation and input that can build even better ideas. From each new experience, more ideas can be developed and tried. All team members also need to develop listening skills so that they can obtain sufficient and accurate information necessary for an effective working relationship. Successful communication results in a mutual understanding of what was sent and what was heard. This component of trust promotes loyalty and commitment to achieve the goals of the team.

Closely related to this is fair leadership. A fair leader gives open, honest feedback and sets the tone for constructive dialog among team members.

Complementing fairness is sensitivity. A leader who supervises with sensitivity provides team members with leadership support that acknowledges the value of each paraeducator's contribution to team success, as well as the diverse needs of each team member.

Conclusion

Tying together all these elements, the following questions can be used to assess the effectiveness of teacher and paraeducator teams:

- Do all team members understand team goals?
- Are all team members committed to these goals?
- Are team members concerned about and interested in each other?
- Do team members have the emotional maturity to acknowledge and confront conflict openly?
- Do team members listen to others with openness and understanding?
- Do all team members value one another's contributions?
- Do team members feel comfortable contributing ideas and solutions?

- Do team members recognize and reward team performance?
- Do team members encourage and appreciate comments about team efforts?
- Are team meetings held at a specific time?
- Is leadership effective?
- Is constructive feedback given freely to improve decision-making?
- Is information shared willingly?
- Are team members willing to communicate their concerns?

The interdependent working relationship of today's paraeducators, teachers, and principals is often like a jigsaw puzzle. Unfortunately, they don't have a picture on the front of a box to know what the puzzle is supposed to look like when it's finished. Sometimes they don't even have all the pieces. That's why, in today's education climate, the most successful schools operate as a team. When paraeducators, teachers, and principals team up to connect the pieces of the puzzle, students are the ultimate beneficiaries.

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How Paraeducators Can Improve Systems

by Teri Wallace

Have you ever heard paraeducators say in response to the challenges they face in their profession, “But what can I do?” It is true that sometimes the issues they face can feel “too big to tackle” and yet there are many paraeducators who are having a huge impact on their own situations and the systems that affect their work. This article provides some examples of what paraeducators can do when they feel like they would like to have an impact or improve something specific. The experiences of paraeducators are important to consider in decision-making by educational systems at the state, district and school levels. If you are a paraeducator, we hope you will consider getting involved. If you supervise paraeducators, we hope you will encourage them to get involved and support their participation.

Serving on Committees

There are many committees, task forces, ad hoc groups and consortia that exist for a variety of purposes, and it is important that paraeducators are involved to ensure their voices are heard and their opinions considered.

In many states, paraeducators provide leadership on state level committees, providing guidance to the individuals who are creating state policy, helping to develop infrastructures for training and preparation, and sharing information about activities related to paraeducators statewide. Learning about these opportunities can usually occur by contacting the state education agency.

In addition to state level groups, there are also district and school level groups. Paraeducators might consider joining staff development committees, site councils, and other committees and groups to ensure their ideas and opinions are brought to the table and shared.

Identifying Training Needs and Opportunities

Many paraeducators work with administrators to secure training opportunities. A good way to show a need for training is to conduct a needs assessment. This can be a simple five or six question survey asking paraeducators in an area if they feel prepared for their daily responsibilities, if they feel they could use more training, what topics would be most useful in their work with students, and if they are facing any challenges for which they think training might help. Summarizing the results of the needs assessment and sharing it with decision-makers can help to support a specific request. Securing input from teachers is a good way to get additional support for training goals and plans. Using data and stories to illustrate and support requests is a useful strategy. Sometimes decision-makers reject requests because they simply do not understand enough about the situation. Information representing a group of people can often have more influence on changing the system than the individual experience of one person.

Sharing Information

Often times paraeducators do not believe they have information to share with others when, in fact, they do. Presenting at local and state conferences is a great way to share knowledge and experience with others, and to network with paraeducators working in other schools, districts or states. In addition, sharing information with coworkers or being a mentor to a new paraeducator can benefit both parties.

Some paraeducators have the gift of storytelling or writing. Finding an outlet for this type of expression can also be beneficial. Telling stories can make a difference to a child, an administrator, or a legislator. Expressing views and sharing experiences is an important way to add information to a situation.

Active participation in professional associations, unions, and other groups organized around a topic or issue can be a very rewarding way of making a difference. These groups often have particular strategies for influencing change and ensuring an impact. They typically have conferences, newsletters, Web sites, and other avenues for getting and sharing information.

Creating New Initiatives

Some paraeducators have started new programs and initiatives. For example, starting a mentor program for new paraeducators in their district and receiving the support and funding for it from district administrators. Or, beginning a fund for children whose families do not have enough money to buy school supplies or go on a field trip. Or, establishing a training program for paraeducators by working with a team of paraeducators and teachers to design and implement a plan to do so. These are all real situations and the unique quality in the paraeducators involved was the passion they felt. Not everyone can or should or wants to start a new program, but it's good to know that the option exists.

Summary

Paraeducators are increasingly becoming more and more active in helping to create and improve the systems in which they work, whether in big or small ways. There are many roles they can take, important messages they need to share, and huge impact they can have.

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Resources for Paraeducator Development

The following resources offer information that may be of use in enhancing the role of paraeducators in preK-12 education settings. For further information about each, contact the sources cited.

- **Supporting Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Schools: A Curriculum for Job-Embedded Paraprofessional Development.** By G. Ghare, J. York-Barr, and J. Sommersness. Published by the Institute on Community Integration, this new curriculum is a tool for special educators to use in training paraeducators who provide direct instructional and social support to students. Topics include instructional strategies in prompting, waiting, and fading; natural cues, consequences and supports; and individualized adaptations. It also addresses behavior as communication, definitions of inclusive education, and student relationships. The facilitator manual includes instructional content as well as master copies of materials to be duplicated for paraprofessionals in the training sessions. Available from the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 612/624-4512 or <http://ici.umn.edu>.
- **Strategies for Paraprofessionals Who Support Individuals with Disabilities Curriculum Series.** The six modules in this curriculum series for training paraprofessionals in educational settings address the following topics: The Paraprofessional – An Introduction; Providing Cross-Cultural Support Services to Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families; Positive Behavior Strategies for Paraprofessionals; Early Childhood – The Role of the Paraprofessional; Transition – The Role of the Paraprofessional; and Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. The introductory module is designed to precede the others; the remaining five are stand-alones that can be used in any sequence and combination. The series includes facilitator modules and student modules (student modules may be duplicated). Available from the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 612/624-4512 or <http://ici.umn.edu>.
- **National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals.** The center offers training events and materials for paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators; technical assistance to facilitate development of state and local systems and infrastructures that support the work of paraprofessionals; publishes a newsletter and Web site; and sponsors an annual national conference. For more information visit the Web site at <http://www.nrpara.org> or call 435/797-7272.
- **National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources Web Site (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html>).** This resource operated by the Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research at the University of Southern California offers an extensive collection of full-text articles online addressing various aspects of the paraeducator role in education, abstracts from the ERIC Database on paraeducators, a description of numerous paraeducator-to-teacher career ladder programs, additional paraeducator resources, and an opportunity to subscribe to a listserv electronic discussion forum on paraeducators.
- **National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education Web site (<http://www.special-ed-careers.org>).** The Web site contains information on the nature of paraeducator work, education required, personal qualities, job outlook and advancement, preparation, and additional resources.
- **Supervising Paraeducators in School Settings: A Team Approach.** Edited by A.L. Pickett and K. Gerlach. In this newly-published text is practical information and activities for preparing teachers, speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, and administrators to work effectively with paraeducators in educational settings. It includes guidelines and strategies for improving performance, management, staff development, and professional advancement opportunities. Available from Pro-Ed Publishing, Austin, Texas, 800/897-3202 or 512/451-3246.
- **IDEAPractices Web site (<http://www.ideapractices.org>).** The Web site is designed to answer questions and provide information about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and support efforts to help all children learn. A search of the site by the term “paraprofessional” yields over 50 resources, including *IDEA Partnerships Paraprofessional Initiative – Report to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs*; the *SpeNSE Fact Sheet – The Role of Paraprofessionals in Special Education*; *IDEA Practices – Knowledge and Skills for Teachers Supervising the Work of Paraprofessionals*; and *The Paraprofessional’s Guide to the Inclusive Classroom*.
- **Students with Disabilities and Paraprofessional Supports: Benefits, Balance, and Band-aids.** By M. Giangreco and M.B. Doyle (2002). Published in *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 34(7). The article, based on review of current paraprofessional literature and issues, addresses five contemporary questions tied to improvement of paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities. For each it offers pertinent information from the literature and implications for practice. It also challenges readers to evaluate whether existing and proposed actions truly accomplish what is intended for students with disabilities.

Paraeducator Certification: Iowa's System

by Susan Simon

Paraeducators in Iowa can now receive specific, focused training in their local communities, and be acknowledged for their education by the state. During the 1990s stakeholders across the state – paraeducators, teachers, administrators, parents, and staff of the Department of Education and the Board of Educational Examiners – were concerned about the status of paraeducators, and the lack of training they received. They worked cooperatively for over a decade to bring about a law creating a voluntary certification system. It outlines the competencies needed by all paraeducators, and also establishes an infrastructure for recognizing mastery of the general competencies as well as higher levels of competencies in specific areas. This article describes the activities that led to certification, the specific components of the law, the process for approving programs, and outcomes of the certification movement.

Awareness

In the early 1990s, awareness of paraeducator issues in Iowa was limited. Some individuals expressed concerns about the changing role of paraeducators. There were pockets of uncoordinated activity. Several area education agencies, local school districts, and community colleges provided training. As the numbers of paraeducators grew and their assignments changed from working primarily in special education settings to working increasingly in general education classes, more administrators and parents became aware of the critical importance of paraeducators.

Deborah Hansen, a consultant for the Iowa Department of Education, provided special leadership and advocacy within the department and throughout the state for paraeducator training and recognition. She provided technical assistance to local and area education agencies and community colleges, held

forums for discussions, created pilot projects, and supported sharing of materials and training techniques in state-wide and regional conferences. She also spoke to policymakers.

Needs Assessment

In 1995, the Iowa Department of Education conducted focus group meetings surveying paraeducators, general and special education teachers, administrators, support and related services personnel, and parents. The groups represented individuals from rural and urban areas in a variety of educational settings across Iowa. According to the *Paraprofessional Needs Assessment Project Focus Group Assessment Results*, the respondents felt that paraeducators performed a variety of roles that were becoming increasingly complex. Some paraeducators stated that their responsibilities were defined in written job descriptions, but others reported that they had only vague, generic or no job descriptions. Paraeducators were often trained on-the-job by teachers or occasionally attended training designed for teachers; they did not feel training was adequate.

The needs assessment not only documented concerns, it raised awareness of the critical role of paraeducators in education. In 1996, representatives from local and area education agencies and community colleges began meeting, under the direction of the Department of Education and the Board of Educational Examiners, to discuss improving the services to paraeducators statewide. This group of stakeholders constituted a consortium seeking to enhance the skill and training of paraeducators.

The Guide

The stakeholders contributed to the *Guide for Effective Paraeducator Practice in Iowa* (1998), which was distributed widely across Iowa. Beginning with a

statement of beliefs and vision, this publication outlines state and federal rules and regulations, and is a resource for developing guidelines for paraeducator practice and staff development. Recommendations for improving paraeducator services and specific suggestions for paraeducators in special education settings are included.

The guide lists core competencies for all paraeducators, and specific competencies for working in early intervention/childhood or home instruction; inclusive classrooms and programs for children and youth with special needs; and vocational training programs. Helpful tools include a “Suggested Checklist for Principals” and “A Family Guide to Paraeducator Services.”

The guide became a valuable resource for educators and a framework for effective practice. This led to the development of pilot projects and models for training paraeducators and teachers that were shared at local, regional, and state conferences and meetings.

Requirements

Stakeholder efforts, highlighting the need for state recognition, culminated in June 2000, when the governor signed legislation creating the Iowa Paraeducator Certification. The law specifies competencies for Level I Generalist Certification and Level II Areas of Concentration. Paraeducators may also obtain Advanced Certification.

The Level I Generalist Certification requires successful completion of at least 90 clock hours of training in behavior management, exceptional child and at-risk child behavior, collaboration and interpersonal relations skills, child and youth development, technology, and ethical responsibilities and behavior. Under the direction and supervision of a qualified classroom teacher, the paraeducator will be able to complete 32 specific tasks under the categories of:

- Support a safe, positive, teaching and learning environment.
- Assist in the development of physical and intellectual development.
- Support social, emotional, and behavioral development.
- Establish positive and productive relations.
- Integrate effectively the technology to support student learning.
- Continually practice ethical and professional standards of conduct.

Level II Areas of Concentration Certification may only be obtained by those who hold Generalist Certification. Paraeducators must complete at least 45 clock hours in each desired area of concentration: early childhood, special education, limited English proficiency, and career and transition. For Level II Advanced Certification, paraeducators must have an associate degree or have earned 62 hours at an institution of higher education. In addition they must complete a minimum of two semester hours of coursework involving at least 100 clock hours of supervised practicum with children or youth in an educational setting. The practicum may be part of an associate degree.

Approved Programs

The Iowa Board of Educational Examiners and the Iowa Department of Education work together to recognize and approve paraeducator training programs. Through rules, the Board of Educational Examiners establishes levels, standards, and competencies. Local school districts, area education agencies, community colleges, or other institutions of higher education submit documentation of their programs for approval to the Department of Education. Once a program is approved, each institution designates a certifying official who verifies that paraeducators meet all the program requirements. When paraeducators finish Iowa-approved paraeducator training programs, they apply for certification from the Board of Educational

Examiners. The Department of Education has recognized and approved paraeducator preparation programs in 11 area education agencies and five community colleges. Several area education agencies developed cooperative training plans. Statewide, paraeducators receive instruction through a variety of methods including distance education.

In 1999, Kirkwood Community College received a Personnel Preparation Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education. The goal of the Making a Difference grant is to increase the quality and quantity of related services personnel. The project promotes the training and certification of paraeducators who are currently working in schools. In order to increase the scope of the project, the grant also provides support to six community colleges that are replicating the project in their communities. These efforts coordinate with training offered by area education agencies.

The Future

Although Iowa is in the very early stages, over 150 certificates have been issued and the interest in paraeducator certification is increasing. School districts are supportive of the training and, despite tight budgets, many are providing additional salary for paraeducators who complete their certification.

Paraeducators take pride in their work, are interested in learning, and in enhancing their professionalism. Children and their families are the ultimate beneficiaries of trained, skilled, and certified paraeducators.

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A Teacher's View of Certification

In the past, teachers were assigned an associate/teacher's aide. They would often not meet each other until the first day of school, there was no time to train the aide outside of the time with the children, and what was taught was inconsistent and depended on the teacher. Other professionals did not recognize the importance of the associate position, though special education teachers knew paraeducators were and still are essential in special education; teachers would not be as effective without them, and students depend on them for assistance in various ways all day long. They are the teacher's right hand.

The certification classes now available in Iowa give basic information to paraeducators, which allows them all equal footing as they start their various positions. Learning about roles and responsibilities, confidentiality, and observational skills gives paraeducators valuable tools for working in the classroom and assists in developing a partnership between the teacher and the paraeducator. The classes result in informed assistants who understand the special education process, and why certain things must be done such as IEPs, data collection, and parent meetings.

The paraeducators who take the time to obtain certification bring themselves and their profession respect and recognition. Paraeducators are indispensable and I, as a teacher, could not do what I do without the paraeducators who work with me.

Contributed by Mary Craven, Special Education Teacher, Cedar Rapids Community School District. Pictured are Mary and two paraeducators who work with her: Shirley Matheny and Lise Enoksen-Pease.

Improving Paraeducator Supports Through Schoolwide Action Planning in Vermont

by Michael F. Giangreco, Julie Benay, Mary Smith, and Mary Beth Doyle

Over a period of many years Swanton Elementary School, in rural northwestern Vermont, has developed a well-earned reputation for being an inclusive school. It's a place where classroom teachers, special educators, paraeducators, administrators, parents, and students work together to create a welcoming and supportive learning community that strives to meet the needs of students with a wide variety of characteristics. Part of what makes Swanton Elementary successful is leadership that encourages critical self-reflection and continual improvement. So it wasn't surprising that when an opportunity arose for Swanton Elementary to examine their paraeducator supports with a critical eye toward self-improvement, they embraced the challenge.

A mini-grant from the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, University of Vermont, provided Swanton Elementary, along with over 40 other schools nationally, with the opportunity to field test *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports*. This workbook (available online at <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport/guide.html>) offered a 10-step process to guide the school's work. The steps included the following:

- Inform your local school board of your intention to establish a team, or use an existing team, to address paraeducator issues.
- Ensure that the team includes the appropriate members of the school and local community.
- Have the team assess their own status and fact-find in relation to the six paraeducator topics: Acknowledging Paraeducators; Orienting and Training Paraeducators; Hiring and Assigning Paraeducators; Paraeducator Interactions with Students and Staff; Roles and Responsibilities of Para-

educators and Others; and Supervision and Evaluation of Paraeducator Services.

- Prioritize and select topics and specific issues that reflect areas of need within the school that the team will work on first.
- Update your local school board on the team's ranked priorities.
- Design a plan to address the team's ranked priorities.
- Identify local, regional, and statewide resources to assist in achieving team plans.
- Implement the team's plans.
- Evaluate the plan's impact and plan next steps.
- Report impact and needs to your local school community.

During the 2000-01 school year Swanton Elementary formed a Paraeducator Planning Team that included paraeducators, special educators, general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, a school board member, and the assistant principal. They followed the guide's steps to self-assess their paraeducator practices, identify priorities, and develop a plan to improve their paraeducator supports. Throughout the remainder of the school year, and into 2001-2002, they implemented the plan and began to evaluate its impact. Their plan of action, based on self-selected priorities, included these five components:

- Development and distribution of a paraeducator handbook.
- Establishment of a new set of meeting structures: (a) bi-monthly meetings of the full paraeducator staff, (b) monthly meetings between special educators and paraeducators, and (c) paraeducator "team leaders" to coincide with the school's organization into grade level teams.

- Training of paraeducators using the course materials, *Supporting Students with Challenging Behaviors: A Paraeducator Curriculum* (Backus & CichoskiKelly (2001).
- Organization of a teacher-guided initial file review process at the outset of the school year to familiarize paraeducators with students' characteristics, goals, supports, and accommodations.
- Creation of a professional development bulletin board along with an application process for paraeducators to apply for workshops and course attendance.

After putting their plans into action for the better part of a school year, the Paraeducator Planning Team surveyed and interviewed members of the school community in an effort to answer the following question: In what ways are students with disabilities better off because of the paraeducator supports we have implemented through our paraeducator action planning? It is always difficult to directly attribute changes in student outcomes to the actions taken as a result of planning efforts, such as in this case the school's participation in paraeducator action planning. Yet there was a general consensus within the school community that the new supports they had put in place as a result of their paraeducator action planning were being utilized, were perceived as "helpful in impacting student learning," and had a "strong effect" that contributed to overall school improvement. For example, paraeducators reported that the new handbook helped clarify job responsibilities and establish shared expectations, offered a common language, and provided consistent guidelines. As one paraeducator commented, "If I understand my job and responsibilities, I can better work with students." The

initial file review process was seen as beneficial in helping the paraeducators know more about the students. As another paraeducator shared, “Last year I did not have access to IEPs. This year I am clearer on who the students are and what their goals are.” As a result of the course taught by the school psychologist on supporting students with challenging behaviors, one paraeducator noted, “The impression of those paraprofessionals who supervise the playground indicates that the playground has become a more orderly and safe environment for students.”

Classroom teachers and special educators commented on some of the other innovations. As a special educator stated, “The monthly meetings have been positive. They give the paraeducators a chance to ask questions... they learn about the ‘why’ of what they are being asked to do.” Another mentioned, “Paraprofessionals are getting the awareness of the smaller steps that are needed to break skills down so children can access the learning.” A speech-language pathologist commented, “There is a sense that we [teaching faculty] are ‘reachable’. I’ve had an increase in [paraeducators] asking me questions.”

The assistant principal reported that although the innovations they put in place were generally perceived positively, there was still work to be done so that they are used more consistently and incrementally improved. For example, some paraeducators reported that “there was not adequate time to review all the student files” and that “some teachers did not use the time for file review.” This paraeducator feedback highlights aspects of the school’s action plan that can be improved. In a summary report about the school’s participation in this project, the assistant principal wrote the following comment: “Those who did do a file review felt that the information was helpful, but some suggested that we need to follow-up [later in the year] once the paraeducators are have been working with the students and have gotten to know them better. There should be time for the paraeducators and the teachers

to review progress and see what the new goals are [for the next part of the year].” In the same report the assistant principal wrote, “... we have seen a positive impact on the school climate, atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration, empowerment of paraprofessionals, and overall communication as a result of our efforts to improve support for paraprofessionals. While we cannot assume that these changes have had or will have a direct impact on student behavior and achievement, we are confident that our efforts are having a positive effect on our school. We are committed to continuing the process begun through this project.”

Swanton Elementary is continuing on its path of self-reflection and incremental improvement, striving to make a good school even better. If you are interested in learning more about schoolwide paraeducator action planning or finding information about other paraeducator topics, check out our project Web sites at <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport/> and <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/paraprep/> or call 802/656-1144.

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Note: Partial support for the preparation of this article was provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services under the funding category, Model Demonstration Projects for Children and Youth with Disabilities, CFDA 84.324M (H324M980229), awarded to the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont. The contents reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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Mary’s Story: Wearing Two Hats

I wear two hats in the Swanton schools. I am a paraprofessional at the elementary school and I am also the mother of two children who have Individualized Education Plans. As a result of our school’s paraeducator action planning, the training and support I have received have greatly affected my ability to perform my duties. The paraprofessional handbook we developed is a useful resource, with information about everything from sick time to lunchroom duties and playground issues. As part of the action plan we also have meetings with the special education teachers, which help me to know how to meet student needs and try different approaches. And we meet with other paraprofessionals to help each other figure things out and share ideas. These meetings have helped me realize I’m not the only one facing the same problems. The training on supporting children with challenging behaviors has been very helpful, as well. I’ve gained strategies to help avoid difficult situations. I tried these strategies at home with my own children, who are five and nine, and have been surprised how quickly and easily a meltdown can be avoided.

I would have to say that the training and support have helped me to not only help my students, but also my own children. I feel I know more about what I can expect in my own children’s IEPs and how to be an effective advocate.

Contributed by Mary Smith, Paraeducator, Swanton Schools.

Paraeducator Peer-Mentoring: Working Together for Student Success in Washington

by Beverly Mathews

Paraeducators play an important role in the support of at-risk students. Under the supervision of certified/licensed staff, paraeducators work to increase student learning and to help students reach their established goals. As members of the team that focuses on the academic, behavioral and social growth of all students, paraeducators often work with many students and staff members throughout the day. Roles and responsibilities of paraeducators vary depending on their job assignments and who they are working with. Communication difficulties, problem-solving skills, instructional strategies, behavior management concerns and role clarification are just a few of the challenges paraeducators face daily. Meeting these challenges is a difficult task for all paraeducators, but especially for ones that are newly hired. One effective way for administrators to meet the needs of new paraeducators is through a mentoring program. The goal of this article is to share the value of offering peer-mentoring for paraeducators and share some information about one specific mentoring program that has been used successfully in the Pacific Northwest.

The Purpose of a Paraeducator Mentoring Program

A paraeducator peer-mentoring program offers districts an opportunity to assist staff to better meet state and district goals. New paraeducators often have little or no training or experience when they begin working with our most challenging students. In a mentoring program, a beginning paraeducator is paired with a more established and experienced paraeducator, who can offer his/her expertise, encouragement, modeling and support. The supportive professional relationship continues throughout the first year of employ-

ment. The specific goals of such a mentoring program are as follows:

- To support new paraeducators in the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to meet district and state goals.
- To increase knowledge of instructional and behavioral intervention strategies that promote student achievement.
- To increase collaboration and employee job satisfaction, and decrease isolation of paraeducators.
- To maximize the recruitment and retention of quality paraeducators.

The role of a mentor is one of encouragement and support. Mentors can help new paraeducators to feel valued and part of a team. They help by modeling an attitude of professionalism, constant learning, creativity, and flexibility. They support new paraeducators by helping them become familiar with other school staff and the location of supplies. Mentors are able to model and share useful strategies and also to provide the newer paraeducators with up-to-date information about ongoing training.

A well-organized and supervised peer-mentoring program increases collaboration and decreases isolation of paraeducators. It improves the quality of the paraeducator's work with both students and staff, helping the paraeducator feel and be more competent and confident. Districts that have peer-mentoring programs find recruitment and retention of competent, well-trained and dedicated staff is improved.

Paraeducators play a key role as school districts and states struggle to improve the quality of services for all students. Ongoing training and support for paraeducators are crucial components in students success.

A Model of Peer-Mentoring for Paraeducators

The Puget Sound Educational District of Washington State has developed and piloted an online peer-mentoring program, "Strengthening the Paraeducator Community Regional Mentoring Program." This program has been used in districts/schools to help support new paraeducators. The value of having mentor support online is that more paraeducators can receive updated assistance throughout an entire region. Online communication is quick, easy and available to an unlimited number of paraeducators.

The components of the mentoring program are as follows:

- **Selection of Mentors.** A mentor is an established and experienced paraeducator who is willing to share his or her expertise with new paraeducators. It is important that a mentor demonstrates the ability to communicate well with others and has a commitment to professional growth. Principal input is used in the selection of each mentor.
- **Identification of New Paraeducators.** Identification of new paraeducators is done through the District Human Resource Department or school principal. The new staff are then informed about the benefits and purpose of the mentoring program.
- **Team Contact Time.** A time is set aside weekly for the team (mentor/new paraeducator) within a school to address concerns, exchange information, discuss online topics, problem solve, and develop strategies.
- **Online Support.** Mentors have access online to specific information and strategies to help them support new paraeducators. Working together, mentors and new paraedu-

cators are able to cover the following topics online: Getting Started, Confidentiality/Ethics, Professionalism, Role Clarification, Instructional Strategies, Communication, and Proactive Behavior Management. Other support offered online includes a discussion board, mentoring materials, an axiom calendar, resource information, and mentoring updates.



- **Mentor Meetings.** Three meetings are held throughout the year for mentors. During these meetings mentors from across the region are able to meet and share information and strategies. Information and topics are covered that the mentors can take back to share with the new paraeducators.

Benefits of a Mentoring Program

Our district has found that there are numerous benefits of paraeducator peer mentoring, including the following:

- **To the District**
 - Provides a method to assist paraeducators in meeting state competencies.
 - Communicates accurate information to new employees more quickly.
 - Increases student learning with the use of trained paraeducators.
 - Aids in recruitment and retention of qualified staff.
 - Promotes professionalism amongst classified staff.
 - Helps paraeducators to feel part of the district/school and its culture.

Encourages the understanding of classroom, building and district policies and procedures.

- **To the New Paraeducator**

Provides a method to assist paraeducators in meeting required competencies.

Provides a set of clear expectations of the roles and responsibilities.

Offers a forum to ask and answer questions, and an avenue to acquire needed materials and resources.

Provides encouragement and emotional support.

Helps new and experienced staff to feel valued and part of a team.

Provides the modeling and sharing of useful strategies.

Begins the understanding of and value for continuous learning.

Reinforces learning from classes and inservices.

Allows for acquisition of management and discipline skills.

Gives up-to-date information about ongoing training opportunities.

Provides a broader view of paraeducator job opportunities.

- **To the Experienced Paraeducators (Mentors)**

Increases job satisfaction by helping others.

Motivates the mentor to be more professional and to improve his or her own instructional skills.

Provides pride and recognition.

Helps to establish rapport with co-workers.

Encourages a sense of team spirit.

Gains new ideas and strategies for working with students.

Keep current with building, district, state and national issues.

Develops increased confidence, communication and problem-solving skills.

Expands career opportunities.

- **To Student Learning**

Increases student success because they are working with a trained paraeducator.

Establishes more consistency in student services because of lower staff turnover.

Offers a wider range of instructional and management strategies.

Enhances student safety through supervision by well-trained and confident paraeducators.

Gives students the opportunity to work with another nurturing, skilled, and caring adult.

Conclusion

Competent paraeducators are important to the delivery of the best possible educational services for our at-risk students. Through mentoring, new paraeducators can get the support to successfully meet the diverse needs of students. Working together, peer-mentoring is about forming relationships and offering support and encouragement. Opportunities for collaboration, and to increase skills, knowledge and confidence are important for success. Who benefits from a mentoring program? Administrators, teachers, paraeducators and most importantly the students!

Note: General mentoring information in this article was gathered from the "Passing on the Message" mentoring project developed in cooperation with the Puget Sound Education Service District, WEA, and supported by the Washington Education Association and the National Education Association.

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Linking Schools, Families and Communities in Montana: The Hardin Parent Center

by Tina Hoagland

Paraeducators Janice Eckman, Davene Big Lake, and Ruth Harris fulfill a unique role as a link between the schools and the families in Hardin, Crow Agency, and Fort Smith, Montana. Hardin borders the Crow Indian Reservation, and Crow Agency and Fort Smith are on the Reservation. Janice, Davene, and Ruth are staff of the Hardin Public Schools' Parent Center, a program that works to draw parents into the educational process. Begun as a part of the

Janice, Ruth, and Davene have been instrumental in developing relationships with individuals, businesses, and service organizations, strengthening the Parent Center's success.

Even Start Program, the Parent Center has been in its current configuration as a Title I funded facility for four years. Janice is the Parent Involvement Coordinator and Davene and Ruth are Family Advocates.

Family Fun Night, Family Game Night, and Books for Bingo

The Parent Center organizes several Family Fun Nights (FFN) and Books for Bingo (BFB) events for elementary students and their families and Family Game Nights (FGN) for elementary, junior high, and high school students and their families. According to Janice, the purpose of these activities is to, "build a positive bridge between home and

school. A time for families to come to the school when the child is not in trouble and it's not related to sports."

The FFNs for elementary schools are staffed by school personnel, including teachers, who are stationed at activity centers that promote academic and cultural skills. There is a theme for every FFN. When the book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* was the theme, an art project was to create egg carton caterpillars and tissue paper butterflies; the science station illustrated the life stages; and for a nutrition activity the families made banana, apple, and raisin caterpillars and celery, peanut butter, and pretzel butterflies. One of the centers is always designed to allow participants to make their own snacks for the night. The Student and Family Advocates work well together planning these special events. Remarkably, one FFN had 350 people in attendance, this in a town of about 3000. Janice attributes their success to getting the students involved. Once a family attends, they realize what fun it is and want to return the next month.

The FGNs for the middle schools and high schools also draw a large crowd, since many families have been through the elementary grades and FFNs and consider it an important time to be together as a family. There are a large number of board games available and the families who attend choose games to play for the evening. At the end of the night, the games are given away as door prizes. BFB began as a way for the Parent Center staff to encourage families to read together with participants playing bingo and choosing a book each time they win a game. Janice revealed that each participant "wins" and goes home with at least one book.

Many of the games used for FGN are donated by local businesses, which, in addition, donate supplies for FFNs and books for BFB. Area businesses and ser-

vice organizations also donate cash to purchase books, games, and supplies. Janice, Ruth, and Davene have been instrumental in developing relationships with individuals, businesses, and service organizations in their community that strengthens the Parent Center's success.

Evangeline and Paul Pryor and many of their seven children have been attending FFNs, FGNs, and BFB for five years. Evangeline said, "We went because we felt our family got closer and had fun together." For each of these activities an adult must accompany all students, as the purpose is to promote the importance of family in the educational process.

Parenting Groups

The Parent Center also offers classes and study groups for parents. The calendar for Parent Groups is set at the beginning of the year and the topics and scheduling are done based on parent surveys. The Parent Center works with 75 to 100 parents a year. Information about the groups is distributed by word of mouth, notes home with students, school newsletters and calendars, and advertising in the local newspaper. Teachers have also successfully referred parents for specific groups. One parent told Janice that her blood pressure had fallen since she started attending the Parent Groups.

Home-School Coordination

Davene and Ruth's responsibilities include home visits to families of all Hardin School District students who will be entering kindergarten. They provide families with information packets about school and what their child can expect in kindergarten. Community agencies and medical/dental providers have become aware of these visits and have asked that the packets include in-

formation from them; for example, a coloring book related to healthy eating and a toothbrush and toothpaste. Ruth and Davene coordinate home visits with the Student Advocates to ensure that there is not a duplication of services.

Another role of the Family Advocate is to meet with families and act as a liaison, bringing them together with their children's teachers. Teachers request this service through a referral form asking a Family Advocate make a home visit. During the home visit, the importance of the parents as teachers to their children is often discussed. Ruth gave the following example of a successful home visit – a first grade teacher asked Ruth for help with a child that was struggling with reading. Ruth visited the family and the mother made a commitment to read to the child. The mother indicated that she was not aware of how important it was to read to her child and was appreciative of the visit. The teacher reported that the child's reading skills began to improve.

Davene is also the Home-School Coordinator for the Hardin Public Schools' Special Education Program. She makes home visits during non-school hours to get needed signatures. Her role involves explaining the purpose of the forms and the services of the Special Education Program, including the resource room. Parents often discuss their concerns with her and, in turn, Davene relays their concerns to appropriate school personnel. In this way, she acts as a link bringing teachers and parents together. Davene gave the following example of her interactions with parents on behalf of special education – the school was having difficulty obtaining permission to test a student who wasn't reading on grade level. The family was reluctant to sign the form as they were unsure what would happen if they did. Because Davene was able to explain the purpose of the form, the family agreed to sign, and the child qualified for additional services. With that intervention, the student's reading level has improved two grades levels in one year. Both the family

and the school were grateful to have the assistance of the Coordinator.

As part of her position as Home-School Coordinator, Davene attends Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings when requested by the family. Her role during the IEP is to act as a support for families who may speak English as a second language. Davene is Native American and bilingual, speaking both Crow and English. Since the population of Hardin, MT and the surrounding communities is primarily Native American, Davene has a unique understanding of the culture. She said that she does not get involved in the conversation unless the parents/families ask her to directly.

Conclusion

When Janice Eckman, Davene Big Lake, and Ruth Harris aren't involved in one of the above activities, they are promoting the Parent Center to their community and sharing their success with other communities. Confidentiality is emphasized in all of their interactions with students and families. The Parent Center is located on the campus of Hardin Intermediate School and provides a welcoming environment for families and students. There are books, videos, and games available for checkout; computers that can be used; and brochures and pamphlets for families to take. It was obvious from talking to these three women that they are excited about what they do and the positive difference that they make.

Contributed by Tina Hoagland, Director, Paraeducator Development Project, Montana Center on Disabilities, Montana State University-Billings, Billings, Montana. She may be reached at 406/657-2039 or THoagland@msubillings.edu. Davene has retired from her position since this article was originally written; her position has been filled and the new Family Advocate continues to provide the services described.

A Parent's Experience

Evangeline Pryor and her husband live in Hardin, Montana, and have seven children. Evangeline first heard about the Hardin Parent Center through the local school and went there to get information on Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) when her son was diagnosed with ADHD. She was given pamphlets and checked out books and videos. Most importantly, Janice, Ruth, and Davene, the paraeducators who staff the Hardin Parent Center, gave her encouragement and an invitation to participate in Parent Center activities.

Evangeline took four parenting classes through the Parent Center. She wanted to get as much information as possible so that when she encountered issues related to raising her children, including a child with a disability, she would have the skills in place to manage them. She says, "I utilized the Parent Center whenever I could to help myself and my family."

On May 10, 2000 Evangeline received her Associate of Arts Degree in Human Services from Little Big Horn Community College. Her decision to pursue her education in human services was influenced by her experience with the Parent Center and the fact that she grew up in a single parent family. When she became interested in starting a Parent Support Group for parents of children with ADD/ADHD, Evangeline discussed it with Janice, Ruth, and Davene. They supported her idea and the first meeting was in October 2001. The group meets at the Parent Center and at least one of the Parent Center staff is there to lend a hand.

Contributed by Evangeline Pryor, parent of students in the Hardin Public Schools, and by Tina Hoagland, Director, Paraeducator Development Project, Montana Center on Disabilities, Montana State University-Billings.

Paraeducators to Educators: A School-University Partnership in California

by Cynthia Hutten-Eagle

A unique school-university relationship began in 1992 when an administrator from the ABC Unified School District (ABCUSD) contacted the Occupational Studies Department at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) and asked for help in preparing district paraeducators to work with students and teachers. "Paraeducator" describes school employees who provide instructional and other direct services to chil-

A program was needed to provide coursework leading to baccalaureate degrees for paraeducators who wanted to go on to be teachers, particularly in Special Education.

dren, youth, and/or their parents or other caregivers, and who are supervised by certificated, licensed professionals (Pickett, 1989). Though they often work with some of the most challenging students, paraeducators generally receive little or no training to do their jobs. Recognizing this, ABC Unified wanted to improve the skills and knowledge base of their paraeducators, and a training course was developed for them utilizing materials from the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services (NRC). Many partners participated in the initial planning of the course, including paraeducators, school district administrators, union representatives from the California School Employees Association (CSEA), and University faculty. The first course took place in 1994 and continues to be offered annually.

A neighboring school district, Bell-

flower Unified, learned of the program and asked for a course in their district. As their initial class ended, the two districts, which were both were experiencing teacher shortages, asked if the University could set up a program to train their paraeducators to become teachers. Since their paraeducators were familiar with the school systems, knew the daily stresses involved, lived in the community, had similar cultural backgrounds to their students, and had demonstrated their ability to work with children, district personnel felt that they would be excellent candidates for a teacher preparation program.

It was decided that a system was needed to provide coursework leading to baccalaureate degrees for paraeducators who wanted to go on to be teachers, particularly in Special Education. Many had not attended college other than the paraeducator training course, but successfully worked in classrooms daily and knew they wanted to teach. The University responded to the districts' need for teachers by writing and receiving a federal training grant from the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in 1998.

Program Objectives

Four major objectives guide the program. First, the training group is diversified through the recruitment of paraeducators from underrepresented populations, including paraeducators with disabilities, paraeducators who are members of an ethnic or racial minority group, and paraeducators who reside within high poverty areas. Second, much of the training program is conducted at school district sites, affording the opportunity for paraeducators to stay close to their worksites and communities. Third, recognizing the diversity of the paraeducators and their indi-

vidual needs, support is provided to assure their ability to remain in the training program to its completion. Lastly, the partnership between the school districts, local community college, and the University is being expanded and refined, involving personnel from each agency.

Program Structure

An advisory board, whose members include paraeducators, school district administrators, University personnel, a CSEA union representative, and a specialist from a Regional Occupational Program, guided the beginning of the program. The entire process involved a blending of personnel from the agencies working together, and strong bonds of collaboration were developed. Forty-five paraeducators were selected to participate over the three-year period, in cohorts of 15 per year, with completion of the Paraeducator Training Course as a prerequisite for application. Sixty percent (27) of the 45 paraeducators are members of underrepresented populations, and 71% (32) live within school district boundaries. Four of the participants are male, and 41 are female.

Each paraeducator coming into the program was required to sign an agreement to teach students with high-incidence disabilities (mild to moderate mental retardation, speech or language impairments, emotional disturbance, or specific learning disability) in a regular or special education setting for a period of two years for every year that they receive funding through the program. Financial support covers three years of college tuition, two summer sessions, and a stipend of \$250 per semester or summer session for books, supplies, or other education related expenses. Courses are held, as often as possible, at school sites within the districts in the

early evening hours, and the school districts provide childcare for the courses at their particular sites.

In addition to academic advisement and support provided by University faculty and staff, meetings with the Project Director, and assistance with enrollment, registration, and the often challenging paperwork associated with University attendance, a District Advocate was chosen from each district to provide on-site guidance. They meet regularly with the paraeducators to disseminate



information, provide encouragement, and answer district-related questions.

Many of the paraeducators continue community college attendance to complete lower division requirements in addition to the courses provided through the program. They find this to be a cost-effective way to save their University tuition for upper division classes while working toward their degrees. The District Advocates provide a strong communication link with the community colleges, and interact on the paraeducators' behalf.

As each cohort progresses into courses and becomes more comfortable with their role as students, they are encouraged to begin taking on-campus classes in addition to those offered in their districts. The experience of being on a college campus with 33,000 students can be overwhelming at first, and participants usually take classes together, carpool, and form study groups.

Trainee Support Services

Providing the needed support for the paraeducators has been a strength in the delivery of this program. The partici-

pants all work in their school districts, many are the first member of their family to attend college, and most are parents of school-age children. Customized advising is held both within the school districts to accommodate the paraeducators' schedules, as well as on campus at the University. The District Advocates provide school district support and are accessible for individual guidance in addition to their regularly scheduled meetings. When several of the paraeducators were experiencing difficulty with college level writing assignments, one of the District Advocates, a high school English teacher, was hired to teach writing seminars on Saturday mornings. The paraeducators receive units of credit for attending, and repeat the course each semester, if needed.

The childcare component of the project has been helpful to participants with young children. A trained childcare provider employed by the school district is available during class time for courses held at school district sites. Besides assisting with the cost of childcare, this service saves time for the paraeducators, who do not have to take their children to another location between work and class times. It also brings the children into closer contact with their parents as students – they see mom or dad going to class and often meet their instructors.

The districts have also been supportive in recognizing the paraeducators at school board meetings and other district functions, and by including news of the project in district newsletters.

For those paraeducators who are not able to finish all of their degree coursework during their time of participation in the program, financial aid information and counseling are provided.

Program Outcomes

This grant-funded partnership has proven to be a mutually responsive, highly satisfying, and productive venture. Of the original 45 paraeducators, 13 have completed their baccalaureate degrees and 28 are still taking courses.

[Hutten-Eagle, continued on page 31]

Being Part of the Partnership

Being in the Long Beach Paraeducator Partnership has opened up new things for us as people and as educators. Each week we take back knowledge, theories, and strategies that help us work with the culturally diverse children in our school district. Communicating with other paraeducators and the support that we give each other are the most rewarding experiences and keep us motivated. The paraeducators in our cohort share information on classes, classroom techniques, how to deal with behavior problems, and the many personal issues we face while working and going to school. We also stay in touch and keep informed through the Web site (<http://www.geocities.com/grantprogram>). The partnership provides an opportunity for all of us to grow as educators and legitimize what we already do. It gives us an opportunity to shine on our way to becoming teachers, while we are working on our degrees and credentials.

One of the highlights of the program so far happened when our program coordinator asked us to be presenters at the California Paraeducator Conference, and we were shocked because we didn't think that we had anything to say that anyone wanted to hear. But our conference room filled up quickly with listeners, and we were delighted at the end of our presentation when hands were raised with questions. At the conference we also secured a lot of valuable information to apply, practice, and share in our classrooms. There were more than 1000 paras there just like us, all seeking knowledge. It was truly an amazing experience.

Contributed by Lisa Baldwin and Alayne Pickens, Paraeducators, Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach, California. Photo is (left to right) Lisa Baldwin, paraeducator; Cynthia Hutten-Eagle, training program director; and Alayne Pickens, paraeducator.

Meaningful Staff Development: The Eastern Suffolk BOCES Model

by Joan E. Skelly

There was a time in the not too distant past that the sight of two adults in a typical classroom meant one of three things: there was a student teacher completing the required field experience, the teacher was being observed by an administrator, or a class parent was serving the cupcakes at a class party. How times have changed! Today, for a num-

ber of very good reasons, not the least of which is the education of students with physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges alongside their non-disabled peers, educational programs are moving from a solo act to an ensemble. The cast in any particular setting is as varied as the needs of the students being served. Other teachers, related service providers, medical personnel, and paraeducators often join classroom teachers. And although the roles of each may vary slightly in different settings, it is the paraeducator whose duties tend to reflect the greatest diversity overall. Is it any wonder, then, that the paraeducator who envisions her job as supporting academic instruction is confused and disillusioned when she finds her major job responsibilities include toileting and tube feeding? Or that the paraeducator who signs on for what he believes to be primarily medical support functions feels overwhelmed when he finds himself supporting the instructional program in a chemistry class?

Often, the frustrations lead to resignations, leaving a gaping hole in the instructional support team that is not easily filled because the lack of paraeducator substitutes is the order of the day. The lack of appropriate support in any program cannot help but have negative effects on student outcomes and staff morale. It is essential, then, to develop and implement mechanisms to improve recruitment practices as well as provide continuous support to new and veteran employees.

This all brings me to the obvious conclusion: we need meaningful staff development. Administrators, especially building principals, tend to harbor a love-hate feeling toward staff development. Overall, principals value and support opportunities for their instructional team to improve or reinforce skills that translate to positive student outcomes. But, they dread the disruption to the instructional program when staff members are not present during school hours and few if any substitutes are available.

At Eastern Suffolk BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) on Long Island, New York, years of planning, implementation, evaluation and revision have yielded a training/mentoring program that attempts to address the challenges of recruitment, retention, and focused and meaningful staff development for paraeducators. The program provides orientation for new paraeducators and substitutes, program specific training for veteran staff, and a job embedded mentoring model for ongoing in-house support for all paraeducators.

The content of our training program is competency-based material developed by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCP). This material is well-designed to meet the needs of paraeducators working in special educa-

tion and vocational settings, and can be easily adapted to general education settings.

The preservice and substitute training is typically offered during the summer months and several times during the school year. During this half-day workshop, participants are provided with a broad overview of the structure and function of BOCES as well as insight into our students and programs. When new employees reach their assigned buildings, the mentoring system provides both initial and ongoing support as the employee transitions into the new job. In addition, in many of our buildings, a “meet and greet” orientation is provided to per diem substitutes to help them meet the demands of the assignment for the day.

Recognizing the need to minimize pulling employees from their schools during the school day, three core courses form the basis of training for all BOCES paraeducators: the roles and duties of paraeducators, legal and ethical responsibilities, and communication and problem solving. These foundation courses are considered important enough to be presented during the school day at regular intervals during the year. After-school workshops and seminars are also offered and include more specialized topics. Paraeducators choose to attend these workshops based upon their current assignments and/or their job-related goals or special interests. A monetary incentive is offered for each 15 hours of staff development completed. And, again, the school-based mentoring system offers continual support for paraeducators.

Our paraeducator and teacher mentors serve a vital and pivotal role in our staff development process. In addition to providing in-house mentoring support, they serve as instructors for our core courses. They also serve as liaisons

A focused and systematic training and mentoring model allows us to address the needs of both rookies and experienced staff.

to the school and central administration, and communicate information relevant to the training and support of paraeducators at the local, state, and national levels.

To perform these diverse duties effectively, the mentors, both teachers and paraeducators, meet regularly for continued training, to address problems, and to share successes. These opportunities for learning and dialog support the mentors in carrying out their responsi-

bilities to new and veteran staff and per diem substitutes.

A focused and systematic training and mentoring model allows us to address the needs of both rookies and experienced staff. Offering this support through release time trainings, after-school workshops, and through a job-embedded mentoring system helps to ensure that we reach all of our paraeducators. By providing appropriate training and staff development, we hope to

strengthen our instructional teams, improve student outcomes, and enhance recruitment and retention efforts to maintain and enhance the skills of our current and future paraeducator staff.

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Positive Aspects of the Training/Mentoring Program

As a school principal, I've found that the Eastern Suffolk BOCES paraeducator training and mentoring program has had a positive effect on our school's students for a variety of reasons. The primary purpose of the program is to develop a sense of "team." In special education, as well as in general education, the paraeducator no longer works in isolation from the instructional staff, nor does the related service staff work in isolation from the classroom teacher. With emphasis placed on an integrated model, the paraeducator is considered an integral member of the educational team. Paraeducators work with students to reinforce what is being taught by both classroom teachers and related service staff. Through this training program all participants learn how to provide that reinforcement, as well as how to work as members of a team.

In the program, emphasis is placed on the development of effective communication strategies. If and when interpersonal issues arise, team members are better able to resolve conflict. If unable to come to resolve, both paraeducators and teachers can call upon mentors for assistance through mediation. The focus is placed on resolution

rather than conflict, student outcomes rather than personalities.

Behavior management is another vital topic. It is imperative for every member of the school community to understand and practice the principles of the building- or program-wide behavior management system. Certified personnel may have been trained in behavior management while working on their degrees. For the paraeducator this may be a new concept. Most students are assigned individual aides for safety reasons. As the team member who may know the student better than any one within the educational setting, this program trains the paraeducator how to implement management techniques, collect data, and share relevant information related to the effectiveness of the student's behavior intervention program. Since functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans are now mandated, the paraeducator is instrumental in achieving positive student outcomes.

On a broader level, those involved in the training learn a great deal about classroom management, a topic often ignored in colleges and universities. Classroom

management can be seen in two ways – having to do with student behavior and having to do with effective utilization of staff. This program addresses both. Teachers learn how to work with and include the adults assigned to their classrooms and everyone learns practical application of the strategies and techniques that research indicates ensures an effective learning climate.

Another advantage has to do with esteem issues. Having embraced this training program, Eastern Suffolk BOCES has communicated to both paraeducators and teachers that they are vital. Acknowledging the importance of their roles helps staff create and maintain a positive attitude toward their jobs, their colleagues, and students, which translates to a positive school climate and positive student outcomes.

Contributed by Cynthia Croke, Principal, North Country Learning Center, Eastern Suffolk BOCES, Holbrook, New York.

Meeting Student Needs Through Paraprofessional Training in Rural Idaho

by David Forbush and Jerry Waddoups

In 1996, a parent of a child with a disability wrote a letter to the superintendent of schools stating that she was willing to allow a paraprofessional to work with her son if the paraprofessional was supervised by a teacher and provided with training to meet her son's needs. This letter prompted the administration of Preston School District in Preston, Idaho, to organize a three-day training for paraprofessionals. This training has now been in place for the past six years.

This article describes the history of the Preston School District's professional development training program for paraprofessionals. It includes a condensed description of our training development timeline, a list of yearly activities, topics of training, methods and strategies, how training has improved the quality of education, and lessons learned.

Training Timeline

The following items are key events in our six years of training paraprofessionals and development of our training program. These events have produced paraprofessionals who are highly skilled members of our education team:

- **Year One.** We purchased the *Enhancing the Skills of Paraeducators* program from the Utah State University Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation. This video-supported curriculum was delivered over three days by Preston School District special education staff. This was the first time all paraprofessionals in the district were brought together to formally address their instructional needs, and paraprofessionals indicated that they were pleased that school administrators were interested enough in them to provide the training.
- **Year Two.** The *Enhancing the Skills of Paraeducators* curriculum was repeated with newly hired paraprofessionals. For the first time, paraprofessionals were invited to attend the teacher-focused Quality Education Conference at Idaho State University. Previously, only certificated staff had been invited. Later in the year, paraprofessionals received training in a structured reading program.
- **Year Three.** For the first time, with their supervisory teacher, special education paraprofessionals were invited to attend special education team meetings and IEP meetings for students with whom they worked. Monies were allocated to send paraprofessionals to the Utah Paraeducator Conference. Now paraprofessionals attend this conference on a yearly basis. We organized a training program for teacher and paraprofessional teams with personnel from Utah State University. Teachers and paraprofessionals attended 12 training sessions. Instructional teams learned to clarify individual roles and responsibilities and practiced using formative evaluations to improve instructional performance. They also learned and demonstrated effective problem solving and communication strategies. At the close of the year, a policy requiring paraprofessionals to attend all professional development activities was adopted.
- **Year Four.** A paraprofessional committee was established to receive input on training topics and coordinate all matters associated with paraprofessionals. The committee was composed of a regular education teacher, special education teacher, special education paraprofessional, Title-1 paraprofessional, and the Director of Special Education. Before the end of the year, the committee proposed changes that would directly benefit paraprofessionals and our instructional program. Paraprofessionals also received training to deliver direct instruction reading programs. Later, professional staff and paraprofessionals worked together to train other paraprofessionals. Training sessions on various topics were held one time per month, and continue today.
- **Year Five.** Special education teachers were required to submit their paraprofessionals' job descriptions to the Director of Special Education and evaluate the paraprofessionals' performance. Paraprofessionals and professional staff participated in three days of reading training from nationally recognized reading consultants from Utah State University. District administrators considered the need for a competency and compensation level system for paraprofessionals. They also acknowledged the difference in training needs for resource, Title 1 paraprofessionals, and paraprofessionals serving students with more severe disabilities. Individualized training for each group began to be offered.
- **Year Six.** Paraprofessionals participated in a live videoconference with school districts from across the United States. Anna Lou Pickett, past director of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, spoke to paraprofessionals about their changing role, recent legislation affecting paraprofessionals, and the roles and responsibilities of teachers. Consultants from the Jordan School District in Salt Lake City, Utah, provided reading instruction on phonemic awareness, letter recognition and pre-reading skills.

Paraprofessional Training and Our Quality of Education

Our paraprofessionals' instructional skills have grown by participating in our professional development program. With enhanced skills, they have met students' educational needs with a variety of instructional programs, delivered in one-on-one or in small groups. Our professional development program has also helped paraprofessionals identify powerful variables affecting student achievement and the importance of data as a tool to measure instructional outcomes and guide instructional interventions.

Idaho has a reading initiative called the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI). Paraprofessionals, under the direction of professional staff, administer all testing, which involves individually administering a curriculum-based 10-minute reading assessment three times per year. Teachers and paraprofessionals use this data to design remedial reading interventions for students scoring below grade level. Paraprofessionals deliver the remedial reading interventions in small groups. Without paraprofessionals, our reading groups would be so large that individual needs would not be met.

The IRI intervention is just one example of many, where paraprofessionals have woven themselves into the fabric of our instructional program. Under the direction and supervision of certified professionals, paraprofessionals also assist with delivery of accelerated math, the extended school year for students on IEPs, summer reading and math programs, occupational and physical therapy services, gifted and talented programs, technology instruction, educational signing for the deaf, and a variety of other programs. Without paraprofessionals, these services would either be diminished or unavailable.

Lessons Learned Along the Way

Six years of training has taught us many lessons that have enhanced our training program, including:

- Paraprofessionals' enthusiasm for training is enhanced when they par-

ticipate in the identification, planning, and delivery of training.

- Training must be immediately applicable to the requirements of a paraprofessional's job.
- Paraprofessionals must be assigned to tasks for which they have been trained. They feel more confident and enthusiastic when they have received specific training for an assigned task.
- When appropriately trained and supervised, teachers, parents, and administrators recognize paraprofessionals as an invaluable member of the instructional team.
- When appropriately trained and supervised, paraprofessionals display the same professional behavior as certified staff.
- Like teachers, paraprofessionals require ongoing professional development.
- Teachers require training to effectively supervise paraprofessionals.

Conclusion

Today, students' educational needs exceed district financial resources for hiring professional staff. Paraprofessionals, when appropriately trained and supervised, have met many student needs at a fraction of the cost. Appropriate training and supervision are essential. This requires additional expenditures, but the cost is recaptured as schools multiply the amount and quality of services.

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A Valued Paraprofessional

I have been a paraprofessional in the Preston School District for 17 years. During that time, I have worked in Special Education and in Speech/Language Pathology. I believe that as a paraprofessional I make it possible for teachers to do a better job with students. My relationship with teachers has changed over the years. Now, teachers view paraprofessionals as an important part of the educational system. Paraprofessionals are no longer just a pair of extra hands, but an indispensable part of the instructional program. I feel more valued now by parents, teachers, and other professionals who work with students. It is a privilege to work under the direction of trained and dedicated professionals. I feel that our relationship is one of two professionals working together to enhance the quality of education for students.

I have received extensive training during my years in the Preston School District. Training experiences include instructional team work training from Utah State University, Precision Teaching training, MANDT training by Logan Regional Hospital, a video training entitled, "Enhancing the Skills of Paraeducators," and training in reading and math instruction. I have also learned to collect data and deliver instruction to assist students in both academic and social growth. I love kids, and being able to work with them as a paraprofessional is an added bonus.

[Harkness, continued from page 1]

programs and group homes. Despite the differences in our duties, paraeducators do share a prescribed role. Quite simply, the paraeducators' role is to work under the direction of licensed professionals to help students succeed in their assigned tasks. This role is fulfilled in the following ways: a) supporting the teaching professionals by following individual education plans and specific directives, b) modeling expected behaviors in all



encounters with students, c) fostering increasing levels of student independence wherever possible, and d) acting as liaisons between the students, instructional staff, and parents wherever necessary. My experience as a paraeducator has been in classrooms pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Therefore, this article centers on this particular learning environment. Still, it is important to remember that any student's location, whether the classroom, the home, the worksite, or the community, becomes an environment where learning and growth are anticipated and expected.

Because we work in close proximity to students and likely have more individual and small group time with them than teachers do, paraeducators educate students in ways generally not afforded teachers. In the classroom, teachers deliver general instruction and direction, and answer questions posed by students with the courage and ability to ask them. Paraeducators, on the other hand, watch for more subtle signals of comprehension or misunderstanding and step in to clarify, interpret, and redirect where students need extra support. Students benefit from this more individualized attention from an adult who commands the

respect of a teacher while acting on their behalf as learners. Teachers appreciate not having to divide their attention into so many pieces and parents take comfort in the knowledge that their children's needs will not be overlooked in diverse and crowded classrooms. Finally, administrators are better able to fill staffing positions in times and places where teachers and dollars are scarce.

The Challenge to Build Effective Teacher/Paraeducator Teams

Defining the paraeducator role on paper is the easy part. Making it work in the classroom is the greatest challenge educator teams face. Yet, one could argue that effectively balanced teacher/paraeducator teams are the key to opening doors to success for students with special needs. Teams become most effective when the expected learner outcomes are understood, and the instructional roles each member plays are clear. Good communication is crucial in teacher/paraeducator teams.

Communicating in education settings is challenging. While teachers tend to stay in one classroom or setting over time, paraeducators often move among various settings, working with a variety of students and staff. Very few teachers and paraeducators enjoy the luxury of common planning time, so verbal exchanges between them are often brief and sometimes hurried. Paraeducators quickly decipher teacher directives (what outcome is expected, how it is supposed to happen, and where the priority is placed – on process or product) so as not to infringe on learning time, and become aware of areas where they are expected to take initiative in lieu of specific directions (picking up clerical tasks or redirecting wandering minds and feet). Making efficient use of communication time is essential for teacher/paraeducator teams.

Another challenge for paraeducators working with struggling students is to know when to watch from a supportive distance and when to step in to help. Because we work so closely with students,

our desire to see them succeed tempts us to step in too soon, depriving them of the satisfaction of having accomplished their tasks under their own power. Or we may hold out too long until their repeated failed attempts have convinced them they will never succeed. But when we are keen observers and empathic listeners with students, parents, and teaching professionals, the ebb and flow of teaching and learning appears seamless. For paraeducators, the ability to balance on a threshold between encouraging eustress that promotes growth, and alleviating distress that breeds frustration, comes with listening to teacher direction and parental input as well as much practice. Mastering this skill is essential for promoting student independence, which is the ultimate goal for teacher/paraeducator teams.

The Importance of Training

While teaching professionals have come to their vocation through an educational process of study, practicum, and licensure, paraeducators more often than not have arrived with little more formal training than life experience. This experience taught us to think on our feet, but it probably has not taught us the most effective response to the unique needs and behaviors of the variety of students with whom we work. Likewise, life has not necessarily taught us how to work on an educational team. Therefore, it is imperative for school administrators to provide training opportunities for paraeducators that will enable us to fulfill our role in the education process. This can best happen when paraeducators and teachers are asked to identify their own training needs, and then are trained separately where the needs are unique to each role and together when the needs are the same.

Additionally, teachers can provide paraeducators with on-the-job training by giving clear directions that state the expected outcomes, the processes to be followed, and if necessary, the importance of each. It is especially helpful when teachers and administrators dem-

onstrate their openness to questions and suggestions from paraeducators. Timely constructive feedback is also a valuable training tool.

Paraeducators should take advantage of every available opportunity to train for the role in general as well as for the specific skills needed to do assigned tasks. Each of the students and staff members with whom we work has a distinctive set of needs and behaviors and we can best respond to them when we understand our own needs and behaviors. We must know our own hot buttons and how to defuse them when they get pushed, because they will be, and know where to go for help when we need it, because we will. Training opportunities are most useful when we can practice the appropriate responses to unexpected behaviors in others so that they become automatic. Above all, in training or on the job, paraeducators must ask questions of and follow the examples set by the professionals directing our work.

The Rewards of the Profession

Few other work settings offer the variety of duties or the flexibility of schedule found in education settings. Because paraeducators take direction from licensed teaching professionals, we are able to directly impact student success while still having time to enjoy personal lives outside of work. And because we work with students, they appreciate our work long after they have moved on. Lastly, for those considering careers as licensed educators, working as a paraeducator offers a hands-on setting in which to decide whether teaching is a viable career goal and to experiment with different learning environments before committing to focus on a particular age group or specialty. No matter what the title is, the role of paraeducator is a challenging, rewarding, and valuable position on the education team.

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[Pickett, continued from page 3]

and program implementers in SEAs, LEAs, and two- and four-year institutions of higher education is the lack of information about the current practices across agency lines and areas of responsibility connected with paraeducator employment, roles, supervision, and preparation at the state and local levels.

These issues cannot be addressed in a vacuum. There is a powerful need for SEAs to provide leadership to develop and nurture partnerships among LEAs, two- and four-year institutions of higher education, unions, parents, and other stakeholders to gather and analyze information that will enable them to establish standards for paraeducator roles, preparation, and supervision, and to build infrastructures for paraeducator career development. Paraeducator and teachers partnerships will work in concert to:

- Clearly delineate distinctions in teacher and paraeducator roles.
- Identify similarities and differences in the roles of paraeducators who are assigned to all programs administered by schools and other education agencies.
- Identify core knowledge and skill competencies required by all paraeducators and those required by paraeducators who work in programs that require more advanced skills and knowledge.
- Establish standards for comprehensive, seamless systems of paraeducator preparation that include: preservice and inservice training, structured on-the-job training, and access to postsecondary education that will support and facilitate career advancement for paraeducators who want to enter the ranks of teachers.
- Develop credentialing systems or other mechanisms that will ensure that paraeducators have mastered the skills required to carry out assigned tasks.
- Set standards for paraeducator supervision and indicators for evaluating their performance.

- Develop standards for preparing teachers and related services personnel who supervise paraeducators.

Finding viable responses to these issues cannot be accomplished overnight. It will require the commitment of all of the stakeholders described above, and the willingness to work cooperatively to ensure the availability of a well-trained and effectively supervised paraeducator workforce.

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scheduling for paraeducators are not enough if the materials or space paraeducators require are inadequate, difficult to find or nonexistent.

Public Relations

Supervisors, teachers and other professionals directing the work of paraeducators are responsible for certain public relations tasks on behalf of the paraeducators that work with them. Teachers and administrators may not understand the importance of this task.

One public relations task supervisors will most likely find themselves engaged in on paraeducators' behalf involves representing paraeducators in situations when they are unable (or not invited) to speak for themselves. For example, paraeducators will not be present for

Supervisors, teachers and other professionals directing the work of paraeducators are responsible for certain public relations tasks on behalf of the paraeducators that work with them.

many of the conversations teachers have with parents. It is up to the teacher to explain to the parents who the paraeducator is, and what his or her role is in the education or care of their child. Similarly, it is also up to the supervisor to keep the administration informed of the paraeducator's progress, performance, and – in some cases – any serious concerns the paraeducator has about his or her job.

Another public relations task teachers might engage in as supervisors would include introducing and identifying the paraeducator to school adminis-

trators, other school professionals, and the parents of the students assigned to their care. It is the supervisor's responsibility to make sure it is clear to all involved in the education of the children with whom the paraeducator works who the paraeducator is, what his or her role is, and that he or she is a valued member of the supervisor's team.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is up to the person who directs the work of the paraeducator to advocate for additional training, necessary role clarification, and involvement in decision-making for the paraeducator. For many teachers it may take some time to adjust to the idea that their assistance in this area is important to the development of quality support and training of the paraeducators with whom they work.

Training Paraeducators

For most people to do their jobs well, they need to be adequately and appropriately trained. As such, it stands to reason that if school professionals expect paraeducators to carry out the tasks they give them, they must first train paraeducators appropriately. The initial step in training paraeducators – and one that is too often overlooked – is providing paraeducators with an orientation at the start of their employment. An orientation will be the most effective if it is structured and includes, among other things, general and specific information about the paraeducator's job responsibilities (including a written job description), district and school policies, a tour of the school facilities, and introductions to staff and team members.

After the orientation, the paraeducators' supervisors are responsible for providing direct support and on-the-job training. Without this support, the potential for confusion and frustration increases as paraeducators are left to figure things out for themselves. It is with this task that staff development for teachers and other school staff would be useful in helping them understand their role in training and supporting para-

educators.

Paraeducators, like the professionals around them, need to keep their skills current and be informed of any changes in methods, policies, or legislation affecting students with disabilities. Without training in staff development techniques, it might not occur to teachers to initiate and create (with the paraeducator) a growth and development plan. Through training teachers in staff development techniques, teachers would learn that an orientation and on-the-job training are the minimum training requirements paraeducators need in order to do their jobs. But to truly provide the best education and care for students with disabilities, and to increase paraeducators' job satisfaction and retention levels, supervisors need to support and advocate for inservice training for the paraeducators that work with them.

If teachers understand the importance of staff development and are trained in staff development techniques, they are more likely to be aware of available training opportunities and understand that it is their responsibility to inform paraeducators of these opportunities. Teachers would know, for example, to look for inservice training in many different forms including training sessions provided by districts, community colleges, universities, and other agencies, as well as provide access to independent learning opportunities through articles, journals, videos, self-directed training guides, and the Web.

Teachers and others directing the work of paraeducators cannot assume that an orientation and on-the-job training are enough for the professional development of the paraeducators in their schools. As the paraeducators' supervisors, teachers need to be aware of paraeducator interests, strengths, and weaknesses and support paraeducators in seeking to improve their skills.

Summary

Since the quality of work performed by any staff member is directly affected by the quality of the preparation put into

that work, teachers and administrators must understand what is necessary to prepare and support paraeducators. In turn, their efforts will ultimately contribute to better instruction, a stronger team atmosphere, and increased confidence and job satisfaction among paraeducators. We hope that teachers and administrators will intentionally design a system that recognizes the contribu-

Paraeducators need to keep their skills current and be informed of any changes in methods, policies or legislation affecting students with disabilities.

tions of prepared, supervised paraeducators. In the words of Daniels and McBride (2001), "In the final analysis, schools cannot adequately function without paraeducators, and paraeducators cannot adequately function in schools that lack an infrastructure that supports and respects them as viable and contributing members of instructional teams."

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[Hutten-Eagle, continued from page 23]

Five are currently teaching, one has completed a Master's degree, one is enrolled in a Master's degree program, and six are in credential programs. Four students dropped out of the program: one moved out of state, one needed to improve basic academic skills, one went to work full-time outside the school district to support her family, and sadly, one passed away (the support of her family by the other paraeducators has been phenomenal). By the time the funding for the grant ends, we anticipate having thirty-five graduates and six who will be continuing to work on their degrees.

New Directions

Encouraged by the success of the original project, a second OSERS grant was written to provide tuition and support to 60 paraeducators from the neighboring Long Beach Unified School District. Funded in 2001, this project is similar to the first, and the second group of 15 paraeducators will begin classes in the fall (see the sidebar for the paraeducators' view of this project). We are now developing a math support component which will be available to paraeducators from both grant programs, as they have expressed a need in this area in addition to the writing assistance. We are so pleased with the progress of the paraeducators in both programs, and hope to continue to prepare them to become teachers in local school districts.

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A Final Word

From the Editors

This issue of Impact provides information about paraeducators and their roles, preparation, supervision and the legislation that guides such things. It is clear that the various roles of paraeducators have changed and continue to change in our dynamic educational system. As their roles evolve, so does their need for preparation and training. We hope that new legislative changes serve as a catalyst for better, more efficient, and comprehensive systems to prepare and support the paraeducator workforce.

In addition to adequate preparation and training comes the need for appropriate supervision, including meaningful job descriptions, time to plan with licensed staff, and review of job performance. We have found that when paraprofessionals receive these things, they not only feel competent in their jobs, but they feel valued as members of the instructional team. Teachers, store managers, taxi drivers, doctors, steel workers, principals, and every other person in every other job must have the tools necessary to do their jobs well. Why would we expect anything different for paraeducators?

Legislation, role clarification, preparation, and supervision are needed to ensure that paraeducators and teachers are working together to support the success of students with disabilities in our educational settings across the country.

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- **The Paraeducator's Role on Education Teams**
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- **Federal and State Standards for Paraeducators**
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A publication of the Institute on Community Integration (UAP) and the Research and Training Center on Community Living, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. Dedicated to improving community services and social supports for persons with disabilities and their families. This Impact is also published on the Web at <http://ici.umn.edu/products/newsletters.html>.

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Impact

Feature Issue on Paraeducators Supporting Students with Disabilities and At-Risk

Volume 15 · Number 2 · Fall 2002

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Impact is published quarterly by the Institute on Community Integration (UAP), and the Research and Training Center on Community Living, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. This issue was supported, in part, by Grant #90DD0506/01 from the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, US Department of Health and Human Services; and Grant #H133B980047 from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, US Department of Education.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute, Center, University, or their funding sources.

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