Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium, which has been in existence for 10 years, consists of nearly 40 individuals, including teachers and paraprofessionals from local school districts, and individuals from state agencies, unions, and institutions of higher education. The purpose of this consortium is to coordinate a variety of activities designed to support and enhance Minnesota's paraprofessional workforce. The consortium has set goals and activities to help facilitate its purpose.

Minnesota Paraprofessional Goals and Activities

The following goals and activities are intended to build a system that prepares paraprofessionals for the workforce to better contribute as team members to the changing educational environment in Minnesota —

- Create and support a well trained paraprofessional workforce in Minnesota.
- Create a vision and guiding principles for the role of paraprofessionals as valued members of the educational team.
- Develop a set of core competencies required of all paraprofessionals working in Minnesota schools.
- Develop specialized competencies for selected learning environments within Minnesota schools.
- Develop training materials to reflect the guiding principles and competencies generated in Minnesota.
- Establish the Education Track of Community Supports Program certificate and degree program within Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, technical and community colleges.
- Facilitate the development of a career pathway.
- Coordinate and sponsor Minnesota's Annual Statewide Paraprofessional Conference.

If you would like to become a member of the consortium, please send a letter of interest, with recommendations to — Barbara Jo Stahl MN CFL Suite F6 1500 Highway 36 West Roseville, MN 55113

The consortium will review current openings and recommend accordingly.
• Sponsor regional paraprofessional conferences.
• Support districts as they train and support paraprofessionals working in Minnesota schools.
• Develop, disseminate and provide technical assistance on the use of various tools.
• Disseminate information about research, training, resources, and useful tools to Minnesota educators, administrators, and paraprofessionals.
• Encourage and support the development of collaborative training for paraprofessionals and teachers at the local level.
• Fund regional coordinators to conduct collaborative training activities based on the guiding principles and competencies for Minnesota paraprofessionals and their instructional supervisors.
• Disseminate information about research, training, resources, and useful tools to Minnesota educators, administrators, and paraprofessionals.
• Publish and disseminate a newsletter for paraprofessionals, educators, and administrators in the state of Minnesota.
• Establish and maintain a Web site. That includes training opportunities, materials, resources, tools, core and specialized competencies, and links to other Web sites.
• Present to state and national audiences about paraprofessional roles, importance, and issues, and about available resources regarding the Minnesota paraprofessional workforce.
• Study and demonstrate effective practices related to employment, support, and development of paraprofessionals as members of the educational team.
• Identify pockets of excellence and encourage replication of effective strategies/practices.
• Encourage nomination of schools using effective practices that support paraprofessionals.
• Identify the competencies needed by educators who direct the work of paraprofessionals.
• Conduct focus groups around the state to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by educators who direct the work of paraprofessionals.
• Analyze the results of the focus groups to identify the competencies needed by educators.
• Provide training for educators directing the work of paraprofessionals.
• Support districts as they train and support educators directing the work of paraprofessionals working in Minnesota schools.
• Develop, disseminate, and provide technical assistance on the use of various tools such as hiring strategies, sample job descriptions for paraprofessionals, and orientation checklists.
• Understand the changes in the condition of the paraprofessionals workforce in Minnesota.
• Conduct a statewide survey of paraprofessionals to determine their training needs, etc.
• Ensure that Minnesota educational policies and rules promote a well-trained and supported paraprofessional workforce.
• Monitor and influence educational rules and policies that impact paraprofessionals in Minnesota.
Another school year is underway. Here are some updates from the state. A huge step on behalf of paraprofessionals was taken by both Congress and the Minnesota legislature with the passage of Minnesota Omnibus Education Bill of 1998. For the first time there is mandatory staff development and training for paraprofessionals who serve students with disabilities. Some school districts already have excellent staff development programs for all their staff including paraprofessionals. This new legislation now requires that all districts meet specific requirements for paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities. The 1997-98 Minnesota Legislature passed the Omnibus Education Bill that requires that paraprofessionals who are working in schools and with special education have prior training and be supervised by licensed staff. Below is a posting of the bill.

State of Minnesota
Minnesota Omnibus Education Bill of 1998
Article 2, Section 9
(b) For paraprofessionals employed to work in programs for students with disabilities, the school board in each district shall ensure that —

1. before or immediately upon employment, each paraprofessional develops sufficient knowledge and skills in emergency procedures, building orientation, roles and responsibilities, confidentiality, vulnerability, and reportability, among other things, to begin meeting the needs of the student whom the paraprofessional works;

2. annual training opportunities are available to enable the paraprofessional to continue to further develop the knowledge and skills that are specific to the students whom the paraprofessional works, including understanding disabilities, following lesson plans, and implementing follow-up instructional procedures and activities; and

3. a districtwide process obligates each paraprofessional to work under the ongoing direction of a licensed teacher and, where appropriate and possible, the supervision of a school nurse.

With this new legislation there is a significant interest in quality staff development programs. Because Minnesota has had a statewide paraprofessional consortium for the past nine years, our state is in a very good position to provide schools with technical assistance to achieve this training mandate. Progressive schools have a team of paraprofessionals and district personnel planning the implementation of this new legislation. Call the person in charge of your district’s staff development and see if they need assistance. Staff involvement increases the chances of quality programs.

As you are probably noticing other places in this newsletter, we have a new Web site, thanks to Teri Wallace and her staff at the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. All that is currently available in paraprofessional resources is on this Web site. New additions will be added on an ongoing basis. Continue to check for updates.

Barbara Jo Stahl,
Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning
Consortium Has Impact

Andi Upin, Nancy Corbin, and Kathy Wente each bring something different to the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium. They each have different experiences, which contribute greatly to the diversity of the membership of the consortium. Andi Upin is an instructor in the Professional Human Development Department at Ridgewater Community College in Hutchinson. She has been a member for 10 years and is involved with the paraprofessional certificate program that Ridgewater Community College offers. Nancy Corbin also has been a member for 10 years and works as an occupational therapist for the Rum River Special Education Cooperative. She is in charge of the paraprofessional training for the cooperative. Kathy Wente works at the State Academy for the Deaf in Fairbault. She is a residential program lead worker. She provides direct care for after school programs for students who are deaf. Below is an interview with each of them regarding the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium and its activities that help support paraprofessionals around the state.

Nancy Corbin
I think paraprofessionals feel more valued. The consortium activities have helped increase awareness and give a broader base of knowledge of the para’s role, to people in the state. You can see the result of this by seeing paras attending more school workshops and trainings. It is also reflected in the changes being made with para contracts. In our special education cooperative, paraprofessionals and teachers have the same number of days that they are expected to be at the school. In the past paras were only expected to be in the schools if the student they were working with was also there. Today they are expected to be there according to their contract. The role of the para is changing and the consortium is helping make everyone aware of the new definition.

Kathy Wente
Because of the work that the consortium does, paraprofessionals are being recognized for who they are and what they do. The statewide para conference, which is sponsored by the consortium, gives paras the opportunity to network and find out what is going on elsewhere, such as: school districts, classrooms, dormitories and many other places. The conference also helps pass on information. The ParaLink newsletter also brings more awareness that there are others out there doing what they do.

Q: What impact has the consortium and its activities had on paraprofessionals?

Andi Upin
I think the greatest impact is the consortium itself serving as a conveyor of knowledge to people in Minnesota and the nation. The consortium with its diversity in membership, such as: working paras, union representatives, special education districts, and many more, come together as a group with one goal in mind: to help strengthen and empower the role of the para. Unfortunately, some people still don’t know the definition of the role of the para, but with the work of the consortium many people around the state are paying attention and learning about the paras’ changing role.

An example of this is the annual statewide paraprofessional conference that the consortium sponsors. This conference brings together 500 individuals where everyone is anxious to learn, share and celebrate what they do. Also, consortium members present at national conferences using Minnesota as a model. I don’t mean to say that we are perfect; we have a lot of challenges ahead of us to continue the process of getting knowledge about paras out there.

Kathy Wente
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Para of the Year makes paraprofessionals feel good, even if they don't win they feel supported and important in their role. Also, the consortium helps get information out quickly about what is going on around the state such as job descriptions, trainings, etc.

Kathy Wente
By getting involved in the conferences and letting administrators and supervisors know what paraprofessionals are about – how we need to be heard and what we need. Consortium activities brought a voice that paraprofessionals didn’t have before. Through the consortium’s interacting with higher levels of the system — such as gaining attention in legislation — paraprofessionals are being heard. Those who support paraprofessionals can continue this effort by sharing information they learn about trainings, conferences, and other professional development opportunities.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead
One of the goals of the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium is to establish and maintain a Web site for paraprofessionals and the individuals who support them. The site includes up-to-date information on the following —

- Training opportunities and materials
- ParaLink newsletter on-line
- Pockets of Excellence profiles
- Guiding principles
- Core and specialized competencies
- Speakers’ bureau
- Questions and answers Web board
- Paraprofessional resources and tools
- Links to other Web sites

Below is a description of the information on the Web site —

About Us
This section includes general information about the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium. It describes the make-up of the members and the purpose of the consortium in their work. In the future, you can look forward to viewing a presentation about the consortium’s current and future goals and activities.

Annual Statewide Conference
Here you will find up-to-date information about the annually planned Minnesota Paraprofessional Conference. You will be able to find out the date, place, and registration information.

Para Resources
This is where you will find links to other paraprofessional Web sites, along with past and present issues of the ParaLink newsletter. A chart of core competencies for Minnesota’s paraprofessionals is found under the core competencies link, and you will also be able to find a list of a variety of resources for paraprofessionals, from curriculum to staff development.

Para of the Year
Here you will find nomination information for Para of the Year. You can see what the nomination form looks like and mail or fax in your own completed nomination. You also have the opportunity to view past Para of the Year winners.

Pockets of Excellence
The Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium identifies schools or districts (through a nomination and selection process) that use exemplary strategies or practices for supporting, training, supervising, involving paraprofessionals in the planning process, and retaining paraprofessionals. Here you can view profiles of Pockets of Excellence selected for the 1997 school year. Look for the 1998-99 nomination form coming soon.

Para Chat
The chat room forum is a place for paraprofessionals to communicate with each other around the world via their Web browser. Participants in the chat room may post questions, respond to other questions or comments, or engage in a live chat where they can communicate with others in a room. Most browsers support participation in our chat room. We hope you find it useful!

What’s New
This section will give you up-to-date resources, news and activities for paraprofessionals and individuals that support them. This includes everything from new training opportunities to the latest issue of the ParaLink. Always check in here to stay informed! The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium Web Site address is http://www.ici.coled.umn.edu/para/

http://www.ici.coled.umn.edu/para/
Workshops

Paraprofessionals/Educational Assistants Inservice Network
St. Paul — January 26, March 16, April 20, 4:30-6:30 p.m.
Hopkins — January 19, March 16, April 20, 4:30-6:30 p.m.
Anoka — January 19, March 16, April 20, 4:30-6:30 p.m.
Farmington — January 19, February 23, March 16, 4:00-6:00 p.m.

Paraprofessional Horizons is conducting trainings for paraprofessionals/educational assistants and others working with students with special needs, cosponsored by Metro SPRISE, Metro ECSU and Regional CSPD. Topics include core competencies updates, roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, communication and resolving conflicts, behavior management and instructional techniques. These networks, at varied metro area locations, provide an informal setting for learning together and sharing ideas and practices. A certificate for 2 clock hours will be available at each network meeting. The fee is $20 for all four sessions, and registration will remain open throughout the school year. Please call (612) 706-0801 ext. 107.

Paraprofessional/Educational Assistants Workshop Series
St. Paul — February 10, 17, 24, and March 3, 5:00-7:00 p.m.

Paraprofessional Horizons present this workshop for paraprofessionals/educational assistants and others working with students with special needs. It is cosponsored by Metro SPRISE, Metro ECSU and Regional CSPD. Topics that will be included are IEPs and the law, the Minnesota Rule and Communication Issues, proactive behavior management, promoting resiliency in students. Presenters are educators who bring expertise in working with students and their families. They will address issues, questions and resources related to the topics. Participants will explore classroom strategies and techniques that enrich the learning experience. Core competencies for Minnesota paraprofessionals will be addressed in these sessions. The registration fee is $20 for the entire series, registration, however is limited. You must register one week prior to the first class. Please call (612) 706-0801 ext. 114.

Preparing for the New Millennium: Profiles for Success
February 4–5, Radisson Hotel South, Bloomington
This comprehensive conference will provide participants with information on innovative programs and strategies that will prepare them to provide quality services to students who are identified as having special vocational needs.
Sponsored by Minnesota Vocational Association for Special Needs Personnel (MVASNP). Call (612) 536-0872 for more information.

Workshop on Augmentative Communication Systems/Devices
Dates to be announced
Intermediate District 287
Augmentative Communication Specialists teach this workshop. If you use electronic and non-electronic augmentative communication systems with your students (pre-kindergarten to adults), this workshop is for you! The introductory workshop will address 1) Why does my student have voice output? He/she never uses it! 2) What do I do with the device during gym? Or does my student have to have it along at all times? 3) It doesn’t say what my student needs it to say…What now? 4) When will I be done programming this thing? 5) What do I do if the other kids want to play with the device? 6) People still talk to me instead of the student. For more information, please contact Linda Rees, Assistive Technology Program Facilitator, at (612) 550-7185.
ParaLink is published by the Minnesota State Paraprofessional Project, a joint project of the Institute on Community Integration (UAP), College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, and the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning; Institute on Community Integration; or their funding sources. The University of Minnesota and Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, are equal opportunity employers and educators. This publication is available in alternate formats upon request. Call (612) 624-4512

The ParaLink is a free publication. If you would like to be added to the mailing list, contact — Jennifer Utermarck (612) 626-7335 uterm001@tc.umn.edu.