This Paralink is dedicated to the topic of staff development: what is it, who is the target audience, what are the components, and what are districts doing about it? The Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium is one group that has set the wheels of progress in motion through its initiatives. Programs are being developed and people have been identified throughout the state that can be contacted as you seek the goal of staff development for the paraprofessionals working in your school or district.

Getting the Lay of the Land: Minnesota’s Needs Assessment Results

The most recent needs assessment of paraprofessionals in Minnesota conducted by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning has been disseminated to districts across the state. A total of 3,530 paraprofessionals responded to the survey that asked them about training, supervision, satisfaction, work responsibilities, planning time with licensed staff, and other important topics. The percent of paraprofessionals reporting that they feel adequately trained for their job responsibilities is the same as reported in 1997—70%. While this is a huge increase from the 57% that was reported in 1994, there are still 30% who reported not feeling adequately prepared for their day-to-day responsibilities. Figure 1 and Table 1 (see p. 3) show the way paraprofessionals responded to questions about training requirements contained within Minnesota Paraprofessional Legislation (Minnesota Omnibus Education Bill of 1998—Article 2, Section 9). This is important information for districts to consider as staff development activities are designed for paraprofessionals.

Continued on page 2
Laying the Tracks for Training Opportunities

Many of you are well aware of the competencies, training materials (e.g., Minnesota Paraprofessional Guide), skill assessments, state and regional conferences, and other work that has been done. Information about these activities is available on the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium's (MPC) Web site (http://ici2.coled.umn.edu/para).

Many districts around the state are using these tools to design and deliver training, and the state conference continues to fill up earlier and earlier. In addition to these activities, we have been obtaining information from individuals who conduct paraprofessional training and we hope to make this information available via the Web site.

In addition to the resources and activities listed above, the Institute on Community Integration is developing online training for paraprofessionals based on core and specialized competencies, entitled Para-e-Link. A technology needs assessment was conducted in preparation for designing this online training. More than 300 paraprofessionals responded to the survey and we learned —

• 100% of the paraprofessionals have access to a computer, email, and the Internet through home, school, or public library. 23% reported having access via school, though 54% indicated that when they used the computer, it was usually at school.

• Nearly 70% of the paraprofessionals reported that they used a computer daily, and 23% reported weekly use.

• Paraprofessionals responding to the survey indicated that they were comfortable or very comfortable with the following: keyboard (90%), computer (95%), email (78%), and Internet (73%).

• Approximately 70% of the paraprofessionals responding indicated that they would be likely to participate in online training, if offered.

Engineering a Change: Training the Trainers

On March 19 and 20, we conducted the first meeting of paraprofessional staff development district contact representatives. The meeting provided nearly 150 individuals from districts across Minnesota with information and resources regarding paraprofessional staff development. Attendees enjoyed learning from each other at this exciting meeting. An important resource identified during the meeting is the work of the Regional Low Incidence Facilitators (RLIFs). RLIFs conduct
assessments of training needs and work within their region to support training that responds to those needs. Many of these facilitators support staff development of paraprofessionals. Information about how to get in touch with your District Contact for Paraprofessional Staff Development and the RLIFs in your region is available on the MPC Web site.

In addition to efforts regarding the preparation of paraprofessionals, we are also currently creating materials for teachers that direct the work of paraprofessionals. These materials are based on the 30 competencies identified through focus groups and a statewide validation survey. Once completed, we will offer these products to institutes of higher education to use in teacher training programs and will conduct in-service training across the state to teachers hoping to increase their knowledge and skill in this area.

All Aboard!
While this article just touches on some of the many staff development efforts occurring for paraprofessionals around the state, we hope that the movement continues to grow and that every district climbs aboard and keeps the wheels a-spinnin’.

Contributed by Teri Wallace, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

![Figure 1. Respondents Reporting Having Had Training](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel I have had the opportunity to develop knowledge/skills specific to students with whom I work (N = 3443)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ongoing training offered prepares me to understand the disabilities of the students with whom I work (N = 3423); 6% Does Not Apply</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ongoing training offered prepares me to follow lesson plans for the students with whom I work (N = 3307)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ongoing training offered prepares me to implement instructional procedures and activities for the students with whom I work (N = 3289)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the ever-expanding world of education, a unique “language of terminology” has developed comprised of jargon, buzz-words, and acronyms. “Student-centered,” “process-oriented,” “empowering,” “real-life experience,” and a dozen other phrases fill the air at district meetings, staff training seminars, and conferences throughout the country.

But what, exactly, is meant by these vague terms? What exactly are they saying? When a phrase is overused, it can often lose its meaning and impact, becoming a blanket that shrouds its original intent and power. The phrase “staff development” has — regrettably — come dangerously close to this foggy fate. Before exploring strategies and guidelines for creating staff development programs, it is a good idea to explore what, exactly, these two words mean.

What is it?
Despite the simplicity of the terms involved, staff development is difficult to define. It can, perhaps, best be understood by examining what it is not. Staff development is not an isolated event, workshop, conference, staff meeting, or series of plaques that recognize an “employee of the month.” While all of the aforementioned can be incorporated into a staff development program, they do not comprise the whole. At its core, staff development is a process; a recognition that staff are constantly in the process of growing, learning, evaluating, experimenting, and adjusting their practice and philosophy as it relates to daily work. In short, staff development is the never-ending process of professional growth.

Who is Involved?
As the term implies, staff development involves staff. But who, exactly, is that staff? Does it apply only to the weakest members of a community or isolate a particular, less-educated population? Does it seek to improve only those who are incompetent or under-trained? The answer to these questions is an emphatic “No!”

In the context of the educational system, staff development must involve everyone — teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, volunteers, leadership groups, and others instrumental in school activities. Just as a weight trainer would not seek to build his/her biceps while neglecting the rest of the body, in a staff development effort, the whole system must be incorporated. Staff development must, by definition, involve everyone.

What is the Goal?
Thomas Guskey points out that staff development must, first and foremost, “be designed with some purpose or some vision of what effect is desired” (1994). It must have, at its outset, a tangible, carefully selected goal related to the goals of the school building and district in which it is developed. “While [staff development] activities may take a variety of forms, all should be related to a school mission that emphasizes the important and worthwhile learning goals for all students” (Guskey, 1999). Ultimately, staff development occurs for the sake of learners. Because students change and needs evolve, staff development must do the same. The staff development effort is never complete.

How is it Done?
Any staff development effort must be tailored to the needs and goals of the individuals and students involved. However, the following guidelines...
Professional Opportunities for Educational Assistants in Minneapolis School District

In the Minneapolis School District, effective educational assistants are highly valued. They are assets in and of themselves, but they also promote the larger goal of ensuring that students maximize their academic success and develop positive relationships with adults. To reinforce this value, diverse training and educational opportunities are offered to challenge educational assistants at all points of their career.

80-Hour Core and Disability Training
Special education assistants, student support specialists, and educational assistants attend an 80-hour Core and Disability Training which is offered in the fall and spring of each school year. The training consists of the following —

• 50-Hour Core Training
  The first 50 hours, the Core Training, are instructed by Minneapolis teachers and support staff in the evenings and Saturdays. Core Classes: Disability Awareness, Due Process, Professional Development Plan, Effective EA, Crisis Prevention, Building Relationships, Data Collection, Cultural Awareness, Functional Behavior, Docusystems, Fetal Alcohol Awareness, and Families and Resiliency. An open book Core Test is given at the completion of these classes. Each student must receive at least a passing score of 80%.

• 30-Hour Disability Training
  The second part of the 80-hour training is the 30-Hour Disability Training. The disability areas include Emotional Behavior Disorders, Academic Support, Autism, MMMI, Early Childhood Special Education, and Physical/Other Health Impairments. The instructors collaborate in each disability area to provide a training that is most appropriate to the needs of the support staff.
  An open book Disability Test is given at the end of this aspect of the training.

Key components of the trainings include the following —

• Important strategies and topics highlighted in the training are teaming, universal precautions, medications, the history of each disability, curriculum adaptations, behavior management techniques, and media/technology. The classes are small and involve many interactions between students and instructors and students and students.

• A certification of completion is given to each student who attends the entire 80-hour Core and Disability Training.

• CPR and first aid certifications are also required for special education assistants. Individuals find these classes in their community education catalogs, local fire stations, or state agencies. CPR and first aid classes ensure students with appropriate information regarding medically fragile students or at-risk situations that may arise in our buildings or playgrounds.

• After the initial 80-hour Core and Disability Training, special education assistants are required to earn 16 continuing education units (CEU’s) each year. These include refresher...
Minnesota legislation [MS 125A.08(b)] now requires ongoing special education paraprofessional staff development. The training opportunities should be available to enable the paraprofessional to continue to further develop knowledge and skills specific to the students with whom the paraprofessional works. Funding for this mandate can come from a variety of sources.

Sources
School districts receive funding from Federal, State, and local sources. Each category of funding has certain requirements or restrictions for use of the funds. The good news is that paraprofessionals fit into many of the funding streams. Both Title 1 and Special Education, Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD), funds may support paraprofessional staff development.

CSPD Funds
Minnesota has allocated federal staff development funds to address identified staff development needed to meet the instruction and related services needs of children with disabilities. For each child who has a disability and receives special education through an individual education plan (IEP), individual interagency intervention plan (IIIP), or individual family services plan (IFSP), Minnesota allocated $20 to each Special Education Administrative Unit during the 2000-2001 fiscal year for implementing local CSPD plans. Each special education administrative unit (special education director) is responsible for developing a CSPD plan that allocates the staff development funds based on needs of the district. Further staff development resources can be found on the following Web site at http://cfl.state.mn.us/staffdevelopment/fundstaffdevel.html

Best Practice
Best practice for paraprofessional staff development usually incorporates —

- District and building paraprofessional staff development plan.
- Combined resources allocation for paraprofessional staff development from Special education, Title 1, and District Staff Development funds.
- Pairing and sharing of staff development offerings among neighboring school districts.

Contributed by Barbara Jo Stahl, Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning.
Professional Development Pays:
St. Francis Contract Ties Compensation to Competencies

In a time when the public focus is on high student achievement, one Minnesota school district is taking a proactive stance by awarding additional salary compensation to educational assistants who show increased skill proficiency in their jobs. More competence earns more pay.

Independent School District #15 in St. Francis has 6,000 students, 375 teachers, and 220 assistants. According to Human Resources Director Nancy Rajanen, the school board and the educational assistants agreed that the level of interaction between students and non-licensed support staff merited the development of a system that provides sufficient training for all of the adults who work with the district’s students.

The educational assistants and the district have constructed a voluntary career ladder that now has three competency levels. Rajanen’s goal is to eventually have seven levels in place. The competencies have been specifically fashioned to fit the district’s goals and the assistants’ training needs.

According to Rajanen, the competency-based alternative compensation package, which took four years to design, is unique in that it is not tied to hours but to demonstrated skills. Educational assistants earn a 1.5% pay increase for each competency level they complete. Peer coaching, a component of level two, is an important part of the program.

When asked about peer coaching, media assistant Judy Hultman responded that it is still a work in progress: “The biggest problem is getting time to observe and learn from each other,” she said. “The benefit is that it heightens the awareness of what is happening in the rest of the district.”

After taking classes for core competencies in the first level, educational assistants may proceed to the second, in which they write professional goals and choose the workshops that best fit their job assignments. The course content becomes more program and task specific with each level increment. Licensed teachers, earning their own continuing education credits by serving as in-house experts, prepare and present most of the training for the non-licensed staff.

“Personally, I am happy with the salary increment, and education is always beneficial. Self-improvement raises confidence and attitude,” Hultman said, regarding the overall success of the program. “I have no data on this, but I know the EA’s are feeling more confident and empowered in their jobs.”

Nearly half of the educational assistants have begun the coursework since the program’s inception in 1998/99.

Contributed by Chris Harkness, Paraprofessional, Tri District #6067.
Paraprofessional Training Particulars: The Benton-Stearns Education District Staff Development Model

It all started quite innocently about 12 years ago with a phone call from a school administrator. “Could you come to our district and provide training on paraprofessional responsibilities?” he said. Since that first presentation for a small group of paraprofessionals, training opportunities have become regularly scheduled events for paraprofessional employed in Benton-Stearns Education District (BSED) member school districts.

While training sessions continue to be held in districts by request, most training sessions are now held in the BSED office classroom. The BSED staff plans a series of training sessions in the fall, winter, and spring on a variety of topics.

Topics are most often determined by administrator/staff requests or by the paraprofessionals through training evaluations. A wide range of special education-related materials and subjects have been presented including these general topics: Roles and Responsibilities of the Paraprofessional, ABC’s of Disabilities, Bag of Tricks (Behavior Interventions), Learning Styles, ODD/ADHD, Teaming and Communication, Confidentiality/Data Privacy, and Stress Management. These topics have been primarily presented by BSED and Benton-Stearns Day Treatment staff.

Since the Minnesota Omnibus Education Bill [MS 125A.08 (b)] passed in 1998, literally hundreds of paraprofessionals have attended the 12-15 sessions held each year. Success of this program is attributed primarily to two supportive factors: 1) the quality of the speakers and pertinent information presented, and 2) compensation provided in the paraprofessional contract. Each member district paraprofessional contract includes specific language regarding number of hours of training allowed, an hourly rate of pay, and, in some cases, allowance for registration, mileage, and transportation costs. The paraprofessionals are empowered with the choice of where and when they receive training. In addition to training opportunities provided by the BSED staff, paraprofessional staff may choose from other workshops offered in the area.

Some of those include Paraprofessional and Provider Potpourri hosted by the St. Cloud Technical College in February, the state conference held in Hutchinson in May, and local district staff training usually offered on in-service days.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned from past mistakes primarily involve issues of communication —

• A contact system that directly involves paraprofessional staff is imperative. School administrators and special education teachers need to know about training sessions available, but brochures must be sent directly to the target audience, the paraprofessionals.

• Secondly, current and accurate records of attendance must be kept. Administrators have called a number of times to verify attendance records.

• A third area of caution involves knowledge of school district policies and procedures. Information presented has occasionally not been in concert with actual

Continued on page 9
• Review and model off of programs already in existence.
• Encourage experimentation and implementation, embedding the learning into actual practice in the classroom.
• Develop a system that provides support, modeling, opportunities for peer-networking, and feedback.
• Continually evaluate, check in, and adjust. The particulars of any staff development program will rely heavily on district resources and personnel needs and strengths, learning styles, and interest. However, the key to implementation is to be 1) intentional, 2) deliberate, and 3) reflective.

When a school system is effective, staff development is not only important, it is inevitable. It will and must happen. Staff development does more than strengthen education — it is education. It is more than jargon — it is action.

Conclusion
The educational assistants in the Minneapolis School District are vital employees motivated to improve their techniques and increase their knowledge by taking advantage of the diverse opportunities available to them.

Contributed by Roberta Woods, Facilitator of Special Education Assistants, Teacher Instructional Services-Special Education. Contact Roberta at 612.668.5420.

For further information, see the Staff Development Catalog on the Minneapolis Public Schools Web site, which offers information regarding all classes available to Minneapolis employees (http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/staffdev/index.html). The SEA/EA/Specialist Newsletter distributed four times a year is another resource for staff development opportunities and pertinent information.

Contributed by Angie Swanson, ParaLink Editor.
Workshops
Mark Your Calendars Now for These Upcoming Training Opportunities!

- The 20th National Conference on the Training and Employment of Paraprofessionals in Education, Rehabilitation, and Related Services, Madison, Wisconsin at the Monona Terrace Convention Center, May 9–12, 2001. Attendees will gain knowledge of new dimensions in the roles, preparation, supervision, and career mobility for the paraprofessional workforce. For further information regarding registration, content, or the opportunity to present, please visit the Web site at http://www.nrcpara.org/call.htm or contact Marilyn Likins, Co-director, National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals at Utah State University, 435.797.PARA or email: mlikins@utah.uswest.net.

- Paraprofessional Miniseries — Summer Institute 2001, The PREP Center, third floor, Intermediate District 287 Service Center, 1820 Xenium Lane North, Plymouth, from July 30–August 3, 2001. Designed specifically for paraprofessionals and others in support roles within the school setting, the Paraprofessional Mini Series is a collection of 10 mini courses offered over a five-day period for a half-day each. For more information regarding topics and logistics/registration, visit the Web site at http://www.prepcenter.org or call Sharon Arends at 763.550.7221.

- 2001-2002 School Year Para Series, The PREP Center (see above), two Saturdays and three Tuesdays throughout the school year. A variety of topics will be offered for all paraprofessionals. For more information regarding topics and logistics/registration, visit the Web site at http://www.prepcenter.org or call Sharon Arends at 763.550.7221.
Minnesota Paraprofessional Speakers Network

The following form has been developed to assist in preparing a network and database of speakers to address the core and specialized competencies identified as expectations of all paraprofessionals working in Minnesota schools. Many districts are looking for speakers to assist in the preparation of their paraprofessionals. We hope this network will connect you with those who need training. As a member of this network we will share information with you about new materials and resources. Please complete the following information and return it as soon as possible. Share this form with others who might be interested. Thank you!

Name

Place of Employment Position Title

Address

City State Zip Code

Telephone Fax Email

Web site (relevant to expertise/experience only)

Please indicate the competency areas in which you have experience as a speaker —

- Philosophical, historical, and legal foundations of special education
- Characteristics of learners
- Assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation
- Instructional content and practice
- Supporting the teaching and learning environment
- Managing student behavior
- Communication and collaborative partnerships
- Autism
- Technology
- Professionalism and ethical practices
- Early childhood — home visitor programs
- Early childhood — center based programs
- Transition to work and adult life
- Providing support in the general education setting
- Physical and other health impairments

I give my permission to the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium to provide my name as a potential speaker, either in print or via the Web. I understand that particular arrangements for my involvement as a speaker will be negotiated by me and the potential agency, organization, or individual for whom I might be speaking.

Signature Date

Please attach a 100 word description of your expertise/experience. Any info over 100 words will be omitted. Be prepared to provide references upon request.

Please return to —
Teri Wallace
Institute on Community Integration, U of M
111 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Tel. (612)626-7220 Fax (612)624-9344