Guiding the Way:
Minnesota’s Paraprofessional Consortium

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium has been in place for nearly 14 years. Established by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, the Consortium provides leadership in the design and coordination of activities intended to prepare and support Minnesota’s paraprofessional workforce. The Consortium is comprised of paraprofessionals, teachers, administrators, state agency staff, union representatives, university and college faculty and instructors, parents, and others interested in paraprofessionals.

The Consortium uses six principles to guide its work —

1. Paraprofessionals are respected and supported as integral team members responsible for assisting in the delivery of instruction and other student-related activities.

2. The entire instructional team participates within clearly defined roles in a dynamic environment to provide an appropriate educational program for students.

3. To ensure quality education and safety for students and staff, paraprofessionals are provided with a district orientation and training prior to assuming those responsibilities. Ongoing training is supported for job-related responsibilities.

4. Teachers and others responsible for directing the work of paraprofessionals have the skills necessary to work effectively with paraprofessionals.

5. By recognizing paraprofessionals’ training, responsibilities, experience, and skill levels, they are placed in positions for which they are qualified, which effectively and efficiently use their skills to enhance the continuity and quality of services for students.

6. Administrators exercise leadership by recognizing paraprofessionals as educational partners.

In this issue of ParaLink (see page 7), you will meet some of the new members of the Consortium. You can learn more about the work of the Consortium by visiting our Web site at http://ici2.umn.edu PARA/. Please bookmark this site and watch for news and information.
How Paraprofessionals 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 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 chal-
lenges 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 co-workers 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.


Teri Wallace is Project Director with the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and Co-Director of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals. She may be reached at 612/626-7220 or by e-mail at walla001@umn.edu.
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. 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, allowing the paraeducator to participate in the planning process, appreciating each other’s unique personality traits, respecting diversity, and demonstrating a positive attitude toward teamwork. Once a team works well together, the job is less stressful and more rewarding for all team members, and results in greater benefit to students.

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?
- Are team members willing to communicate information and 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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Call for Nominations
Paraprofessional Pockets of Excellence

The Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium consists of educators, paraprofessionals, and representatives from various organizations dedicated to the improvement of education. The consortium was established by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning to support training, development and dissemination of materials, and research activities that focus on enhancing, understanding, and facilitating the growth of paraprofessionals in Minnesota.

Why identify pockets of excellence?
The role of paraprofessionals is evolving. Increasingly they are becoming integral members of the educational team in meeting the needs of students. To increase the quality of educational services, paraprofessionals must be provided with support, training, and opportunities to be effective in their roles on the education team.

We are seeking nominations of schools that use effective strategies or practices for supporting, training, supervising, planning with, and retaining paraprofessionals. We are interested in finding and sharing these “pockets of excellence” with others who are searching for practices, strategies, or tools to enhance the capacity of the education team to provide effective services.

How are exemplary practices/strategies/tools identified?
The Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium seeks nominations from students, family members, educators, and local, state, and national organizations of practices/strategies/tools that are considered exemplary. Nominated practices/strategies/tools should fit into one or more of the following three priority areas:

- Role Practices/Strategies/Tools: Enhancement, diversification, or recognition of paraprofessional roles (e.g. providing opportunities for non-instructional roles, committee assignments, etc.)

Upon nomination, schools will receive a guide which describes the selection process and criteria used to rate the applications. To determine exemplary status, the complete application will be assessed by a peer review group consisting of paraprofessionals and educators. School practices/strategies/tools identified as exemplary will be profiled and:

- Sent to all schools in Minnesota
- Published in the Paralink Newsletter
- Used as the topic of state and national teleconferences
- Included on a web site

Please see page 6 for Pockets of Excellence Nomination Form.
Nomination Form
Paraprofessional Pockets of Excellence

Please complete the following information to nominate a school that you believe represents excellence in working with, supervising, training, and/or retaining paraprofessionals. Nominations will be accepted on a rolling basis. Preliminary application reviews will take place in October 2003 and January 2004. We will then contact the school and inform them of the opportunity to continue the application process. The application will be rated in response to a set of criteria which will be included in the application guide.

Please contact Teri Wallace at the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota (walla001@umn.edu or 612.625.6619, fax) with any questions or needs for assistance regarding the nomination and/or application procedure. This form is available in alternative format and languages upon request.

School Name __________________________________________________________________________
Street Address __________________________________________________________________________
City, State, Zip Code _____________________________________________________________________
Contact Name _______________________________ Email Address _____________________________
Telephone Number ___________________________ Fax Number ______________________________

On a separate sheet of paper, please briefly explain why you regard this school as exemplary in its work with paraprofessionals.

Please indicate the practices стратегии/tools you are nominating:

___ Employment practices стратегии/tools for hiring, training, advancing, and retaining paraprofessionals. Please specify:
    ___ Recruiting     ___ Ongoing Training     ___ Interviewing      ___ Recognition
    ___ Hiring            ___ Advancement           ___ Evaluation

___ Collaborative practices стратегии/tools that facilitate collaborative relationships between paraprofessionals and teachers.

___ Role practices стратегии/tools that enhance, diversify, or recognize paraprofessional roles (e.g., providing opportunities for non-instructional roles, committee assignments, etc.).

Name of Nominator _______________________________ Email Address _____________________________
Organization Name _____________________________________________________________________
Street Address __________________________________________________________________________
City, State, Zip Code _____________________________________________________________________
Telephone Number ___________________________ Fax Number ______________________________

Please send or fax this form to: Teri Wallace, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 111A Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Dr SE, Minneapolis, MN, 55455. Fax: 612.625.6619.
Sally Berg has served as the principal at Murray County Central Elementary School in Slayton for the past seven years. Prior to the principalship, she served the same district as the Federal Program Coordinator. Sally has done a great deal of Title I and Special Education paraprofessional training in her district.

Diane Cirksena has been involved with the implementation of state standards for the Department of Children, Families and Learning since 1994, primarily working with teacher and administrator training. She brought 20 years of teaching and curriculum development to this experience, along with experience in private industry. Working with the paraprofessional requirements in NCLB is a new assignment for her. She is working with a policy-setting group so that the State will establish direction that encourages paraprofessionals to improve their skills, while leaving as much control in the hands of districts as possible.

Sharon Franke has been a Para (TA Inclusion) at Mississippi CAM for 11 years. Starting as a Title One TA for two years, she later switched to Special Ed. Besides being a paraprofessional, Sharon is also a union steward for Teamsters Local 320. Sharon also owns and runs her own trucking company. Sharon received her class A license last fall. She hopes she can give back to the students the wonderful experiences she had while growing up in the St. Paul School District.

Elida Olson has been a paraprofessional in the St. Paul School District for the past nine years. She is currently an Educational Assistant at Cleveland Quality Middle School where she serves as Lab Manager for the Math Success Maker (CCC) computer lab, utilized by approximately 500 students. Elida has joined the Consortium to take on an active role in helping her fellow paraprofessionals understand and prepare for the upcoming changes in our field.

Susan Stradtman, a former special education paraprofessional, worked for ISD 917 IDEA Program for about 14 years. She now works for SEIU Local 284 (Service Employees International Union), representing approximately 8500 support staff in Minnesota. Susan represents about 1800 paraprofessionals in the metro area and about 500 other support staff in southwestern Minnesota.

Lisa M. Talcott has been a Title One teacher in ISD 203 since 1990. ISD 203 is a small district (K-12 enrollment of about 1000) in southeast Minnesota. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, she also supervises and trains Title I paraprofessionals.

Lisa Vala, a resident of Plymouth, is a parent representative to the consortium. Lisa is the parent of an elementary-age child who receives individualized paraprofessional support that allows her to be fully included in her mainstream classroom.

Joe Pershern works for AFSCME Council 65, Nashwauk, MN, as a Field Staff Representative. AFSCME Council 65 represents employees in 53 school districts throughout the state. Joe is also the parent of a special needs child who requires the assistance of a paraprofessional throughout the school day.
Resources for Para Development

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

Print Resource

**Supervising Paraeducators in School Settings: A Team Approach**
Edited by A.L. Pickett and K. Gerlach
This newly-published text contains 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, TX, 800/897-3202 or 512/451-3246.

Web Resources

**National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education**
Web Site
www.special-ed-careers.org
This Web site contains information on the nature of paraeducator work, education and personal qualities required, job outlook and advancement, preparation, and additional resources.

**National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources**
Web Site
www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html
This Web site of the Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research at the University of Southern California offers an extensive collection of full-text articles addressing various aspects of the paraeducator role in education, abstracts from the ERIC Database on paraeducators, descriptions of numerous paraeducator-to-teacher career ladder programs, additional paraeducator resources, and a listserv electronic discussion forum on paraeducators.

**IDEAPractices Web Site**
www.idea-practices.org
This Web site is designed to answer questions and provide information about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and to 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
- SpeNSE Fact Sheet – The Role of Paraprofessionals in Special Education
- IDEA Practices – Knowledge and Skills for Teachers Supervising the Work of Paraprofessionals
- The Paraprofessional’s Guide to the Inclusive Classroom