**1998 Minnesota Paraprofessional of the Year**

Paraprofessionals make a difference in the lives of students, parents and staff in their school districts and communities everyday. This year the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium received numerous quality nominations for “Paraprofessional of the Year”, Making the process of selecting a winner very difficult. The Consortium choose three. **Congratulations to Mark Feeley, Lonnie LaRose, and Betty Sue Neal.**

The Consortium would like to thank all who took the time to nominate paraprofessionals for this award. Minnesota should be very proud of the exceptional work that paraprofessionals do around the state.

*Mark represents the Bloomington Public School’s finest. He is a role model who all paraprofessionals should emulate.— Patrick J. Geraghty*

Mark Feeley began his work as a paraprofessional in the Bloomington Public Schools in 1992. In the last six years, he has supported students with physical and mental impairments. Mark is an exceptional paraprofessional in his gift in knowing when to be supportive and when to encourage independence in students. He is incredibly creative in adapting materials to meet individual needs. Mark is positive, calm, gentle and has a deep conviction about meeting the unique needs of his students.

Mark demonstrates a genuine interest in the lives of his students. In addition to his role of paraprofessional during the school day, he attends students’ extra curricular activities and volunteers in school sponsored social group activities after school hours.

Mark’s colleagues and co-workers consider him an extraordinary asset to their school. His students hold him in the highest regard and consider him a positive role model. As one student said, “Mark can find the good in every person, a lesson in every experience.”

*She will take the toughest of the tough kids and put on a tea party complete with Grandma’s best cups, tea and crumpets and the boys love it.*

—Sharon Sudeith

Many people at Crossroads School and Vocational Center ISD #15 consider Lonnie LaRose their hero. She has been a paraprofessional there for 15 years and works with students who have Emotional Behavior Disordered, and students with Level V EBD. She serves about 125 children through an entire school year.

Lonnie was recently confronted with a serious illness. She has used this life situation as an opportunity to help students understand how a person’s attitude and strong work ethic can make a difference in the way one decides to live their life. Lonnie continues to inspire both students and staff with her openness to share her experience and grow from the adversities that life presents.

She is exceptional in her strategies to meet the needs of her students in a meaningful and impressionable style. Lonnie is involved with many extra activities in the school. One example is her involvement in the Cultural Diversity Committee. She has created several opportunities for her students to learn about other cultures, such as having a Native American family teach students how to make a headdress. Lonnie shows commitment, enthusiasm, and loyalty to her work. She is an outstanding paraprofessional.

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Recognition of all the 1998 Nominees

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium would like to recognize all of the 1998 nominees for “Paraprofessional of the Year”. All the nominees are extremely valuable to the success of the students and schools. The dedication, commitment, and determination of these paraprofessionals help make the process of education the very best it can be. Thank you to all of them:

Pamela Berent
Michelle Betnke
Pat Brown
Naomi Colburn
Judy Dalve
Julie Dikkin
Susan Douglas
Carol Emery
Shirley Gourde
Mary Heitzig
Gerrie James
Peg Jerdee
Lorraine Karlsgodt
Mary Keilty
Gayland Klein
Dianne Klein
Sandee Klemmer
Jerre Klinger
Karen Krussow
Lori Landowski
Bonnie Lotzer
Jeannine McGregor
Joann Nelson
Diane Pattock
Sigrid Ruhmann
Nancy Scharadin
Salie Schuweiler
Carol Snell
Sandy Sobkowiak
Danette Stoks
Jean Symanietz
Becky Thomsen

Betty has taught me to teach from my soul...to reach the kids with compassion... — Lonnie D. Schmidt

How do you appropriately thank someone who has given so much to her community by her work as a paraprofessional? This is a question that Menahga Public School has had to face, because Betty Sue Neal, a paraprofessional in the district for 24 years, is retiring. Betty has worked with hundreds of students during her years with the district and has had lasting impressions on all of her students.

Betty has dedicated a major portion of her life to the education of Menahga students. She lets students know that they are special and can be successful. She has an instinct for her role as a paraprofessional, and teachers feel that Betty is the one, who in fact, has taught them so much about working with students.

Menahga is proud of Betty, and as one colleague said “...people of all ages would be honored and thrilled to see Betty chosen ‘Paraprofessional of the Year’. She is already this school district’s Paraprofessional of a Lifetime.”
Minnesota’s Paraprofessional Retreat

On January 6th and 7th, 1998 Minnesota held a Paraprofessional Retreat in Red Wing, Minnesota. The main purpose of the retreat was to begin the process of identifying core and specialized competencies needed for paraprofessionals working in Minnesota schools. This article describes who participated, what was discussed, and how the process of identifying necessary competencies for paraprofessionals occurred. Finally, a summary of the steps involved in the process is provided.

Participants

Nearly 50 individuals participated in the retreat. The participants included: paraprofessionals, educators, administrators, school board members, union representatives, individuals from institutions of higher education, state agency staff, and a national expert in the training and support of paraprofessionals. Individuals came from all over Minnesota to discuss, and provide input on this important topic.

Retreat Content

The two day retreat featured (1) a discussion of the current context facing members of the paraprofessional workforce in Minnesota, (2) review of the 1997 amendments to IDEA that relate to paraprofessionals, (3) an overview of activities occurring across the nation related to the training and support of paraprofessionals, (4) determination of a set of guiding principles that would direct the work during the two days, (5) identification of core and specialized competencies for paraprofessionals working in Minnesota, and (6) a discussion of the skills needed by individuals who direct the work of paraprofessionals. A brief summary of each of these areas is provided below.

Current Context. Minnesota has seen a huge increase in the number of paraprofessionals employed in special education during the last few years. In fact, while the number of special educators decreased in 1997, the number of paraprofessionals (full time equivalent) has increased by 7% from the year before. In addition to the increase in numbers of paraprofessionals, their roles are also changing. Surveys were conducted in 1994 and 1997, which provide information regarding the role and responsibilities, educational preparation, training, and support of paraprofessionals in Minnesota.

Changes in IDEA. The 1997 amendments to IDEA state that paraprofessionals can provide special education services when they are appropriately trained and supervised. IDEA provides guidance to Minnesota as requirements, competencies, orientation, and ongoing training for paraprofessionals is determined.

National Perspective. Anna Lou Pickett from the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services, The City University of New York, provided an overview of the activities occurring across the nation. She also recognized, and indicated the high regard she holds for the work occurring in Minnesota. Specifically, she noted the collaborative relationship among the consortium members and systemic nature of the consortium activities. She emphasized the need for competencies for paraprofessionals with corresponding systems of training and certification.

Guiding Principles. The retreat members established a set of guiding principles to direct their work for the two days. These principles will be put together on a poster and disseminated. These six guiding principles are comprehensive and provide a vision for all in education. (These guiding principles can be posted and used as a resourceful tool.)

Competencies. Prior to the retreat, individuals from the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, established a list of competencies for paraprofessionals. This list was based on a review of the current literature, research, licensure requirements for Minnesota educators, and the work of other groups across the nation (e.g., The Council for Exceptional Children, and others). Individuals at the retreat reviewed this list in light of the following issues: (a) should the competencies be required of paraprofessionals? (b) what level of competence should be expected (i.e., awareness, understand, skill demonstration), and (c) at what point should the paraprofessional

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have the competence (i.e., prior to employment, within the first two weeks, or within the first 45 working days). As a result, two types of competencies were established, core competencies expected of every paraprofessional working in Minnesota schools, and specialized competencies expected of paraprofessionals working in specific programs (e.g., early childhood, transition) or with specific students (e.g., those with behavior challenges or physical and other health impaired). While these competencies were developed by a diverse group of individuals, efforts are still continuing to gather input and feedback from folks across Minnesota.

Skills needed by Individuals who Direct the Work of Paraprofessionals. In addition to the identification of the competencies needed by paraprofessionals, retreat members discussed the skills needed by individuals who direct the work of paraprofessionals. Across Minnesota and the nation, the role of the educator is changing. A major concern of many educators appears to be their lack of knowledge and preparation in guiding and directing the work of paraprofessionals in special education, work in regular classrooms, and community sites away from special education classroom. Not often do teachers enter the classroom ready to direct the work of other adults.

Next Steps  
Currently, the guiding principles developed at the retreat are being shared with Minnesotans. Information is continuing to be gathered regarding the core and specialized competencies. Additionally focus groups consisting of paraprofessionals, administrators, and educators are being conducted to identify the skills needed by individuals to appropriately direct the work of paraprofessionals. Information gathered by this process will result into competencies that describe what teachers must know and be able to do to effectively direct the work of paraprofessionals. Self-directed training materials and other tools to be used to facilitate the realization of our guiding principles will be developed.

Coming Soon to a Mailbox Near You!

As a result of the Minnesota’s Paraprofessional Retreat on January 6 and 7, 1998 the following guiding principles were established. Look for these to come your way in the near future.

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 functional team participates within clearly-defined roles within a dynamic changing environment to provide an appropriate educational program for students.

3. By recognizing the training responsibilities, experience, and skill levels; paraprofessionals 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.

4. To ensure quality education and safety for students and staff, paraprofessionals are provided with a district orientation, and training prior to assuming those responsibilities.

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

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

Please look for this to come your way in a poster format.
Participants Reactions from the Retreat

The paraprofessional retreat was a great success and it could not have been without the help of those who participated. Three of the participants volunteered to answer questions in relation to the retreat in Red Wing. Anna Lou Pickett from the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Service, The City University of New York, Teri Wallace, from the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, and Randee Dill, from Transition Plus and a Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium member. The following is a transcription of the three interviews:

QUESTION ONE

What impact do you think having the core competencies for paraprofessionals will have on the quality of educational services provided for children?

Anna Lou: Everyone who is working as part of the instructional team must now have knowledge and performance skills. Core competencies ensure that paraprofessionals are prepared to carry out their assigned tasks. Minnesota is taking a look at what hasn’t been done in the past and moving forward.

Teri: I think that core competencies will establish a standard identifying the knowledge and skills needed to serve as a paraprofessional in Minnesota. To the extent that paraprofessionals are provided the training and support necessary to achieve these competencies, I believe that what they will know and be able to do as a result will have a dramatic impact on the quality of services kids receive. In addition, I believe that educators must understand the most efficient ways to work with paras in the educational setting that exist today. Role clarification and appropriate training set the stage for quality services.

Randee: I think there will be a big impact if they are looked at and followed. Criteria being set in the hiring process means that people are going to be hired with more skills and most likely it will be improved. It is very important to have core competencies because of all the different areas of education that paraprofessionals work in. The core competencies are very critical.

QUESTION TWO

What is your reaction to the work of the retreat?

Anna Lou: I was really excited! I was pleased to have been asked to be there. Minnesota is in the forefront with good ideas to pass on and there is a good chance that they will succeed in their efforts. This is because Minnesota keeps all constituence in mind. They look at the roles, needs and contributions of the local school districts, unions, parents, professionals, two and four year colleges, and paraprofessionals versus activities performed by the state in a vacuum.

Teri: As a retreat planner and facilitator, I thought the commitment and efforts of the participants were extraordinary. Their work during the day and half showed their support of this critical workforce. And, as a professional dedicated to the development of a trained and supported paraprofessional workforce in Minnesota...I think that we made a huge leap during the retreat and I look forward to a strong and continuous momentum.

Randee: I was overwhelmed with the diversity of the groups that were working to set standards for paras. The representation of teachers, top people in administration - all in the interest of having better core competency standards for paras. Ultimately, we were all there for the students in our schools.

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**QUESTION THREE**

How will establishing core competencies in Minnesota affect the role of a paraprofessional?

**Anna Lou:** If core competencies are established and training is provided the important role that paras play will be recognized and their status as team members will be enhanced. It will encourage skilled paras to stay in the field.

**Teri:** I think that core competencies are the first step for paraprofessionals to a clearer, more defined role on the educational team. Specialized competencies or a personalized job description will also help paraprofessionals and the individuals who direct their work better serve students. Competencies, appropriate job descriptions, training, performance assessment, and support will go a long way to preparing paraprofessionals for their changing roles. While some schools excel in these areas, far too many do not.

I think that paraprofessionals and educators will benefit a great deal from the clearer role definition in the changing educational context. This clarification will help them to better serve students. When students are better served and supported, everyone involved feels more competent and successful in their jobs.

**Randee:** If core competencies are used correctly they are going to be critical. I can only see them helping paras positions by having more quality and competent people hired.

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**News From The State**

Greetings! The 1997-98 school year has been an exciting one for paraprofessionals. Governor Arne Carlson has declared the week of April 27, 1998 as Minnesota Paraprofessionals Recognition Week. As the proclamation from the Governor stated “Paraprofessionals and direct service staff work to encourage, inspire, motivate, and stimulate students and adults to prepare for the challenge of the future.” I am looking forward to para week ’98.

—Barbara Jo Stahl

Many of you may have questions regarding the retreat in Red Wing and what it means to you in your role as a paraprofessional. Barbara Jo Stahl, MN Department of Children, Families and Learning, volunteered to answer the following list of questions:

1. **Because of the core competencies will paraprofessionals have to have licensure/certification for the state of Minnesota?**

   No, paraprofessionals will not have to have licensure/certification. The core competencies will be used to assist districts in designing their own staff development and to guide us as a state.

2. **What is a way that paraprofessionals will be able to get training for competencies?**

   School districts are responsible for training for the competencies. This will happen before, or immediately upon employment in emergency procedures, and continue on an on-going basis. Paraprofessionals should talk to staff development in their building and district if they have further questions.

3. **What were the main goals of the retreat?**

   The main goals of the retreat were to bring all stakeholders who work with and have an interest in paras together to identify the tasks that paras do to be successful with students. Basically we wanted to create a set of core competencies for paraprofessionals.
PARAphernalia

Training Grants
Every year the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium chooses approximately 10 training projects from among several proposals that are submitted from around the state. The intent of these projects is to promote training among paraprofessionals and educators within local school districts. The projects include topics that focus on staff development for paraprofessionals and educators working in teams in programs serving students with disabilities. There is a description of the training activity, evaluation method and follow up activities in each training project. For more information or if you would like to have a copy of the list of training projects please contact Jennifer Utermarck at 612.626.7335 email: uterm001@tc.umn.edu

Coming Soon! Minnesota’s Paraprofessional website is almost here. The final stages to the web site, which was created by the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium, are being developed. There are many things to look forward to in this web site. It will offer useful information and resources, updates on new activities and training, and opportunities to interact with other paraprofessionals across Minnesota. In the future you can expect to see the Paralink at this web site too! It will be here in June of 1998 at the following address: http://www.ici.coled.umn.edu/para

MN Directory of Services for Children with EBD
Lists programs and services for students with emotional/behavioral disorders. Directory is divided into Minnesota’s developmental/planning regions, 1996. Costs: $25 Contact PACER at (800) 53-PACER.


Hope For the Families By Robert Perske. Helps parents and families overcome their fears and explore new options in education, work and social affairs for their children with disabilities, 96 pages. Costs: $10 Contact PACER at (800) 53-PACER

Trainings

Reed Martin Comes to Minnesota
Tuesday, May 19, 1998 9am-12:30pm or 6:30pm-9:30pm
A free PACER workshop for parents of children with disabilities. Reed Martin, a nationally-recognized attorney and authority on special education law, is coming to present information on recent changes in federal law and provide updates on recent court cases. He will include information on how to make IDEA work. In addition to being a highly sought-after speaker throughout the United States, Reed Martin is also a parent of a child with special needs. Advanced registrations requested. Please call PACER at (800) 53-PACER.

Rocketing into the future
May 8, 1998 8:30am-3p.m.
Sponsored by Northern Lights CTIC, Minnesota Power, Fond du Lac Tribal & Community College, On the Limit, and MN Transition Leadership Committee, this conference is for students, Parents, teachers and Case Managers. It is a day long conference on post secondary options and self advocacy for students with disabilities in Grads 10, 11, and 12. Please call Mick Seme (218) 879-1283 for more details.

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Para Link

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