

# Paraprofessionals

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

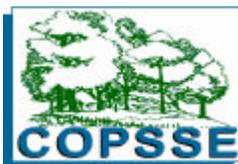
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

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Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

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# Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

In addition to our authors and reviewers, many individuals and organizations have contributed substantially to our efforts, including Drs. Erling Boe of the University of Pennsylvania and Elaine Carlson of WESTAT. We also have benefited greatly from collaboration with the National Clearinghouse for the Professions in Special Education, the Policymakers Partnership, and their parent organizations, the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, paraprofessionals have evolved as important members of instructional teams providing services to students with special needs; but the infrastructures to support them have not substantially improved. The role of paraprofessionals in the past 50 years has moved from assistance with clerical tasks toward more instructional tasks. Their changing role reflects changes in educational practices, evolution of teachers' roles, shifts in legislation and policy, and shortages of qualified teachers. These changes require the development of: (a) standards for paraprofessional roles and competencies, (b) infrastructures to prepare paraprofessionals for their new roles, and (c) administrative systems to support instructional teams at the school level. The active involvement of many different constituents—policymakers in federal and state governments, administrators in state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs), personnel developers in two- and four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs), researchers, professional organizations and others—is required.

Whereas paraprofessionals (e.g., paraeducator, teacher assistant, instructional assistant, education technician, transition trainer, job coach, therapy assistant, home visitor) work in a variety of roles and environments, this paper focuses on their work with students with disabilities, K-12, in schools and programs across the U. S. Paraeducators are school employees who: (1) work under the supervision of teachers or other licensed/certificated professionals who have responsibility for (a) identifying learner needs, (b) developing and implementing programs to meet learners needs, (c) assessing learner performance, and (d) evaluating the effectiveness of education programs and related services, and (2) assist with the delivery of instructional and other direct services as assigned and developed by certified/licensed professional practitioners.

## EVOLUTION OF THE PARAPROFESSIONAL ROLE

### Historical Summary

The role of paraprofessionals as instructional supports and key members of educational teams does not have a long history. Although numbering more than 500,000 today (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2000), as recently as 1965, there were fewer than 10,000. As their numbers have increased, their roles have expanded. Events and trends that have caused policymakers, educators, and others to reassess the role of the paraprofessional workforce have included: continuing efforts to include youth with disabilities in the general education classroom and their communities; growing need for occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech-language pathology services for children and youth of all ages; increasing numbers of students from ethnic and language minority heritages in school systems nationwide; continual shortages of teachers and related services personnel; and changing and expanding roles of school professionals as classroom and program managers. These developments, which had a significant impact on the emerging role of paraprofessionals in special education, are relevant today.

### 1950s and 1960s

Paraprofessionals worked in education and human service programs as far back as the early 1900s; however, it was not until the mid-1950s that their value was recognized. Post-war shortages of teachers led local school boards to look for alternative service providers. Paraprofessionals were recruited for clerical functions to free teachers for instruction by an early Ford Foundation project in Bay City, Michigan schools. Some critics were concerned that paraprofessionals would be used as cheap labor to replace teachers or that their presence would justify increased class sizes.

The primary responsibilities of paraprofessionals were the same regardless of educational settings, (e.g., general, special education), including noninstructional tasks (e.g., playground supervision, housekeeping tasks in the classroom, material preparation, and record-keeping).

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The civil rights movement, efforts to improve equality for women, and early campaigns to secure entitlements for children and adults with disabilities led to expanded programs across education and human services. Compensatory education for disadvantaged students, individualized education for students with disabilities, specialized programs for students from various cultural backgrounds, and an increase in governmental infrastructure to support the delivery of special services stimulated the employment of paraprofessionals; in addition to clerical support, teachers now needed instructional assistance. Similarly, an increase in public attention to the inequities in educational opportunities for students from minority groups led to a growing lack of confidence by parents and policymakers in the ability of teachers to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This led to the employment of paraprofessionals from the local communities of students and their families to serve as liaisons between home and school. For the first time, paraprofessionals provided instructional support to students and their parents. More theory and position papers about using paraprofessionals in instructional positions were published. While paraprofessionals gained momentum, opportunities for people from varied cultural backgrounds, women, and individuals with disabilities to achieve professional status improved.

### **1970s and 1980s**

The federal government played an active role in the New Careers movement through legislative actions, funding, and administrative guidelines. For example, the U. S. Department of Education (USDOE) supported the Career Opportunities Program (COP) that trained 20,000 individuals in career advancement programs in 1971. COP programs were developed jointly by school districts and teacher education programs to support paraprofessionals who wanted to become teachers. At the same time that IHEs were recruiting paraprofessionals into teacher education programs, states were developing certification procedures, identifying duties of paraprofessionals, mandating the use of paraprofessionals in some programs, and addressing training and career mobility for paraprofessionals wanting to remain in their current roles. Although COP ended with positive reactions from all involved in 1977, few LEAs or IHEs that originally participated in COP continued to offer opportunities for career development based on the COP model. As federal funding for all education programs decreased during the 1980s, interest in improving the performance of paraprofessionals waned as their use increased. Double-digit inflation, shrinking tax bases, and other economic factors were responsible for reducing funds for education. SEAs and LEAs provided services in a cost-effective way by hiring and integrating paraprofessionals into existing organizational and administrative structures, while practices associated with deploying, managing, and training paraprofessionals became unstructured and often non-existent.

### **1990s, 2000, and 2001**

The role of paraprofessionals has continued to evolve. Educational reform efforts are promoting new roles for teachers as managers and instructional team leaders. Specifically, teachers have greater responsibilities for program and classroom management, participation in school site decision-making, and implementation of accountability systems and measures. Changes in teachers' roles have implications for the roles of paraprofessionals. In addition, provisions in federal legislation require that all personnel be adequately prepared for their roles and responsibilities. This legislation includes: 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 (ESEA), the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB). The amendments to IDEA (P.L. 105-17) and NCLB (P.L. 107-110) have important implications for the role and preparation of paraprofessionals. Both of the laws refer to preparation and supervision requirements needed for paraprofessionals to provide specific services. The 1997 Amendments to IDEA require training and supervision for paraprofessionals who assist in the provision of special education services:

*A State may allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulations, or written policy, in meeting the requirements of this part to be used to assist in the provision of special education and*

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*related services to children with disabilities under Part B of the Act.* [34 CFR §300.136(f)]

In addition, NCLB established paraprofessional training requirements for new paraprofessionals (anyone hired on or after January 8, 2002). NCLB also sets a deadline 4 years from enactment (January 8, 2006) for currently employed paraprofessionals to meet one of the following requirements: (a) complete at least 2 years of study at an IHE; (b) obtain an associate (or higher) degree; or (c) meet a rigorous standard of quality and demonstrate, through a formal state or local academic assessment, knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing, reading, writing, and mathematics; or knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing, reading readiness, writing readiness, and mathematics readiness, as appropriate [Title I, Section 1119/b]. These requirements apply to any paraprofessional whose position is directly funded by Title I and who provides instructional support services. In a Title I school-wide program, any paraprofessional providing instructional support services will have to meet these requirements, including paraprofessionals providing special education services that are instructional in nature. In addition, the regulations state that a paraprofessional must work under the direct supervision of a teacher. The teacher plans the paraprofessional's instructional activities and evaluates the students with whom the paraprofessional works. In addition, the paraprofessional must work in close proximity to the teacher. Assistants without instructional duties are not included in the definition of *paraprofessional*.

These requirements have prompted a renewed interest in competencies and standards, credentialing systems, and infrastructures to support preparation and ongoing development. More research on the training needs, supervision, appropriate use, and efficacy of paraprofessionals provides the basis for the results and recommendations of this paper.

## **A REVIEW OF CURRENT LITERATURE**

### **Supply and Demand**

Determining the number of paraprofessionals working in schools across the nation is a huge challenge. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook (2000-2001)* reported approximately 1.2 million teaching aides/assistants employed in public/private schools and early childhood/daycare centers. The paper reports other data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and the NCES Common Core of Data (CCD) program. By other calculations, there are approximately 550,000 paraprofessionals currently employed in full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in the U.S. The number was generated from a 1999-2000 survey of chief state school officers in the 50 states, the territories of the U. S., the District of Columbia, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Department of Defense conducted by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCP). This number represents an increase of 50,000 paraprofessionals (10%) since a similar NRCP survey in 1996. Of the 550,000 paraprofessionals, approximately 290,000 work with children and youth with disabilities, and 130,000 or more work with multilingual learners, Title I, and other remedial education programs. About 130,000 work as library/media paraeducators, computer assistants, etc. In addition to the increase in paraprofessionals, the NCES reported a 48% increase in instructional paraprofessional employment compared to a 13% increase in student enrollment and an 18% increase in teacher employment from 1990 to 1998.

Clearly, schools must review and create meaningful ways to support their strategies to recruit and hire paraprofessionals. In addition, state and federal agencies must implement efficient, accurate methods of determining the number of paraprofessionals working in K-12 education and identify the program funds used to support their positions.

### **Preparation and Training of Paraprofessionals**

A 1974 study classified the duties of paraprofessionals working in special education classrooms with students with mild disabilities as: (a) clerical, (b) housekeeping, (c) noninstructional, and (d)

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instructional. The 2001 Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education found that there were differences by region and district in the types of services paraprofessionals provided, and the majority of special education paraprofessionals nationwide spend at least 10% of their time on each of the following activities: (a) providing instructional support in small groups, (b) providing one-on-one instruction, (c) modifying materials, (d) implementing behavior management plans, (e) monitoring hallways/study hall/other, (f) meeting with teachers, (g) collecting student data, and (h) providing personal care assistance. In some studies, paraprofessionals reported being responsible for a student's instructional program when that is the responsibility of the teacher. Other studies found that paraprofessionals reported a high level of responsibility in their jobs and that they made decisions regarding adaptations, provided behavioral support, and interacted with team members, including parents. This is a huge concern that points to a need for training and preparation, not only of paraprofessionals but also of those who direct and supervise their work.

Several guiding principles may be used in designing preservice and inservice training for paraprofessionals: (a) training should be aligned with a set of competencies and standards of performance; (b) specific training formats are best for teaching certain skills, e.g., an overview of the school-wide behavioral plan might take place in a large group, but what that means for a specific student with an IEP might require on-the-job training and modeling by a teacher; (c) training should be comprehensive and include varied opportunities and specific instruction on the needs of specific students; (d) training opportunities should be organized for ongoing paraprofessional development; (e) an initial orientation to the school's procedures and programs must be followed by opportunities for ongoing, targeted training and supervision; (f) teacher/paraprofessional teams can discuss new strategies, appropriate implementation roles, and learn the same content at the same time; (g) when paraprofessionals receive specific-skill training, it is important to follow up and ensure that they implement the skill correctly; and (h) finally, training and preparation must be aligned with appropriate role expectations and day-to-day supervision.

### **Certification and Licensure**

There is substantial agreement that paraprofessionals play an important role in educating students with disabilities. Regardless of paraprofessionals' backgrounds and roles, training is a critical element in effective employment and retention. Despite agreement on the need for paraprofessional training, many local and state education agencies do not provide significant preservice or inservice training. Since the 1997 Amendments to IDEA, a renewed interest in developing standards and certification has emerged. Several associations [Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the American Speech, Language and Hearing Association (ASHA), American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)] have established knowledge and skill competencies. CEC has set paraprofessional competencies, and some states also have paraprofessional competencies or standards. New legislative requirements will have an impact on certification and licensure across our nation. It is critical that constituents, including federal and state policymakers, SEA and LEA administrators, personnel developers in 2- and 4-year IHEs, researchers, professional organizations, and others align their efforts for an efficient, effective system of preparation.

## **A SUMMARY OF CURRENT ISSUES**

### **Effectiveness**

There has been increasing attention to the impact of paraprofessionals on student achievement, and this paper reviews key studies. However, many variables are involved with the appropriate use and supervision of paraprofessionals, and studies of paraprofessionals' effectiveness must be considered carefully. It is difficult to make general statements about efficacy, because extant research results are often contradictory.

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## **Supervision**

Associated with issues of paraprofessionals' efficacy and appropriateness of service delivery is the issue of supervision. Confusion in many schools leads to inappropriate expectations and assignments, lack of communication, and little planning between educators and paraprofessionals. Several studies and opinion pieces have addressed the importance of supervision and concluded that, given appropriate supervision, paraprofessionals can perform instructional activities. Currently, legislation supports the need for supervision, and now teachers must learn strategies for supervising paraprofessionals beginning in their teacher preparation programs.

## **Summary**

The key issues were summarized in a report to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the IDEA Partnerships Paraprofessional Initiative. Six overarching themes were identified by a cross-partnership (IDEA Partnerships, e.g., ASPIIRE, FAPE, ILIAD, and PMP) forum, including: (1) confusion and misunderstanding about roles, responsibilities, and supervision of paraprofessionals by teachers, administrators, and families; (2) lack of clear federal, state, and local policies and standards; (3) need for consensus about who paraprofessionals are and what a paraprofessional does; (4) inadequate training for administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals about appropriate roles, responsibilities, and supervision; (5) inadequate opportunities for instructional teams to plan, collaborate, and support one another's efforts; and (6) need for systematic infrastructures and administrative support for training, team collaboration/planning, and utilization of appropriate practice. These six broad issues, coupled with the need for identifying the efficacy of the paraprofessional role, are also the key paraprofessional issues supported by the literature.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

The following research will facilitate improvements: (a) efficient and accurate systems to identify information about the paraprofessional workforce; (b) the relationship between paraprofessional behaviors and the academic engagement and achievement of students; (c) models of paraprofessional support that demonstrate alignment among standards for roles, preparation, and supervision; (d) factors associated with successful collaboration/coordination among general educators, special educators, and paraprofessionals in the support of students in inclusive educational settings; (e) recruitment/retention strategies that lead to successful paraprofessionals; (f) factors (training, supervision, duties, planning time) associated with the successful use of paraprofessionals; (g) how teachers work with paraprofessionals on administrative, instructional, and noninstructional tasks; (h) infrastructures to support the preparation and ongoing development of paraprofessionals (e.g., preservice and inservice training, career ladders); (i) knowledge/skill competencies and corresponding training approaches; and (j) models for preparing administrators and teachers to supervise and direct the work of paraprofessionals effectively.