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ABSTRACT

Paraeducators were first introduced into American classrooms in response to teacher shortages during the early years of the post-World War II baby boom. Today, they are major participants in the delivery of education and special services, from early childhood through high school, for children with and without disabilities, and for those who speak English as a first or second language, especially in inclusive classrooms. Rural and small schools, which often have limited resources and difficulty attracting highly qualified teachers, are particularly dependent on paraeducators, whose roles and responsibilities have become increasingly complex in recent years. Although they enjoy an important role in American education, their rapid growth has given rise to a number of concerns: many paraeducators spend up to 50 percent of their time providing instruction to individual students with no teacher present; many currently lack formal (or even informal) training and a recognized place within the school, despite the fact that they may have as many as 20 or even 30 years of classroom experience. Paraeducators often are hired the day that school starts, have no formal job description, have no mailbox to receive school information, and are generally excluded from inservice or orientation training offered to the professional staff. This article offers ways in which principals can show paraeducators that they recognize the valuable contribution they make to schools, like providing mailboxes and including them in internal mailings, including them in faculty meetings, including them in parent-teacher conferences, providing time for teachers and paraeducators to plan their work together, and orienting paraeducators hired during the school year. (DFR)

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Paraeducators: A Powerful Human Resource

Betty Y. Ashbaker and Jill Morgan

It has been more than 50 years since the first paraeducators (also known as teachers' aides, classroom assistants, instructional assistants, and paraprofessionals) were introduced into American classrooms in response to teacher shortages during the early years of the post-World War II baby boom. Today there are more than 930,000 paraeducators employed in the United States, a number that is predicted to increase 38 percent by 2005 (Moskowitz and Warwick 1996). They are major participants in the delivery of education and special services, from early childhood through high school, for children with and without

disabilities, and for those who speak English as a first or second language, especially in inclusive classrooms.

Rural and small schools, which often have limited resources and difficulty attracting highly qualified teachers, are particularly dependent on paraeducators, whose roles and responsibilities have become increasingly complex in recent years. Their job descriptions range from clerical and housekeeping tasks to instruction providers (Morgan *et al.* 2000), and there has been a trend toward roles that require specialized skills and expertise, such as managing computer labs. Experienced paraeducators, familiar with classroom routines, students, and parents, provide valuable assistance to teachers.

As the roles of paraeducators continue to grow, so too does the need for support from principals and classroom teachers. For example, studies show that paraeducators are highly motivated to receive training when it is offered to them in the form of a conference, a distance education class, or a district workshop. They feel that such training will make them

more effective—and to many this is a greater incentive than financial rewards (Ashbaker *et al.* 2000).

States that have established paraeducator networks through newsletters or conferences report high levels of participation. In addition, by providing practical support and advancement opportunities, principals demonstrate respect and recognition for paraeducators that is reflected both in their performance and their willingness to stay in the job (Logue 1993; Passaro *et al.* 1991).

Disturbing Trends

Although paraeducators enjoy an important role in American education, their rapid growth has given rise to a number of concerns.

- A recent report revealed that many paraeducators spend up to 50 percent of their time providing instruction to individual students with no teacher present (Robelen, 1999). It has also been estimated that special education students may spend up to 80 percent of their

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Standards for Quality Elementary and Middle Schools, Third Edition* (NAESP 1996):

Organization. Sufficient numbers of well-qualified personnel are provided to fulfill the school's goals.

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instructional time with paraeducators rather than with certified teachers (Vasa *et al.* 1982).

- Many paraeducators currently lack formal (or even informal) training and a recognized place within the school, despite the fact that they may have as many as 20 or even 30 years of classroom experience (Ashbaker *et al.* 1998; Stuska 1998).

- A national survey of Chief State School Officers (Pickett 1998) found that less than half of the states had any infrastructure or requirements for the employment, training, and supervision of paraeducators.

- Training for paraeducators is often a local initiative (Morgan *et al.* 1995), but in states where guidelines and standards for paraeducators are established, local initiatives for training may be lacking (Pickett 1996).

- Paraeducators often are hired the day that school starts (or later), have no formal job description, have no mailbox to receive school information, and are generally excluded from inservice or orientation training offered to the professional staff (Ashbaker and Morgan 1998).

- Many paraeducators work in isolation, in different physical spaces from their supervising teachers, and therefore lack role models to follow and feedback on their performance (Ashbaker and Morgan 1999; French and Pickett 1997).

Principals and Paraeducators

How can principals show paraeducators that they recognize the valuable contributions they make to schools? While members of the school community, including administrators, teachers, parents, and school board members, may openly recognize the contributions of paraeducators on a personal and informal level, there are a number of ways that principals can make this appreciation visible. Here are some suggestions, none of them highly demanding of time or resources:

- **Provide mailboxes for paraeducators and include them in internal mailings.** Paraeducators often must depend on teachers to pass on or share information about training opportunities and district events. But breakdowns often occur when paraeducators work with several teachers, in several roles, or in more than one school. Without a direct communications channel, they may miss out on valuable information.

- **Include paraeducators in faculty meetings.** They will feel valued if invited to participate in meetings where essential information is distributed and important decisions are made regarding the school and the students they work with. If paraeducators' attendance is considered

important, they should be paid for their time.

- **Include paraeducators in parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings.** Where paraeducators spend large amounts of time with particular students, it may be appropriate to have them participate with teachers in parent-teacher conferences. If this is not convenient or possible, the teachers should take the time to consult with the paraeducators so that full and accurate information about students' needs and progress can be passed on to parents by the teachers. The same guidelines should apply to IEP teams, since paraeducators often can provide valuable information and insights based on their frequent one-on-one work with students.

- **Provide time for teachers and paraeducators to plan their work together.** As an instructional team, teachers and paraeducators need time to discuss their respective roles and assignments, and to give each other feedback. While time is always in short supply, scheduling planning periods as short as 20 minutes on a regular basis will increase the team's efficiency, ensure timely communication of concerns and needs, and acknowledge paraeducators' role in the instructional process.

- **Provide and support training opportunities.** Consider the needs of paraeducators when planning inservice training. The most appropriate means of training paraeducators in specific aspects of their classroom roles is often on-the-job training conducted by their supervising teachers. This type of training can be accomplished as part of their classroom routine if they are allowed time to plan and discuss it beforehand. However, some aspects of paraeducator training will require outside resources and input, and schools should budget for and obtain various training materials that paraeducators can study.

- **Orient paraeducators hired during the school year.** A substantial portion of school inservice training for paraeducators is typically delivered prior to the start of the school year.

What Is a Paraeducator?

Paraeducator is a blanket term covering such titles as teacher's aide, classroom assistant, instructional assistant, and education paraprofessional. The term denotes those who work alongside educators in much the same way that paralegals work with lawyers and paramedics work with doctors and nurses.

Paraeducators are typically long-term, local residents, mostly women, who work part-time for modest wages. They are often parents or grandparents of students,

and therefore have a vested interest in the success of both the school and the wider community. Paraeducators often represent racial and ethnic minority groups in the community, bringing knowledge of other languages and cultures into the school.

As a result of 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), "adequately trained and supervised" paraeducators can be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services.

Those hired on or after the first day of school lose out on this training. Consider compiling a binder of basic information about school routines and schedules, organizational structure, district programs, discipline policies, and emergency procedures that will enable the paraeducator to quickly acquire essential information. Such a binder can also be used by substitute teachers and volunteers.

- **Clarify appropriate communication channels for paraeducators.** Paraeducators should know who to contact if they have difficulties or emergencies. Provide them with the names and assignments of staff personnel so that they know who to call for information about such issues as payrolls, evaluations, supplies, and emergency leave.

- **Provide supervisory training to teachers.** While teachers can model effective instructional skills and techniques for children and parents, they may need training to teach those skills and techniques to paraeducators. Such training is becoming more available and is a wise investment.

These are but a few small ways by which principals can acknowledge the value of the paraeducators who work in our schools, and give them greater confidence in their own ability and effectiveness. Supporting paraeducators with investments of time, information, and communication can produce disproportionately high returns for your schools and your students. □

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Looking Ahead

Employment of teacher assistants is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2008. Student enrollments are expected to rise, spurring demand for teacher assistants to work with and monitor students, and provide teachers with clerical assistance. Teacher assistants will also be required to help teachers meet the educational needs of a growing special education population, particularly as these students are increasingly assimilated into general education classrooms. Education reform and the rising number of students who speak English as a second language will continue to contribute to the demand for teacher assistants.

The number and size of special education programs are growing in response to increasing enrollments

of students with disabilities. Federal legislation mandates appropriate education for all children, and emphasizes placing disabled children into regular school settings, when possible. Children with special needs require much personal attention, and special education teachers, as well as general education teachers with special education students, rely heavily on teacher assistants.

School reforms that call for more individual instruction should further enhance employment opportunities for teacher assistants. Schools are hiring more teacher assistants to provide students with the personal instruction and remedial education they need.

Source: *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2000-01 Edition. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Selected Resources

**National Resource Center for
Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services**
6526 Old Main Hill
Utah State University
Logan, UT 84322-6526
info@nrcpara.org

National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources
Waite Phillips Hall
Rossier School of Education
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0031
[www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/
Clearinghouse.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html)

American Federation of Teachers
Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel Division
555 New Jersey Ave.
Washington, DC 20001
www.aft.org/psrp

**National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special
Education**
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
www.special-ed-careers.org

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