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America's teacher recruitment and retention challenge has been well documented and widely reported in the national media (Brown, Hughes, and Vance, 1999; Darling-Hammond, Dilworth, and Bullmaster, 1996; Education Week, 2000). Urban and

rural schools, particularly in high poverty communities, are finding it increasingly difficult to find and keep qualified teachers. Moreover, while the public school student population is currently 34.5% minority - and projected to be over 50% by 2035 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996) - the public school teacher population remains overwhelming white, with only 13.5% teachers of color (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001).

The nation's K-12 public schools employ more than 700,000 paraeducators and an additional 1.4 million education support personnel (National Education Association [NEA], 1997). Over the past decade, thousands of these paraeducators have made the transition to teaching, and there is growing evidence that many more are capable of doing so if provided support and assistance (Clewell and Villegas, 1998). Paraeducators and other education support personnel appear to be a promising source from which to recruit and prepare candidates to help address the growing need for qualified and diverse teachers in urban and rural public schools. This digest examines the qualities that make paraeducators good candidates for teaching, and looks at the critical aspects of successful programs that prepare paraeducators as classroom teachers.

WHY PARAEDUCATORS MAKE GOOD TEACHERS

Paraeducators serve many roles in public schools, though they typically work under the supervision of a classroom teacher or other professional personnel. Paraeducator roles include instructional assistants, teachers' aides, library aides, preschool caregivers, building monitors, media aides, and other similar titles. Education support personnel (ESP) serve even broader roles in schools including food service, custodial and maintenance, transportation services, health and student services, security, technical services, clerical, and skilled trades.
Paraeducators and ESP often make ideal teacher candidates, particularly for hard-to-staff urban and rural schools. This population of candidates very often has attributes including:

* They are mature candidates who already have classroom experience,

* They are more likely to live in the communities where they work and to share the language and/or culture of the students they serve (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996),

* They often have significant experiences working in public schools and with challenging students,

* A majority of participants in paraeducator-to-teacher programs are individuals of color (Haseklorn and Fideler, 1996),

* Their retention rate in teacher education programs is higher than that of traditional teacher education candidates (Dewitt Wallace--Readers Digest Fund, 1997),

* Once paraeducators become teachers, they tend to stay in the classroom longer and achieve at equal or higher levels than teachers from traditional teacher preparation programs (Dewitt Wallace--Reader's Digest Fund, 1997), and

* According to a 1997 NEA survey of paraeducators and ESP, half of paraeducators, and significant portions of other ESP job groups, are interested in becoming teachers. Additionally, paraeducators often have considerable academic preparation; 68% of paraeducators have attended college and 19% already have a bachelor's degree.

It should be noted that paraeducators who wish to pursue teaching also face significant challenges. Among these are:

* Financial constraints. Low salaries and the high cost of college tuition make the prospect of returning to school very daunting for many paraeducators and ESP.

* Education barriers. Many paraeducators have been out of school for years and/or have marginal academic records.

* Family considerations. Eighty percent of paraeducators are married and 48% have school-age children (NEA, 1997). This often makes going back to school even more challenging.

* Time commitment. Few paraeducators are able to leave work and pursue a degree or credential full-time, nor are they able to take several years to complete a part-time program.

* Institutional barriers. Many teacher preparation programs do not provide the support and flexibility to accommodate non-traditional students such as paraeducators.

PARAEDUCATOR-TO-TEACHER PROGRAMS CURRENT DESIGN

Given the barriers outlined above, few paraeducators would be able to pursue teacher preparation and/or licensure without support and assistance. However, across the country, colleges and universities, school districts, and state departments of education are offering a wide array of programs, scholarships, and other support services for paraeducators interested in pursuing teacher licensure. A 1996 survey conducted by Recruiting New Teachers, Inc. identified 149 such "paraeducator-to-teacher" programs (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996). A separate survey by the NEA identified some 182 programs (2000). A growing number of these programs report very promising results (Dandy, 1998; Dewitt Wallace - Reader's Digest, 1997; Recruiting New Teachers [RNT], 2000).
The types of programs available for paraeducators vary significantly. Some programs offer only small scholarships or stipends for paraeducators to enter existing teacher preparation, while others offer comprehensive services specifically geared toward the paraeducator. Several states provide funding for paraeducator-to-teacher programs, though most programs are supported through local funding and/or funds provided by private foundations or federal grants (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996). While levels of funding also vary, programs that have reported favorable results have also reported significant costs associated with the program (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996).

Several reports and research projects have documented key components of effective paraeducator-to-teacher programs (Clewell and Villegas, 1998, 2000; Dandy, 1998; RNT, 2000). Clewell and Villegas (1998, 2000) point to six common features in the programs they evaluated:

* Strong collaboration between a local school district that employs paraeducators and a nearby university that provides the coursework and academic support for participants. Universities often must commit to adapting or changing curriculum, revising admissions

standards, and/or providing financial support. School districts often must commit to giving paraeducators release time, guaranteeing teaching jobs to graduates, and/or providing financial support to program participants.

* A recruitment and selection process that gives an active role to partnering school districts. School district personnel play an active role in the identification and recruitment of participants which helps to ensure a large and diverse applicant pool.

* Teacher preparation admissions criteria that blend traditional and non-traditional measures. Many paraeducator-to-teacher programs consider a wide variety of criteria for admissions to teacher preparation beyond test scores and grades. These include principal and teacher recommendations, job performance results, extensive personal interviews, years of work experience, motivation to succeed, maturity, and other criteria.

* Teacher preparation curriculum that fits the needs of program participants. This includes changing when and where courses are offered, such as at the school site or on weekends. It also includes a teacher preparation curriculum with emphasis on cultural diversity and on valuing the strength and capacity that urban students bring to the learning process.

* Comprehensive academic and social support for participants. Academic progress is closely monitored and participants are offered a variety of supports including tutorial programs, access to special learning centers, workshops to develop study and test-taking skills, and developing individualized education plans. Many programs also offer childcare services and workshops for spouse and other family members.

* Tuition and other financial assistance. Many programs offer scholarships and grants from funds made available by private foundations or government grants. Others offer "forgivable loans" that are erased when graduates teach in partner school districts. Still other programs offer emergency loans or grants for books, supplies or even personal needs such as rent.

Other reported program components include leadership by advocates on the campus and in the district, building strong ties to community-based organizations and local

churches, and using program graduates to mentor participants in the pipeline (Dandy, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The need for qualified teachers in America's urban schools has already reached crisis proportion. Often, efforts to address this quality teacher challenge ignore the importance of ensuring a diverse teaching force that is culturally connected to urban students and parents (Eubanks, 1999). Recruiting, preparing, and supporting paraeducators to become fully licensed teachers has proven to be one viable strategy for addressing both teacher quality and teacher diversity demands. Yet, while the evidence is compelling, little is being done in the education policy and legislative arena to provide funding and support for these program models (Haselkorn and Fideler, 1996). Local, state, or federal funding has not replaced much of the financial support initially provided by private philanthropic foundations. Unless this happens, paraeducator-to-teacher programs will remain very promising models with little significant impact on the teacher shortage.

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