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ABSTRACT

The first of this collection of four fact sheets discusses the role of paraprofessionals in educating students with disabilities. The caseload characteristics of paraprofessionals, specific activities of special education paraprofessionals, the kind of training paraprofessionals receive, and supervision and support of paraprofessionals are addressed. The second fact sheet focuses on special education paperwork. It reports that the typical special educator spends 5 hours per week completing forms and doing administrative paperwork, and that more time is spent on paperwork than grading papers, communicating with parents, sharing expertise, supervising paraprofessionals, and attending individualized education program meetings. The third fact sheet discusses the role of general education teachers in special education. Information is provided that indicates that 87% of general educators feel successful in teaching most students with disabilities. The preparation of general educators, the effectiveness of professional development programs, and the support general educators receive are described. The final fact sheet centers on preschool special education teachers. It cites research indicating 97% of preschool teachers feel successful in providing services for most children with individualized education programs. This fact sheet discusses how preschool special education teachers are promoting inclusion, and how prepared special education teaches are to supervise paraprofessionals. (CR)

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The Role of Paraprofessionals in Special Education

For more than 50 years, paraprofessionals have provided essential support for students with disabilities. Traditionally, such support was primarily in the form of clerical and one-on-one student assistance. Today's paraprofessionals—who number upwards of 250,000 nationwide—play an increasingly prominent role in the instruction of students with disabilities (Annual Report to Congress, 2000). To support paraprofessionals in fulfilling the responsibilities of their expanded roles, education agencies must understand the contexts in which paraprofessionals work and use that information to provide them with appropriate training and supervision.

The typical special education paraprofessional is a 44-year-old female who works in a regular elementary or secondary school. She has 6.5 years of experience in special education and 7.9 as a paraprofessional overall.

What are the caseload characteristics of paraprofessionals?

The average special education paraprofessional works in five different classes per week and serves 21 students, 15 of whom have disabilities. Fifteen percent of all students served by paraprofessionals are limited English proficient, and 31% of paraprofessionals are fluent or nearly fluent in the non-English languages spoken by their students. This is twice the rate of non-English proficiency for special education teachers.

Paraprofessionals in the wealthiest districts serve an average of 16 students, while those in the least wealthy districts serve 23 students. The differences in paraprofessionals' caseloads may be explained, in part, by the frequency with which districts use paraprofessionals to provide one-on-one assistance. While it appears more common to assign paraprofessionals to this role in wealthier districts, differences do not reach statistical significance.

What do paraprofessionals do?

The responsibilities of paraprofessionals vary based on geographic region and type of district. Paraprofessionals in the Southeast are significantly more likely than paraprofessionals in the Northeast, Great Lakes, Mountain Plains, and Western regions to provide personal care assistance and health care services. Fewer paraprofessionals in the Northeast than in the Mid-South spend 10% or more of their time on administrative tasks like completing forms and paperwork and preparing instructional materials.

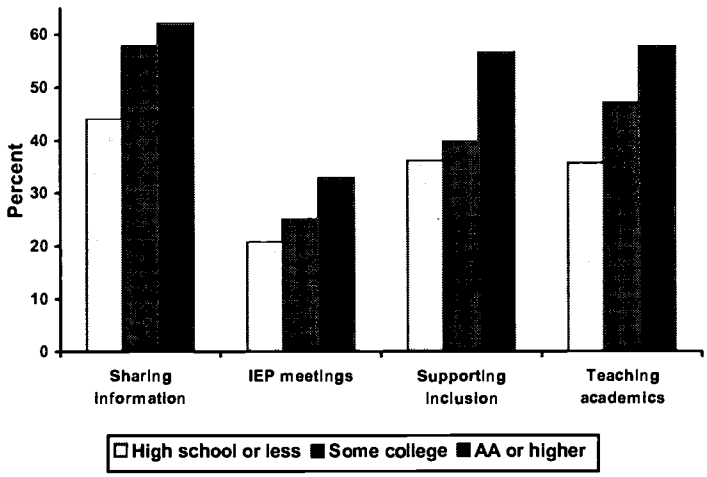
Nationwide, the majority of special education paraprofessionals spend at least 10% of their time on each of the following activities:

- providing instructional support in small groups;
- providing one-on-one instruction;
- modifying materials;
- implementing behavior management plans;
- monitoring hallways, study hall, etc.;
- meeting with teachers;
- collecting data on students; and
- providing personal care assistance.

What kind of training do paraprofessionals receive?

Paraprofessionals bring to their work a range of preservice educational experiences: high school diploma or less (29%), some college (38%), and associate's degree or higher (32%). Approximately 13% have a paraprofessional certificate or credential. Another 6% have a teaching certificate or license. The importance of higher education is significant. Paraprofessionals with college experience rated themselves significantly higher than those without college experience in their performance in several job responsibilities, including sharing information about students with teachers for planning, problem solving, and decisionmaking and participating in IEP meetings.

Percent of paraprofessionals who feel skillful to a great extent at performing specific tasks, by level of education

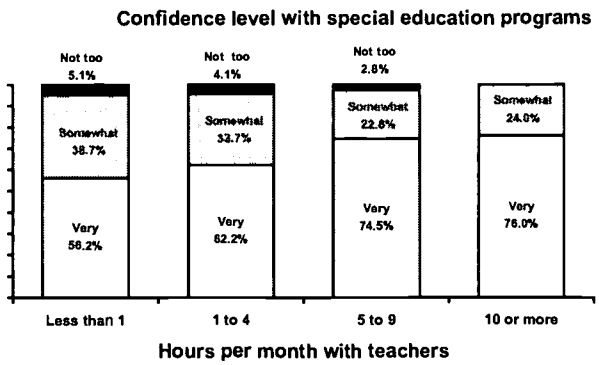


Nationally, paraprofessionals spent 37 hours in professional development in 1999-2000. Thirty-three percent of those hours were required by their district or state. In the past 3 years, 76 percent of paraprofessionals received training in teaching academic concepts and skills, and 83 percent received training in implementing behavior management programs developed by teachers. Paraprofessionals who receive more professional development in a specific work-related task feel consistently more skillful in that area. For example, 59 percent of paraprofessionals who received 8 or more hours of professional development in teaching academic concepts and skills felt highly skilled doing that compared to 38 percent of those who received no such professional development. As a group, more educated paraprofessionals spend far more time in professional development, which may increase differences in levels of skill.

Who supervises and supports paraprofessionals?

Fifty-eight percent of paraprofessionals are supervised by a special education teacher or related service provider; 37% are supervised by a school or district administrator, and 3% are supervised by a non-special education teacher. Regardless of the position of their supervisor, the majority of paraprofessionals (89%) feel they have the support they need.

Level of confidence as a function of time meeting with teachers



Contact with professionals in the school has a positive effect on paraprofessionals. Those who spend more time meeting with teachers on lesson planning, curriculum development, guidance and counseling, evaluation of programs, or other collaborative work related to instruction feel more confident in their ability to implement special education programs. Furthermore, paraprofessionals who participate in school, district, or agency committee meetings report higher ratings in their ability to implement education programs and in their overall performance.

SPeNSE, which was sponsored by OSEP and conducted by Westat, included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators, special and general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraprofessionals in spring and fall 2000. For more information, see www.spense.org.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-00-CO-0010. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.

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Paperwork in Special Education

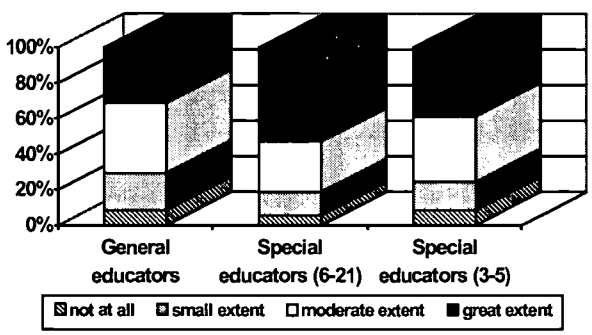
Special education teachers often cite "required forms and administrative paperwork" as an area of dissatisfaction with their working conditions. Because the United States is trying to raise students' academic performance and address a teacher shortage, any conditions that contribute to teacher attrition and interfere with teachers' ability to devote their time, attention, and talent to meeting the instructional needs of their students cause increased concern.

How much time do special educators spend on paperwork?

The typical special education teacher spends 5 hours per week completing forms and doing administrative paperwork. Special educators spend more time on paperwork than grading papers, communicating with parents, sharing expertise with colleagues, supervising paraprofessionals, and attending IEP meetings combined. They spend as much time doing paperwork as they do preparing for lessons.

Perhaps even more important, 53 percent of elementary and secondary special education teachers report that routine duties and paperwork interfere with their job of teaching to a great extent. Only 39 percent of preschool special education teachers report that paperwork interferes to a great extent; however, these teachers report spending almost 6 hours per week on paperwork. Preschool special education teachers who report that paperwork did not interfere at all average 2 hours per week on paperwork. Elementary and secondary teachers who said routine duties and paperwork did not interfere at all with their job of teaching or interfered to a small extent spent an average of 3 hours per week on paperwork, so the difference between 3 and 5 hours seems to be an important one.

Percent of teachers who feel routine duties and paperwork interfere with teaching



Is paperwork a special education issue or an issue for all teachers?

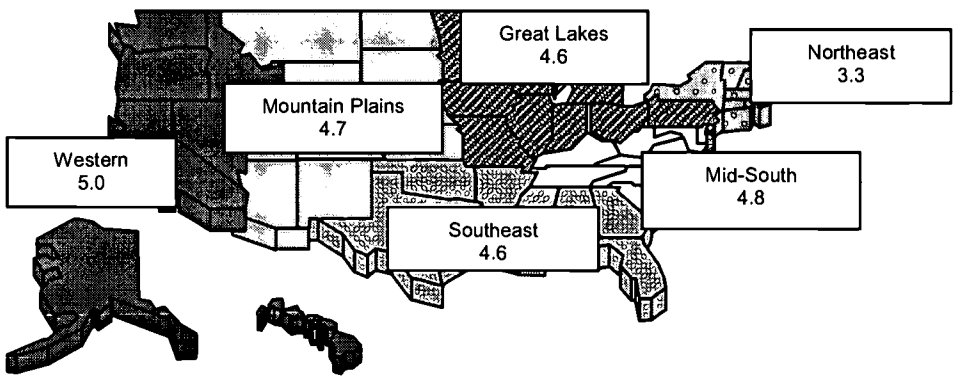
General educators spend considerably less time than special educators completing forms and administrative paperwork—2 hours per week compared to 5—and this is no higher for those who have students with disabilities in their classes. However, general educators

spend 2 hours more per week than special educators grading papers. Furthermore, general education teachers are significantly different from special education teachers in the extent to which they feel routine duties and paperwork interfere with their job of teaching. General education teachers may think of grading papers as part of their instruction, so they may perceive it as contributing to their teaching rather than interfering with it.

Does paperwork vary from place to place?

Hours spent on paperwork varies by district size and geographic region. Preschool special education teachers in small districts spend 3 fewer hours on paperwork each week than their colleagues in large districts. Elementary and secondary special education teachers in small districts also spend slightly less time than their colleagues in very large districts. All special education teachers in the Northeast spend less time on paperwork than teachers in any other region of the country, 3.3 hours a week.

Median number of hours special education teachers (for students ages 3-21) spend per week on paperwork by region



Is paperwork a problem?

Paperwork may be problem for some teachers and not for others. Fourteen percent of special educators spend an hour or less per week completing forms and administrative paperwork. Another 24 percent spend 1.5 to 3 hours. At the other extreme, 8 percent of teachers spend more than 14 hours on paperwork a week.

It is interesting to note that, after controlling for many other working conditions, paperwork emerged as significant in the manageability of special education teachers' jobs and their intent to stay in the profession. Intent to stay was also linked to age, school climate, and the perceived manageability of their jobs.

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General Education Teachers' Role in Special Education

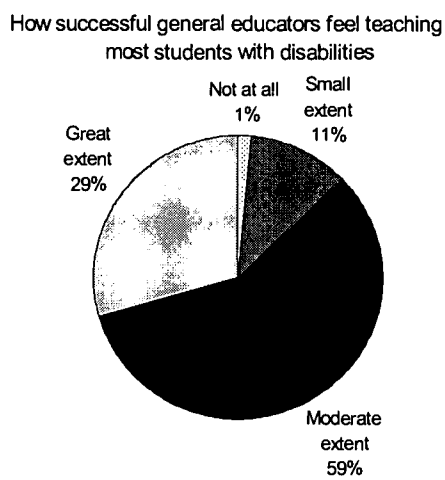
Consider these facts:

- 75% of all students with disabilities spend 40% or more of their day in general education (U.S. Department of Education, 2001);
- 96% of general educators currently teach students with disabilities or have done so in the past;
- General educators have an average of 3.5 special education students assigned to their caseload;
- The most common disabilities represented on general educators' caseloads are specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, and emotional disturbance; however, 1 in 10 general educators have caseloads that include students with other health impairments, mental retardation, hearing impairments, or developmental delay.

General educators make significant contributions to the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. How do they feel about this responsibility? What training and other support have general educators received to assist them in this endeavor? Results from SPeNSE help answer these questions.

How successful did they feel?

Eighty-seven percent of general education teachers felt successful in teaching most students with disabilities to a moderate or great extent, and a similar percentage felt somewhat or very confident in making educational decisions about special education students. Furthermore, their level of confidence was associated with the types of support they received. For example, 92% of general education teachers who had specific procedures to use with the special education students in their classes felt moderate or great success compared with 73% who had no such procedures. Similarly, general education teachers who received inservice training on the needs of students with disabilities and special materials to use with these students felt significantly more successful than those who did not. Responses to these items were generally consistent across grade levels.



General educators' confidence in serving students with disabilities seemed dependent upon their relationship with special education teachers. Those who often received instruction-related suggestions from special educators felt significantly more confident than those who did not in teaching students with disabilities and in making educational decisions about them.

What preparation did they receive?

Adapting instruction for students with disabilities, managing the behavior of students with and without disabilities, and collaborating with special education teachers are important skills for general educators. Yet many teachers completed their professional preparation at a time when few students with disabilities were taught in general education classes. Even among teachers who were recently prepared, some training gaps remained. Fewer than one-third of those who had been teaching 6 years or fewer received any preservice preparation in collaborating with special education teachers. Just over half received preparation in adapting instruction, and only two-thirds were taught how to manage student behavior.

General educators' professional development on teaching students with disabilities

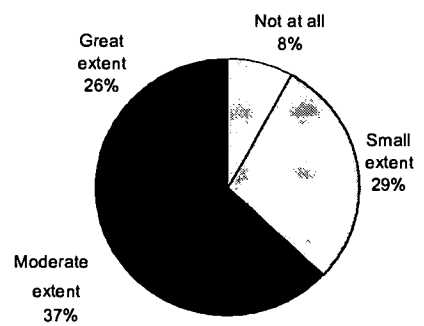
	Amount in past 3 years		
	More than 8 hours	1-8 hours	No hours
Adapting instruction	21%	49%	31%
Managing behavior	28%	46%	26%
Collaborating with special educators	10%	38%	52%

However, some general educators were able to acquire these important skills through inservice programs. In the past 3 years, 70% of general education teachers received continuing professional development in adapting instruction for students with disabilities, and 21% of these teachers received more than 8 hours of instruction. In managing behavior, 28% received more than 8 hours of inservice, and 46% received less than 8 hours. Far fewer general educators received training in collaborating with special education teachers, so it is perhaps not surprising that general educators rated their skills relatively low in this area.

Was professional development effective?

The professional development hours that general educators spent enhancing their skills in collaboration and in adapting instruction for students with disabilities were significantly associated with their perceived success. Of those who received more than 8 hours of professional development in the past 3 years on collaborating with special education teachers, only 1% felt not at all successful or successful to a small extent in teaching students with disabilities. This compares with 11% of those who received fewer than 8 hours of professional development and 14% of those who received none. Likewise, of those who spent 8 or more hours learning to adapt instruction for students with disabilities, only 3% felt not at all successful or successful to a small extent compared to 15% of those who did not have any professional development in that area. The relationship between professional development hours on behavior management and perceived success in teaching students with disabilities was less clear.

Extent to which general educators received support to teach students with disabilities



Did they receive adequate support?

Most general educators said they received the support they needed to teach students with disabilities to a moderate or great extent. This support included help from special education teachers, special procedures for working with students, continuing professional development on the needs of students with disabilities, and assistance from paraprofessionals.

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Preschool Special Education Teachers

Consider these facts:

- The typical work week for a preschool special education teacher, those serving children ages three to five, comprises 24 hours of teaching, 6 hours of paperwork, and 6 hours preparing lessons, in addition to hall duty, reading background material, communicating with parents, attending IEP and other meetings, consulting with general education teachers, and supervising paraprofessionals outside of class time.
- The average preschool special education teacher serves 14 children, and almost 75% of preschool special education teachers serve children ages birth to 5 exclusively.
- The most common disabilities preschool special education teachers encounter are developmental delay (71%), speech or language impairments (56%), autism (38%), mental retardation (30%), and other health impairments (20%).
- Nearly 70% of preschool special education teachers plan to remain in teaching until retirement, and 4% plan to leave the field as soon as possible, which is lower than the percentage for all special education teachers.

Ninety-seven percent of preschool teachers feel successful in providing services for most of their children with individualized education programs (IEPs). Eighty-one percent believe to a great extent that they are making a significant change in the lives of their students, and 87% characterize their own overall job performance as very good or exceptional. While most preschool teachers perceive their job performance positively, they do face challenges of including children with disabilities in educational settings with their nondisabled peers and supervising paraprofessionals in preschool programs. How they meet these challenges is discussed below.

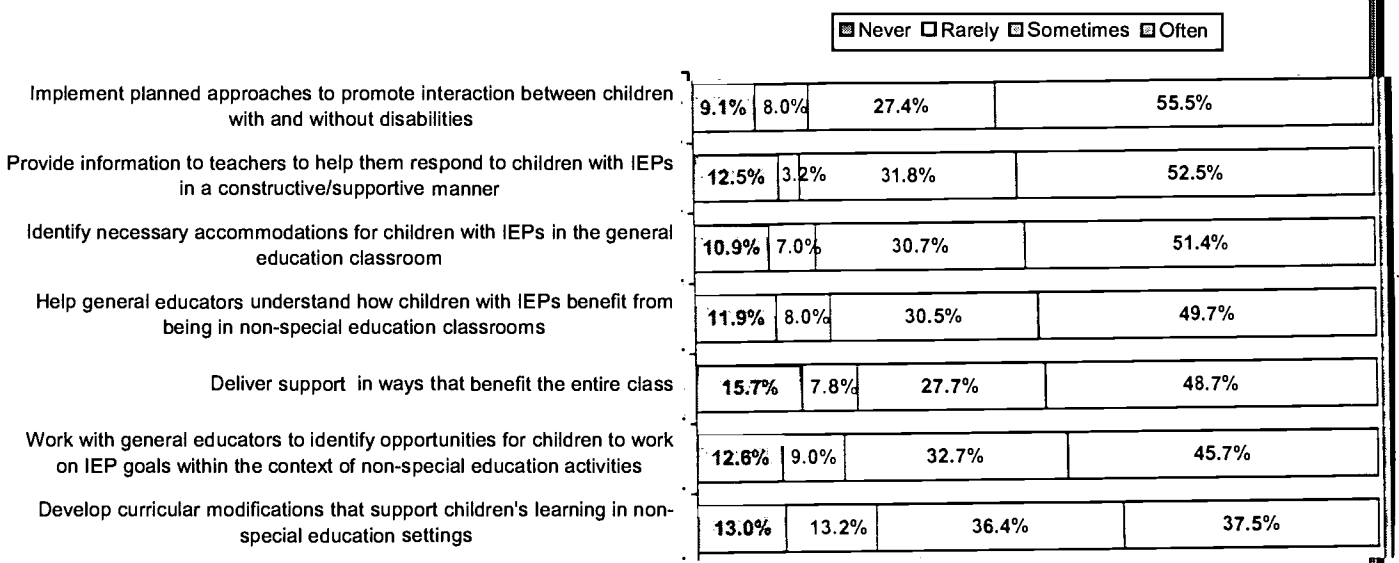
How are preschool teachers promoting inclusion?

While the majority of preschool special education teachers work in regular preschool or K-12 schools, services are often provided in segregated classes that include only preschoolers with disabilities. Eighty-eight percent of preschool teachers work in regular preschool or K-12 schools, while 12% work in special education schools. Meanwhile, 77% of preschool teachers' instructional time is spent in special education settings, 12% is in regular education settings, and 10% is in home or community-based settings. Those preschool teachers whose students spend part or all of their day in non-special education settings use a variety of techniques to support these children in inclusive settings, such as collaborating with non-special education teachers, identifying needed accommodations, and promoting interaction between children with and without disabilities.

Preschool special education teachers report using practices to promote the participation of children with disabilities in the general education program less often than other special education teachers. Moreover, 75% report that the practices they use to support inclusion are used throughout their school or district, so decisions about inclusive practices may not be within teachers' control. Inclusion efforts may also be hindered by a combination of factors: the lack of widespread, preschool programs for non-disabled children, and the absence of same-aged non-disabled peers in those facilities developed primarily to serve preschoolers with disabilities.

Use of practices to promote inclusion did not vary by geographical region, district size, or district wealth. However, preschool teachers who felt very skillful in collaborating with non-special education teachers used inclusive practices significantly more often than those who felt less skillful in collaboration. Furthermore, preschool special education teachers who had more hours of continuing professional development in collaboration perceived themselves as more skillful in collaborating with non-special education teachers.

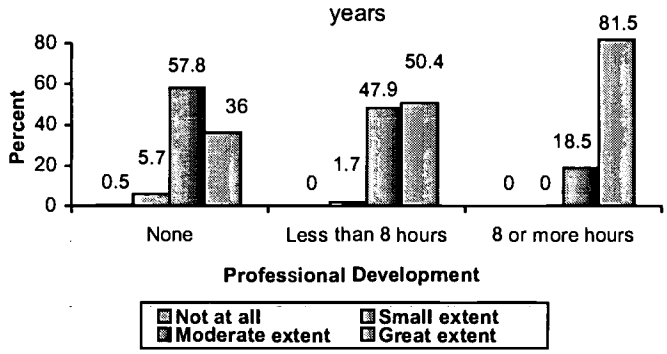
How often preschool teachers use various methods to support children with IEPs in non-special education settings



How prepared are preschool teachers to supervise paraprofessionals?

Special education teachers supervise 74% of paraprofessionals who serve children ages 1 through 5. While preschool teachers spend an average of 1.5 hours per week supervising paraprofessionals outside of regular class time, only 24% received preservice training in this area, and 58% had no continuing professional development in this area in the past 3 years. While most preschool teachers felt moderately to greatly successful in supervising paraprofessionals, their preservice preparation and continuing professional development exposure were significantly associated with their perceived skill. For example, 82 percent of preschool teachers who had 8 or more hours of continuing professional development in supervising professionals felt skillful to a great extent in doing so. Only 50% percent of those with less than 8 hours and 36% of those with no professional development felt equally skillful. Similarly, those preschool teachers who received preservice preparation in supervising paraprofessionals were more likely than those who did not to feel skillful to a great extent.

Preschool teachers' perceived skill in supervising paraprofessionals, by the amount of professional development they received in that area in the past 3 years



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