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Training for Paraprofessionals: The Community College Role

Background

Since paraprofessionals were introduced into classrooms over 40 years ago, the job market has grown steadily and the job description has changed considerably. The approximately 500,000 paraprofessionals employed in education in the United States represent a 48% increase in the number of paraprofessionals employed between the years 1990 and 1998. The nation's schools now see these individuals as critical to student success. Most of these individuals are hired with designated funding from federal programs, generally for educationally disadvantaged, migrant and special education students, although some states also have special funding for employing paraprofessionals. Education paraprofessionals work in a variety of settings:

- Preschools and day care centers
- Elementary schools
- Junior and senior high schools
- Vocational education centers
- Adult education programs.

The job description for paraprofessionals is no longer limited to clerical responsibilities (e.g., recordkeeping, copying, cafeteria and bus duty). Paraprofessionals now support instruction and work under the direction and supervision of certified teachers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, paraprofessionals provide instructional and other support for classroom teachers, allowing the teachers more time for collaboration with their educational teams, lesson planning and direct teaching. States, and even local districts, have their own job titles for paraprofessionals, including the following:

- Teacher aide or assistant
- Instructional aide or assistant
- Special education aide or assistant
- Preschool or early childhood assistant
- Bilingual aide or assistant
- Learning resources assistant.

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The value of paraprofessionals was first recognized in the post-war period of the 1950s when there was a shortage of teachers. During that time, there were efforts to recruit and train individuals to perform clerical and student monitoring. The goal was to allow teachers to spend more time on instruction. Federal legislation, particularly the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), furthered the employment of paraprofessionals. Head Start, compensatory education, bilingual education and other federal initiatives defined services that included paraprofessionals in the education mix. In 1974, the employment of paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities increased as a result of federal legislation.

Although the need for paraprofessionals was increasing, state and federal policy debates frequently ignored this often-used resource in the public schools. Some steps were taken to establish a credentialing system, but by the early 1980s these efforts were not being given priority. With Congress' passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, P.L.107-110), paraprofessional issues have again moved to the forefront, with a new interest in paraprofessional qualifications to effectively assist teachers and other educators in advancing student learning.

Credentialing of Paraprofessionals

Credentialing of paraprofessionals is not widespread. Just 13 states have established certification or credentialing requirements for this role; and in seven of those states, there have been no changes in the requirements since 1970. Minimal standards have been created in 31 states, while several other states have administrative guidelines for employment. Except for the lack of credentialing as a binding employment criterion, credentialing requirements are alike in no two states.

Even though there has been some call from a few professional organizations for credentialing paraprofessionals, there has been little attention given to the idea. The establishment of standards would define the required knowledge and skills for a person in a paraprofessional role. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has published a list of competencies that their organization believes a paraprofessional should exhibit. These competencies range from basic skills to personal qualities that include such areas as interpersonal and human relations, creative thinking, problem solving, and organizing and processing information.

Two states that have adopted licensing requirements for paraprofessionals are California and Georgia. In **California**, teacher aides working in bilingual programs must have:

- Completed two years of study
- Received an associate of art or teacher assistant degree
- Passed an exam administered by the Commission on Credentialing.



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In contrast, **Georgia** requires paraprofessionals to have:

- A specified number of hours in job-related training
- Their license renewed every five years with 20 additional hours of job-related training.

States including **Maine, Texas, Kansas, New Hampshire and Vermont** have implemented multiple levels of certification. These usually are based upon different amounts and types of college coursework and/or job-related training. Some experts believe that tiered approaches, those that distinguish between the different levels of skills and responsibilities required of various types of paraprofessional and used in Iowa, Maine and Delaware, provide the best models of credentialing systems.

Although many in the education establishment, as well as the United States Congress, believe the skills of paraprofessionals should increase, there is still no outcry for credentialing these individuals. The provisions in NCLB may eventually lead to calls for credentialing, but the process may be very slow because increased standards will have implications for increased pay.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The act clearly places the requirements for those who work directly with children – teachers and paraprofessionals – in the forefront of the debate on how to implement new standards of quality in education. As a result of this legislation, paraprofessionals who are or will be working in schools supported with Title I funds and have instructional-related responsibilities, have new employment criteria. Part A of NCLB requires all newly hired paraprofessionals funded by ESEA, Title I must meet new standards as of January 2002, but gives those paraprofessionals hired before that date until January 2006 to meet new employment criteria.

Paraprofessionals must do one of the following:

- Complete two years of full-time study at an institution of higher education (48 semester hours in some states and 60 in others)
- Obtain an associates degree or
- Meet rigorous standards of quality and demonstrate through a formal assessment the knowledge of and the ability to assist in reading, writing or mathematics. He or she also must possess a high school diploma.



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NCLB refers to paraprofessionals who assist with instructional activities and does not include assistants who perform only clerical duties. Under the teachers' direction, these paraprofessionals spend significant time:

- Giving individualized attention
- Tutoring students
- Assisting with classroom management
- Recording grades
- Setting up equipment and assisting students with its use (e.g., computers)
- Preparing materials for instruction
- Conducting parental involvement activities
- Acting as translators
- Working with special education students and students who speak English as a second language.

Individuals who work in food services, cafeteria or playground supervision, personal care services, non-instructional computer assistance and similar positions are not considered paraprofessionals under Title I.

Responsibility for Implementation

The act relinquishes responsibility for implementation to state and local education agencies. The U.S. Department of Education will not approve associate degree programs, other college coursework or state/local paraprofessional assessments of a person's ability to assist in reading, writing and mathematics instruction, including basic skills assessment. It is the responsibility of each local education agency, working with the state, to make plans for paraprofessionals to meet the NCLB requirements.

Funding

The NCLB Act states that until school year 2004-05, school districts must use 5%, but not more than 10%, of their Title I, Part A funds (unless a lesser amount is needed) to help persons meet the "highly qualified" teacher and paraprofessional requirements. Other federal formula program fund sources that may be used to meet the "highly qualified" designation include Title II, Part A, Teacher and Principal Training and Recruiting Fund, and Title V, Part A, Innovative Programs.



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Across the nation, community colleges are already planning training to assist paraprofessionals in all three of the ways identified in NCLB to meet the “highly qualified paraprofessional” requirements. In an analysis of state-level efforts, AFT ranked states according to their progress in addressing the new Title I requirements. Five top-ranking states include community colleges in their efforts. Community colleges in those states have developed and offer:

- Associate degree programs
- Training programs with test preparation
- Test-preparation courses only.

Community College Roles in Meeting the NCLB Requirements for Paraprofessionals

According to the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, approximately 198 community colleges offer either two-year associate degrees (associate in arts, sciences or teaching) or one-year certificate programs to paraprofessionals working in inclusive special and general education, bilingual/ESL, Title I and early childhood programs.

Two Years of Higher Education Coursework

Persons who have already taken coursework at a higher education institution(s) and not yet accumulated the equivalent of two years of semester credit hours, may continue to take courses (not specified in NCLB) until they have reached the sufficient number. This may be an option of interest to paraprofessionals who prefer to take courses in an area of special interest rather than the specified core courses of an associate degree. Paraprofessionals who already have close to one year of courses may prefer to enroll in a one-year certificate program.

Associate Degrees

The associate degree option may be desired by some paraprofessionals who strive to become teachers. In some districts this number is substantial. Survey research estimates that 52% of the Latino paraprofessional population in Los Angeles schools had aspired to become teachers before they became paraprofessionals. After having worked as paraprofessionals for an average of five years, however, 75% now wish to become teachers. Community college programs that help paraprofessionals meet new requirements and prepare them for transfer to a teacher education baccalaureate program may open new avenues for minority and older teacher candidates. Some examples of associate degree programs designed specifically for paraprofessionals follow:

- **Northeast Community College** in Nebraska has a program of study for an associate of arts degree for education paraprofessionals. It combines general education requirements, selected education-related courses and suggested electives. The associ-



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ate of arts degree with an emphasis on paraprofessional education provides the educational background needed to apply for substitute-teaching certification in Nebraska public schools.

- **Fort Scott Community College** in Kansas offers paraprofessionals the opportunity to gain college credit for coursework completed with the ParaEducator Network, an online distance education format to train paraprofessionals. Students can simultaneously earn an associates degree with an emphasis in Special Education Paraprofessional. For every 13 courses completed from the ParaEducator Learning Network, students gain one hour of college credit from the community college. It costs \$60 per credit hour for in-state residents and ranges from \$88-\$138 per credit hour for out-of-state students.
- **Illinois** convened a task force to work with the community colleges that were developing two-year paraprofessional preparation programs. The programs, approved in spring 2003, will lead to an associate of applied science degree and recognition as a paraprofessional educator. The state also is working on plans to award credit for prior learning to individuals with significant professional experience.
- **Ohio** has developed paraprofessional standards for an associate degree program and is offering planning grant funds to two-year institutions to develop and offer such programs. The state also is working to ensure opportunities for articulation to four-year institutions and teacher degree programs.
- In **Texas**, the Higher Education Coordinating Board has appointed a committee, of both community college and university representatives, to begin work on an associate of arts in teaching degree to be offered by community colleges. The degree could be offered by any community college in the state. With 50 community college districts and over 75 colleges within those districts, Texas will need to solve its articulation and transferability problems for future teachers, while helping persons retain or seek jobs as paraprofessionals. The state does not offer a degree in education and has a statutory limitation of 18 semester credit hours in education coursework that can be offered at the baccalaureate level.

Formal Assessments

The NCLB act offers persons the opportunity to stay in a paraprofessional job or to be hired for one if they can “pass a formal assessment of their knowledge of and ability to assist in reading, writing and mathematics instruction in public school classrooms.”

This requirement has been interpreted by states in different ways, but in all cases it requires an assessment of whether a person can use reading, writing and mathematics skills at a level appropriate for the role to which they are assigned and assist teachers in implementing instruction in these areas in the classroom. Some states and local districts are requiring their paraprofessionals to take specific examinations that are available from commercial sources. Colleges then offer training that includes test preparation.



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The assessment option is appealing to many school districts because it may be the quickest route for persons to meet the “highly qualified” requirements. Current paraprofessionals, however, are very fearful of tests and the immediate consequence of failing. States, in most cases, are leaving to school districts the decision about which assessment to use and are being cautious about the guidance they give because they are aware of how employment conditions may vary between school districts. Therefore, the districts are responsible for determining if the assessment is a valid measure of the required skills. In some cases, community colleges are working closely with local school districts to create meaningful training related to the reading, writing and mathematics requirement and then develop and administer tests that are specifically related to this requirement.

Some of the formal assessments already being used include the following:

- ETS ParaPro Assessment
- ACT’s WorkKeys
- Project Para UNL (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)
- Basic Skills Tests (state tests given after two years of college education for education majors).

In addition, a number of comprehensive training programs designed specifically for paraprofessionals are now available for school districts to use or purchase. Two examples are:

- Project Para UNL – Paraprofessional program materials for public use
- Child Development Associate (CDA) – Training program for pre-K and kindergarten educators offered by the Council for Professional Recognition and collaborations with local community colleges.

Because states and districts are responsible for the formal assessment, they must be sure training programs include not only appropriate content but also a rigorous assessment. They also must consider if community college credit will be offered for the courses, if paraprofessionals can afford the program and if financial support will be available. Here is what some states are doing:

- **Connecticut** has elected to use the Educational Testing Service (ETS) examination developed for paraprofessionals and is developing a series of workshops to assist them in preparing for the test.
- **Illinois** has developed guidance for districts on appropriate assessments. The State Board and Community College Board expect two-year institutions to partner with teacher unions, regional offices of education, and school districts to engage in test-preparation assistance.



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- **North Carolina** has apprenticeships, professional development programs and assessments offered by individual districts and local community colleges.
- **Rhode Island** has existing standards that serve as the foundation for training programs currently offered by local districts and two-year institutions. They help prepare paraprofessionals for the ETS ParaPro test, which was selected as the assessment tool for the state. The state is working on expanding these programs to include instructional skills in reading, writing and math.

Policy Challenges for Paraprofessional Training

The primary challenges to paraprofessional training are the problems posed by new NCLB requirements. The time, effort and expense involved may outweigh the financial returns of the educator position.

Potential Paraprofessional Shortage

NCLB supporters say that what will emerge in the future are paraprofessionals who will be far better prepared to assist students to achieve learning goals. Today, many paraprofessionals are not financially prepared, do not have the time or are not psychologically ready to make the commitment to the training required to maintain or gain a position as a paraprofessional. A possible boomerang effect of NCLB is that the additional employment criteria will result in fewer paraprofessionals in classrooms, more teachers on their own without assistance and less quality education. Many paraprofessionals may simply quit their jobs rather than meet the new standards. In efforts toward quality education, the teacher shortage may be exacerbated by a new paraprofessional shortage, resulting in even more challenges for education.

No Grandfather Clause

State and federal education officials say they believe few paraprofessionals already have the necessary college experience. For paraprofessionals who have not had college coursework but do have many years on the job, their work experience is not enough to meet the standards set by NCLB. The legislation does not include a grandfather clause. Paraprofessionals who fall short of the qualifications must go to college, pass an assessment test or leave the Title 1 school altogether.

Training Obligations

Most paraprofessionals are women with responsibilities of caring for families. The amount of time paraprofessionals would have to invest to get a degree or two years of coursework will be difficult given their multiple roles. Attending college full time and working full time is challenging to anybody in any profession.



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Expense of Meeting New Standards

Based in part on low wages, it will be difficult for many paraprofessionals to afford the expense of two years of higher education or an associate's degree, even with the generally lower costs of community colleges. In addition, economic incentives to stay on the job are minimal. Nationally, the median annual earnings of teacher assistants in 2000 were \$17,350. Given the ceiling on the job, there is little room for advancement. Even if paraprofessionals are able to meet one of the two higher education requirements, without a financial increase in wages to compensate for the training, many paraprofessionals may leave the classroom.

For paraprofessionals who would prefer to take an assessment test to courses in higher education, many would still need some sort of coursework to prepare for the test. This again will require funds to pay the community colleges for the test-preparation course, in addition to the cost of the test itself.

Policy Challenges for Community Colleges

Community colleges need to know what type of program to develop or how to refine existing programs. Furthermore, they need to know if there will be enough demand and financial support to maintain their programs.

Appropriate Direction for Community Colleges

The option "two years of higher education full-time study" is vague and leaves community colleges unclear on whether they should develop associate degree programs or two-year certificate programs for paraprofessionals. In some states, two years of full-time study can be equivalent to associate degree requirements. Furthermore, NCLB allows each state to determine its own requirements for coursework taken during the "two years of full-time study." Community colleges need to work with the state or local education agency on appropriate program content. The challenge for community colleges is to know which program will best serve current and future paraprofessionals.

Division of Funds

Community colleges in many states will offer test-preparation courses, with some including the test as part of the course. Paraprofessionals are wondering who will pay for the coursework or the assessment test. Districts and schools are allowed to use federal grant money to cover some of the costs to paraprofessionals. Much of the grants, however, go toward student programs. To support paraprofessionals' higher education and assessment costs, money could be cut from student programs. Also, part of federal grants must go toward helping both teachers and paraprofessionals meet new requirements. The state or local education agency will face difficult decisions in determining how programs divide training funds. It is not clear whether providing training for paraprofessionals will be very high on the agenda, given all the other requirements that have to be met.



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Policy Recommendations

Because most states have not, in the past, had explicit requirements for paraprofessional educators, the NCLB Act is a concern to many current paraprofessionals and may become a roadblock to others in the future. The following recommendations will help clarify the community college options and make them more available:

- **Collaborate.** Local districts have the latitude to determine which of the NCLB requirements will be used. This means colleges and school districts must collaborate to create programs. Otherwise, paraprofessionals and paraprofessional candidates will be left without the necessary training, and districts will be unable to employ persons for this role. States that do not have community college programs designed specifically for paraprofessionals should immediately explore the different ways to work with the colleges to design new programs. Options should include avenues that are convenient and not beyond the rigor of the paraprofessional role.
- **Publicize NCLB requirements.** Every effort should be made by states, community colleges and school districts to publicize the requirements for becoming a paraprofessional, particularly for persons seeking employment at a school receiving Title I funds.
- **Develop associate degree programs.** Associate degree programs with course content that will immediately help the paraprofessional on the job and provide the option of a stepping stone to a baccalaureate degree are needed across the country.
- **Utilize community colleges for assessment and preparation courses.** The short-term solution for current paraprofessionals, paraprofessional candidates and the employing districts may be to develop or select a formal assessment that is easily accessible through district-community college collaboration. A preparatory course, with distance-learning options and exam could be administered through the local college.
- **Develop funding strategy.** Local school districts should develop policies that use Title I, as well as other resources, to provide financial support for training so working paraprofessionals can stay on the job.
- **Scholarships for enrollment in community college program.** Some form of state, district or school financial support should be considered to support paraprofessionals' efforts to meet new NCLB requirements. School districts could offer scholarships for the community college programs in exchange for working within the district for a specified period of time or else pay the fees for the assessment. Many states already offer state grants for persons who are paraprofessionals and seek to become teachers. There are many more states, however, that need to consider funding of this nature if they are going to have a ready source of persons for paraprofessional positions.



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Conclusion

Schools serving students who are disadvantaged or limited English-speaking are feeling immediate pressure to employ “highly qualified” paraprofessionals, even though these states may not have any certification requirements for paraprofessionals. Whether states decide they want to institute certification requirements for paraprofessionals is yet to be seen because most of these individuals are employed in schools impacted by NCLB.

The real problem that needs to be faced, and sooner if teachers are to continue to have support from paraprofessionals, is that there are increasing educational requirements for most paraprofessionals in the schools, but weak financial incentives for meeting them. In many cases, paraprofessionals do not even receive regular increases to their already low salaries. Nevertheless, requirements must be met.

Community colleges are the sensible source for meeting new requirements, not only because they are convenient and economical, but also because they have valuable experience in providing community services off-site and through distance education. Community colleges also can customize existing associate degree and certificate programs, develop assessment preparation courses, and in states where it is applicable, administer any state-adopted assessments.



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