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POLICY SNAPSHOT

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Supercharging Student Success: Policy Levers for Helping Paraprofessionals Have a Positive Influence in the Classroom

With nearly a million paraprofessionals working in elementary and secondary schools (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), ensuring they are well prepared and supported is essential to their and their students' success. Paraprofessionals work closely with classroom teachers to support students from special populations and are typically supervised by a general or special educator.

Because paraprofessionals often work with students who have a disability, are falling behind in critical skills, or are English language learners, it is important that they have the instructional and management skills needed to support these special populations. In addition, because of the widespread implementation of new college- and career-ready standards, paraprofessionals may require additional support to help students learn more rigorous content in new ways. When properly prepared and supported, paraprofessionals can be valuable, if not essential, members of the school community and can offer multiple benefits to students, teachers, and parents.

In this Policy Snapshot, we summarize existing research about the instructional contributions of paraprofessionals to student learning and behavioral outcomes, as well as their noninstructional contributions. We also identify important state policy considerations for preparation, supervision, professional development, and career development for paraprofessionals and for teachers working with paraprofessionals.

This Policy Snapshot provides information that governors, state legislatures, state boards of education, and state education agencies may wish to consider when designing and implementing policies related to paraprofessionals. To help states make informed policy decisions, we also include practical examples of paraprofessional programs and policies as well as other resources. However, we do not endorse any of the policies or programs featured.

Who Is a Paraprofessional?

Paraprofessionals (also referred to as paraeducators or teaching assistants) are support staff members who work directly with students under the supervision of classroom teachers, special educators, or administrators. Paraprofessionals may perform a variety of duties, including the following:

- Providing instructional or one-on-one support
- Modifying materials
- Monitoring hallways, study hall, and recess
- Meeting with teachers and other staff as appropriate
- Collecting performance data on students
- Implementing teachers' academic lesson plans or behavior management plans
- Providing personal care and assistance (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, n.d.)

What Does Research Say About the Contributions of Paraprofessionals?

Research suggests that paraprofessionals can positively influence student learning when they are placed in appropriate roles and provided with adequate preparation and ongoing supervision. Multiple studies have found that students who received one-on-one or small-group tutoring or instruction from paraprofessionals improved their reading performance more than students in control groups who did not receive similar support (Bingham, Hall-Kenyon, & Culatta, 2010; Brown, Morris, & Fields, 2005; Vadasy, Sanders, & Tudor, 2007).

In their review of the literature, Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, and Vadasy (2007) found numerous studies demonstrating that paraprofessionals can improve the reading skills of students who are at risk or who have learning disabilities. The authors found commonalities across the studies. In these studies, paraprofessionals did the following:

- Implemented research-based reading approaches and received extensive training on the approaches used
- Received explicit training in behavior management
- Provided supplemental, rather than primary, instruction to students
- Were monitored and given ongoing feedback about their instruction by general and special education teachers

Upon review, there also is evidence of noninstructional contributions made by paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals may do the following:

- Enable teachers to spend more time with individual students in small groups (Alborz, Pearson, Farrel, & Howes, 2009).
- Reduce teacher stress (Alborz et al., 2009).
- Increase the teacher's job satisfaction (Alborz et al., 2009).
- Facilitate key connections "between parents and teachers, parents and community services, students and teachers, students and their parents, and students and their peers" (Chopra et al., 2004, p. 219; Rueda, Monzó, & Higareda, 2004; Wenger et al., 2004).
- Make school culture less alienating for students (Genzuk, 1997; Rueda et al., 2004; Wenger et al., 2004).

Experts in the field also have expressed concern related to the overreliance on paraprofessionals in schools and districts and have made the following suggestions:

- **Place Paraprofessionals Strategically.** To avoid overreliance on paraprofessionals, Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter (2012) recommend reviewing current roles of paraprofessionals and considering potential alternatives. In some cases, hiring additional special education teachers, assigning paraprofessionals to a teacher rather than to an individual student, or increasing opportunities for teachers to plan and collaborate may more effectively meet students' needs (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011; Giangreco et al., 2012).

- **Recognize That Paraprofessionals Are Not Substitutes for Teachers.** An unintended consequence of employing paraprofessionals is that the general education teacher may become less engaged with students who are assigned to a paraprofessional (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009). Students with disabilities often are those with the highest needs, and one of the primary concerns, both of paraeducators and of other experts, is that the paraprofessional can become viewed as the primary instructor for students with individualized education programs (IEPs) (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2011).
- **Beware of Potential Drawbacks of Assigning a Paraprofessional to One Student.** Research suggests that students with disabilities working one-on-one with a paraprofessional can be less-engaged academically, experience fewer interactions with their classmates and teachers, and exhibit higher rates of challenging behavior (Carter et al., 2009; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). In addition, paraprofessionals assigned to one student may be more likely to feel isolated or burned out (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001).

Strategies for Talent Development Policies That Support Paraprofessionals

Recent policy trends have placed a greater focus on talent development reforms for both teachers and administrators. Lessons learned from these reforms, combined with research on paraprofessionals, suggest the following strategies may help ensure that paraprofessionals are prepared to support teachers in the classroom. When crafting policy and guidelines related to paraprofessionals, consider the following four strategies:

1. **Establish Selection Criteria and Onboarding Procedures for Hiring Paraprofessionals.** Through policy and guidance, states can help ensure that paraprofessionals have the basic knowledge and skills needed to perform their duties prior to entering a classroom.

   Set Hiring Criteria. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), requires paraprofessionals to have completed at least two years of study at an institution of higher education, obtained an associate's or higher degree, or passed a state or local academic assessment of knowledge and skills in assisting with instruction. An exception is made for paraprofessionals who serve only as translators or who only conduct parental involvement activities; these individuals must have a secondary school diploma or its equivalent but do not need to meet other requirements (ESEA, 2002).

   Require an Orientation. After hiring paraprofessionals, provide them with orientation to their work site. Typically conducted by the supervising teacher or administrator, orientations should include a school tour; introductions to key people in the school; orientation to the location of supplies and technology; a review of school and classroom policies, procedures, and rules; access to IEPs; and instruction on how to read and interpret IEPs (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007). Planned orientations can signal value and respect for paraprofessionals while providing useful, practical information that paraprofessionals will need to do their job well (Giangreco et al., 2001).

2. **Clarify the Role of the Paraprofessional.** Research suggests that many paraprofessionals and their supervising teachers and administrators are unclear about the duties and expectations of paraprofessionals (Ratcliff, Jones, Vaden, Sheen, & Hunt, 2011). States can clarify roles through standards and job descriptions.

   Adopt, Adapt, or Create Standards or Competencies. Performance standards or competencies articulate expectations for paraprofessionals in clear and accessible language. These standards should serve as the backbone of evaluations, job postings, and feedback conversations. For example, the Connecticut State Department of Education's Guidelines for Training and Support of Paraprofessionals (2012) includes the following:

   - A series of matrices that provide differentiated responsibilities, knowledge competencies, and skills for performance based on the paraprofessional's level of experience
   - Role-specific competencies for paraprofessionals working in birth to age 3 early education and paraprofessional job coaches
   - Standards for teacher and provider supervisor competencies
   - Roles of principals
   - Sample evaluation tools
   - Paraprofessional job descriptions
   - Recommendations to help districts create their own handbooks for paraprofessionals

   Provide Model Roles and Responsibilities. States can provide examples of what paraprofessionals should and should not be expected to do and help districts to differentiate between the roles of paraprofessional, general education teachers, special educators, administrators, and substitutes. For example, the Montana Office of Public Instruction's resource guide (2012) defines *paraprofessional*, includes relevant excerpts from statutory language, and outlines the roles and responsibilities for school administrators, special education and Title I professionals, general educators, paraprofessionals, and substitutes.

3. **Foster Conditions for Proper Supervision and Development of Paraprofessionals.** States can set policies and requirements to help ensure that paraprofessionals receive adequate supervision and actionable feedback from supervisors as well as receive the initial and ongoing professional learning to continually improve their practice.

   Provide Districts With Guidance and Support. Creating a culture of respect and collaboration can help paraprofessionals feel valued and decrease the likelihood of turnover (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). State education agencies, through guidance and support, can encourage district and school leaders to recognize the contributions of paraprofessionals. Professional learning should emphasize how teachers and districts can support the contributions of paraprofessionals, integrate paraprofessionals into school teams, solicit feedback and suggestions from them, and create a collaborative team approach to education that acknowledges and values every team member's contribution.

Key Resource

In her article Maximize Paraprofessional Services for Students With Disabilities, Nancy French (2002) offers 20 suggestions for special educators to help them become more effective managers and increase the effectiveness of paraprofessionals.

Source: http://www.ldonline.org/article/6184/

Require Preservice Development or Require Districts to Provide Professional Learning to Teachers. Frequently, special education teachers believe they are not as prepared as they need to be for supervising and directing the activities of paraprofessionals and indicate that they have little or no preservice training in this area (Drektrah, 2000; French, 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). States should collaborate with teacher preparation programs to revise preservice requirements for teacher candidates to include instruction on supervising paraprofessionals. State and district professional development also should address supervisory practices for current teachers already in the field. In a study by Wallace et al. (2001), teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals identified the following teacher competencies as important for teachers who direct the work of paraprofessionals:

- Communication with paraprofessionals
- Planning and scheduling
- Instructional support
- Modeling for paraprofessionals
- Public relations
- Training
- Management of paraprofessionals

Set a Maximum Number of Paraprofessionals Assigned to One Special Educator. Reducing the number of paraprofessionals assigned to a special educator will allow special educators more time to plan and supervise paraprofessionals and collaborate with classroom teachers (Suter & Giangreco, 2009).

Offer Professional Learning Opportunities, Set Professional Learning Requirements, or Offer Guidelines Related to Professional Learning. As noted earlier, initial and ongoing professional learning opportunities are key to ensuring that paraprofessionals have the skills and knowledge needed to effectively perform their roles; yet studies suggest paraprofessionals do not feel they have sufficient preparation or expertise (Breton, 2010; Giangreco et al., 2001). Through direct assistance, requirements, or guidelines, states can help ensure paraprofessionals engage in job-embedded professional learning that is directly relevant to their roles and responsibilities.

The Council for Exceptional Children's Special Education Paraeducator Common Core Specialty Set for PSPC may provide states with a resource from which to begin drafting guidelines or professional learning plans. In addition, although research on paraprofessionals' learning needs is limited, states may want to consider that paraprofessionals frequently cited the following topics as training needs:

- Assistive technology
- Disability-specific paperwork
- How to address student behavioral, emotional, and social challenges
- Indicators of abuse and neglect
- Physical or occupational therapy
- Rights and responsibilities of families and children related to learning needs
- Rules, procedural safeguards, and programs related to behavior management
- Speech therapy services (Breton, 2010; Carter et al., 2009)

State Spotlight

Rhode Island statutes provide requirements related to the qualifications, initial training, and ongoing professional development of paraprofessionals.

Standards and Guidelines. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) provides standards and indicators that apply to all paraprofessionals. In addition, the state offers differentiated guidelines for the following:

- Paraprofessionals working with students who have English as a second language
- Paraprofessionals working under the supervision of a classroom teacher with students with speech/language impairments
- Paraprofessionals who support students with behaviors that interfere with learning and/or relationships
- Paraprofessionals assisting with community-based instruction
- Paraprofessionals who support students with diverse academic needs

Qualifications. All newly hired paraprofessionals must meet the NCLB requirements. In addition, all paraprofessionals must participate in a state-approved preapproved employee training program. Although RIDE sets the minimum qualifications, districts may set more stringent requirements.

Initial Training. Paraprofessionals must participate in a state-approved pre-employment program that provides instruction on the Rhode Island Standards for Teacher Assistants. For example, the fall 2014 Teacher Assistant Training Program by The Education Exchange provides training on RIDE standards for teacher assistants; school policy and procedures; instructional skills; work in the inclusion classroom; behavior management and positive behavioral supports; collaboration and communication skills; and confidentiality, professional ethics, and diversity. This session is coupled with a required field experience.

Professional Learning. State statute requires that paraprofessionals engage in ongoing professional development as a condition of continued employment but do not specify a number of hours. In 2012–13, Educational Collaboratives and RIDE offered paraprofessional networks. These networks enabled paraprofessionals to network with other paraprofessionals across the districts and engage in paraprofessional-specific professional learning three times per year.

Compensation. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the annual mean wage of paraprofessionals in Rhode Island in 2013 was the second highest in the nation ($31,460).

Sources: http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes259041.htm
http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/Statutes/title16/index.htm
http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Teacher-Assistants/May2014_TA_Flyer.pdf
http://www.ride.ri.gov/TeachersAdministrators/OtherToolsInformation/TeacherAssistants.aspx

State Spotlight

The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Network offers training materials on its website focused on paraprofessionals:

- Training for Teachers and Special Educators—This turn-key set of materials is designed to be delivered as professional development to the general educator, special educator, and paraprofessionals who work together. The content focuses on "roles and responsibilities of team members, communication and problem-solving, and learning to support students in the classroom" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010, para. 1). Materials include slide presentations with trainer notes, slide handouts for participants, and activity handouts.
- Online Training Series for Special Education Paraprofessionals—These online trainings cover a variety of topics. Paraprofessionals can earn in-service training hours for viewing the materials with a group of their peers if districts and intermediate units allocate time to do so, or they can view the materials on their own. Topics of trainings vary, ranging from how to support students with specific disabilities to creating positive classrooms to supporting students in reading and mathematics.

Sources: http://www.pattan.net/category/Resources/Instructional%20Materials/Browse/Single/?id=505b0eba0c1c44c055000008
http://pattan.net-website.s3.amazonaws.com/images/2014/06/19/PARA_OnlineTrng0614.pdf

4. **Support or Provide Recognition and Reward Programs.** Research suggests that paraprofessionals often feel undervalued and underpaid, which may contribute to high rates of paraprofessional turnover (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Ghere & York-Barr, 2011; Malen et al., 2011). Although states and districts may not be able to increase paraprofessional salaries, they can demonstrate appreciation for the contributions of paraprofessionals through statewide recognition, conferences, and rewards programs as well as through support for the career development of paraprofessionals.

Provide Recognition and Rewards. States can develop recognition programs similar to those for teachers and school leaders. For example, the Connecticut State Department of Education and the School Paraprofessional Advisory Council award an Anne Marie Murphy Paraeducator of the Year award annually. In Minnesota, Governor Dayton proclaimed the week of January 12, 2014, as Paraprofessional Recognition Week, and the Minnesota Department of Education released suggested strategies for recognizing paraprofessionals' contributions. Each year, the Nebraska Department of Education and Project PARA cosponsor a paraeducator conference and present one paraeducator with the Nebraska Paraeducator of the Year award. Keeping in mind that paraeducators often see compensation as a sign of perceived value (Giangreco et al., 2001; Malen et al., 2011), states also can provide suggestions on how districts can integrate paraprofessionals into performance-based compensation models and other salary reforms.

Support Career Development of Effective Paraprofessionals. Providing opportunities for effective paraprofessionals to become teachers can help fill high-need positions within a district and support the career development of the paraprofessional. Multiple "grow-your-own" programs exist across states. These programs have had varying success, but limited research shows that effective paraprofessionals can successfully transition into the role of classroom teachers (Hunt, Kalmes, Haller, Hood, & Hesbol, 2012; Tejwani, Nakamoto, Hoffman, & Flaherty, 2013). Given the needs for greater diversity in the teaching force and more bilingual teachers, much literature focuses on transitioning bilingual paraprofessionals to roles as bilingual teachers. Research suggests that the inclusion of financial assistance, academic advising and support, and social components, such as cohort classes and meetings and family supports, can be important to ensuring bilingual paraprofessionals' success in transition to teaching programs (Bernal & Aragon, 2004; Bonner, Pacino, & Stanford, 2011; Rintell & Pierce, 2003).

Did you know?

Multiple states offer "grow-your-own" or tuition assistance programs for paraprofessionals. Programs include the following:

- Arizona: Grow-Your-Own-Program Paraprofessional Tuition Assistance
- Illinois: Grow Your Own Illinois
- Massachusetts: Paraprofessional Teacher Preparation Grant Program
- Utah: Paraeducator to Teacher Scholarship Program

Program Spotlight

The California School Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program

In 1990, the California legislature established the California School Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program (PTTP), which provides opportunities for effective school paraprofessionals to become certified classroom teachers in K–12 schools.

Eligibility. Interested paraprofessionals must provide verification that they meet the qualifications of a paraprofessional according to NCLB. They also must obtain a Certificate of Clearance, which is the same character and identification clearance required of student teachers and other certificated staff prior to working in schools.

Financial Support. Paraprofessionals accepted into PTTP receive up to $3,500 in annual financial assistance. However, tuition and fees at public systems of higher education in California greatly exceed this amount, requiring substantial financial commitment from paraprofessionals.

Typical Certification Path. Once accepted into PTTP, paraprofessionals complete degree and subject matter requirements and complete an internship program. After receiving a teaching certificate and graduating from PTTP, the PTTP graduate enters the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program, an induction program that supports the educator for the first two years of employment. In addition, PTTP graduates who received certification in special education also receive support and professional development from the Special Education Local Plan Area.

Funding. The legislature initially allocated funding in local assistance funds for program implementation, plus some funding was added to the budget of the Commission on Teacher Credentialing to administer the program. Throughout the years, the PTTP has expanded and contracted based on budgetary changes. In 2008–09, PTTP became funded as a Tier III program, which gave districts and county offices of education the opportunity to use funds for a different purpose. Then, in 2013–14, legislation changed school finance funding into a tiered system through the local control funding formula, which gives even more flexibility to districts.

Program Impact. Since its initial implementation, PTTP has produced more than 2,200 fully credentialed program graduates. Throughout the years, PTTP has expanded and contracted based on budgetary changes. The program also has recruited a diverse teacher candidate pool. In 2010–11, PTTP enrolled 858 paraprofessionals, 54 percent of whom identified themselves as minority group members and 45 percent of whom reported being fluent in a second language.

However, the new, more flexible funding streams have made it more challenging for the Commission to collect data and monitor implementation. The future of PTTP is unknown; proposed legislation seeks to end the program.

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I WANT TO LEARN MORE!

National Resource Center for Paraeducators (NRCP). The NRCP's mission is to "address policy questions and other needs of the field, provide technical assistance, and share information about policy questions, management practices, regulatory procedures, and training models that will enable administrators and staff-developers to improve the recruitment, deployment, supervision, and career development of paraeducators." For more information, visit http://www.nrcpara.org/.

National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources. This site, run by the Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research, lists sites and articles related to paraeducator pathways into teaching. For more information, visit http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html.

The PAR²A Center. Located at the University of Colorado–Denver, the PAR²A Center serves as a national research and development center that explores training and supervision for paraprofessionals and their impact on employment conditions and student achievement. For more information, visit http://www.paracenter.org/researchers/bibliography/paraeducator-career-ladder-programs/.

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