

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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*Many children with disabilities attend Catholic schools, but the resources to serve these children adequately are limited. Teacher assistants are increasingly being used to meet this need by assisting students with disabilities in regular classrooms. The authors maintain that such assistants can be effectively used in Catholic schools for this purpose, and others, if appropriately prepared. This article identifies the education needed to enable urban teacher assistants to work effectively with students with special needs in regular classrooms in Catholic schools. The article also examines a preparation program at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.*

## INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities attend Catholic schools in significant numbers. SA 2002 study sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Catholic School Children with Disabilities*, found that 7% of the children in Catholic schools have been identified as having a disability. While most of these students have learning or speech and language disabilities, 28% have less common conditions such as mental retardation, hearing and vision impairment, autism, physical disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, or traumatic brain injury.

Catholic schools receive little public assistance in serving these children (DeFiore, 2006). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2000) provides certain special education services, a proportionate share of each district's IDEA funds, for children with special needs placed by their parents in Catholic schools. But less than 1% of the children with disabilities in Catholic schools receive services under IDEA (USCCB, 2002). Further, because IDEA funding is so limited, it is usually directed to children

needing less intervention, such as those with speech-language disorders or learning disabilities. Overall, 87% of the Catholic dioceses participating in the USCCB (2002) study reported that at least some of their schools do not have the capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This has an adverse impact on enrollment and denies some children access to a Catholic education.

The National Catholic Educational Association's (NCEA) *National Congress on Catholic Schools for the Twenty-First Century* (1991) emphasized that part of the mission of Catholic schools is to affirm the dignity of all students and educate a diverse student body. The NCEA has also stressed that all parents have a right to choose appropriate education for their children, including parents of children with special needs. Thus, Catholic school systems must ensure that "there are places in Catholic schools for the children of all Catholic families, wherever they live, whatever their income, and whatever special needs and gifts their children have" (NCEA, 1991, p. 5). To meet this goal, the Catholic schools will have to increase their capacity to educate special needs children.

Catholic schools have been moving toward this goal by adopting innovative approaches to including children with special needs (DeFiore, 2006). Resource room programs and in-class accommodations are frequently used (USCCB, 2002). Certain Catholic school systems have also pursued inclusive education by contracting with specialists, such as speech therapists and special educators, who can focus on children with special needs, co-teaching, creating privately-funded resource programs to provide remediation and reinforce classroom instruction in a small group, reducing class sizes, introducing self-contained classes with mainstreaming in selected subjects, providing summer programs to build skills, and training peer mentors for children with disabilities (Laengle, Redder, Somers, & Sullivan, 2000; Patchell & Treloar, 1997; Powell, 2004). The Archdiocese of St. Louis provides affordable assessments of children's special needs through a Catholic Guidance Office (DeFiore, 2006). Dioceses have also designated special needs coordinators to consult across schools, and have hired teachers who are dually certified in regular and special education to serve both as classroom teachers and advisors to other teachers regarding inclusion. Collaborative problem solving teams are also used to identify accommodations and resources for children with special needs (Barton, 2000; Frey et al., 2000; Lawrence-Brown & Muschaweck, 2004).

Another way Catholic schools can help children with disabilities succeed is to employ teacher assistants and instructional aides, now often called paraeducators to recognize their distinct paraprofessional identity. There has been little academic discussion of paraeducators in Catholic schools, but in practice

they have been recognized among Catholic educators as beneficial to the inclusion of children with disabilities (Loreman, 2000; McNally, Cole, & Waugh, 2001). Moreover, the use of paraeducators in Catholic schools has proven beneficial to regular education students as well as to children with special needs (Blackett, 2001). However, there have been concerns that under certain circumstances, paraeducators can contribute to the isolation of students with special needs, particularly if the paraeducators are not oriented toward supporting the class as a whole (Loreman, 2000). Thus, to help individual paraeducators reach their potential as effective members of teaching teams in Catholic schools, specialized preparation is essential (Broadbent & Burgess, 2003).

This article examines the ways paraeducators can be used in Catholic schools, and the education they need to function effectively in this environment. University-based preparation of paraeducators is also discussed, examining specifically the ongoing programs at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PARAEDUCATORS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Paraeducators have become an invaluable resource to classroom teachers (Morgan, Ashbaker, & Forbush, 1998; Riggs, 2002). More than 675,000 full-time equivalent paraeducators, identified by a variety of titles, including teacher aide, instructional assistant, and dedicated aide, worked in elementary and secondary public schools in the United States in 2001 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001). One-third of all public school teachers benefit from the assistance of a paraeducator (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, 2000).

In the public schools, paraeducators are employed primarily in special education and related services (Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000). They play a major role in the delivery of services to children with special needs (French, 1998; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Riggs, 2001, 2005), and are being asked to take on ever-increasing responsibility for direct instruction and student support (Beale, 2001; French, 1999; Moshoyannis, Pickett, & Granick, 1999; Pickett, 1999; Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003; Riggs, 2005). With the dearth of qualified teachers, paraeducators often assume teaching duties in urban public schools (Comer & Maholmes, 1999). However, paraeducators often lack appropriate preparation and supervision (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2003; Mueller & Murphy, 2001; Pickett et al., 2003).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) required that paraeducators working in Title I schools be highly qualified by 2006. This generally means that paraeducators in Title I schools are required to complete an asso-

ciate degree program or 2 years of college, or pass a state-approved test. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) extends that requirement to include all special education paraeducators assisting students in content areas.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL, 2004) anticipates that paraeducator employment opportunities will continue to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. As discussed in Pickett et al. (2003), this increased demand for paraprofessional staffing is due to: (a) the ongoing effort to include children with disabilities in general education (DOL, 2004; Mueller & Murphy, 2001; Pickett, 1999; Riggs, 2001, 2005); (b) the increasing number of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds (DOL, 2004; Genzuk, 1997; Rueda & Monzo, 2000; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995); (c) rising demand for higher quality education, individualized instruction, and compensatory education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds; (d) continuing shortages of credentialed teachers in nearly every program area (NCES, 2001; Recruiting New Teachers, 2000); and (e) the shifting role of teachers who, as a result of differentiated staffing reforms, are becoming managers of instructional programs or leaders of instructional teams, and spending more time on school governance (French, 2001; French & Pickett, 1997; Pickett, 1999).

## STANDARDS FOR PARAEDUCATORS

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), in conjunction with the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services (NRCBERS), has identified minimum knowledge and skill standards for paraeducators serving students with disabilities (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2003). Nevertheless, roughly 70-90% of paraprofessionals hired by the public schools have no job-specific preparation (CEC, 2003). There is considerable evidence that even after they are hired, most paraeducators are not formally educated further (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Mueller, 2003; Pickett, 1999; Riggs, 2001). Most of the education paraeducators do engage in is informal, on-the-job immersion by teachers and other paraprofessionals. This results in haphazard, unfocused, and incomplete opportunities for professional growth and skill development. Few state or local education agencies systematically orient, educate, or certify special education paraprofessionals (Cyr, 2000; French & Pickett, 1997; Mueller, 1997; Pickett et al., 2003).

The widespread inadequacy of paraeducator preparation is due in part to limited financial resources and insufficient time (Cyr, 2000). Other factors undermining paraeducator preparation include lack of institutional recognition and reward, few opportunities for career advancement, and difficulties

in traveling to inservice sites (French & Pickett, 1997; Steckelberg & Vasa, 1998). In addition, few colleges prepare future teachers to develop and use the skills of the paraprofessionals with whom they will work (French & Pickett, 1997).

The impact of inadequate preparation can be significant. Data increasingly show that insufficient paraeducator preparation adversely affects student achievement (Katsiyannis et al., 2000; Moshoyannis et al., 1999; Railsback, Bracken, & Schmidt, 2002; Riggs, 2001). Unprepared paraprofessionals communicate poorly with teachers, have little understanding of instructional modifications and accommodations, inadvertently interfere with instructional programs by giving answers to assignments, and burn out and/or leave their positions quickly (D'Aquanni, 1997; Jones & Bender, 1993; Milner, 1998; Nittoli & Giloth, 1997). Giangreco and associates have found that poorly prepared paraeducators working in inclusive settings have particular difficulty dealing with the challenging issues surrounding the role of paraeducators, including: (a) teacher-paraeducator role confusion; (b) the emergence of paraeducators rather than teachers as primary communicators with families; (c) assignment of the least qualified personnel to provide most of the instruction and support for students with the greatest needs; (d) excessive reliance on one-to-one paraeducator support, leading to unintended consequences such as unnecessary dependency, interference with teacher involvement, and interference with peer relations; and (e) paraeducators serving as substitute friends for students with disabilities (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al., 2003; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999).

Also important in assessing the need for paraeducator preparation is the growing cultural disparity between students and teachers. In 1999, 37.9% of public school students were members of minority groups, but fewer than 10% of teachers were from minority groups (NCES, 2001). In contrast, paraeducators typically live near their schools and come from the same cultural backgrounds as their students (Eubanks, 2001; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Rueda & Monzo, 2000; Wall, Davis, Crowley, & White, 2005). Paraeducators generally relate well to the students, making school less alienating (Genzok, 1997; Villegas & Clewell, 1998; Wall et al., 2005). Further, paraeducators demonstrate commitment to the relationship between the school and the community (Brandick, 2001; Wall et al., 2005).

## **GROWING NEED FOR WELL-PREPARED PARAEDUCATORS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

The Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Washington, which include the District of Columbia and five Maryland counties, provide a vivid example of

both the potential for inclusion of children with special needs in Catholic schools and the corresponding need for qualified paraeducators. There are 112 schools in the Archdiocese of Washington including 75 archdiocesan elementary schools which served approximately 21,000 children in 2005-2006.

The archdiocesan schools in the District of Columbia are configured as the Center City Consortium. These urban schools serve children from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, serving 77% minority and 65% special needs children (see Table 1). Over the past 2 years, Center City Consortium schools have welcomed almost 1,000 new students through the federally funded Opportunity Scholarship program. The program allows low-income families living in Washington, DC, to send their children to the school of choice with federally funded scholarships for tuition and fees. These students are similar in background and need as the students already served in the Consortium. As overall enrollment has grown, so has the number of students with special needs.

The Archdiocese of Washington schools have varying levels of support systems to assist students with special needs. In most schools, resource teachers in collaboration with classroom teachers work to develop strategies and intervention plans for each student with special needs. One dimension of this effort is focused on increasing the use and effectiveness of paraeducators in the classroom through job embedded preparation programs for paraeducators and teachers. The archdiocese piloted a 30-hour in-service program to prepare paraeducators to work in inclusive classroom settings. Simultaneously, professional development programs prepared teachers to work more effectively with paraeducators (18 hour program) and coached principals on creating professional climates to enhance the working relationships of instructional teams (6-hour program). These programs were well received by participants. The archdiocese now has paraeducators in most of its elementary schools, and is currently investigating future training development to meet program needs. At the time this article was prepared, the Center City Consortium Schools employed 50 paraeducators, with 68% representing minority groups and 5% with disabilities, similar to the demographic data on the children (See Table 1).

Table 1

*Student and Paraeducator Demographic Data from the Archdiocese of Washington Compared Nationally*

	Catholic schools nationwide	Archdiocese of Washington elementary schools in Washington, DC
Student demographic data		
Number of students	2,647,301	4,493
Percentage of minority students	25.6%	77%
Percentage of students with special education needs	7%	6%
Paraeducator demographic data		
Number of paraeducators	unknown	50
Percentage of minority paraeducators	unknown	68%
Percentage of paraeducators with disabilities	unknown	5%
Paraeducator vacancy rate (open positions)	unknown	5%

*Note.* Source for national data (McDonald, 2005).

## HIGHER EDUCATION FOR PARAEDUCATORS

For the past 5 years, The Catholic University of America (CUA) has partnered with the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Institute—a provider of services for children and adults with developmental disabilities—to develop and deliver university-level paraeducator preparation. This effort began with a nine-credit undergraduate program (ParaMet), funded by the Office of Special Education and Related Services (OSERS) of the U.S. Department of Education, to enhance the skills of paraeducators working with students with special needs. After the passage of NCLB, it became clear that a more comprehensive program would be required, and the CUA/DCPS/Kennedy Institute partners were

awarded an OSERS grant to provide a 48-credit certificate program (ParaEd) which would meet NCLB requirements. Expanding to a 60-credit program which will be open to paraeducators in Catholic, public, and charter schools in the DC metropolitan area is currently a priority.

## THE PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The curriculum is based on the knowledge and skill standards set by CEC (2003). These include the following content areas: (a) foundations of special education; (b) development and characteristics of learners; (c) individual learning differences; (d) instructional strategies; (e) learning environments and social interactions; (f) language; (g) instructional planning; (h) assessment; (i) professional and ethical practice; and (j) collaboration. The design incorporates the perspectives from four primary models that dominate the thinking of educators today: ecological or environmental, behavioral, constructivist, and psychodynamic (Walker & Shea, 1999; Zirpoli & Melloy, 1993).

The curriculum also emphasizes problem solving and reflection, which are essential tools for education professionals (Posner, 2000). The end goal is to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that allow paraeducators to problem solve on their own or with assistance from teachers. These new skills, and the confidence to apply them, can lead to positive outcomes in all areas of children's lives. Figure 1 depicts this process.

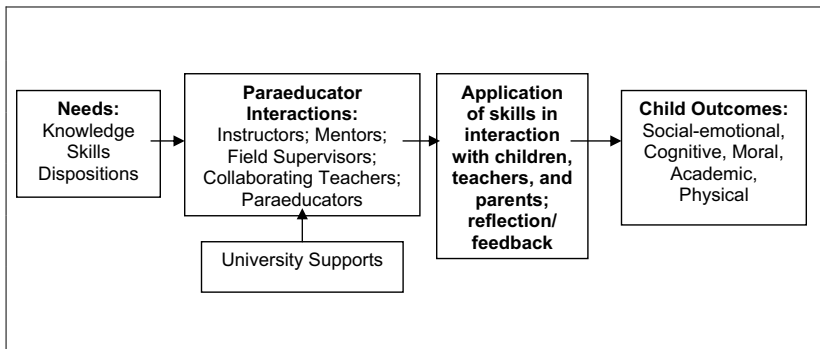


Figure 1. ParaEd pathways to change

The program is based on best practices drawn from the recent literature on professional development. For example, a study involving 1,000 teachers in 5 states identified four key features of effective staff development programs, all of which have been built into the project (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000). First, the preparation program continues over a long



period (3.5 years) while the paraeducators are working full-time in their field. This allows extensive coordination between what is taught in the college classroom and what the paraeducators are experiencing daily. Second, the paraeducators are encouraged to provide support to each other as undergraduate students through study and support groups, which encourage cooperative learning and persistence. Third, learning activities are connected to the paraeducators' classrooms, such as (a) classroom-based projects and cooperative learning, (b) video self-assessment and case studies, (c) a full school-year field placement, and (d) infusion of special education content into all coursework.

For the 60-credit program, paraeducators can take five courses per year (2 fall, 2 spring, 1 summer) while they continue full-time employment during the school year. Coursework focuses on the following areas, with an emphasis on developing reflective practices and practical problem-solving skills:

- Education foundations, human growth and development, and educational psychology (9 credits)
- Foundations of special education, including a field component (9 credits)
- Best practices for working with students with disabilities (9 credits)
- Partnering with families (3 credits)
- Academic proficiencies, including writing, mathematics, and computer skills (15 credits)
- Instructional methods: reading and math (6 credits)
- Communication and problem solving (3 credits)
- Religion (3 credits)
- Classroom management (3 credits)

## **ADMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS AND PROCESS**

Project staff held a series of information sessions in the schools when there was an opening for a new cohort of students. Applications typically were double the number of available slots. Applications required high school and college transcripts, recommendations from principals and cooperating teachers, and a writing sample. All applicants came to The Catholic University of America for a personal interview, were tested on reading comprehension using the Nelson-Denny Reading Comprehension Test, Form G (Brown, Fishco, & Hanna, 1993), and provided a writing sample. The most promising applicants were selected based on academic potential, personal characteristics (including work habits and motivation), and work experiences.

Five ParaMet cohorts (88 paraeducators) and two ParaEd cohorts (41 paraeducators) have enrolled. The paraeducator candidates have been predominantly minority (93% African American, 5% Latino), mature (average

age 40 years), and experienced (average 5.7 years of work experience in schools). Most were closely tied to Washington and its schools (72% current residents; 56% graduated from city high schools or GED programs). Overall, 75% of the paraeducators graduated from high schools, while 25% held GEDs. Five were bilingual (English and Spanish); one was fluent in American Sign Language.

To plan instruction, two surveys were administered to accepted students: one for computer and library skills (17 skill-related items on a 3-point rating scale and 4 yes/no questions) and a self-evaluation based on the CEC's professional standards for paraeducators (CEC, 2002; 61-items, 5-point rating scale). Teachers also rated the paraeducators with whom they worked. Finally, an evaluator held focus groups at the end of each semester to obtain information to guide program improvement.

## **CHALLENGES IN TRAINING OF URBAN PARAEducATORS**

Four years of experience with paraeducators reveal them to be enthusiastic, motivated, dedicated to their work, and open to all they are learning in the university classroom. However, numerous assessments made clear that the paraeducators would need extensive support to succeed in college work. The accepted paraeducator candidates had earned a grade of C on average in language arts in high school, and nearly half (44%) scored in the lowest quartile on the Nelson Denny reading test. The paraeducators' writing samples revealed problems in organization, sentence construction, and writing mechanics. The paraeducators had little experience with library research, and less than half (46%) had a home computer. Moreover, the paraeducators were hampered by their lack of familiarity with the customary protocols and procedures at a university. They often did not notify their instructors of obstacles they faced, sometimes did not take advantage of supports available to them, and had a difficult time juggling home, work, and school. Their home lives often prevented them from focusing on their studies. One paraeducator became homeless during her time in the program, and two others lost their jobs due to budget cutbacks.

## **STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

The program incorporated several practical strategies to help the paraeducators be successful:

- *Logistics*: Classes were scheduled at times that would fit most easily into the paraeducators' work and personal schedules. The classes were also located in a building that was accessible by public transportation.

For the ParaMet Program, all the texts, as well as a stipend for transportation, materials, and child care needs were supplied.

- *Comprehensive orientation:* Prior to the start of each cohort, paraeducators came to The Catholic University of America for a half-day orientation session, during which the demands of the program were described in detail. This included a session on library research skills.
- *The university culture:* There was a need to familiarize the paraeducators with the basics of the culture of academia. A discussion about the syllabus was held at the beginning of each course, explaining that the syllabus was a kind of contract between instructor and student. Throughout the program the importance of communication with the instructors, and of seeking assistance when needed were emphasized.
- *Academic competencies:* Basic academic skills were incorporated into the classes. Special sessions focused on writing, study skills, and word processing. Copies of *The Master Student* were given to all participants.
- *University support:* Students were made aware of the support available on campus through the Counseling Center, the Writing Center, the Office of Disability Support Services, and library. Several paraeducators with disabilities, such as blindness and Cerebral Palsy, arranged for a representative of the disability office to attend classes and modify materials as needed.
- *School-based support:* Many of the ParaMet/ParaEd students work in the same schools, and easily formed study and support groups. This has been a particularly effective support for the paraeducators, who feel comfortable seeking help from each other. In addition, a teacher-paraeducator mini-conference is held for each cohort, during which the paraeducators come to the university with their supervising teacher and discuss roles and ways to effectively communicate. This conference, along with school visits during the paraeducators' field placement year, elicits support from the teachers and helps the paraeducators apply what they are learning to their classrooms. Paraeducators report that since enrolling in our programs they have been asked to, and are able to, take on increasing responsibility in their classrooms.

## **COLLEGE FOR PARAEDUCATORS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

The educational backgrounds and academic needs of the urban paraeducators in Catholic schools are similar to their public school counterparts. Their preparation needs are also similar, and remain based on the CEC standards. However, the Catholic school context necessitates enhancement of the ParaEd curriculum

consistent with the goals of the Catholic schools. It is important for paraeducators to understand the philosophy of Catholic education and how inclusion of children with special needs is consistent with that mission. A tool for understanding mission and educational strategies is reflection or contemplation. The contemplative practice model encourages Catholic school educators to ask fundamental questions related to their schools' inclusive practices (Long & Schuttloffel, 2006). Paraeducators also need to understand policies and procedures related to serving children with special needs in the Catholic schools, including the development and implementation of individualized plans. To help address these issues, Catholic school personnel who are members of the planning teams (teachers, special needs educators, principals, specialists) should be involved in supporting the paraeducators' professional growth.

Paraeducator preparation partnerships between universities and Catholic schools are rare. We are aware of only one program that provides college-level preparation specifically for paraeducators working in Catholic schools (i.e., a program in Australia through the Australian Catholic University; Broadbent & Burgess, 2003). Pioneer programs will not only prepare paraeducators to work effectively with the special needs population in Catholic schools, but can also develop data providing further insight into the best strategies and methods for this specialized paraeducator education.

## CONCLUSION

There is a growing demand for well-designed, college-level preparation for paraeducators, especially preparation focused on inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms. This need is especially pressing in Catholic school systems, where there are limited resources but expanding enrollments of children with disabilities. University-school partnerships further the mission of all involved institutions. The Catholic Church has consistently reached out to assist people with disabilities, and greater inclusion of children with disabilities in Catholic schools is a natural and inevitable extension of this history. Creative use of well-prepared, Catholic school-oriented paraeducators is critical to fulfilling this important mission.

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