

# **Questionable Utilization of Paraprofessionals: Are We Addressing the Symptoms or Root Causes?**

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TASH Conference, Reno, NV, November 2004

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## *Abstract*

Treating the symptoms of a problem may provide temporary relief or buy some time, but the symptoms will continue to surface until the root cause is adequately addressed. In an era of increasing utilization of paraprofessionals, concerns have been identified in the professional literature (e.g., least qualified personnel assigned to support students with the most complex learning characteristics; detrimental effects of excessive proximity) associated with ensuring appropriate education for students with disabilities when schools rely on paraprofessionals as a primary support in general education classrooms.

The national response to these concerns has been to focus on strengthening supports for students with disabilities by focusing on improvements in training and supervision of paraprofessionals. This approach is predicated on the assumption that we have identified a root source of the problems associated with the appropriate educational support of students with disabilities in general education classes -- namely that paraprofessionals need to be more highly skilled to carry out the tasks that professionals ask of them.

Of course, improving training and supervision of paraprofessionals are desirable and appropriate steps. While valued and important roles for paraprofessionals to assist in the provision of special education will continue to exist, we are concerned that strengthening paraprofessional supports alone, without simultaneously examining their interactions with general and special education practices, may be akin to treating symptoms rather than root causes. In other words, is the field's increasing and potentially inappropriate utilization of special education paraprofessionals merely symptomatic of root problems in general and special education? Will access to the general education curriculum and pursuit of individually determined goals for students with disabilities be appropriately supported if we simply strengthen the paraprofessional workforce? We believe these questions warrant closer scrutiny, particularly given concerns about whether the very model of extensive reliance on paraprofessionals is conceptually sound.

The a subset of the most prominent, baseline data highlighting the aforementioned concerns will be presented in addition to the most recent interim implementation data from schools that have participated in an action-planning process to proactively address their schools' overreliance and inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals.

## Recent Resources from UVM Paraprofessional Projects

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