

# Schoolwide Planning to Improve Paraeducator Supports: A Pilot Study

Michael F. Giangreco, Stephen M. Broer, and Susan W. Edelman

*Center on Disability and Community Inclusion*

*University of Vermont*

*101 Cherry St., Suite 450*

*Burlington, Vermont 05401-4439*

*802-656-1144*

*mgiangre@zo.uvm.edu*

## Abstract

This pilot study chronicled the use of a process called, *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports*, by teams in four schools, grades K-12. Data reflect the utilization and outcomes of the process along with the perspectives of 27 study participants. Findings indicated that the process assisted all four schools to self-assess their paraeducator practices, identify priorities in need of improvement, develop action-plans, and implement them. Study participants reported that the process did what it purported to do and rated it highly on a series of consumer-oriented variables (e.g., ease of use). Implications for schools and future use are discussed for improving paraeducator supports.

Over the past few decades, the utilization of paraeducators in special education has increased substantially (French & Pickett, 1997; Pickett, 1999). Simultaneously, their roles have evolved and expanded (Doyle, 1997; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). In the past, paraeducator roles often focused on support functions such as preparing materials, taking attendance, supervising students in the lunchroom or on the playground, and monitoring bus arrivals and departures. Today paraeducators are more integrally involved in providing instructional supports to students with and without disabilities (Demchak & Morgan, 1998; Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000; Marks, Shrader & Levine, 1999; Welch, Richards, Okada, Richards & Prescott, 1995).

Though the scope and complexity of their roles have expanded, there is little evidence that most paraeducators are adequately trained or supervised (French 1998; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Jones & Bender, 1993; Passaro, Pickett, Latham & HongoBo, 1994). At the same time, it has become increasingly difficult to attract and retain paraeducators in special education. Commonly cited reasons include factors such as lack of orientation and training, poorly defined job descriptions, low wages, limited opportunities for advancement, insufficient administrative support, and lack of respect (French & Cabell, 1993;

French & Chopra, 1999; Giangreco, Edelman & Broer, 2001; Hadadian & Yssel, 1998; Morehouse & Albright, 1991; Passaro et al, 1994).

Although the aforementioned issues span geographic boundaries, concerns about the utilization of paraeducators can be especially acute in rural areas where shortages and attrition of both paraeducators and certified professionals exist (Palma, 1994; Passaro et al., 1994). At the same time it is generally acknowledged that paraeducators are a valuable local resource. In rural schools the pool of personnel most likely to serve as paraeducators reside, and plan to stay, in the local community (Demchak & Morgan, 1998). In addition to providing strong linkages to the local community, they also can provide continuity for students with disabilities and special education programs (Demchak & Morgan, 1994).

Challenges pertaining to paraeducators have been further complicated by lack of consensus about their roles (Downing Ryndak & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997; Lamont & Hill, 1991; Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Welch et al, 1995). Recently, the literature has begun to present perspectives that question the expanding utilization of paraeducators in ways that result in the least qualified school personnel being asked to provide the primary instructional

**Table 1.**  
**Steps of A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports**

1. Inform your local school board of your intention to establish a team, or use an existing team, to address paraeducator issues.
2. Ensure that the team includes the appropriate members of the school and local community.
3. Have the team assess their own status and fact-find in relation to the six paraeducator topics:
  - (a) Acknowledging Paraeducators,
  - (b) Orienting & Training Paraeducators,
  - (c) Hiring & Assigning Paraeducators,
  - (d) Paraeducator Interactions with Students and Staff,
  - (e) Roles & Responsibilities of Paraeducators, and
  - (f) Supervision & Evaluation of Paraeducator Services.
4. Prioritize and select topics and specific issues that reflect areas of need within the school that the team will work on first.
5. Update your local school board of the team's ranked priorities.
6. Design a plan to address the team's ranked priorities.
7. Identify local, regional, and statewide resources to assist in achieving team plans.
8. Implement the team's plans.
9. Evaluate the plan's impact and plan next steps.
10. Report impact and needs to your local school board.

supports for students with the most complex and significant learning and behavioral challenges (Brown et al, 1999; Freschi, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 1999).

The purpose of the present study was to explore the utilization of a 10-step paraeducator planning process, *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports* (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999), (see Table 1). This process was designed to assist school-based teams assess their own status in terms of paraeducator supports, identify their priorities pertaining to paraeducator supports, develop a corresponding plan of action, implement the plan, and evaluate its impact.

This study posed a series of evaluative questions.

1. How did the school teams rate themselves in reference to 28 indicators of paraeducator support?
2. What were the schools' self-identified paraeducator priorities?
3. What actions did the schools choose to address their paraeducator priorities?
4. Did the paraeducator planning process do what it purported to do (e.g., help people gain insights and understand the perspectives of others about paraeducator issues, help the school select appro-

priate priorities that require attention, and develop a plan to address identified priorities)?

5. How did the team members rate the paraeducator planning process across a series of consumer-oriented variables (e.g., importance, ease, helpfulness)?
6. What were participants' perspectives on the strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement of the action-planning process?

This pilot study fills a gap in the literature by presenting initial data on a practical tool that educational teams can use to improve the paraeducator supports offered in inclusive schools. Availability of the planning guide online provides rural schools with easy access to a current tool that can assist them in improving their paraeducator supports. Currently, no other comparable processes or data are described in the professional literature.

## **Method**

### *Setting*

This study was conducted in four schools in Vermont. The schools were selected because they: (a) were part of the same K-12 system, (b) had a history of

including a full range of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and (c) employed paraeducators to provide educational supports for students with and without disabilities.

Three of the schools (grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8) were part of a K-8 school district with a student population ranging from 430 (grades K-2) to 530 (grades 3-5). Older students from this district attended a union high school (grades 9-12) with a population of over 1,400. Nearly 10% of the students in these four schools received free or reduced lunch. Approximately 5% of the students were from minority racial/cultural backgrounds.

Each school provided some type of specialized instructional supports to between 20% and 26% of the student population in one of three ways: (1) *IEPs* (Individual Education Programs) under the auspices of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Amendments of 1997*; (2) *504 Plans* under the auspices *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973*; or (3) *157 Plans* under the auspices of a *Vermont Act 157* that requires each school to maintain a building-based instructional support team to provide educational supports to “at risk” students, prior to considering referral for special education.

### *Study Participants*

Data were collected from 27 individuals, including 11 paraprofessionals, 5 general education teachers, 4 special educators, 3 parents, and 3 school administrators (principals or assistant principals). This represents nearly 82% of all the individuals who actually participated in the planning activities. Data were not collected from the 10 other individuals who participated in part of the planning; but for various reasons (e.g., changed jobs, moved away, health/family concerns) these individuals discontinued their involvement during the study period. There were seven participants each from the primary, elementary, and middle school, and six from the high school.

### *Procedures*

The central administration for the school districts agreed to have the four schools participate in the field-testing of *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Support* (Giangreco, Edelman & Broer, 1999) during the 99-00 school year with some carry over into 00-01. This was consistent with the districts’ interests to improve their paraeducator supports. A principal or assistant principal in each school served

as the initial point of contact between the school community and the research team, which consisted of the three authors.

A member of the research team met with a school administrator in each of the four schools to discuss the field-testing at the beginning of the 99-00 school year. Participation required formation of a team comprised of 5 to 8 participants with representation across constituencies (e.g., parents, paraeducators, teachers, special educators, and administrators) or utilization of an existing team or committee.

Each school was provided with copies of *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Support*, a 27-page planning booklet which included simple directions pertaining to each of the steps listed in Table 1 along with corresponding worksheets to help guide the team’s process and record their work. For example, in Step 3 each team assessed their own school’s status on 28 indicators of paraeducator support across the six categories (e.g., orienting and training, hiring and assigning, and roles and responsibilities) listed in Table 2. They used a simple rubric to rate each of the 28 indicators as either, “Needs major work”, “Needs some work”, “OK for now”, or “Doing well”. This self-assessment formed the basis for selecting priorities and subsequent action-planning and implementation in each school.

Written directions included in the guide booklet were purposely presented in general ways so teams would be encouraged to make their own decisions about how they would interpret the materials and operate. In fact, the cover of the booklet included a general direction that stated, “This guide is meant to be used as a workbook. Please write in it, add to it, and feel free to adapt in ways that make sense to you!” Each school’s planning team used the process on a schedule that they determined. Rather than being required to follow a strict standardized process, each team followed generally the same process, but was encouraged to make individualized adjustments to ensure that the process was relevant and meaningful in their setting. Review of each school’s guide booklets allowed the research team to understand the various ways that the process was adapted.

School personnel, not research team members led field-testing. Research team members, did attend some of the planning meetings to observe the teams’ efforts and were available to respond to questions, but they were not there to guide or control the process. Teams in each of the schools used the process to

**Table 2.**  
**Paraeducator indicators used in schoolwide self-assessment**

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### **Acknowledging Paraeducators**

1. Paraeducators should be considered members of the educational teams corresponding to their work assignments. These teams typically consist of the student (when appropriate), the student's parents, teachers, special educators, and others as needed on an ongoing or situational basis (e.g., related services providers, school nurse, bus driver, older mentors with the same disabilities as the student).
2. Paraeducators provide important services, under the supervision of a licensed educator, that influence student learning, social/emotional development, and inclusion.
3. Paraeducators should be valued, appreciated, and recognized for their unique competencies, hard work, and contributions to the classroom, school, and community.

### **Orienting & Training Paraeducators**

4. Paraeducators should receive orientation (e.g., information about the student, classroom, and school) and entry-level training prior to working directly with students (e.g., teamwork, inclusive education, roles and responsibilities of team members, principles of learning).
5. Paraeducators should receive ongoing, on-the-job, training to match their specific job responsibilities and assignments.
6. Paraeducators should have access to ongoing learning opportunities, in addition to their on-the-job experiences (e.g., workshops, courses, internet study) that promote their skill development in relevant areas (e.g., supporting students with challenging behaviors; approaches to literacy; use of technology; needs of students with low incidence disabilities) and have input into what training they need.
7. Paraeducator training experiences should be designed to allow individuals to gain continuing education or college/university credit.

### **Hiring & Assigning Paraeducators**

8. Practices should be established to recruit, hire, and retain paraeducators.
  9. Substitute paraeducators should be recruited and trained to ensure that a student's access to education and participation in his/her educational program is not unduly disrupted when the regular paraeducator is unavailable due to occurrences such as illness, injury, personal leave, or professional development.
  10. Each school should have an agreed upon team process and criteria for determining whether paraeducator support is needed for students with disabilities to receive an appropriate education.
  11. When paraeducator support is determined to be necessary for a student, a written plan should explicitly clarify the nature and extent of the support and explain how it is referenced to the student's educational program (e.g., IEP goals, general education curriculum).
  12. In most circumstances it is advisable to assign paraeducators to classrooms or instructional programs rather than to an individual student. In the rare cases when a paraeducator is needed for an individual student, efforts should be made to ensure that paraeducators provide supportive, rather than primary or exclusive, services.
  13. When administrators are making work assignments and re-assignments to meet students' educational needs, it is advisable to gain input directly from paraeducators and other team members (e.g., parents, teachers, special educators, related services providers) to understand factors that may influence job performance, job satisfaction, and reduce burnout (e.g., variety of duties, interpersonal dynamics, individual skills and interests, longevity with a particular student).
  14. Paraeducators should have an accurate job description that outlines their roles and responsibilities. This job description should be commensurate with the paraeducator's skill level as it pertains to students both with and without disabilities.
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**Table 2. (Continued)**  
**Paraeducator indicators used in schoolwide self-assessment**

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15. Paraeducators should be compensated in accordance with their level of education, training, experience, and skills.

### **Paraeducator Interactions with Students & Staff**

16. Paraeducators are expected to demonstrate constructive interpersonal skills with students and other team members (e.g., use respectful communication when speaking with or about others; maintain confidentiality; ensure dignity when providing personal care).
17. Paraeducators should develop and demonstrate attitudes and work habits that encourage: student independence; foster appropriate interdependence; promote inclusion and peer interactions; enhance each students' self-image; and prevent the unintended negative effects often associated with the potential over involvement and proximity of adults.

### **Roles & Responsibilities of Paraeducators**

18. Within the classroom, on a day-to-day basis, the classroom teacher is the instructional leader and interacts directly on an ongoing basis with students who have disabilities. Paraeducators function as a vital support to students under the direction of the teacher and special educators.
19. Teachers, special educators, and related services providers (e.g., speech/language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists) have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the appropriate design, implementation, and evaluation of instruction carried out by paraeducators.
20. Paraeducators should be informed about the educational needs (e.g., IEP goals and objectives; components of the general education curriculum) and characteristics of the students with whom they work, as well as classroom and school practices and routines.
21. Paraeducators should have opportunities to contribute to the development of the educational program, instructional plans, and activities created by each student's educational team, but should not be given sole responsibility for these and related activities.
22. Some of the functions of paraeducators are to: support the implementation of instructional programs; facilitate learning activities; collect student data; and carry out other assigned duties (e.g., supervise students at lunch or recess; provide personal care supports to students; do clerical tasks) based on plans developed by the teachers and special educators.
23. Times and mechanisms should be established to allow opportunities for paraeducators to be oriented to teacher's plans, report on student progress, ask questions, and offer their perspectives.

### **Supervision & Evaluation of Paraeducator Services**

24. Paraeducators should receive ongoing supervision and regular performance evaluations which are based on their job descriptions and apply clearly defined processes and procedures.
  25. Supervisors of paraeducators (e.g., teachers; special educators) should be trained in effective supervisory practices through preservice, inservice, or graduate training.
  26. Paraeducator services should be considered in school-and district-level school improvement action-planning to ensure that appropriate services are available and effectively utilized.
  27. When a student is receiving support from a paraeducator, an evaluation plan should be established to determine, if possible, how and when paraeducator services can be faded through increased student independence or replaced by more naturally occurring supports (e.g., classroom teacher, peers).
  28. School districts should develop ways to evaluate the impact of paraeducator services on individual students, classrooms, and staff.
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assess their school's needs, identify priorities, develop a corresponding plan, and implement their plan.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Feedback was provided to the research team in three primary forms: (a) a copy of their completed planning booklet and corresponding documentation such as team meeting minutes; (b) questionnaires completed by planning team members, and (c) documentation of the outcomes or products resulting from their planning. Using questionnaires, participants were asked to rate the perceived pace of their team's planning efforts using a Likert-style scale where 1 was anchored with the phrase "very slowly" and 4 was anchored with the term "quickly." Participants were asked to respond to seven additional statements using a Likert-style scale where 1 was anchored with the phrase "strongly disagree" and 4 was anchored with the phrase "strongly agree."

The questionnaire statements sought to identify the participants' perspectives on (a) whether the paraeducator planning process did what it purported to do (e.g., helped gain insights about paraeducator issues, helped select appropriate priorities, and developed a plan) and (b) a small set of consumer-oriented variables (e.g., importance, ease of use). Questionnaire data were analyzed using the *SAS System* (1996). Written comments and data from completed documents were presented thematically according to the evaluation questions posed by the study.

In the late spring of 2000, 11 of the study participants also provided suggestions for updating the booklet in a 2-hour group meeting with the research team. All of the forms of feedback were used to prepare a revision of *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Support* (Giangreco, Edelman & Broer, 2000; 2001). Revisions consisted primarily of minor changes in language that encouraged more flexibility of use. For example, Step 10 was revised to state "Report impact and needs to your local school community" rather than the original direction to report to the "school board." The substantive aspects of the content and process remained unchanged. A revised version is available online in a pdf (portable document format) at <http://www.uvm.edu/~uapvt/parasupport/guide.html>.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study are organized according to the six major evaluation questions posed by the

study. In considering these findings, the reader is encouraged to consider the study's limitations. First, this was a pilot effort with a local scope and a relatively homogeneous population. Second, the data collected reflect primarily the perceptions of planning team participants. Last, data are not directly linked to student outcomes — though presumably the steps taken in the four schools to improve paraeducator supports are meant to provide students with personnel who are better prepared and supported to do their work.

### *How did the school teams rate themselves in reference to 28 indicators of paraeducator support?*

As shown in Table 3, although the schools varied in their self-assessments, each school rated between 50% (n=14) and 86% (n=24) of the 28 indicators from Table 2 as in need of either "some work" or "major work." A more detailed breakdown of the four schools' responses (see Table 4) shows that there were seven indicators (i.e., 4, 9, 21, 23, 25, 27, 28), across four of the six topical categories, where all four schools self-identified the need for "some work" or "major work."

Conversely, each school rated between 14% (n=4) and 50% (n=14) of the 28 indicators from Table 2 as either "OK for now" or "Doing well." There were only two indicators (i.e., 2, 16) where all four school teams rated themselves as either "OK for now" or "Doing well." The ratings for the remaining 20 indicators were spread across the four rating options.

### *What were the schools' self-identified paraeducator priorities?*

In step 4 of the planning process teams identified their top five priorities from the 28 indicators listed in Table 2. In stating their priorities, some were reflected as individual indicators while other priorities were presented as a combination of two or more indicators that were conceptually related from the team's perspective. For example, the top ranked priority from the primary school addressed roles and responsibilities by combining items 20, 21, and 23. Indicators pertaining to the category, *Roles and Responsibilities*, accounted for 40% (n=8) of the priorities ranked among the top five by the four teams. Indicators pertaining to categories, *Orientation and Training* and *Hiring and Assigning* each accounted for 20% (n=4) of the priorities ranked among the top five by the four

**Table 3.**  
**Paraeducator support indicators—Percentage of ratings**

Schools:	Needs major work n (%)	Needs some work n (%)	OK for now n (%)	Doing well n (%)
Primary School	4 (14.28)	13 (43.43)	6 (21.43)	5 (17.86)
Elementary School	18 (64.29)	6 (21.43)	1 (3.57)	3 (10.71)
Middle School	9 (32.14)	9 (32.14)	10 (35.71)	0 (0.00)
High School	2 (7.14)	12 (42.86)	12 (42.86)	2 (7.14)

teams, followed by *Supervision and Evaluation* at 15% (n=3), and *Acknowledging Paraeducators* at 5% (n=1). None of the indicators in the top five priorities were from the category labeled, *Paraeducator Interactions with Students and Staff*.

Indicator 23 was the only one identified by all four schools among their top five priorities. This indicator stated, “Times and mechanisms should be established to allow opportunities for paraeducators to be oriented to teacher’s plans, report on student progress, ask questions, and offer their perspectives.” Three indicators (i.e., 4, 20, 21) were identified by three of the four schools among their top five priorities. Respectively, these indicators addressed, (4) orientation and entry-level training of paraeducators; (20) paraeducators being informed about the educational needs and characteristics of the students with whom they work, as well as classroom and school practices and routines; and (21) paraeducators having opportunities to contribute to the student’s team while not being asked to assume sole responsibility. Based on the priorities identified, each team selected between two and four actions to take in an effort to improve their paraeducator supports.

*What actions did schools choose to address their paraeducator priorities?*

The primary school took four actions. To address communication problems identified by the staff, they established procedures that directed all student planning teams to spend their first two meetings of the year developing team norms. These norms addressed topics such as team meetings (e.g., schedule, structure, communication, attendance, and evaluation), clarifying paraeducator roles, paraeducator supervision, and information sharing. The teams’ agreed-upon norms and team-meeting schedules were submitted to the school principal.

To increase paraeducator involvement in educational planning, the team began to critically evaluate their existing use of teacher and paraeducator time. Specifically, they began by examining staff utilization during activities being attended or supervised by multiple teachers and paraeducators. For example, in one wing of the primary school, several classes come together about one-half hour, three times a month, for a community building “wing sing” typically attended by all of the teachers and paraeducators associated with those classes. They started asking themselves, “Do we really need all of the teachers and paraeducators there for this activity? Could we change the staffing so that some of the teachers and paraeducators could use that time for planning, meeting, or training?” They began to explore other times during the day when groups of students were being supervised by multiple staff members (e.g., lunch, recess) in an effort to find more time to work together. They began to explore whether there were times during the day when a student who typically received paraeducator support could do without it. Though a student needed paraeducator support in reading, could he function without a paraeducator during physical educational or music class? The team developed an initial list of their ideas with the notion that ideas would continue to be collected and shared with the principal for distribution schoolwide.

The other two actions, taken at the primary school addressed hiring and assignment issues. First, procedures and communication mechanisms were established to ensure that paraeducators were made aware of job vacancies in a timely manner using web postings, a central office phone system, and a mailing to paraeducators. Secondly, they developed a *Paraeducator Job Re-assignment Checklist*. The purpose of this tool was to provide a clear, consistent, schoolwide process for addressing job assignment changes that resulted in a good match for students, parents, and staff.

**Table 4.**  
**Self-assessment ratings**

<b>Paraeducator Indicators</b>	<b>Needs major work</b>	<b>Needs some work</b>	<b>OK for now</b>	<b>Doing well</b>
<b>Acknowledging</b>				
1.		P, E, M	H	
2.			M, H	P, E
3.	E	P	M	H
<b>Orientating &amp; Training</b>				
4.	E, M, H	P		
5.		P, E, H	M	
6.		E, H	P, M	
7.		H	M	P, E
<b>Hiring &amp; Assigning</b>				
8.	E, M	P	H	
9.	P, E, M, H			
10.	M	P, E	H	
11.		E	P, M, H	
12.	E, M	P	H	
13.	E	P, M	H	
14.	E, M		H	P
15.	P, E	M	H	
<b>Interactions with Students &amp; Staff</b>				
16.			M	P, E, H
17.		H	E, M	P
<b>Roles &amp; Responsibilities</b>				
18.	E, M	H	P	
19.	E	H	P, M	
20.	E	P, M	H	
21.		P, E, H, M		
22.	E		P, M, H	
23.	E	P, M, H		
<b>Supervision &amp; Evaluation</b>				
24.	E	M, H	P	
25.	E, M	P, H		
26.	E, M	P	H	
27.	P, E	M, H		
28.	P, E	M, H		

School Key: P = Primary E = Elementary M = Middle H = High

**Table 5.**  
**Participants' perspectives**

<b>The Paraeducator Action-Planning process:</b>	<b>strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)</b>	<b>disagree <i>n</i> (%)</b>	<b>agree <i>n</i> (%)</b>	<b>strongly agree <i>n</i> (%)</b>
1. helped gain insights about paraeducator issues in our school	—	1 (3.70)	19 (70.37)	7 (25.93)
2. helped me understand the perspectives of others about paraeducator issues	—	1 (3.70)	20 (74.07)	6 (22.22)
3. helped our school select appropriate priorities that require attention	—	—	15 (55.56)	12 (44.44)
4. helped our school develop an appropriate plan to address our self-identified priorities	—	—	17 (62.96)	9 (33.33)

Though they operated independently, the elementary, middle, and high school teams each chose to pursue a similar course of action. Each developed orientation materials (e.g., notebooks) and procedures for paraeducators tailored to their school. These materials combined schoolwide information that would be vital for any new employee (e.g., calendars, schedule, sick day procedures) as well as information designed specifically for paraeducators (e.g., roles and responsibilities, time and mechanisms for paraeducators to become familiar with students and connect to the efforts of individual student planning teams).

Each of these schools also established professional development opportunities for their paraeducators. The elementary school offered a course for paraeducators taught by the school's assistant principal, who was a special educator. The course, which included 18 hours of classroom instruction plus supervised practicum activities, covered topics including: (a) collaborative teamwork, (b) inclusive education, (c) families and cultural sensitivity, (d) roles and responsibilities, (e) characteristics of students with disabilities, and (f) implementing teacher-planned instruction. The school's action-plan stated that the proposed impact of these orientation and training initiatives was to help "Paraeducators feel valued, secure, welcomed, informed, and in a better position to respond to the needs of students."

The schools also developed plans for ongoing paraeducator staff development. For example, the

middle school developed a one year training schedule for paraeducators based on a combination of paraeducator interests identified through a questionnaire and interests identified by the school's teachers and administrators. The training included both out of school workshops and in-house training for paraeducators. Similarly, the high school established monthly informational training sessions on topics of interest in the high school (e.g., supporting students with challenging behaviors, assisting students in the classroom, fostering independence). All four teams reported their work to their respective school board.

*Did the paraeducator planning process do what it purported to do?*

As shown in Table 5, nearly all (96%) of the study participants "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the paraeducator action-planning process helped them gain insights about paraeducator issues in their schools and understand the perspectives of others about paraeducators issues. All of the study participants "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the paraeducator action-planning process helped their school select appropriate priorities that required attention and develop plans to address their self-identified priorities.

*How did the team members rate the paraeducator planning process across a series of consumer-oriented variables?*

Each of the schools devoted a full school year, and part of another, to develop and implement their

**Table 6.**  
**Consumer-oriented variables**

I believe our paraeducator planning team moved forward:	very slowly	somewhat slowly at a reasonable pace		quickly
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
	2 (7.41)	3 (11.11)	22 (81.48)	—

  

The Paraeducator Action-Planning process:	strongly disagree	disagree	agree	strongly agree
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
5. is an important activity for our school	—	—	9 (33.33)	18 (66.67)
6. is a logical process	—	—	17 (62.96)	10 (37.04)
7. is easy to use	—	—	24 (88.89)	3 (11.11)

plans to improve paraeducator supports. As shown in Table 6, none of the study participants rated their pace as “quick,” though over 81% (n=22) considered it a “reasonable pace.” The five study participants who indicated that they moved forward “somewhat slowly” or “very slowly” were all from the same school. This school’s work was interrupted by unexpected events including turnover in membership, changes in leadership, and life circumstances (e.g., child birth, family illness).

Regardless of how they rated their pace of work, all 27 study participants rated their use of the Paraeducator Action-Planning process as “an important activity” for their school; nearly 67% (n=18) of those “strongly agreed” that it was important. There was also strong agreement that the process was “logical” and “easy to use.”

*What were participants’ perspectives on the strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement of the action-planning process?*

Written comments provided by study participants offered initial insights into perceived strengths and weaknesses of the paraeducator action-planning process as well as their suggestions for its improvement. As shown through representative comments in Table 7, study participants found the primary strengths of the process were: (a) bringing people together to discuss paraeducator issues, (b) the organization and utility of the process, and (c) its adaptability. As one

parent wrote, “It’s been a great learning experience for me!” A paraeducator shared, “I am very hopeful that the kind of work we have begun with this process will be sustained over time.”

Primary weaknesses identified included: (a) wordiness and use of jargon, (b) time and scheduling challenges, and (c) difficulties involving general education teachers and parents. There was also a key concern that some important issues were beyond the control of the action-planning team. For example, some study participants identified compensation levels as an area of concern, but one which their committee was unable to address.

Correspondingly, the primary suggestions for improvement included: (a) reducing the use of jargon, (b) soliciting more broad-based and sustained participation school-wide, and (c) exploring ways to consolidate steps and encourage flexibility in use. A group meeting attended by 11 of the study participants provided specific feedback on each step. The feedback resulted in minor adjustments to the process reflected in the revised version of the tool.

The most consistent example of an adaptation was that the planning teams wanted to get feedback on the self-assessment indicators (Step 3, Table 1) that extended beyond their own members. Therefore, each group sought feedback from more members of the school community. They distributed questionnaires to other people in the school and compiled the results before making decisions about their priorities in Step 4.

**Table 7.**  
**Written comments about strengths and weaknesses**

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### **Strengths**

- brings people together to discuss paraeducator issues (administrator)
- it focuses attention on paraeducators, which might not happen otherwise (paraeducator)
- logical process provides opportunities for meaningful dialogue (administrator)
- it organizes our thinking so that we can identify concerns (teacher)
- clear, concise, and user-friendly (paraeducator)
- easy to understand and use (paraeducator)
- priorities are authentic (special educator)
- can be adapted/modified to fit each school's need (parent)

### **Weaknesses**

- too wordy, a little jargony (paraeducator)
  - Time! No one ever has enough because we go to hundreds of meetings and leave each one with tasks (teacher)
  - scheduling around everyone's time! (parent)
  - requirements for school board involvement (administrator)
  - too little participation of regular educators (parent)
  - difficult recruiting parents of students (special educator)
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## **Discussion**

The findings of this pilot study demonstrated that utilization of the planning process, *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports*, was effective in assisting cross-constituency teams in four schools to develop and implement action-plans based on self-assessed needs and priorities to improve their school's paraeducator supports. Additionally, the findings indicated that study participants considered the process important, logical, and easy to use. The primary importance of these most basic of findings is that other schools who are interested in improving their paraeducator supports now have an initially field-tested process, revised in response to consumer feedback, that is available on-line for free to assist them in their efforts. The literature offers no comparable tools designed to serve this purpose.

Field-testing in schools that were part of the same system presented unique opportunities for strategic district-wide planning, as well as longitudinal planning within each school. For example, some indicators of paraeducator support were identified as needing work by all four teams (e.g., recruiting and training substitute paraeducators). Areas of self-identified common need may be appropriately considered for district-wide action. Simultaneously, as individual

schools select and act upon their unique self-identified needs, they can use their priorities across more than one year, and are encouraged to build their paraeducator efforts into overall school improvement plans.

Areas where schools consider themselves to be "Doing Well" may also provide opportunities for central office administrators to have school personnel share knowledge, procedures, and skills across schools in reciprocal ways. For example, schools could collaborate around common training needs to use resources more effectively. Similarly, a school that is doing well at providing orientation to new paraeducators could share their approaches with a school that has such a need. The receiving school might be doing well at a different practice (e.g., guidelines for ensuring the dignity of students receiving personal care support) that is an identified need in the first school. Communication is the key to such informational cross-fertilization.

Although self-assessment ratings used in the planning process are useful to prompt reflection on current practices and identify priorities in need of action, it is important to limit their use and interpretation to their stated purpose. First, there is no pretense of reliability in terms of these self-ratings. In other words, how a team rates themselves may be different than

how they would be rated by others. This recognition was one of the main reasons each sought feedback from a wider set of people.

Second, the self-ratings are relative. Teams that rate many of the indicators of paraeducator support as “needs some work” or “needs major work” should not be assumed to be under performing. In fact, teams or individuals that are the most self-critical often are the highest performing because they are always striving to be better. The four schools in this study are a prime example of this phenomenon. Though each school identified several indicators in need of improvement, they all had a positive local reputation as good schools that have relatively advanced paraeducator practices.

In order for self-assessment to be reflective and honest, teams need to be able to be self-critical without the fear that the information they generate for their own planning purposes might be inappropriately used against them. Therefore, these self-ratings are best suited to assist with the specific task of improving paraeducator support indicators. It would be inadvisable, for example, to assume that a school that reports a higher self-assessment is necessarily doing a better job than one with lower self-assessment ratings. Administrators, school board members, faculty and community members should resist the temptation to compare a school’s self-assessment with the self-assessment of another school; such comparisons are of little value and potentially harmful. Allowing teams to action-plan in an atmosphere that encourages honest self-assessment is important getting people invested in change that they perceive as their own.

## Future Directions

Given the limitation of four field-test sites, all within the same district, additional field-testing of the planning process is underway in 17 schools across ten states during the 00-01 school year. Thirty-one additional schools have agreed to participate in field-testing during the 01-02 school year, bringing the total number of field-test sites to 52 over a three year period.

Since many schools may be the only school in their district using this planning process, project staff have developed an internet based method to communicate information and solutions to paraeducator support challenges between schools that might not otherwise be linked (i.e., [www.uvm.edu/~uapvt/parasupport](http://www.uvm.edu/~uapvt/parasupport)). Under a link labeled *Shared Understanding: Beliefs, Values, and Principles*, each of the 28 indicators of paraeducator support used by schools to self-assess and identify their priority needs is cross-referenced with four types of information. These four informational categories include: (a) data-based literature citations and summaries, 1991-present; (b) non data based literature citations and summaries, 1991-present; (c) training materials, and (d) “Ideas from the Field”. “Ideas from the Field” reflect some of the actions developed and implemented by schools as part of field-testing. For example, you can find a *Paraeducator Re-assignment Checklist* developed by the primary school in this study by clicking on the “Ideas from the Field” for indicator #13 (dealing with paraeducator work assignments and re-assignments). Similarly, you can access the *Table of Contents of the Paraeducator Orientation Manual* developed by the elementary school in this study by clicking on the “Ideas from the Field” for indicator #4. As current and future field-test sites generate their solutions and submit them to the research team they will be continually posted on the web site. The combination of literature, training materials, and “Ideas from the Field” cross-referenced to each of the 28 indicators of paraeducator support offers interested individuals and teams a rich and growing resource.

Future research on this paraeducator planning process should extend the number, types, and locations of schools involved in field-testing. Efforts should also be made to understand the link between the actions taken by the schools and the impact of students. In the meantime, this pilot study provides encouraging data that school teams using *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports* can successfully identify their own paraeducator needs, develop action-plans to meet those needs, and implement their plans.

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