



Building Capacity to Attract, Train, Support and Retain Paraeducators

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It's now out in the open...our schools cannot function without the assistance of paraprofessionals who provide instructional support to our students. With the advent of the "No Child Left Behind Act," (NCLB) the public is coming to grips with the fact that many of our most challenged students have been educated by a primarily untrained, under-supervised workforce. Recent research investigations in the field of "paraeducation" have reported both the positive and negative impacts of paraeducator support on students with disabilities and their at-risk peers (Pickett, 2003). A closer look at the research may assist districts in systemic reform efforts that will help attract, train, support and retain members of this critical workforce. This article will provide a brief review of current Federal legislation, important research regarding paraeducators and an in depth description of one school district's attempt to systemically reform its paraeducator service delivery model, in order to improve services for, and benefits to, students with disabilities and their at-risk peers.

Impact of Federal Legislation

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and under current Reauthorization (IDEA)

Legislators recently acknowledged the important role that paraeducators play in the instruction of students considered "at risk" for school failure; those enrolled in Title I programs. As such, the NCLB Act required, effective January 8, 2002, that newly hired paraeducators in Title I designated systems meet one of the following qualifications:

- Have completed at least 2 years of study at an Institute of Higher Education, or
- Possess an Associate's degree, or
- Demonstrate competence through a State or locally approved assessment.

Currently employed staff have until 2006 to meet these standards (NCLB). Similarly, in the Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997 (as well as the present reauthorization of IDEA, spring 2003), legislators, for the first time in Special Education history, allowed that "paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised" can assist in the provision of services to students with identified special education needs.

The caveat to both of these legislative statutes (NCLB and IDEA) is that, by in large, states and local education agencies are interpreting the statutes and regulations in a variety of ways, thus creating policy and procedural inconsistencies across and within states and their local districts. Where states have developed standards or guidelines for paraeducators, as well as certification or licensure for their paraprofessionals, a foundation for school reform efforts has been provided at the local level. In the absence of these policies and standards for the profession, local school districts must create their own standards for practice. Under these conditions, field practitioners can look to the "paraeducation" research to develop "promising practices" that will help ensure longevity of quality staff in the school system.

What the Research Says...

While there exists little "scientifically-based research" evidence that the use of paraeducators provides benefit to students, the NCLB and IDEA legislation, by default, acknowledge their

employment and contribution to the educational community (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). The purpose of this article is not to dispute the current model whereby paraeducators instruct students who are struggling, but rather to acknowledge that these folks are here to stay, let's ensure that their human resource potential is maximized. As a field, Special Education cannot afford to minimize the important work of paraeducators, nor their potential to fill some of the increasing vacancies that the field is currently experiencing (both teacher and paraeducator). Some researchers have noted potential negative impacts of paraeducator support. Giangreco et. al. (1997) observed paraeducators supporting students with significant disabilities in general education classrooms and reported problems related to proximity. Eight factors were reported: 1) interference with student ownership by general educators, 2) separation from classmates, 3) increased dependence on adults, 4) impact on peer interactions, 5) limitations on students receiving competent instruction, 6) students loss of their personal control, 7) students loss of their gender identity, and 8) interference of instruction of "typical" peers. In another qualitative study, Marks et. al. (1999) recorded why paraeducators assume responsibility for "inclusion students" who experience behavioral and emotional challenges. Four reasons were highlighted in this study: 1) ensuring that the student not be a "bother" to the general education teacher, 2) meeting the student's immediate academic needs, 3) being the "hub" and the "expert," and 4) representing the philosophy of inclusion. Clearly, the data from these two studies generate concerns about the benefits and impact of a service delivery model that relies so extensively on relatively under-trained and under-supported paraeducator staff; however, many positive benefits have been reported in the literature (Pickett, 2003.). Educators working side-by-side paraeducators, parents, and policy-makers, can and do attest to the benefits of paraeducator support. Some research, however, points to the potential harmful effects of the paraeducator support model gone awry. What can a district do to address some of these concerns?

One District's Story

The district described below is considered suburban, located just a few miles from Burlington, Vermont. For readers unfamiliar with the special educational practices of Vermont, the state has one of the highest percentages of students included in general education programs (approximately 79%, Office of Special Education Programs). This K – 12 district is no different, consisting of three elementary schools, a middle school and high school, with resource rooms operating in the middle and high schools only. Eight students are sent to placements outside of the district (e.g., alternative programs, home program). Total student population is roughly 2,600, with a special education population numbering about 280 (early education through grade 12). Special education and related services are provided in-district by 40 certified staff and at any given point in time, approximately 75 paraeducators. A collective bargaining unit represents certified teaching staff, while the support staff are not so represented. Paraeducator salaries to this point are based on a two-tier system, tied to experience and expertise. All support staff receive a comprehensive benefit package comparable to the professional staff (e.g., health, dental, life, retirement).

The District Director of Student Support Services contacted the author (and consultant) to discuss his desire to revisit all policies, procedures and practices relating to the delivery of student support services for all students in the district (e.g., IEP, Section 504, Educational Support Team). He expressed some concerns about one component of the system, the paraeducator support model. Primarily, he raised issues noted in much of the paraeducator research (e.g., attracting qualified candidates; retaining them once hired; providing adequate orientation to the job; developing appropriate and relevant job descriptions that align with

evaluation processes; creating necessary supervision and on-going support for support staff; and establishing appropriate compensation based upon experience and training). Additionally, the Director, in the position for over 20 years, admitted that he knew little of the current practices regarding his paraeducator workforce, due in large part to a shift from centralized administration to a decentralized, site-based, management model. The impact of this shift was inconsistent local practice from building to building, resulting in the “silo” effect. Recognizing these problems, the author and Director cooperatively developed a multi-year reform plan
Year One Reform Initiatives: Smooth Sailing!

- Paraeducators and their supervising teachers completed training needs assessments (developed by the author).
- Based upon the compiled needs assessment data, the author developed a nine-hour “orientation” attended by all paraeducators. Three training topics were covered: 1) roles and responsibilities of the team members, including effective communication, 2) facilitating accommodations and modifications for students, and 3) positive behavioral supports. Paraeducators were offered varying dates and times in which to attend the mandatory sessions and were paid for their attendance, all held after school. To keep supervising special educators and related service providers informed, they received copies of all handouts and materials from the sessions.
- At the beginning of the year, the author established contact with one special educator in each of the five buildings to respond to building-based issues. Some building-based paraeducator skill development occurred as a result of these discussions (e.g., assisting with accommodations for students at the high school level). In one case, the author brokered with another consultant to provide training at the early intervention level.
- To determine effectiveness of the activities listed above, paraeducator participants completed satisfaction evaluation surveys following all training activities. Additionally, the Director fed back to the author-consultant any recommendations/commendations received from the professional staff. Based upon these data, adjustments were made and directions shifted as needed.

Year Two Reform Initiatives: A Few Bumps in the Road

- Prior to the start of the school year, the Director contracted with the author to conduct two days of in-service; one with professional staff and one with paraeducators. The professional staff engaged in small and large group activities to assess what was working well, and what was not, across a variety of student support system components: referral/identification systems, effectiveness of specific programs, and paraeducator supports. The paraeducator staff engaged in a similar process, but focused on the following system dimensions: orientation and skill development; duties, responsibilities and compensation; job descriptions; on-going supervision and coaching; and evaluation. Additionally, paraeducators were offered three workshops from which they self-selected one to attend for further personal skill development.
- As an outcome of the August in-service with the professional staff and to create greater consistency of services and supports across the district, the Director established an

“Executive Council,” comprised of certified staff representatives from each of the five buildings. This team met monthly to discuss various reforms efforts, to include the paraeducator support system reforms. Similarly, the author was contracted to replicate a representative “Advisory Council” of paraeducators from the five buildings.

- The author scheduled the first meeting with the fifteen paraeducator representatives following the August in-service and arrived to the meeting prepared to subdivide the group and begin tackling the issues and concerns raised during the inservice. The discussion and recommendations of the group, however, took a dogleg turn. The burning agenda item was the fact that there existed significant salary differences amongst the paraeducators. Many who had been in the system were earning less than the “new hires,” often fresh out of college. Thus, the central issues on the table that needed to be addressed were hiring practices and compensation adjustments. The author and Director consulted one another, along with Central Administrators, and ultimately determined that the Director and Superintendent should address the salary and hiring issues.
- Simultaneously, the author and Director initiated development of a three-tiered career ladder, based largely on the work of Pickett et. al. (1999). This included revising antiquated job descriptions and tying them to a living-wage salary schedule. This was accomplished through negotiations with paraeducator representatives, the Superintendent, Business Manager and Director.
- Orientation for new-hires continued as it had during Year One.
- To address on-going professional development needs of paraeducators and NCLB requirements, the Director and author previewed on-line training programs and selected one which was made available to all paraeducators and their supervisors throughout the district (Master Teacher, 2002). With the implementation of this training approach, supervisors and paraeducators can individualize skill and content-building activities since the program offers numerous modules. Thus, building-based training by the author was substituted for on-line access, creating district capacity.

Year Three Reform Initiatives and Beyond: Slowly, But Surely...

- In an effort to meet NCLB requirements, Master Teacher has developed an assessment for paraeducators. The District plans to require all paraeducators to take and “pass” at 80% the assessment.
- Finalization and Board adoption of the three job descriptions.
- Development of an evaluation system and forms that complement the job descriptions. This system will most likely give paraeducators “credit” for participation in on-line training courses, as well as on-the-job- training, a critical training activity for this workforce (Mueller, 2000).
- Skill-building for other “stakeholder groups,” including supervising special and general educators and administrators. Potential content includes: implementing effective hiring practices, orienting the paraeducator to the job/building, delegating and managing, evaluating performance and developing strategies to acknowledge paraeducators as critical members of the educational community (Pickett & Gerlach, 2003; French, 2003).
- Implementation of a paraeducator planning process (Mueller & Murphy, 2001). This three-step process assists IEP teams in identifying: 1) the specific student needs, such as

safety; 2) what the student can and cannot do and the extent to which s/he needs assistance during the course of the day; and 3) where, when and how the paraeducator will provide support and encourage independence.

Lessons Learned

The previously described efforts appear to have been successful because of several critical components summarized below.

- The District administration was willing to risk investigation of potentially poor practices and to support reform efforts, both philosophically and financially.
- District administration and staff acknowledged that change, reform and evolution occurs slowly, often with hesitations, stops and restarts.
- District administration recognized the importance of participatory management and encouraged all stratifications of the staffing system to participate in being a “learning organization.”
- District administration was willing and open to accept recommendations from an independent consultant to assist in guiding the evolutionary process.

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