

Paraprofessionals

What You Should Know About Ensuring a Highly Qualified Workforce

IN THIS WATCH

Increased demand, new federal requirements, and changing roles—Are you prepared to ensure a highly qualified paraprofessional workforce?

In 1965, fewer than 10,000 paraprofessionals—defined here as school employees who assist with the delivery of educational services under the direction of licensed/certificated professionals—were employed in the nation's schools. Current estimates range upward of 500,000, with the prospect of thousands more paraprofessionals entering the workforce in the coming years. More than 50 percent of these paraprofessionals work with students with disabilities.

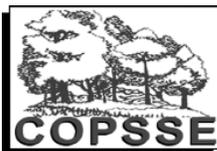
As the number of paraprofessionals in schools has increased, their roles also have expanded. Unlike their cohorts 40 years ago who primarily performed clerical and housekeeping tasks, today's paraprofessionals have assumed additional responsibilities, with an emphasis on supporting teaching and learning. Nationwide, paraprofessionals spend at least 10 percent of their time on each of the following instructional and learner support activities:

- Collecting data on students.
- Providing personal care assistance.
- Monitoring hallways, study halls, and other learning environments.

It appears that these trends—rising demand for paraprofessionals coupled with a greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles—are only going to increase. As school districts continue to rely on paraprofessionals to assist with instructional and learning tasks, the issue becomes one of *quantity*—ensuring an adequate supply—as well as *quality*—making sure that those paraprofessionals who are employed are qualified. The latter issue has particular implications for state and local educational leaders in light of recent federal requirements related to paraprofessional preparation.

Are you prepared to ensure a highly qualified paraprofessional workforce? Read on to gain insights from the research.

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- Providing instructional support in small groups.
- Providing one-on-one instruction.
- Modifying materials.
- Implementing behavioral management plans.
- Meeting with teachers.

Supply and Demand: Retaining Qualified Paraprofessionals

Increased demand may be even more acute in school districts that have turned to paraprofessionals to help address needs related to:

- Continuing efforts to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom and the community.
- A growing need for related services for students.
- Increasing numbers of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Further, shortages of paraprofessionals are being noted in some rural areas, as well as in specialized areas such as assisting students in transition programs, working with students with autism, helping students from culturally

and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and providing positive behavioral support to students with emotional and behavioral problems.

Are you prepared for possible shortages? One way to address impending shortages is to enhance retention practices. Paraprofession-

als suggest consideration of the following:

- Make available opportunities to advance professionally (e.g., career ladders).
- Offer higher salaries.
- Provide administrative support (e.g., adequate break time, substitute coverage, planning time with the teacher).
- Ensure a culture of respect (e.g., being perceived as a team member, being invited to team meetings).

Changing Roles and Responsibilities: Making Sure Paraprofessionals Are Qualified

Increased reliance on paraprofessionals to provide instructional and learner support requires ongoing professional development and supervision. Provisions in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* adds to this requirement by establishing training and supervision requirements for paraprofessionals—including those who work with students with disabilities—who provide instructional support services and whose position receives funding from Title I or who work in a schoolwide Title I program. New candidates, as well as currently employed paraprofessionals by the year 2006, must complete at least one of the following requirements:

- Two years of study at an institution of higher education.
- Obtain an associates degree or higher.
- Demonstrate through a formal state or local assessment knowledge and skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Direct supervision by licensed staff is a key element of federal regulations. Teachers must develop strategies for supervising paraprofessionals—designing instructional plans, providing on-the-job training, monitoring daily activities—and administrators must promote effective supervisory relationships and create infrastructures that reward teams.

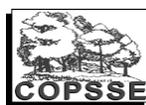
Teachers and administrators who serve in supervisory roles also can do much to ensure that paraprofessionals have adequate knowledge and skills for new instructional support roles. Paraprofessionals who receive inservice training or preservice preparation feel better prepared to fulfill their job responsibilities. Paraprofessionals benefit from training that is specific to their work, including such areas as positive behavioral support, communication and problem solving strategies, instructional and assessment accommodations, data collection strategies, etc.

For More Information

Information reported in this brief was based on the COPSSE issue brief, *Paraprofessionals*, prepared by Teri Wallace. This document can be found on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.

WATCH THIS...

The 1990s saw a 48 percent increase in instructional paraprofessional employment in comparison with an 18 percent increase in teacher employment and a 13 percent increase in student enrollment.



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About COPSSE
 The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The policy briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.

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