

WISCONSIN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Views on Paraprofessionals: A Vision for Paraprofessionals within a Comprehensive System of Personnel Development

Introduction

The future of effective programs and services for all children and youth in our schools lies in the preparation of quality personnel. This is particularly true for personnel who are in positions that do not require certification and who in many instances work closely with students with unique needs, such as paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are one of the fastest growing segments of the education workforce both nationally and in Wisconsin.

Vision

To accurately assess the paraprofessional issues in Wisconsin and to enhance paraprofessional development, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) created the Wisconsin Paraprofessional Task Force in 1994. Working within the DPI's Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD), this interagency task force has worked to create a vision which includes paraprofessionals in this system. The task force has advised the DPI on methods to provide statewide and regional access to paraprofessional training and resources.

One of the task force's greatest accomplishments has been to join forces with the state's Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) Regional Service Network (RSN). The 12 CESAs throughout Wisconsin provide services and support to school districts within the state. The RSN, a function of each CESA, plays a major role in implementing personnel development activities. The task force and the RSN have worked together to build a strong foundation to support paraprofessionals. Their philosophy is that paraprofessionals

- are respected and valued members of the educational team;
- are essential to the social, emotional, academic, and vocational success of students;
- are provided with ongoing staff development on best practices and current, effective educational strategies;

- have clearly defined roles and responsibilities as members of the educational team in their delivery of services to students;
- are provided resources, support, feedback, and assistance by teachers, administrators, and other members of the educational team; and
- are provided systems support, inservice training opportunities, and resources by leaders at the state, CESA, district, and building levels.

Efforts to promote and support paraprofessional development have included an annual statewide conference for paraprofessionals, paraprofessional mini-grants to the CESAs, development of a paraprofessional web page (www.cesa4.k12.wi.us/paraprof.htm), and dissemination of *The Wisconsin Paraprofessional Guide 1996*, which includes the Wisconsin edition of *Piecing Together the Paraprofessional Puzzle*.

Paraprofessional Survey Summary

In the spring of 1997, the Paraprofessional Task Force together with the RSN, recommended a statewide survey of paraprofessionals, also known as *Views on Wisconsin Paraprofessional Workforce*. The purpose was to determine the training and support needs and issues of paraprofessionals in Wisconsin, and to create an awareness of paraprofessional needs in educational settings. This executive report provides a review of the survey results and makes recommendations based on the views of the Paraprofessional Task Force and the RSN. Copies of the complete survey are available from the Department of Public Instruction, Division for Learning Support: Equity and Advocacy, Special Education Team.

For the purpose of this survey, paraprofessionals are defined as school district employees who work in instructional, support, or related services assignments. They serve in a position for which a teacher or other professional staff has the ultimate responsibility for the design, implementation, and evaluation of services and student progress.

Survey Method

The survey took place during the spring and fall of 1997. Four different written surveys were distributed to paraprofessionals, teachers, program support teachers, and administrators. All of the surveys had a variety of check-off and open-ended questions. Focus groups were also conducted. Four focus groups were comprised of paraprofessionals and three consisted of a variety of participants, including, administrators, teachers, therapists, parents, and paraprofessionals. The same three questions were asked in all of the focus group sessions.

The total number of Wisconsin school districts represented in the survey is 164. This figure represents 38% of the 426 school districts in Wisconsin. While the number of individuals surveyed was limited, the survey, nevertheless, provides valuable information.

Results of Wisconsin Data

This section summarizes findings from both the written surveys and the focus groups. Statewide issues regarding the employment, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals in Wisconsin are highlighted.

I. Contributions and Challenges

Contributions of Paraprofessionals:

"I enjoy children, and I feel I contribute to their future."

Focus groups discussions identified many contributions paraprofessionals make through direct involvement with children, as well as their contributions to the educational system. Contributions of paraprofessionals can be summarized into three broad areas: positive roles in the lives of children, assistance to teaching staff, and membership on the educational team.

Challenges of Paraprofessionals:

"We have been referred to in letters as non-essential staff."

Paraprofessionals face many challenges that inhibit their ability to successfully teach and support student learning. Increased information about students and increased ability to work with teachers to plan activities and identify teaching strategies would increase the ability of paraprofessionals to interact and support students. The challenges discussed in

focus groups often lead to paraprofessionals feeling like lesser members of an educational team and may create a sense of isolation and job stress. The focus group discussions can be grouped into four general challenges: poor communication and poor access to information, unclear job responsibilities, lack of recognition in the system, and poor salary, benefits, and job security.

II. Paraprofessional Identity

"I think it would be nice if we had a job description... I've written down what I do and that's my description."

Job Titles:

There were 25 different titles identified in the surveys and many respondents checked multiple answers. Paraprofessionals most often identified different job titles, whereas most administrators continue to use the term *aide*. The most frequently used title still seems to be *Handicap Aide* or *Special Education Program Aide* as defined by the DPI license and the one that has historically been most frequently used. There appears to be growing interest among paraprofessionals in the use of *Teacher Assistant*, *Educational Assistant*, and *Paraprofessional*.

Educational Experience:

The initial qualification for employment as a paraprofessional in Wisconsin is a high school diploma; however, fifty percent (50%) of the respondents have participated in post-secondary education. Twenty-six percent (26%) attended college, but did not receive a degree, twenty-three percent (23%) are degreed with either a bachelor or associate of arts degree.

On-The-Job Experience:

Although forty percent (40%) of the participants have less than five years experience as a paraprofessional, thirty-two percent (32%) had more than 10 years on the job. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the participants hope to continue working in schools as a paraprofessional. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the participants do not belong to a professional organization.

Top Four Cited Job Functions:

The four top job functions most often cited by paraprofessionals and teachers were to supervise activities for more than one learner, assist or supervise an individually assigned learner, monitor student activities outside of the classroom

(playground, bus, etc.), and plan activities for small groups of learners. The surveys showed that a high number of paraprofessionals (49%) serve students in the elementary age area.

III. Paraprofessional Education and Training

Types of Paraprofessional Training:

"To go to an inservice, it has to pertain to an aide's work."

The majority of paraprofessionals receive job training skills close to home. The most frequently cited source of training mentioned by administrators was on-the-job training. Paraprofessionals did not indicate that on-the-job training was provided as often as administrators indicated it was. District inservices were the most prevalent type of training indicated by paraprofessionals. In focus groups, the inclusion of paraprofessionals in district inservices was mentioned as a desired, but not frequently used, method of training. Out-of-district workshops and college/technical courses were indicated more often by administrators than paraprofessionals as a method of training that is available for paraprofessionals.

Employers Support of Paraprofessional Training:

"Three years ago we got trained in child CPR. To keep it up, we pay for it ourselves."

The most frequently noted methods of employer supported training are paid registration, paid time to attend, invitation to teacher inservices and the provision of substitutes to cover paraprofessionals' attendance at workshops. It is interesting to note that forty-two percent (42%) of paraprofessionals have pursued training on their own time and at their own expense.

Incentives For Paraprofessional Training:

"As teachers upgrade education and experience, they are rewarded. We are not."

Most paraprofessionals regard credits as an incentive. A majority of paraprofessionals have pursued the DPI clock hours, even though the accumulation of clock hours is not required for renewal of the special education program aide license. Although the DPI crediting system has historically been in existence the longest, a growing number of paraprofessionals are beginning to pursue credit hours towards the education support personnel (ESP) certificate program sponsored by the Professional Development Academy (PDA), a division of Wisconsin's largest teacher's union, the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC).

IV. Paraprofessional Support

Paraprofessionals Need Support To Do Their Job:

"I had more training sessions to be a Brownie leader than I did to do my job... I started my training when I met my autistic student - some 'warm up' time is needed."

Participants of the focus groups identified several areas of necessary support: respect and acceptance from all educators, awareness of and access to training opportunities, and incentives for attending training.

Job-Related Support Mechanisms:

"Once a week we get together with the therapist and the PT, sit down and discuss... it helps me feel more involved. You are with a team, instead of that outside person just working with the kids."

The top support mechanisms were identified as performance evaluations, informal feedback, planning time with teachers, informal network with other paraprofessionals, team planning time, and formal mentoring.

Informal Ways Teachers Support Paraprofessionals:

"Yesterday it was nice, the LD teacher had left a nice note about how she'd miss me."

There were a variety of methods identified in which teachers informally support paraprofessionals. The most frequently mentioned methods were taking time to share information about students, sharing information about training workshops and encouraging paraprofessionals' attendance, including paraprofessionals in meetings, and seeking and appreciating the paraprofessional's opinion.

An Action Plan to Promote Personnel Development for Paraprofessionals

Given the steady change within general and special education, the need for foresight and planning in the area of paraprofessional development is of paramount importance. The partnership between the Paraprofessional Task Force of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the RSN, as well as the paraprofessional survey, serve as the basis for the following plan of action for paraprofessional development. It is intended that this action plan serve as a short-term plan which will highlight proactive measures and lead Wisconsin toward its vision of a more complete system of personnel development.

I. Vision

The vision for a system of personnel development for Wisconsin which includes paraprofessionals involves aspects of paraprofessional identity, administrative support, education and training, resources, and standards.

Action Plan:

- Continue the Paraprofessional Task Force and the RSN work with the DPI to fully incorporate paraprofessionals into the state CSPD.
- Continue to build partnerships among stakeholders to assist in building a comprehensive system of supports.

II. Paraprofessional Identity

Focus groups and written surveys reinforce the need for respect and acceptance of paraprofessionals within the educational system. Not only do paraprofessionals make important contributions and provide needed job functions, but the vast majority see themselves in jobs or "careers" to which they are committed, and many seek training to support their career development. Yet, paraprofessionals lack a sense of identity and inclusion in the educational system. This is exacerbated by a lack of consistency throughout the state in their basic job title. Promotion of a positive identity for paraprofessionals which affirms their contributions and functions needs to occur on the state, regional, and local levels.

Action Plan:

- Continue to develop the RSN's role in facilitating the development of paraprofessional identity as it relates to students and educational teams.
- Work toward utilization of a common job title such as "paraprofessional" or "paraeducator."

III. Administrative Support

Administrators are instrumental in establishing the recognized formal support systems which provide access to inservice training, develop job descriptions, and incorporate performance evaluations. Wage and benefits, while difficult to address, are also key roles administrators play to support and encourage job stability. Therefore, the system that the administrator adopts not only provides the methods for paraprofessional training, but it sets the tone and determines whether paraprofessionals are viewed as essential or nonessential pieces of the educational model.

Action Plan:

- Collect and disseminate model policies, procedures, and methods of local training and support for paraprofessionals to assist school administrators as they address paraprofessionals in their districts.

IV. Education and Training

A comprehensive system of personnel development encompasses both the preservice and inservice levels. Paraprofessionals need a variety of training options, both to support them as they work with the diverse needs of students and to allow career mobility and flexibility. Paraprofessionals need access to teacher inservices within their district, as well as a variety of other options on a regional and statewide basis. While local districts and CESAs are a logical source of education and training, technical colleges and universities can play an added role in meeting these training needs. Additionally, organizations and associations can include paraprofessionals in their conferences and workshops.

Action Plan:

- Work with the DPI and the RSN to maintain and expand the quantity and quality of paraprofessional inservice training opportunities, specifically the annual paraprofessional conference, CESA mini-grants, and discretionary grants that can be used to provide regional conferences, mentoring projects or other efforts related to paraprofessionals.
- Encourage professional organizations and associations to incorporate paraprofessionals into their state conferences.

- Collect and have accessible examples of technical college programs, quality inservice training models and workshop sessions that can be used by CESAs and local educational agencies (LEAs) to provide training to paraprofessionals and the educational team that supports them.

V. Resources

Paraprofessionals believe that other district personnel provide vital information, feedback, and resource materials for their job. These personnel include administrators, principals, consultants, program support teachers, mentors, teachers, and/or peers. These resources are provided through formal and informal administrative mechanisms, such as time to talk about student progress. Access to and knowledge of resource materials are vital for both the supporting personnel and the paraprofessional. This material must be accessible on many levels.

Action Plan:

- Continue to collect and compile resource materials to enhance teachers' and administrators' abilities to provide training and support for paraprofessionals.
- Support and expand access to the resource materials on a regional basis through the RSN directors and statewide through the CESA 4 Statewide Resource Library and Paraprofessional Web Site.
- Continue dissemination and training around *The Wisconsin Paraprofessional Guide 1996*.

VI. Standards

Standards set the stage for a sense of career identity as they lay a foundation for expectations and often drive efforts for career advancement. This survey has demonstrated that while entry-level standards vary, the majority of the paraprofessionals do have entry-level coursework and experience. Through the survey, issues were raised related to the change in the state license for the "Special Education Program Aide" as well as the need for incentives to provide on-going inservice training. These issues are coupled with the changing face of professional development issues in our state.

Action Plan:

- Identify guidelines and criteria currently being used by districts for hiring paraprofessionals and explore the need for reestablishing state licensing standards or model hiring guidelines that could be adopted by local districts.

- Identify other areas where changes in professional standards may impact paraprofessionals.
- Continue to work with agencies and associations involved in credentialing, certification, and recognition programs to support a coordinated system.

Conclusion

Clearly paraprofessionals play an essential role on the educational team and therefore, need and deserve access to a strong network of support. By providing training and educational opportunities for paraprofessionals, as well as establishing an environment in which their work is respected and valued, our shared vision of continually improving the education of our youth can be realized.

Additional Resources

Improving The Performance of Paraeducators in the Workforce: A Technical Assistance Manual for Administrators and Staff Developers. Pickett, A. CASE/CUNY Room 620 N, 25 West 43rd Street, New York, New York 10036. 212-642-2948. 1993.

Paraprofessional web page (www.cesa4.k12.wi.us/paraprof.htm) CESA 4.

Strengthening the Partnership: Issues, Roles and Responsibilities. Gerlack, K., Pickett, A., and Vasa, S., Olympic Educational Service District #114, Bremerton, Washington 98312, 360-479-093. 1992.

Wisconsin Paraprofessional Guide. Dyar, M., Premo, B., and Rodgers-Rhyme, A. CESA 4, 1855 East Main Street, Onalaska, Wisconsin, 54650, 608-785-9734. 1996.