

Executive Summary

School Paraprofessionals

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee authorized a study of school paraprofessionals in April 2006. The study focused on whether Connecticut should establish minimum standards for public school paraprofessionals who perform instructional tasks for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) and whether different categories should be established for different duties. Findings and recommendations were made in several areas affecting paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities, including the development of a state credential, professional development, supervision, implementation of guidelines for paraprofessionals established by a previous state task force, and data collection.

Overall, the program review committee found that the recurring themes identified in past studies of paraprofessionals in Connecticut, the sentiments expressed by existing paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities regarding their place in the education system, and the recent creation of federal standards for paraprofessionals working in Title I schools justify the creation of a set of state standards.

Establishing a state-issued credential based on specific standards would be a significant step toward enhancing the overall professionalism of paraprofessionals in Connecticut, while at the same time balancing the needs of local school districts. The committee determined that any state standards for paraprofessionals should be developed through the State Department of Education (SDE) and balance three goals: 1) the needs of paraprofessionals; 2) the autonomy of local school districts regarding education issues; and 3) the resources of state government.

Report Content

A key component of the report is a detailed profile of paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities working in Connecticut's local public schools, which was never previously developed on a statewide basis. The profile -- developed through information collected from school districts and contained in an in-house database -- includes an analysis of various demographic characteristics of instructional paraprofessionals, a summary of wages and benefits provided to instructional paraprofessionals, a synopsis of their main duties and responsibilities, and the educational backgrounds and tenure of paraprofessionals.

The report also contains an analysis of the degree to which individual school districts in the state have implemented specific standards. A summary of the other states that have implemented standards for instructional paraprofessionals is included, as are the various federal requirements for paraprofessionals and the changes made to those requirements over time.

State-level efforts in Connecticut over the past several decades to study specific issues relevant to instructional paraprofessionals were also reviewed in the study. A synopsis of the national literature regarding the overall effectiveness of instructional paraprofessionals on student achievement is provided.

Paraprofessionals in Connecticut

The role of paraprofessionals has changed over time from when paraprofessionals first began working in public schools several decades ago. Originally used as an additional resource to provide clerical assistance to teachers, paraprofessionals in the modern-day classroom perform multiple functions. Chief among those functions is assisting teachers to instruct a wide array of students, particularly students with special needs.

In Connecticut, the State Department of Education reported approximately 37,000 noncertified staff (i.e., paraprofessionals) were employed by the state's local public schools for School Year 2005-06. Of those, roughly 12,000 paraprofessionals provided instructional services to students, with nearly two-thirds working in the area of special education.

Analysis conducted as part of the program review committee study revealed the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals assisting with student instruction in Connecticut's public schools are extremely diverse, and a multitude of titles are used by districts across the state for such employees. Over 50 different job titles are used to describe paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities in Connecticut's public schools.

Because data at the state level about paraprofessionals are limited, a key source of information used in the review was a database developed from information collected from 119 of the 169 (70 percent) public school districts in the state. Information about paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities was collected in several areas, including general demographics, wages and benefits, qualifications, duties and responsibilities, professional development, turnover, and student performance. Using this information, a profile was developed of public school paraprofessionals in Connecticut who assist with student instruction.

Results from the data collection effort showed that, as of October 1, 2005, a majority of the roughly 8,700 instructional paraprofessionals employed by the local public school districts that responded to the program review data request were:

- working at the elementary school level;
- female;
- white;
- under the age of 50;
- high school graduates (and 48 percent had at least two years of college);
- working full time during the 10-month school year;
- not new employees, having worked as instructional paraprofessionals in the district for at least two years;
- earning a minimum of \$11.72 per hour (based on SY 2004-05 data);
- offered some type of health and dental insurance and the opportunity to participate in a retirement plan; and
- covered by a collective bargaining agreement.

In terms of the 119 local school districts that provided information to the program review committee, the database indicates that on average (using median numbers) the districts:

- employed 47 instructional paraprofessionals each in October 2005;
- evaluated their performance annually;
- provided some form of periodic training;
- required full-time paraprofessionals to work 32.5 hours per week;
- paid such full-time employees at least \$11.49 per hour during SY 04-05; and
- retained at least 90 percent of existing paraprofessionals from year to year.

Information received from the school districts also indicated that many paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities were actively involved with students for the entire workday. However, the total number of students who interacted with paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities on a daily basis was low in many districts.

Standards for Paraprofessionals

The changes evident in the modern-day classroom have brought increased attention to the quality of the personnel assigned to help students learn. Although no state-level education or training standards exist in Connecticut for instructional paraprofessionals, the committee found various school districts throughout the state have established their own requirements for paraprofessionals. Of the 119 districts responding to the data request, 60 districts had some form of standards for paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities, while another four districts had preferences. Typically, districts required some form of formal education -- either a high school diploma or at least two years of college -- for their paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities.

Federal standards. The issue of standards for paraprofessionals was heightened by the imposition of federal requirements for some paraprofessionals in 2002. Following a study by the federal Department of Education, which found a high percentage of paraprofessionals in schools supported with federal funds were instructing students even though they did not have the proper education qualifications to do so, standards for instructional paraprofessionals were implemented under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The standards apply to paraprofessionals working in any “schoolwide” school supported with Title I funds, regardless of whether the funds are used to pay for the paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals working in “targeted assistance” schools that use Title I funds to pay for those positions must also meet the federal standards.

The program review committee found that several local school districts in Connecticut now require all newly hired paraprofessionals providing instructional services to meet the federal standards, even if the paraprofessionals are not covered under the federal law.

Other states. Nationally, 17 states have established statutory standards for individuals who are instructional paraprofessionals (as defined by the program review committee). The

requirements vary from state to state and are optional in one state (New Hampshire). The three requirements used most frequently in other states for instructional paraprofessionals include possessing a high school diploma, obtaining a specific number of college credits, and having relevant work experience.

Previous Studies in Connecticut

The question of establishing minimum standards for instructional paraprofessionals is not new in Connecticut. Multiple state-level groups have examined this issue and have produced several reports on the topic dating back to the mid-1970s. Although none of the previous studies outlined a state credential based on specific requirements as a condition to work as an instructional paraprofessional, the most recent study in 2001 outlined a draft set of “guidelines” for school districts to use for paraprofessionals working with special needs students. The guidelines, modified from those developed by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals Model in 1999, sought to clarify the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals and develop a framework of key competencies for instructional paraprofessionals in Connecticut. They also identified methods and resources for the training, supervision, and evaluation of instructional paraprofessionals.

To date, the guidelines have been distributed to all local public school districts in the state, yet are still considered draft. Moreover, neither the State Board of Education nor the State Department of Education has officially endorsed or adopted the guidelines. The department is currently working with the State Education Resource Center to broaden the guidelines to include paraprofessionals working with all types of students, not just those with special needs.

Professional Development

Based on information received from school districts as part of the committee’s data request, a high percentage of districts are cognizant of the need for professional development for paraprofessionals and are addressing the issue in various ways. What is not indicated by the results, however, is the specific nature of the training, the overall quality of the training, whether the training helps instructional paraprofessionals become more effective in their profession, or the paraprofessionals’ satisfaction level with the training they receive.

There are no statewide standards for the amount or type of professional development paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities working in local public schools must receive. Further, there was general consensus among paraprofessionals, school principals, and special education supervisors interviewed during the study that professional development for paraprofessionals needs to be strengthened.

The committee found concerns among some that there is not enough training for paraprofessionals, not all districts pay the cost of training, and paraprofessionals have to attend training on their own time. Although some of those issues are part of the collective bargaining process and thus outside the scope of the study, the committee believes adequate and appropriate training should be available to instructional paraprofessionals. Any state requirements, however, must be balanced with the needs of paraprofessionals and the autonomy of local school districts regarding education issues.

Professional development is not limited to paraprofessionals. The program review committee found a need for teachers, particularly new teachers, to receive training on the purpose of instructional paraprofessionals and how to interact with paraprofessionals, especially within the classroom. At present, there is variability in training provided to teachers regarding the overall duties and responsibilities of instructional paraprofessionals.

In terms of overall coordination at the state level, the education department works with various groups to ensure professional development for paraprofessionals is offered. The department, however, does not assess the overall professional development needs of paraprofessionals from a statewide perspective. As a result, additional emphasis is needed at the state level to identify and coordinate the training needs of paraprofessionals.

Supervision

State regulation requires anyone employed by a local public school district and not directly supervised in the delivery of instructional services to students to have the appropriate state educator certification. The committee received anecdotal information that there have been instances where paraprofessionals may be put in situations that could be considered “teaching” without the presence or guidance of a certified employee. There is no way of fully knowing the extent this is occurring statewide, yet it is important that local districts make certain that noncertified staff are not placed in situations that violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. The Department of Education should take steps to ensure school districts follow state regulations in this regard.

Data Collection

Overall, the information at the state level on paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities employed by local public school districts is limited. The Department of Education collects information about noncertified staff, including paraprofessionals, yet any type of statewide analysis of paraprofessionals based on this information is limited. The department, however, has recently required school districts to report specific information to the department regarding Title I paraprofessionals, which the program review committee believes is important and should be made available publicly.

Recommendations

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee adopted the following recommendations:

- 1) The State Department of Education shall develop a state-issued credential for paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities working in Connecticut’s K-12 public schools and submit a plan to implement the credential by January 1, 2008, to the legislative committee of cognizance over education. The State Department of Education shall require that any applicant seeking the credential be a citizen of the United States or an alien legally resident in the United States.**

2) The Department of Higher Education should begin working with institutions of higher education in Connecticut to establish a network of programs within the community-technical college and state university systems that will provide instructional paraprofessionals with career development opportunities through relevant, accessible, and affordable programs.

3) The State Department of Education should periodically contact a sample of paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators -- through unions, school districts, the State Education Resource Center, and Regional Education Service Centers -- to identify the professional development needs of instructional paraprofessionals and any problem areas that may exist. Following such an assessment, the department should begin coordinating, from a statewide perspective, professional development offerings that meet the needs of instructional paraprofessionals. As part of that effort, SDE should report the results of the assessment to the Department of Higher Education.

4) The State Department of Education should encourage all local public school districts to provide training to teachers, particularly new teachers at the beginning of each school year, on the role and effective use of instructional paraprofessionals. The department should also encourage school districts to develop intradistrict methods and strategies whereby paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators periodically discuss issues or concerns involving the use of paraprofessionals in providing effective student instruction.

5) The State Department of Education should periodically remind local school districts that existing regulations prohibit the use of noncertified personnel in an initial teaching role. Further, the department should develop a mechanism to periodically monitor local school compliance with this requirement.

6) The State Department of Education should finalize those portions of the May 2004 *Guidelines for Training and Support of Paraprofessionals Working with Students Birth to 21: Working Draft* concerning roles, responsibilities, and training that it believes would be helpful to all paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities in Connecticut and submit that document to the State Board of Education by September 2007 for its approval.

7) The State Department of Education should summarize the information about Title I paraprofessionals that it will collect annually and post the information on the agency's website. At a minimum, the posted data should include the number of paraprofessionals covered by No Child Left Behind requirements, the number who have not met the NCLB requirements, the number of districts with paraprofessionals out of compliance, and the types of actions taken by those districts to comply (i.e., terminated staff, transferred staff, or did nothing).