

SCHOOL PARAPROFESSIONALS

- The primary focus of the program review committee’s study was on whether Connecticut should establish statewide minimum standards for public school paraprofessionals who perform instructional tasks.
- The general K-12 classroom in local public schools today is vastly different from the classroom several decades ago when schools started using paraprofessionals. The types of students, teaching methods, and the use of technology have changed with time.
- The basic role of a paraprofessional remains that of assisting the teacher, but the specific ways in which that assistance is provided have expanded. Fulfilling federal requirements means public schools must provide more individualized services to an increasing number of students. As a result, the use of paraprofessionals nationwide has increased 123 percent over the last two decades.
- At present, approximately 12,000 paraprofessionals provide instructional services to students in Connecticut, and nearly two-thirds work in the area of special education.
- The roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in Connecticut are extremely diverse.
- Although the term “paraprofessionals” has been used in this study to describe those noncertified school employees who assist with student instruction as part of their overall duties, a multitude of titles are used by districts across the state for such employees.
- Many paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities in Connecticut are actively involved with students for the entire workday, although the total number of students who interact with paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities on a daily basis is low in many districts.
- The changes evident in the modern-day classroom have brought increased attention to the issue of the quality of the personnel assigned to help students learn.
- Connecticut does not have statewide standards for paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities. Local districts may establish their own standards, and the federal government has established standards for Title I paraprofessionals.
- Currently, at least 60 local school districts in Connecticut have established their own education or experience requirements for paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities, while at least another four districts have “preferences.”
- The question of minimum standards for paraprofessionals is not new in Connecticut. Multiple state-level groups have examined the role of paraprofessionals, and several reports have specifically discussed the idea of establishing minimum qualifications.
- The issue of standards for paraprofessionals was heightened by the imposition of federal requirements for some paraprofessionals in 2002. Nationally, 17 states have provisions covering individuals who are instructional paraprofessionals.

Key Points

- There is evidence that minimum standards, including professional development requirements for paraprofessionals with instructional responsibilities, may enhance the educational outcomes of students. The results, however, are not conclusive.
- Any state standards for paraprofessionals should balance the needs of paraprofessionals, the autonomy of local school districts regarding education issues, and the resources of state government.
- The recurring themes identified in past studies of paraprofessionals in Connecticut, the sentiments expressed by existing paraprofessionals 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.

1) The program review committee recommends that the State Department of Education 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.

- During the process of developing the credential for instructional paraprofessionals, SDE is encouraged to consider a model included in the committee report as an example of the type of credential that could be established. The model as currently structured is based on a voluntary credentialing system, but similar elements could be used for a mandatory system. The elements of the model are summarized in the box below.
- A high percentage of school districts responding to the program review data request are cognizant of professional development for paraprofessionals and are addressing the issue in some fashion. However, discussions with paraprofessionals, school principals, and special education supervisors indicated that professional development and training for instructional paraprofessionals needs to be strengthened.
- A key source of training for instructional paraprofessionals is the community college system and state universities. Until recently, at least one community college offered certificate programs for paraprofessionals, but the programs were discontinued due to low demand.
- If there is a demonstrated increase in the need for professional development programs statewide to satisfy the requirements of the paraeducator credential, then the state's community colleges and universities should play a role in providing such training.

2) The program review committee recommends the Department of Higher Education 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.

Summary of a Model for a Voluntary State-Issued Paraeducator Credential

Type of Credential: Voluntary

Position Title: Paraeducator

Definition of Paraeducator: A non-certified, school-based employee who works under the direct supervision of a teacher or other certified professional educator and who assists the teacher or other professional educator with the delivery of instructional and related support services to students.

Categories: Paraeducator; Paraeducator with Additional Skills (e.g., special education, bilingual, state registered interpreter, etc.)

Duration: Five years (initial and renewal)

Minimum Requirements:

Paraeducator - must have high school diploma or GED PLUS two years of study at an institution of higher education OR an associate's (or higher) degree OR passing score on designated assessment test (e.g., ParaPro) with at least the minimum score required by Connecticut for NCLB purposes OR five years of paid employment as a paraprofessional with instructional responsibilities (based on definition of paraeducator) *and* 3.0 Continuing Education Units (CEUs) (30 hours) in courses pertaining to the application of skills and knowledge to classroom instruction PLUS fingerprinting and criminal record check.

Paraeducator with Additional Skills - must meet all of the requirements of the *Paraeducator* credential PLUS 9 semester hours of college coursework or 13.5 CEUs (135 hours) on topics related to the selected skill area OR two years paid employment as a paraprofessional with instructional responsibilities in the selected skill area OR successful completion of any state-recognized requirements in the selected skill area. (Employment, college coursework, or CEUs used to meet the basic requirements of the credential can also be used to demonstrate the additional skill, if the employment, coursework, or CEUs was in the additional skill area for which recognition is sought.)

Both credentials shall include a designation indicating whether the person met the NCLB criteria at the time the person applied for the credential.

Renewal: Every five years, if person completes 3 semester hours of college coursework or 4.5 CEUs (45 hours) of professional development on education-related topics; for paraeducator with additional skills, all 3 semester hours or 2.0 CEUs (20 hours) of the 4.5 CEUs must be in selected skill area

System Administrator: State Department of Education (To facilitate development of the system, SDE shall be allowed to implement relevant policies and procedures as long as notice of intent to adopt regulations is published in the Connecticut Law Tribune within 20 days of implementation of the policies and procedures, with the proposed policies/procedures valid until final regulations are effective.)

Fee: \$75 initial; \$50 renewal

Key Points

- Although the State Department of Education works in conjunction with the State Education Resource Center on training for paraprofessionals, additional emphasis is needed at the state level to identify and coordinate the training needs of all instructional paraprofessionals as a way of achieving SDE's goals of high expectations and standards for student achievement. The department currently does not assess the overall professional development needs of paraprofessionals from a statewide perspective.

- 3) The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education 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.**

- There is variability in training provided to teachers regarding the overall duties and responsibilities of instructional paraprofessionals. Such training can be an important component in developing overall relationships and team building between paraprofessionals and teachers, with the ultimate goal of providing more effective and better coordinated instruction to students.

- 4) The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education 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.**

- Paraprofessionals may be put in situations that could be considered "teaching" without the presence or guidance of a certified employee, which violates the spirit, if not the letter, of a state law prohibiting such practice.

- 5) The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education 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.**

- The document *Guidelines for Training and Support of Paraprofessionals Working with Students Birth to 21: Working Draft* is being modified to incorporate all paraprofessionals, not just those working with special needs children. As such, it is appropriate for state education authorities to indicate an official position on the preferred roles, responsibilities, and training of school paraprofessionals working in Connecticut.

- 6) The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education finalize those portions of the May 2004 *Guidelines for Training and Support of***

Key Points

***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.**

- Starting this school year (2006-2007), local school districts must report to SDE how many Title I paraprofessionals are employed by the district and how many of them meet No Child Left Behind standards. Subsequently, the department will conduct audits to determine whether the local districts are in compliance with the law.

7) The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education 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).