



School Paraprofessionals Staffing

Background

The program review (PRI) committee approved a study of school paraprofessionals staffing in May 2014. The study was requested by the Connecticut chapter of American Federation of Teachers, which represents a great number of paras in many Connecticut school districts. The union and others have raised the issue that districts may be assigning school paraprofessionals in ways that render paras unable to effectively perform their core duties, including those that are required by special education students' individualized education plans.

Earlier in the 2014 legislative session, unions representing paraprofessionals had advocated for passage of HB 5523, which would have created a task force to examine such issues, and their staffing levels in general. There was a public hearing on the bill but it did not pass.

The PRI study's focus is on instructional professional staffing policies and practices in Connecticut K-12 public schools. The study is examining numbers of paras working in school districts, the range of duties and functions they perform, and whether those have changed over time.

In Connecticut, paraprofessionals are not certified, and only paras working in schools or programs that receive federal Title I funds are required to meet federal qualifications. While many districts and schools use the Title I standards for all paraprofessionals, it is not a requirement. Similarly, there are no state requirements for ongoing professional development of paras.

In 2006, PRI conducted a study of paraprofessionals focusing on the issues of qualifications and certification. While credentialing of paraprofessionals is not a major focus of this study, how paraprofessionals are assigned, directed, trained, supervised, and evaluated are all key questions in the study scope.

Main Points

There is no one definition of school paraprofessional, or para. Various definitions and titles exist, depending on federal and state law and regulation, and local district policies, job descriptions, and contracts.

Connecticut State Department of Education collects data on the numbers of FTE non-certified instructional staff (NCIS) in all districts. The categories of NCIS include those assigned to: special education; Pre-K and kindergarten; library/media; ESL/Bilingual; and regular education.

The data indicate that **there are a total of 14,450 NCIS working in the districts in 2013, an increase of about 13 percent from 2003, but a decrease of 2 percent from the 14,741 employed in 2010.**

Most of the increase in NCIS has been in special education, where the number of FTEs has risen about 30 percent, from 7,319 in 2003 to 9,562 in 2013. At the same, the number of paras assigned to other areas and regular education has decreased by about 20 percent.

Since 2004, there has also been an increase in the number of special education teachers (5 percent), while the numbers of special education students has declined by about 3,350 (5 percent). Thus, the ratio of special education students to both special education teachers and special education paraprofessionals has decreased over a similar period – in the case of teachers from 8:1 in 2004 to 6:1 in 2013, in the case of paras, from 5:1 to 4:1.

Results from a recent survey of paras conducted by UConn's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities indicate that **54 percent of paras responding had been working for 10+ years; 41 percent had a BA or higher, while 16 percent had only a high school or equivalency diploma.**

In the vast majority of school districts, paras are unionized, with various unions representing paras.

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, **Connecticut teaching assistants (including paras) are paid an annual average salary of \$29,230, about \$5,000 more than the national average.** The average para salary is about 42 percent of the \$68,580 salary of an elementary general education teacher and 41 percent of the \$71,810 paid to a special education teacher.

Next Steps

Surveys of school districts' human resources and special education departments will seek data about: actual numbers of full- and part-time NCIS, their job titles, the students and/or classrooms they support; and numbers and types of grievances raised, injuries reported, and workers' compensation cases filed. Further data analysis will focus on contract provisions, job descriptions, and school and district staffing patterns.