



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 using 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 programs.

The PRI study's focus is on instructional paraprofessional staffing policies and practices in Connecticut K-12 public schools. The study examined the numbers of paras working in school districts and the duties and functions they perform, finding wide variation among districts.

It may be that paraprofessionals are being used as substitutes for classroom coverage; CSDE does little monitoring of the adequacy of numbers and qualifications of substitute teachers in individual districts.

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, CSDE does not maintain data on the number of paras that meet the standards even in Title I districts.

In 2006, PRI conducted a study of paraprofessionals focusing on the issues of qualifications and certification. While credentialing of paraprofessionals was not a major focus, the current study examined professional development opportunities for paras and found that there are many training programs available, but paid time off from regular duties to attend is an issue. The study also explored ways to recognize paraprofessionals and the valuable contributions they make.

Main Staff Findings

There about **14,450 FTE paraprofessionals** or non-certified instructional staff (NCIS) in Connecticut; **about two-thirds work in special education.**

There has been an **increase of about 13 percent in the number of paraprofessionals** over the past decade; much of the expansion has been linked to two federal laws – No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Most school districts are unionized, but determining how many paraprofessionals are covered by collective bargaining agreements is difficult because of the many different job titles and variation in hours worked. Unionized paraprofessionals are covered by the Municipal Employees Relations Act (MERA), **but few grievances or complaints regarding paraprofessionals** reach the State Board of Mediation and Arbitration or State Board of Labor Relations.

Paraprofessionals are not highly compensated. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average annual compensation of a Teacher's Aide is about 42 percent of the average salary paid to an elementary school teacher.

There is some **research suggesting that paras can be utilized in ways that contribute to positive student outcomes.**

CSDE is required to monitor the implementation of **special education services in Connecticut**, but **one of the key complaint processes is not widely publicized.**

Districts may not be writing IEPs with specificity, making it difficult to determine whether an IEP is being implemented appropriately.

Many collective bargaining agreements include provisions relating to professional development, but there is **no statewide mandate for minimal training before assumption of paraprofessional job duties.**

PRI Staff Recommendations

The report contains 11 recommendations most aimed at improving CSDE's oversight of special education services through technical assistance, focused monitoring, and its administrative complaint process. One such recommendation is that CSDE should more closely monitor the number and qualifications of districts' substitute teachers so it will be less likely that paras will be used inappropriately for classroom teacher coverage.

Another recommendation is to require school districts to provide at least three hours of training to paras before they begin their duties.

There is also a set of recommendations focusing on the Paraprofessional Advisory Council's membership, leadership, and staff support.