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# No Principal Left Behind: NCLB Implications for Paraprofessionals

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# NCLB Implications for Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals provide much-needed services in nearly every U.S. school. How do new regulations in NCLB affect those on your staff?

BY MARILYN LIKINS

More than 525,000 paraprofessionals serve students in schools across the United States today. Their various job titles—teacher's aide or assistant, speech therapy assistant, education technician, instructional assistant, intervener, classroom reduction assistant, direct care provider, transition trainer or job coach, or home visitor—reflect the variety of roles and responsibilities paraprofessionals assume in today's schools and in other compensatory programs provided by local education agencies. They also reflect how much the role of paraprofessionals in the classroom has changed.

Paraeducators who have been in their profession longer than five years are well aware of how much their duties have changed—no longer are they responsible merely for creating bulletin boards, taking roll, or making copies. Today's paraprofessionals are found in preschool, elementary, or secondary classrooms providing accommodations for students with special needs; supervising on the playground or bus; serving as a transition or job coach in the community; conducting small group sessions in reading, writing, and math; working in early childhood programs; and assisting non-English speaking students and their parents.

With the reauthorization of IDEA 97, appropriate training, skill development, and supervision of

paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities became a necessity, not an option, for states and school districts. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) applies further pressure on districts and states by establishing employment criteria for *all* paraprofessionals who work in staff positions or on schoolwide programs funded by Title I and by prescribing education standards for paraeducators who work in schools that receive Title I funds. These requirements go far beyond any previous federal mandate.

Because NCLB was enacted on

the date it was signed, January 8, 2002, this most recent round of federal legislation has left states and districts scrambling to assess the personnel development systems they currently have in place, and in most cases, to determine what remains to be developed to ensure that their paraprofessional workforce is well-trained, highly qualified, and effectively supervised. This article will highlight and clarify the implications for employment, supervision, and training of paraprofessionals mandated by NCLB.

## Who Is Affected?

According to NCLB, any paraprofessional whose position is funded by Title I or who provides instructional support in a Title I schoolwide program will have to meet these regulations. This includes paraprofessionals who:

- Provide one-on-one tutoring if such tutoring is scheduled at a time when a student would not otherwise receive instruction from a teacher
- Assist with classroom management, such as organizing instructional or other materials
- Provide instructional assistance in a computer lab



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- Conduct parental involvement activities
- Provide support in a library or media center
- Act as a translator
- Provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a teacher.

Individuals who work in food services, cafeteria or playground supervision, personal care services, noninstructional computer assistance, and similar positions are not considered paraprofessionals under Title I.

### What Are the Requirements?

NCLB specifies that all paraprofessionals funded by Title I, regardless of their position or responsibilities, *must* have a high school diploma or its equivalent, including those working with families or acting as translators.

At the time the law was enacted, it did not clarify whether existing paraprofessionals have four years to meet this requirement. Recently, however, the Department of Education released *Title I Paraprofessionals Draft Non-Regulatory Guidance* (Department of Education, 2002) to help states and school districts comply with the new requirements under the NCLB Act for paraprofessionals. Although the document is considered nonbinding, it clearly states that the requirement of a "high school diploma or its equivalent" holds for all paraprofessionals and it took effect on January 8, 2002.

### Assessment and Education

Mandatory training and assessment are the cornerstones of the NCLB requirements for paraprofessionals. Those working in programs funded by Title I who provide instructional services to students must meet one of three options to be considered "highly qualified":

1. *Meet a rigorous standard of quality that demonstrates, through a formal state or local academic assessment, knowledge of and the ability to assist in instructing, reading, writing, and mathematics or in readiness activities for reading, writing, or mathematics.*

The purpose of such assessment is to demonstrate that Title I paraprofessionals are highly qualified and have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide effective instruction or readiness skills in reading and language arts, writing, and mathematics.

As districts have endeavored to hire paraprofessionals who are highly qualified according to NCLB requirements, the full effect of the law and its

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near-impossible timelines have created havoc at the state and local levels. During the past nine months, state education agencies (SEAs) have felt the pressure to come up with an answer—yesterday! As a result, it is not surprising that traditional paper-and-pencil tests emerged as a quick solution although such tests were created for an entirely different purpose.

Some states are developing their own statewide assessment specific to their needs while other states are leaving it up to districts to decide. Performance assessments such as portfolios are also being considered by a number of state task forces. The draft guidance provided by the Department of Education stresses that state and local education agencies have the flexibility to determine the content and format of *any* assessment of paraprofessionals as long as there is evidence that the assessment is valid and reliable. The guidelines go on to say that states and districts may also consider a "combination" of assessment strategies such as paper-and-pencil tests combined with on-the-job observations, to assess a paraprofessional's instructional competence.

2. *Have completed at least two years*

*of study at an institution of higher education.*

"Two years of study" means the equivalent of two years of "full-time study," but that is being interpreted differently across states. Some states are defining it as 12 credits per semester for a total of 48 credit hours while others are requiring 15 hours per semester for a total of 60 hours.

Contact your local district or state office to determine what criteria has been set for paraprofessionals in your state. The law does not identify specific content area for the coursework. It is left to the interpretation of the state or local district.

3. *Have obtained an associate's or higher degree.*

Again, the academic content areas for coursework and a culminating degree are not articulated within the law.

Paraprofessionals employed after January 8, 2002, must meet one of these three requirements upon employment; those employed prior to January 8, 2002, have until January 8, 2006, to comply with the requirements. Paraprofessionals who provide only translation services or who work solely with parents are excluded from the education and assessment requirements.

Many educators also want to know if NCLB affects paraprofessionals who serve special education students. It depends. According to the draft guidance, if a person working with students in special education does *not* provide any instructional support (e.g., provides personal care services), the person is not considered a paraprofessional according to the Title I definition and therefore the requirements do not apply.

If, however, a paraprofessional works in:

- A Title I schoolwide program and has instructional support responsibilities, the requirements apply regardless of the source of funding for the paraprofessional's position
- A Title I targeted assistance pro-

gram and provides instructional support, the requirements apply.

Simply put, these requirements apply to *all* paraprofessionals who provide instructional services in a schoolwide Title I program.

#### Supervision

A third component of NCLB states that paraprofessionals shall "work under the direct supervision of a teacher." This particular piece of the legislation was prompted by the fact that many paraprofessionals were providing instructional services to students with little or no direction from

as credit-based courses offered through universities or community colleges, a series of inservice workshops, Web-based training courses, peer mentoring or coaching sessions, or systematic on-the-job training by a supervisor. However, I must add a word of caution: If paraeducators are to gain knowledge and skills to improve their performance, meaningful training must be much more than a one-shot, three-hour workshop by a paid consultant. Such a workshop might be extremely relevant, but it should be viewed as only the first step

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their supervising educator. In as much as policy states that it is the teacher's role to "direct the day-to-day work" of paraprofessionals, the draft guidance specifically outlines what constitutes appropriate supervision and identifies two benchmarks. A paraprofessional works under the direct supervision of the teacher if:

- The teacher prepares the lessons, plans the instructional support activities the paraprofessional implements, and evaluates student performance.
- The paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher. It should be noted that this does not require the paraprofessional to be working in the same classroom with the teacher at all times as was previously indicated when NCLB was first enacted.

#### Training

Paraprofessional training falls into three categories: on-the-job, inservice, and preservice training. Adequate training protects students and maximizes the effectiveness of paraeducators provided it is competency-based, systematically planned, and ongoing. Effective training can take such forms

in a number of coordinated, training efforts that build upon each other in knowledge and skill content with follow-up activities to reinforce newly learned skills on the job.

As states and local administrators explore viable assessment and training options for their paraprofessionals, some questions should be considered:

1. What will the paraprofessional have to show for the training experience?
  - Will university or community college credit be offered? If so, can the paraprofessional afford it or are there other funding options available? Districts can use funds under Title I, Part A for ongoing training and professional development for teachers *and* paraprofessionals.
  - If training comes in the form of an inservice workshop, is there an agenda, certificate, or instructional materials that can become part of a portfolio?
  - Is attendance documented?
  - Is there some form of performance evaluation tied to the training to document acquired skills?
2. Will the training help the paraprofessional do a better job or is it geared primarily toward teachers?

3. Are there follow-up training sessions or homework assignments linked to the work site?
4. Is the training offered at a time that is practical for the paraprofessional?

#### What Can Administrators Do?

Many school principals and district directors have contacted the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals for answers. A majority of them are concerned that they will lose paraprofessionals who have worked in their schools for 10–15 years and are some of their most effective instructors. Many report that their paraprofessionals are ready to quit, and that come January 8, 2006, they will find something else to do. Paraprofessionals cite the cost of education, time to take courses, conflict with family needs, and salary levels among their primary reasons. Fear of failure related to an "unknown assessment" is another frequently cited reason.

Principals can do several things to support their paraprofessional staff members. First and foremost, be informed. Be active at the district and state level to find out what decisions have been made with regard to NCLB employment requirements for paraprofessionals. If discussions are still underway, get involved and share your ideas and concerns by attending monthly meetings, making a few phone calls, or e-mailing state directors to express concerns and offer recommendations on a regular basis. It's important to have a voice.

Second, seek out training opportunities at a district, state, and national level for your paraprofessionals. Mandatory training and supervision is a good thing if it is readily accessible, competency-based, and results in better outcomes for students.

State and local administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals must take an active role in determining what works best to meet their unique needs. A "one-size fits all" mentality may not be the answer when designing performance evaluations and

training programs for paraprofessionals, particularly when their varied backgrounds, experiences, and needs are considered. Today's federal requirements for hiring, training, and supervising paraprofessionals must also be taken into account when selecting appropriate curriculum and building comprehensive systems of personnel development for paraprofessionals and their supervisors. Laying the foundation for quality personnel development requires time and commitment but it can result in highly skilled paraprofessionals, effective instructional teams, and better services for students. **PL**

### Resources

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- Paraeducators supporting students with disabilities and at-risk. (2002). *Impact*, 15 (2), 1-32. Retrieved from <http://ici.umn.edu/products/newsletters.html>
- Pickett, A. L., Likins, M., & Wallace, T. (2002). *The employment and preparation of paraeducators: The state of the art—2002*. Logan, UT: National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, Utah State University and the University of Minnesota.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *Title I Paraprofessionals Draft Non-Regulatory Guidance*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved November 25, 2002, from [www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SASA/paraguidance.pdf](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SASA/paraguidance.pdf)

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Throughout this article, the terms *paraprofessional*, *paraeducator*, and *teaching assistant* are used interchangeably and in some cases, reflect state preferences.

## STATE AND NATIONAL TRAINING RESOURCES:

### Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium

<http://ici2.coled.umn.edu/para/default.html>  
Contact: Teri Wallace, codirector, 612-626-7220

### National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals

[www.nrcpara.org/bookstore/index.shtml](http://www.nrcpara.org/bookstore/index.shtml)  
Contacts: Marilyn Likins, codirector, 801-599-8708  
Teri Wallace, codirector, 612-626-7220

### PAR2A Center, University of Colorado

<http://paracenter.cudenver.edu/>  
Contact: Nancy French, director, 303-556-6464

### Paraprofessional Academy, City University of New York (CUNY)

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/case/paracad/index.htm>  
Contact: Thalia Moshoyannis, project director, 212-817-1829

### Paraeducator Support, University of Vermont

[www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport](http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport)

### Paraeducator and Supervisor Training, University of Vermont

[www.uvm.edu/~cdci/paraprep/](http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/paraprep/)  
Contact: Stephen Doll, 802-656-1140

### Paraeducator Issues, Washington Education Association

[www.wa.nea.org/prf\\_dv/para\\_ed/para.htm](http://www.wa.nea.org/prf_dv/para_ed/para.htm)  
Contact: Jane Robb-Linse, Puget-Sound ESD, 206-439-3636

### Project Para Website, University of Nebraska

<http://para.unl.edu>  
Contact: Stan Vasa, codirector, 402-472-5494

### Project Impact, Tri-SPED Projects, Utah State University

[www.trisped.org](http://www.trisped.org)  
Contact: Dave Forbush, project director, 435-797-0697

### Rhode Island Teaching Assistant Resources

[www.ric.edu/ritap/current%20project%20areas/teachreq.htm](http://www.ric.edu/ritap/current%20project%20areas/teachreq.htm)  
Contact: Judith Saccardo, director, 401-456-4600