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D. E. Forbush

Robert L. Morgan
Utah State University

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Paraprofessionals—An Invaluable And Indispensable Resource

**David Forbush Ph.D. and Robert Morgan Ph.D., Utah State University
Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling**



Currently, an estimated 7,500 to 8,000 paraprofessionals serve students in Utah's public schools. Nationwide, an estimated 500,000 paraprofessionals are working in public schools and it is predicted that this number will reach 1,000,000 early in this decade. In Utah alone, paraprofessionals working a conservative estimate of 3 hours per day deliver 24,000 hours of educational support daily to teachers and children in Utah. At this rate, 4,368,000 hours of service are accrued for Utah's children each school year. Paraprofessionals in Utah and across the nation are irreplaceable because of the high quality educational support that they offer and, compared to certified staff, at a comparatively low cost.

Unfortunately, paraprofessionals are often not adequately recognized for the value of their educational support to at-risk students and students with disabilities. John Barth (1988) stated "nothing is intrinsically valuable; the value of everything is attributed to it, assigned to it from outside the thing itself, by people." If this is true, we should attribute significant value to paraprofessionals. It is indisputable that each of us has a need to feel valued for who we are, what we are, and what we do. Our need to feel valued is particularly acute when we encounter difficulties or seemingly insurmountable challenges.

For many paraprofessionals, the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act presents difficulties and challenges that seem insurmountable. In January of 2002, President Bush signed into law the NCLB act which among other things, requires paraprofessional candidates desiring work in Title I programs to either hold an associate's degree or higher, complete two years of study at an institution of higher education, or pass a rigorous state or local assessment indicating that they are "highly qualified." The requirements of the NCLB act extend these same requirements to all paraprofessionals, including paraprofessionals working in special education who work in schools designated as "school wide" Title I programs. Finally, all paraprofessionals hired prior to January 2002 must meet NCLB requirements by January of 2005 to resume employment. It is widely held that similar requirements for special education paraprofessionals will be announced with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which is anticipated later this year.

Passage of this law has unsettled many paraprofessionals and left them to wonder how the NCLB requirements may personally affect them. We have spoken to several paraprofessionals who plan to leave the public schools in advance of the 2005 deadline because they do not see how they will meet the requirements. This is unfortunate! In these discussions, we have attempted to reframe for paraprofessionals how the NCLB act is potentially the most powerful attribution of their value in public schools to date. Prior to the NCLB act, paraprofessionals were often not factored in when professional development budgets were set. Now, with the NCLB act, public education must acknowledge paraprofessionals' irrefutable importance and the need for them to receive training that leads to their identification as "highly qualified." By reframing these issues for paraprofessionals, we reveal to them that organizations demonstrate the value for their membership by requiring that they meet high standards. The NCLB act requires states to set high standards for paraprofessionals and assist them in meeting them. Paraprofessionals can no longer be overlooked!

Due to the NCLB act, paraprofessionals' basic need to be valued has probably increased. We must meet this need and underscore for paraprofessionals their indispensable value in the public schools. Recently, we asked eight paraprofessionals, whose tenure in public schools ranged from 2 months to 22 years, what school administrators, teachers, students and parents could do to demonstrate that they valued them for who they are, what they are, and what they do. The following is an abbreviated list of their responses.

School Administrators:

- Write notes of appreciation
- Express words of appreciation

- Include us in teacher appreciation week
- Provide us with a reasonable workspace
- Tell us that you value the work we do
- Listen to our concerns
- Express appreciation for our work
- Ask how you can make our job more pleasant
- Know our name and where we work
- Provide us with training to improve our skills
- Treat us professionally even though we are not certified staff
- A simple thank you is wonderful
- Recognize us as part of the school team
- Acknowledge our skills and abilities
- Ask for, and value our opinion

Teachers:

- Leave notes of appreciation
- Acknowledge our work
- Ask for our ideas
- Be willing to listen and talk through problems that arise
- Offer words of encouragement
- Ask for our ideas and opinions and value them
- Show confidence in our skills and ability to complete assignments
- Let us know how much we lighten your load
- Show us the same respect you show your fellow teachers
- Give us ideas on how to improve our instruction
- Include us in decision making
- Praise us when we do something well
- Praise us in front of students so they know that you value our work and us
- Don't give us an assignment without providing clear instructions

Parents:

- Tell us about increases in your child's skills that you notice
- Express appreciation for the help that we offer your children

Students:

- Show appreciation with a smile, notes and colored pictures
- Come back to visit after you leave our school
- Be excited to see us in the hall and community
- Call us by name
- Follow our instructions

This list of suggestions from paraprofessionals spurred us to think of additional expressions of value, particularly when coming from school administrators or teachers. Here is our list of suggestions.

- Nominate paraprofessionals for the Utah Outstanding Paraeducator Award. (Contact Jeff Rydalch at (801) 263-6221 to nominate your paraeducator).
- Send thank you cards
- Arrange for students to create artwork saying "thanks!"
- Allow paraprofessionals to attend the annual Utah Paraeducator Conference
- Write a brief letter to the principal on how much paraeducators contribute
- Develop a "brag board" in the school to post 3x5 cards describing accomplishments of paraeducators.

- Schedule an annual "potluck" breakfast to highlight paraprofessionals
- Make buttons, drink mugs, or framed awards for "Greatest Paraprofessional in the Universe"
- Publish ideas for working by students based on submissions by paraprofessionals
- Arrange for brief periods (e.g. one half day) off work with pay
- Distribute discount coupons for meals, movies, and other activities
- Arrange a special parking spot for the "Paraprofessional of the Month"
- Recognize birthdays of paraprofessionals
- If your local newspaper recognizes Outstanding Employees, describe a "Paraprofessional of the Month."
- Refer paraprofessionals to web sites with resources and information of interest to them, including the following:

www.nrcpara.org
www.trisped.org

The primary message that threads through paraprofessionals' statements is the need to be valued, treated with respect, and treated professionally. Our list of suggestions provides additional examples of how we can value paraprofessionals. We need to begin today, in this new and challenging climate to demonstrate increased value for paraprofessionals. Everyone will be the winner! Most importantly children!

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