Guest Editorial

Paraeducators: Where We Have Been And Where We Are Going

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The February 1993 issue of the Utah Special Educator began: “There are no problems we cannot solve together and very few that we can solve alone—Lyndon B. Johnson.” The issue focused on paraprofessionals and partnerships. As Utah educators form partnerships and collaborate to meet the needs of the individual student, the role of the paraprofessional/paraeducator grows and diversifies. Now is a good time to reflect about paraprofessional development within our state. Where have we been and where are we going?

Quality personnel development requires an infrastructure or foundation to sustain growth and development. The first piece of the foundation began with policy. In May, 1995, the State Board of Education approved the Standards for Paraeducators in Special Education. Concurrently, the Utah Education Association (UEA) board of directors in April, 1995, adopted a position on paraeducators, supporting the need to define the roles, responsibilities, training and supervision of paraeducators.

As school districts defined the roles and responsibilities of their paraeducators, the next logical step was to examine training needs. Districts were faced with several questions. Who would provide the trainings? Who would attend? What training did paraeducators need? Was it feasible? What other options were available? Utah now has a multitude of training options. Districts, first and foremost, can utilize the expertise within their ranks—teachers, coordinators, and experienced paraeducators embody a wealth of knowledge of what “works” in the classroom. Some districts offer courses on a regular basis designed to meet their paraeducator training needs. However, other options are available. The Utah Learning Resource Center (ULRC) continues to train paraeducators and teachers within individual districts. In the past six months the ULRC staff provided 26 trainings attended by 593 paraeducators. Trainings range from a single overview session to continual monthly inservices for a full year. Also, several instructional training packages are now available to districts for use in individual classrooms or small group training sessions. The instructional packages typically consist of video/videodisk instruction supported by print materials. Other instructional programs provide training in specialized areas such as reading, communication skills, and sensory impairments. Each of these training packages relies upon district personnel for implementation and follow through.

What other options are available? For the past two years long distance learning classes for paraeducators have been offered over the EDNET system. The classes were a result of a collaborative effort between the Utah State Office of Education, Utah State University, Salt Lake Community College, and Utah school districts. Twenty paraeducators in two districts participated in the first class. But each quarter the number of districts and paraeducators accessing this option grows. Currently, 72 paraeducators from seven districts are enrolled in the course, “Introduction to Paraeducation.” The classes are part of an associate degree program under development through Salt Lake Community College. Other training? In September, 1994, Utah sponsored the first Paraeducator Conference held on a Friday evening and all day Saturday. Over 750 paraeducators received training and information from national

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UTAH STATE STANDARDS FOR PARAEDUCATORS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Under the supervision of licensed and/or certified personnel, paraeducators shall participate within clearly defined roles to assist those personnel in providing appropriate education and related services for students with disabilities.

Districts shall define and clarify specific job roles and responsibilities for paraeducators. The roles and responsibilities for paraeducators serving as "aides" and "instructional assistants" or any other job title used in a school district shall address how paraeducators assist in the following areas related to the individual job description:

1. data collection for determining strengths and weaknesses
2. implementation of instruction and curriculum
3. behavior management
4. monitoring of student progress
UEA POSITION ON PARAEDUCATORS

UEA believes that there is an appropriate role for paraeducators in schools to assist in the delivery of education and related services. We believe it is appropriate that the paraeducator be considered a member of the instructional team and work under the direct supervision of certified personnel.

We believe that staffing arrangements involving paraeducators should enhance the continuity and quality of services for students and clearly define roles and responsibilities to ensure that paraeducators are supporting and assisting certificated personnel rather than replacing them.

Paraeducators serving on instructional teams should be skilled and competent in working with adults and students. UEA supports training and skill development for all individuals working in the schools, including paraeducators.

Adopted by the UEA Board of Directors
April 21, 1995

Over 750 paraeducators received training and information from national and local speakers. Some districts are now sponsoring local conferences to train and support their paraeducators.

What lies ahead? The Utah Agenda for Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities emphasizes the need for proactive interagency collaboration to enable each student “to be a caring, competent, and contributing citizen in an integrated, diverse, and changing society.” To facilitate integration, agencies are considering more effective staffing patterns for teachers and support personnel. As a result, the numbers of paraeducators serving children from birth to 22 are increasing across agencies. Paraeducators are considered a vital part of the instructional team. Districts are examining creative staffing arrangements involving paraeducators. In some Title I programs, staffing patterns consist of paraeducators, general educators, and support personnel working together in the classroom to decrease the instructor/student ratio and increase individualized attention and feedback to students.

Professionals are now asking, “What about me?” As paraeducators are being trained, teachers and related services personnel are acknowledging the need to develop skills in teaming and supervision. For veteran teachers supervision of adults was not a part of their preservice training. They have learned simply by doing. Recognizing this as a need, universities are developing courses that address supervision issues. Within districts, options are emerging. Currently one district is field-testing a course for teacher and paraeducator teams. Supervision, collaboration, and the teaming process are central to the instruction. The ULRC offers trainings on teaming and supervision based on district needs.

In the past three years, districts have begun to examine alternative roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. As a result, training options both within and outside of districts have multiplied. Additionally, building staff recognize and support the increased competencies of their paraeducators. Paraeducators continue to seek additional opportunities to enhance their skills, often on their own time. The end result? Better services for students. We all need to keep in mind that “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”

An Interview With...Anna Lou Pickett

Paraeducation: Providing Skills To Meet The Needs of Students

Randy Schelble, Program Specialist, Utah Learning Resource Center

Editor’s Note: Anna Lou Pickett is the Director of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services and is a professor at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. She has been a “pioneer” in advocating for training of paraprofessionals in education and works with states and districts to help establish standards for paraprofessionals in education.

You were the first person to use the term “paraeducator,” and it is now commonly used in Utah and throughout the nation. Why did you choose to use this term to describe paraprofessionals?

The primary reason is that everyone knows who paramedics are and what they do. People know what paralegals do. In both cases it relates to the profession that they are working in. We have used the term “paraprofessional” in education for a long time, and it is a perfectly good term. However, it does not really define what people do who are “teacher aides” and “teacher assistants.”

The term “paraeducator” for me begins to bridge that gap. Immediately people can know that these people are part of the educational team. Also, the term “para” means alongside of. That