Enhancing Skills of Paraprofessionals: A Video-Assisted Program

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A training curriculum for paraprofessionals, called Enhancing Skills of Paraprofessionals (ESP), is now being used by over 200 school districts in 40 states. Since 1995, over 3,000 paraprofessionals (i.e., paraprofessionals working in special and inclusive education classrooms) have participated in ESP training in their school districts across the U.S. (see Figure 1). The program was developed by faculty and staff of the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation at Utah State University and the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals at City University of New York (Salzberg, Morgan, Gassman, Merrill, & Pickett, 1993).

Dissemination of ESP corresponds with recent federal legislation that mandates training for special educators. Recent amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act call for establishing standards for related services personnel in special education, including paraprofessionals, and implementing training to meet those standards. With these new amendments, ESP project staff are currently distributing mailings to 4,215 school districts nationwide to promote paraprofessional training.

Description of the ESP Program

ESP is designed to enhance the basic knowledge and performance skills that paraprofessionals need to work with students who have mild to severe disabilities and with students from preschool to high school-age in special or inclusive education classrooms. The ESP curriculum, which is taught by school district, community college, or university trainers, covers a broad range of topics including the education of students with diverse characteristics, roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, ethical guidelines, the Individual Education Plan (IEP), inclusion, interpersonal communication skills, assessment and management of behavior, and delivery and monitoring of instruction.

Instructional activities include readings, discussion, video simulation exercises, and applications carried out in the paraprofessional's classroom.

Figure 1

ENHANCING SKILLS OF PARAEDUCATORS (ESP):
Dissemination of Paraeducator Workbooks by State

Summary Data:
- Number of paraeducator workbooks disseminated: 3024
- Number of states: 40

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See ESP on page 10
Paraeducators read assignments, attend instructional sessions, participate in video-based exercises, respond to test questions, and meet competency requirements in classroom-based application exercises.

Program materials include a 283-page facilitator's manual, a 240-page paraeducator's workbook, and over 2 1/2 hours of VHS videotape exercises. Participating in these exercises, paraeducators make decisions and solve problems typically encountered at school, including ethical dilemmas, conflicts with students and parents, and issues related to behavior management and instruction.

Training Delivery Methods

Instructors may use a variety of distance education and local formats to deliver the ESP curriculum. For example, several districts in Utah participate in paraeducator training through distance education courses broadcast from Salt Lake Community College. ESP is one of many training programs delivered to Utah paraeducators. As many as 11 sites receive the paraeducator course broadcasts, including several remote areas of southern Utah. The Bakersfield City School District in California recently implemented distance education using the ESP program for over 200 paraeducators. Several educational service districts in Oregon send paraeducators to week-long training institutes prior to the beginning of the academic year. Most districts use the program in the context of locally delivered, small- or large-group training sessions scheduled throughout the school year. In September 1997, school districts in Chicago, Illinois; Fairbanks, Alaska; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Bismarck, North Dakota; and Berkeley, California, initiated large-scale training efforts using ESP. At the same time, small-group training began in Puuene, Hawaii; Mineral, Virginia; Mathis, Texas; Florence, Kentucky; Moncks Corner, South Carolina; and Cumberland, Maryland.

Community colleges in Utah, New Jersey, Iowa, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado use the ESP program. Materials distribution centers (e.g., Center for Innovations in Special Education, Columbia, Missouri) loan the training program to districts in their state or region. Project staff maintain contact with several district trainers to provide technical support and assistance.

Pickett (1996) recently estimated that 500,000 paraeducators provide some kind of instructional assistance to students in U.S. public schools. About 280,000 work with students receiving special education services. Paraeducators have established themselves as primary service providers and critical team members in the educational process. Their training directly relates to the quality and efficacy of instruction received by the students with whom they work. Increasingly, districts are recognizing the value of well-trained paraeducators and are becoming actively engaged in enhancing their skills.

References
