

## ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR PARAEDUCATORS FEASIBLE?

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*Paraeducators are vital components of public school educational programs for students with disabilities and those with remedial needs, as well as preschools and residential child care facilities. They are technicians who perform personal care and direct instructional services, and behavior management. Yet, training programs for these important employees are notably absent.*

*This study examined the feasibility of developing training programs in the community college system in Colorado. Directors of special education, teachers, and personnel directors were surveyed to determine their attitudes toward training needs, their perceptions of the levels of support that school districts might offer; and their knowledge of the hiring practices in their own agencies. There was considerable interest in and support for training efforts through the community college system. Yet, a compelling need for local autonomy in the hiring of trained or untrained applicants was illustrated. Conclusions were drawn about the character of potential training programs based on the information provided. For example, training programs must offer a flexible delivery system, and a menu of modules or short courses from which local agencies or schools can select requirements for their employees. Certificate programs were desired but mandated certification was unequivocally rejected.*

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## BACKGROUND

Paraeducators are technicians who serve alongside teachers and other professional educators, "just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as paralegals and paramedics" (Pickett, 1989, p. 1). Paraeducators have been a critical component in the effective delivery of services to children with disabilities, children in remedial education programs, pre-schools, and residential facilities, for more than thirty years (Pickett, 1989). Over the years, there have been substantial increases in the employment of paraeducators (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). This trend has been influenced by numerous factors. The factors include higher costs of educational programming, as well as shortages of qualified teachers and other related service personnel in special, remedial, and early childhood education (Pickett, 1989). Another significant factor is that people who reside in the local community and who have social and/or familial ties to that community are the most frequent applicants for paraeducator positions and are willing to accept a relatively low wage in exchange for the convenience of working a shortened work day close to home. Several studies over the past 20 years have shown that, while they may change positions within the district or agency, paraeducators rarely change employers (French, 1991; Pickett, 1980). Finally, because of shortages of minority teachers and the concurrent increase in the proportion of children from minority backgrounds, school districts have employed the short-term alternative of hiring paraeducators who are much more representative of the school population than are teachers (Pickett, 1989).

Recent research reveals that the role of the paraeducator in the 1980s and 1990s is significantly different from that of the traditional clerical or classroom aide (White, 1984). Whereas the clerical aide often completed routine tasks such as collection of money, attendance, typing, or duplication of materials, for which very little training was necessary, the paraeducator spends significant portions of the day in direct contact with students (Harrington & Mitchelson, 1986; Pickett, 1989; Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ulrich-Ronning, 1982). The duties paraeducators typically perform are: 1) behavior management; 2) tutoring; 3) reading with small groups of children; 4) progress charting; 5) assistance with eating and toileting; and 6) preparing instructional materials and maintaining special equipment (French, 1991).

This level of responsibility and influence on children might suggest that training is in order regarding the differentiation of roles and responsibilities between the professional educator and paraeducator; knowledge of handicapping conditions; human growth and development; behavior management techniques; tutoring techniques, data

lection and observational skills; equipment operation; first aid and safety procedures; legal and ethical issues; and confidentiality. Employers who entrust such responsibilities to an untrained person may, in fact, be placing themselves in legal jeopardy. Yet, systematic training efforts for paraeducators have not kept pace with their increased use (Pickett, 1989). Those who have received training typically have received sporadic on-the-job lessons (French, 1991).

With a few exceptions, paraeducator training occurs after employment, within school districts or other employing agencies, and consists of one-shot workshops with little follow up. School districts face the dual problems of the lack of funds to train paraeducators outside of school hours, and the disruption of services to students if they provide training during the school day. Even when those problems are surmounted, in-district training is rarely monitored or regulated by the state education agency. There is no standard curriculum nationwide, in spite of the existence of some generally accepted competencies, topics and model programs that can inform the development of curricula (Pickett, 1988).

Most states do not require any type of permit, certificate, or license to work as a paraeducator in special or remedial education. Those states that have a statutory basis (Kansas) for regulatory control typically issue permits that are contingent upon an established number of hours of training rather than a particular curriculum.

Another unresolved issue concerns the ideal timing for training (preservice vs. inservice), but there is substantial agreement that the community or junior college is the natural place for paraeducator training (Kaplan, 1982; P. Kells, personal communication, April 30, 1990; Weisz, 1968).

In spite of the large numbers of paraeducators employed by school districts and other agencies, only a few community college training programs exist. Where programs are in effect, seed money for curriculum and program development typically has come from grant monies allocated by state education agencies or the U.S. Department of Education. However, there are some programs that have become self supporting e.g., Chemeketa Community College, Salem, Oregon; Labette Community College, Southeast Kansas; and Kirkwood Community College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Numerous sources of funding for paraeducator program development are available (e.g., Federal Register, 1991). The purpose of most grant programs is to assist in the initial development of training programs, thereby increasing the likelihood of the program's self-sufficiency. Model programs using outside funding, however, are noto-













