



STRATEGY BRIEF:

Induction & Ongoing Professional Learning for Paraprofessionals

Local education agency (LEA) can use this brief to learn more about:

- Effective practices to train new and experienced paraprofessionals;
- Examples from LEAs around the country; and
- Resources to support this work in your LEA.

To learn more about improving induction and development generally, see the [Induction Guide](#) and the [Professional Learning Guide](#).

Context

Often, paraprofessionals don't feel that they have sufficient knowledge or preparation to be effective in their roles.¹ Many special educators and paraprofessionals themselves report that paraprofessionals are not adequately prepared for teaching students with disabilities.² Paraprofessionals frequently receive no formal training, but learn from their colleagues on the job.³ Without appropriate preparation and training, paraprofessionals will not be able to support teachers and students effectively. Formal professional learning programs should be combined with “strong orientation programs, clear and frequent direction from supervising staff, adequate time to meet and plan together, and ongoing professional development.”⁴ Importantly, a body of research finds that professional learning for paraprofessionals can improve their skills and support them in improving student learning.⁵

1 Breton, W. (2010). Special education paraprofessionals: Perceptions of preservice preparation, supervision, and ongoing developmental training. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25(1), 34–45; Goe, L. & Matlach, L. (2014) Supercharging Student Success: Policy Levers for Helping Paraprofessionals Have a Positive Influence in the Classroom. Policy Snapshot, Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research, available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558020.pdf>; Giangreco, M.F., Suter, J.C. & Doyle, M.B. (2010) Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools: A Review of Recent Research, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* Volume 20, 2010 - Issue 1

2 Yates, P., Chopra, R., Douglas, S., Walker, V., Schulze, R., Sobek, E., & Morano S. (2019) Preparing teachers for effective paraeducator supervision. *Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children* Issue 3, November 2019

3 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf

4 Carter, E., O'Rourke, L, Sisco, L.G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(6), 344–359; p. 355

5 Giangreco, M.F., Suter, J.C. & Doyle, M.B. (2010) Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools: A Review of Recent Research, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* Volume 20, 2010 - Issue 1

Effective LEA policies and practices

Provide induction for new paraprofessionals.

Training should begin with an induction program that provides paraprofessionals with clear information about their job responsibilities.⁶ Induction programs should also orient paraprofessionals to the following key elements: the school site; their duties, school policies and procedures; their colleagues; and appropriate ways of communicating with parents and colleagues.⁷

Provide effective professional learning using research-based strategies.

Training for paraprofessionals should also be designed based on what we know about effective professional learning for teachers. Professional learning that includes individual coaching that supports paraprofessionals in applying what they have learned is likely to be more effective than development that solely provides large-group instruction.⁸ Research demonstrates that effective professional development has the following seven features⁹:

- “Is content focused;
- Incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory;
- Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts;
- Uses models and modeling of effective practices;
- Provides coaching and expert support;
- Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection; and
- Is of sustained duration.”

6 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf; Goe, L. & Matlach, L. (2014) Supercharging Student Success: Policy Levers for Helping Paraprofessionals Have a Positive Influence in the Classroom. Policy Snapshot, Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research, available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558020.pdf>

7 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf; Goe, L. & Matlach, L. (2014) Supercharging Student Success: Policy Levers for Helping Paraprofessionals Have a Positive Influence in the Classroom. Policy Snapshot, Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research, available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558020.pdf>

8 Stockall, N. S. (2014). When an Aide Really Becomes an Aid Providing Professional Development for Special Education Paraprofessionals. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 46(6), 197-205; Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf; Carter, E., O'Rourke, L, Sisco, L.G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(6), 344–359;

9 Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

For more information about these features, see this report. A number of studies have highlighted the importance of individualized coaching as a source of paraprofessional learning.¹⁰ To ensure professional learning is effective, districts may want to evaluate training programs. For more information about how to do so, see this brief on evaluating professional learning.

LEAs should also ensure that paraprofessionals receive regular and constructive feedback on their performance and ongoing coaching from a teacher or principal.¹¹ The format of professional learning should take paraprofessionals' schedules and needs into consideration. For example, LEAs might consider holding professional learning for paraprofessionals in the school building during LEA professional learning days.

Professional learning should incorporate high-leverage content.

Professional learning should develop the specific skills and strategies that paraprofessionals are expected to utilize in their roles.¹² In terms of topics, LEAs might want to create a needs assessment survey to solicit training needs from teacher and paraprofessional teams.¹³ LEAs may also want to collect and track information about paraprofessionals' participation in higher education and other formal training opportunities to inform the content of professional learning.

Several studies have identified the specific roles of paraprofessionals and found that they provide a wide array of instructional, social, and administrative support including the following: providing small-group instruction, providing one-on-one instruction, providing behavior support, supervising students, and doing clerical work.¹⁴ Research has also identified the following topics as areas in which paraprofessionals need additional training: assistive technology; disability paperwork; how to address student behavioral, emotional, and social challenges; indicators of abuse and neglect; assisting with speech, physical, or occupational therapy; rights and responsibilities of families and children

10 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf; Stockall, N. S. (2014). When an Aide Really Becomes an Aid Providing Professional Development for Special Education Paraprofessionals. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 46(6), 197-205; Brock, M.E. Carter, E.W. *The Journal of Special Education* XX(X) 1-13 Effects of a Professional Development Package to Prepare Special Education Paraprofessionals to Implement Evidence- Based Practice

11 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf;

12 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf

13 Council for Exceptional Children, Teacher Education Division, (2017) Position paper on training for paraeducators in special education, available at: https://tedcec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017_0.pdf

14 *Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf*" https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(6), 344-359.

related to learning needs; special education rules and regulations; and implementing programs related to behavior management.¹⁵

Capitol Regional Education Council’s Paraprofessional Training.¹⁶ The Capitol Regional Education Council (CREC) is one of six regional education service centers in Connecticut. CREC serves 35 LEAs in Greater Hartford. CREC offers a paraprofessional training curriculum called The Compass. Educational organizations can hire CREC to provide The Compass training or CREC can train and certify staff members to provide the professional learning within their organization. The curriculum is aligned to national and state standards and includes five basic and 16 advanced modules. Some of these modules are also available as an online course. For example, they have a Paraeducator/ Instructional Assistant Blended Learning Training Series. Courses include: Understanding Special Education and My Role, Strengthening My Behavior Management Skills, and Building My Repertoire of Instructional Strategies.

Expand opportunities for paraprofessionals’ learning.

Districts can provide professional learning effectively using a variety of strategies and in a variety of contexts. LEAs may want to consider providing “team-based trainings, schoolwide planning efforts, and summer institutes.”¹⁷ Partnerships with community colleges are another promising approach and could enable paraprofessionals to take college classes at reduced tuition rates and earn college credits.¹⁸ There are also a number of organizations that have developed professional learning curricula that LEAs can purchase or paraprofessionals can access online. For example, the PAR2A Center at the University of Colorado offers a train the trainer model for paraprofessional training and training modules on a variety of topics in education, such as early intervention, special education, and early childhood education.¹⁹

15 Breton, W. (2010). Special education paraprofessionals: Perceptions of preservice preparation, supervision, and ongoing developmental training. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25(1), 34–45; Carter, E., O’Rourke, L, Sisco, L.G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(6), 344–359; Goe, L. & Matlach, L. (2014) Supercharging Student Success: Policy Levers for Helping Paraprofessionals Have a Positive Influence in the Classroom. Policy Snapshot, Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research, available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558020.pdf>; Giangreco, M.F., Suter, J.C. & Doyle, M.B. (2010) Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools: A Review of Recent Research, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* Volume 20, 2010 - Issue 1

16 The Capitol Region Education Council, *The Compass: Helping Paraeducators Navigate the Profession*, <http://www.crec.org/para/index.php>

17 Carter, E., O’Rourke, L, Sisco, L.G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30(6), 344–359

18 Bernal, C. and Aragon, L. (2004) Critical Factors Affecting the Success of Paraprofessionals in the First Two Years of Career Ladder Projects in Colorado. *Remedial and Special Education*, 25(4), 205–213

19 See information here: https://paracenter.org/files/PARA%20brochure%20%2002-27-2014_FINAL2.pdf

Denver Paraprofessional Recruitment and Development Strategies.²⁰ Denver is implementing a number of strategies to recruit and retain high quality paraprofessionals for work with students with disabilities. The LEA is raising starting pay from “between \$14.34 and \$15.14 an hour to between \$15.10 and \$15.86 an hour.” They are also providing five days of professional learning during the summer for paraprofessionals who will work with students who have autism or emotional disabilities. With this additional training, the LEA hopes that paraprofessionals will feel more prepared and thus it will increase retention. Finally, the LEA holds information sessions at central hiring fairs for paraprofessionals than individual schools can benefit from. Staff from Denver’s recruitment team shared that it’s still a challenge to recruit for many of these positions because of the low unemployment rate and the demand for hourly workers in this pay range. They received positive feedback from their candidates that they loved the new training and their information sessions were very successful.²¹

Washington Districts Paraeducator Certificate Program.²² The Washington legislature created a Paraeducator Certificate Program to support districts in providing consistent and high quality training to instructional paraprofessionals across the state. Between August 2018 and July 2019, four school districts and two Educational Service Districts piloted components of this program providing training to over 200 paraprofessionals. The training begins with a foundational course focused on the state’s paraeducator standards of practice. To support districts’ implementation of the training, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction developed an online course that districts can use to supplement the training they provide. The legislature funded two days of the foundational training for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, so school districts are required to provide two days of training to all instructional paraprofessionals in their first year of employment.

From the pilot districts, the Washington Paraeducator Board learned a number of lessons, including the following: Districts should leverage existing teacher training for paraeducators, modifying as appropriate for paraprofessionals. Districts should leverage partnerships to provide the training, including unions, community colleges, and other organizations. Online training should be used as a tool and should be supplemented with in-person training. School districts should work with unions to determine how to provide time for training. Finally, clear communication across the district about training requirements and details is necessary for effective implementation.

²⁰ Asmar, M. (2019) What Denver is doing to recruit more special education paraprofessionals — and keep them <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2019/07/25/what-denver-is-doing-to-recruit-more-special-education-paraprofessionals-and-keep-them/>

²¹ Email communication with Lacey Nelson, Senior Talent Acquisition Manager, Denver Public Schools, February 14, 2020

²² Professional Educator Standards Board, Paraeducator Pilot Program Final Report. (2019). Available at <https://www.pesb.wa.gov/resources-and-reports/reports/>

Implement career ladder programs.

Finally, career ladder programs that offer paraprofessionals the opportunity to work towards becoming teachers provide both professional learning for paraprofessionals in their current roles as well as preparation for a future position as a teacher.²³ They may also increase retention for paraprofessionals who participate in the programs if the programs are designed effectively.²⁴ Important elements of these programs include the following: a strong partnership with a teacher education program; intentional recruitment and selection of program participants that have the skills, commitment, and mindsets to be successful; a rigorous and culturally sensitive teacher education curriculum; and support services such as academic advising, counseling, and financial support.²⁵

San Francisco Paraeducator to Teacher Program.²⁶ The San Francisco Paraeducator to Teacher Program works with university partners and the local teachers' union—the United Educators of San Francisco—to prepare paraprofessionals to become licensed teachers in the LEA's high need areas. The program recruits paraprofessionals working for the LEA who have at least 60 credits from an accredited college and are willing to work towards a credential, and provides them with a variety of supports to help them complete their degree and credential. They also must pass the CA licensing exam. Supports include academic and financial aid counseling, reimbursement of some tuition and expenses, support in passing the required licensure tests, professional learning, and participation in a peer cohort. Participants must commit to working in the LEA for four years after receiving a preliminary credential.

23 Espinoza, D., Saunders, R., Kini, T., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2018). Taking the long view: State efforts to solve teacher shortages by strengthening the profession. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

24 Bernal, C. and Aragon, L. (2004) Critical Factors Affecting the Success of Paraprofessionals in the First Two Years of Career Ladder Projects in Colorado. Remedial and Special Education, 25(4), 205-213

25 Clewell, B. C., Villegas, A. M. (2001). Evaluation of the Dewitt Wallace-Reader S Digest Fund's pathways to teaching careers program. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Available at <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/61801/410601-Evaluation-of-the-DeWitt-Wallace-Reader-s-Digest-Fund-s-Pathways-to-Teaching-Careers-Program.PDF>

26 San Francisco Public Schools, SFUSD Paraeducator to Teacher Program at a Glance, available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZGM8iSK2pEIUgrkXYmIRQ5CnfZIKCZG6rnD6kyzMCyE/edit>; San Francisco Public Schools, Paraeducator to Teacher Program Overview Presentation, available at https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1hSpkruw4IC2jr3cILYA-4O9hE9x4HfmmRlv8tTQ_I1M/edit#slide=id.g1fa15ff0a8_0_117; Telephone conversation with Sharon Zimmern, Program Administrator, San Fran Cisco Unified School District, December 13, 2020

Reflection Questions:

- *Do all new paraprofessionals participate in an induction program?*
- *Does the program provide paraprofessionals with clear information about their roles and responsibilities?*
- *Do paraprofessionals receive professional development and ongoing coaching related to their job responsibilities?*
- *Do you have a method of identifying paraprofessionals' professional development needs?*
- *Do you have career ladder or other professional growth opportunities for paraprofessionals?*

Resources for planning and implementation

- **The National Resource Center for Paraeducators** includes a variety of products, training and career development resources, as well as bibliographies of research related to various aspects of paraprofessional training and professional learning. This page includes a variety of training manuals and resources, including this training program to prepare teachers to supervise paraprofessionals and this curriculum for preparing paraprofessionals to work in inclusive classrooms.
- **Project Para, based at the University of Nebraska**, offers a web-based, self-study program for paraprofessionals. The program is intended to be supported by a local mentor/instructor who can supervise program participants. Participants work through self-study units on different topics and the local mentor/instructor reviews their work and provides feedback. Topics include classroom management and organization, effective communication with students and teachers, developing instructional skills, a variety of topics within special education, and supporting specific content areas. Each topic includes a pretest, lessons, activities and posttest.
- **The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)** provides a variety of training materials for paraprofessionals. It also offers online training for special education paraprofessionals that is free for Pennsylvania educators. Online courses include

a series of trainings that provide information about educational methods and resources for special education paraprofessionals working with students in a variety of educational settings.

- **Washington Professional Educator Standards Board Online Learning Courses.**

The state of Washington offers a variety of free online courses for teachers and paraprofessionals. Courses include an overview of the paraprofessional role and best practices, support for English learners, support for students with disabilities, and information about how teachers and administrators can effectively work with paraprofessionals.

- **Council for Exceptional Children**

- The Paraeducator Professional Development Standards were developed by the Council for Exceptional Children in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Paraeducators. The standards codify the knowledge and skills that paraeducators who serve students with exceptionalities need to be effective.
- This position paper on training for paraeducators in special education discusses the preparation and professional development that paraprofessionals need to serve students with disabilities effectively.

- **The Paraprofessional Resource and Research Center (PAR²A Center)** is a part of the School of Education & Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. The PAR²A Center develops policies, professional learning, and conducts research related to the roles and career pathways of paraprofessionals.

- This tool is an example of a needs assessment for identifying paraprofessional training needs.
- This guide provides information about recruitment, hiring, and management of paraprofessionals.
- This page contains a number of articles on supervising paraprofessionals.



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DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:
Pennsylvania's System for LEA/School Improvement
Lancaster-Lebanon IU13
and WestEd

For the full Human Capital Strategies resource series,
visit <https://www.iu13.org/school-improvement>