



## **STRATEGY BRIEF:**

# Recruiting & Retaining Paraprofessionals

## LEA leaders can use this brief to learn more about:

- Effective practices to recruit and hire effective paraprofessionals;
- Examples from LEAs around the country; and
- Resources to support this work in your LEA.

*To learn more about improving recruitment and hiring generally, see the [Recruitment & Hiring Guide](#). To learn more about retention generally, see the [Retention Guide](#).*

## Context

Many LEAs are challenged to recruit and retain qualified and effective paraprofessionals—often because paraprofessionals typically have low salaries; many do not receive benefits; they have few training or advancement opportunities; and they frequently report feeling undervalued.<sup>1</sup> Paraprofessionals often report that their roles are unclear and many are unprepared for the work schools ask of them, leading to job dissatisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly defining the roles of paraprofessionals and recruiting paraprofessionals that have the skills and competencies needed to fulfill their roles is critical to success. Paraprofessionals have responsibilities that vary widely depending on the position—their roles may include providing small-group instruction, providing one-on-one instruction, providing behavior support, supervising students, and doing clerical work<sup>3</sup>. By clearly defining paraprofessional positions; hiring staff with the appropriate qualifications and competencies; and providing appropriate onboarding and ongoing support, LEAs can set paraprofessionals up to be effective in their roles, and can increase retention of effective paraprofessionals.

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**1** French, N.K. (2003). *Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train, and supervise noncertified staff*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press; 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** 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; 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>; Breton, W. (2010). Special education paraprofessionals: Perceptions of preservice preparation, supervision, and ongoing developmental training. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25(1), 24–45; 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](https://tedcec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Para-PD-Paper_03-10-2017.pdf)

**3** 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.

# Effective LEA policies and practices

## Recruitment

**Develop precise job descriptions.** LEAs should develop clear job descriptions for all paraprofessional positions.<sup>4</sup> The job description should outline state requirements for paraprofessionals as well as the qualifications and competencies needed for paraprofessionals to be successful in their specific roles. These competencies may include communicating effectively, building relationships with students, following instructions, organizing learning materials and environments, and following ethical and professional standards.<sup>5</sup> Consult defined knowledge and skills that paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities need to be effective.<sup>6</sup> The knowledge and skills focus on the following key standards or topic areas: learner development and individual learning differences, learning environments, curricular content knowledge, assessment, instructional planning and strategies, professional learning and ethical practice, and collaboration. For more information about training paraprofessionals to develop these skills see Induction and Ongoing Professional Learning for Paraprofessionals.

**Use varied outreach strategies for recruitment.** For a large, high quality and diverse applicant pool, LEAs should publicize positions through multiple vehicles, such as using local media, posting flyers in schools, and targeting community agencies such as churches and fraternal organizations.<sup>7</sup> Word of mouth can also be an effective tool for recruiting quality candidates. LEAs should share job announcements through their newsletters and other communications to their current employees in all primary languages spoken in their communities.<sup>8</sup>

Recruiting paraprofessionals from the community provides an opportunity to increase the diversity of the teaching staff while also recruiting candidates who are more likely to remain in their positions.<sup>9</sup> LEAs can consider recruiting from sources that have ties to the community and/or experience working with students. These include people who already

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<sup>4</sup> 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>

<sup>5</sup> Council for Exceptional Children, CEC Paraeducator Professional Development Standards, available at <https://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Paraeducator-Preparation-Guidelines>

<sup>6</sup> Council for Exceptional Children, Special Education Paraeducator

<sup>7</sup> Clewell, B. C., and A. M. Villegas. 2001. Ahead of the class: A handbook for preparing new teachers from new sources. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, available at <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Handbook-For-Preparing-New-Teachers-From-New-Sources.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Clewell, B. C., and A. M. Villegas. 2001. Ahead of the class: A handbook for preparing new teachers from new sources. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, , available at <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Handbook-For-Preparing-New-Teachers-From-New-Sources.pdf>; French, N.K. (2003). Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train, and supervise noncertified staff. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

<sup>9</sup> 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.

work for the LEA such as:

- clerical personnel,
- after-school program staff, and campus supervisors;
- volunteers, such as members of the PTA;
- community members such as neighbors, friends, or relatives of teachers;
- and finally, former students.<sup>10</sup>

Also consider educator preparation programs. School LEAs may want to partner with local colleges and universities to recruit students who are pursuing degrees in education or recent program completers who may not be ready to take on the lead role in the classroom.

Recruitment messages should capitalize on the reasons that paraprofessionals are commonly attracted to their positions. These include enjoying working with children, having a schedule that meets the needs of their family responsibilities, and wanting to give back to their communities.<sup>11</sup>

## Reflection Questions:

- *Do you use a wide variety of approaches to posting and sharing open paraprofessional positions?*
- *What approaches are currently being used and what others could be used?*
- *Has your LEA identified the skills that paraprofessionals need for their particular assignment, and communicated this in your job opening descriptions (if the particular assignment is known in advance)?*

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<sup>10</sup> 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; French, N.K. (2003). Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train, and supervise noncertified staff. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

<sup>11</sup> 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

## EXAMPLE IN ACTION:



**Denver Paraprofessional Recruitment Strategies.**<sup>12</sup> Denver is implementing a number of strategies to recruit 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 with 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 is supporting individual schools in recruiting paraprofessionals by holding information sessions at central hiring fairs. 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 appreciated the new training and their information sessions were very successful.<sup>13</sup>

## Support and Retention

**Use effective onboarding practices.** Once the paraprofessionals are hired, the onboarding process should clearly orient paraprofessionals to their roles and their school community and provide clear information about their responsibilities. Supervisors should also provide an orientation that includes a tour of the work site, locations of the supplies and technology they will need, introductions to their colleagues, and a presentation of school and classroom policies and procedures.<sup>14</sup> Also see Induction and Ongoing Professional Learning for Paraprofessionals for more information about induction for paraprofessionals. In addition to the onboarding practices mentioned above, induction programs should develop the specific skills and strategies that paraprofessionals are expected to utilize in their roles and should provide instruction about appropriate ways of communicating with parents and colleagues.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 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/>

<sup>13</sup> Email communication with Lacey Nelson, Senior Talent Acquisition Manager, Denver Public Schools, February 14, 2020

<sup>14</sup> 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>

<sup>15</sup> 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](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>

# Reflection Questions:

- *How are paraprofessionals onboarded?*
- *Do paraprofessionals receive an orientation that includes a tour of the work site, locations of the supplies and technology they will need, introductions to their colleagues, and a presentation of school and classroom policies and procedures?*

**Resource:** *Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train, and supervise noncertified staff*<sup>16</sup> is a guide (available for purchase) that provides strategies for recruiting, managing, and working with paraprofessionals in schools.

Provide growth opportunities. Creating grow your own or career ladder programs for paraprofessionals can help recruit motivated paraprofessionals, provide them with ongoing training, and increase their retention (as educators, if not as paraprofessionals).<sup>17</sup> These programs also increase the diversity of the teaching workforce and can help to address teacher shortages.<sup>18</sup> For more information about career ladder programs see Induction and Ongoing Professional Learning for Paraprofessionals. 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.<sup>19</sup>

**Resource:** *CEC Paraeducator Professional Development Standards: The Council for Exceptional Children, in collaboration with the National Resource Center for Paraeducators, developed and validated a set of standards that codifies the knowledge and skills that paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities need to be effective.*

<sup>16</sup> French, N.K. (2003). *Managing paraeducators in your school: How to hire, train, and supervise noncertified staff*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

<sup>17</sup> 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; Connaly, K. Garcia, A. Cook, S. and Williams C. (2017) *Teacher Talent Untapped: Multilingual Paraprofessionals Speak About the Barriers to Entering the Profession*. Washington, DC: New America, available at <http://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Teacher-Talent-Untapped.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> 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; Children Now. (2010) "Afterschool Policy Brief, Recruiting Teachers to High-Need Schools: A Career Pathway that Builds on California's Afterschool Infrastructure," available at

<sup>19</sup> 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>

## EXAMPLES IN ACTION:



**STEP UP and Teach, Los Angeles Unified School LEA (LAUSD).** This program provides guidance and support to LAUSD paraprofessionals who want to become teachers. There are two cohorts of participants: one group seeking to become Special Education teachers, and a second group focuses on Multilingual/Multicultural (Bilingual) education. The program provides mentoring to help paraprofessionals understand academic requirements and identify appropriate teacher preparation programs. “The STEP UP and Teach program also provides professional learning in a variety of areas including: preparation for credential exams, meeting the needs of all learners, positive behavior support and intervention, and understanding the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).” They provide financial assistance for tuition, textbooks, and credential testing. “In exchange for the financial support and guidance they receive, STEP UP members must commit to work in Los Angeles Unified for two full academic years after they have earned their preliminary credential.” The program has had 645 participants since 2015 and 33% have successfully completed the STEP UP and Teach Program.

The program recently added a phone interview to their selection process and it helps them to recognize the applicant on a more personal level to determine if they are a good match for the program and will be successful. A mentor in the program shared what makes members succeed. “I have seen members succeed who are self-motivated and participate in all aspects of the program (mentor meetings, professional learning, test preparation) with enthusiasm. There is also a sense of community pride amongst our members; most of them are a reflection of our school communities. They have the experience of working in communities in which they currently live and/or grew up. The relationships they form with students, parents, and the school community is not just professional, it is also personal. It is those community ties that aid in retention and effectiveness as teachers.”

**Grow Your Own Illinois (Chicago and Peoria).** Grow Your Own Illinois (GYO) is a teacher training program that supports community members in becoming certified teachers. The program developed from the work of community-based organizations in Chicago that recognized high teacher turnover and the lack of teacher diversity and cultural connection between teachers and students as challenges to improving student achievement. GYO recruits paraprofessionals, as well as other community members. Participants receive tuition assistance, academic support, professional learning, and access to a cohort of peers in exchange for committing to teach in a high-needs school for five years. An evaluation of the Grow Your Own program found a number of positive outcomes of the program. For example, the evaluation found that GYO teachers had strong knowledge of content and strong relationships with students.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Grow Your Own Teachers: An Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness, Executive Summary, available at [https://growyourownteachers.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=223&Itemid=562&lang=en](https://growyourownteachers.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=223&Itemid=562&lang=en)

## Reflection Questions:

- *Are there growth opportunities, such as career ladders, available for paraprofessionals?*
- *How could you learn about which development or growth opportunities your paraprofessionals think would be most valuable?*

**Resource:** *This document from the Paraprofessional Resource and Research Center outlines the skills paraprofessionals need to be effective. This checklist provides an example of a template a teacher or administrator could create to support paraprofessionals in addressing students' needs and challenges.*

**Resource:** *The National Resource Center for Paraeducators includes a variety of products, training and career development resources, and bibliographies of research related to various aspects of paraprofessional training and development. This page includes several manuals about appropriate paraprofessional roles and responsibilities, ways to work with them effectively, and professional learning programs. For example, *Paraeducators in Schools—Strengthening the Educational Team*, provides guidance about paraeducator roles and responsibilities and preparation.*







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