

SPeNSE Fact Sheet

Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education
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The Role of Paraprofessionals in Special Education

For more than 50 years, paraprofessionals have provided essential support for students with disabilities. Traditionally, such support was primarily in the form of clerical and one-on-one student assistance. Today's paraprofessionals—who number upwards of 250,000 nationwide—play an increasingly prominent role in the instruction of students with disabilities (Annual Report to Congress, 2000). To support paraprofessionals in fulfilling the responsibilities of their expanded roles, education agencies must understand the contexts in which paraprofessionals work and use that information to provide them with appropriate training and supervision.

The typical special education paraprofessional is a 44-year-old female who works in a regular elementary or secondary school. She has 6.5 years of experience in special education and 7.9 as a paraprofessional overall.

What are the caseload characteristics of paraprofessionals?

The average special education paraprofessional works in five different classes per week and serves 21 students, 15 of whom have disabilities. Fifteen percent of all students served by paraprofessionals are limited English proficient, and 31% of paraprofessionals are fluent or nearly fluent in the non-English languages spoken by their students. This is twice the rate of non-English proficiency for special education teachers.

Paraprofessionals in the wealthiest districts serve an average of 16 students, while those in the least wealthy districts serve 23 students. The differences in paraprofessionals' caseloads may be explained, in part, by the frequency with which districts use paraprofessionals to provide one-on-one assistance. While it appears more common to assign paraprofessionals to this role in wealthier districts, differences do not reach statistical significance.

What do paraprofessionals do?

The responsibilities of paraprofessionals vary based on geographic region and type of district. Paraprofessionals in the Southeast are significantly more likely than paraprofessionals in the Northeast, Great Lakes, Mountain Plains, and Western regions to provide personal care assistance and health care services. Fewer paraprofessionals in the Northeast than in the Mid-South spend 10% or more of their time on administrative tasks like completing forms and paperwork and preparing instructional materials.

Nationwide, the majority of special education paraprofessionals spend at least 10% of their time on each of the following activities:

- ✦ providing instructional support in small groups;
- ✦ providing one-on-one instruction;
- ✦ modifying materials;
- ✦ implementing behavior management plans;
- ✦ monitoring hallways, study hall, etc.;
- ✦ meeting with teachers;
- ✦ collecting data on students; and
- ✦ providing personal care assistance.

What kind of training do paraprofessionals receive?

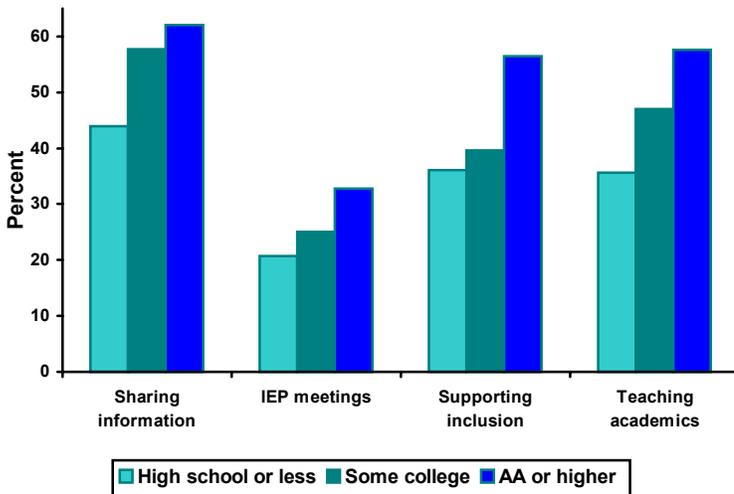
Paraprofessionals bring to their work a range of preservice educational experiences: high school diploma or less (29%), some college (38%), and associate's degree or higher (32%). Approximately 13%

have a paraprofessional certificate or credential. Another 6% have a teaching certificate or license. The importance of higher education is significant. Paraprofessionals with college experience rated themselves significantly higher than those without college experience in their performance in several job responsibilities, including sharing information about students with teachers for planning, problem solving, and decisionmaking and participating in IEP meetings.

Nationally, paraprofessionals spent 37 hours in professional development in 1999-2000. Thirty-three percent of those hours were required by their district or state. In the past 3 years, 76 percent of paraprofessionals received training in teaching academic concepts and skills, and 83 percent received training in implementing behavior management programs developed by teachers.

Paraprofessionals who receive more professional development in a specific work-related task feel consistently more skillful in that area. For example, 59 percent of paraprofessionals who received 8 or more hours of professional development in teaching academic concepts and skills felt highly skilled doing that compared to 38 percent of those who received no such professional development. As a group, more educated paraprofessionals spend far more time in professional development, which may increase differences in levels of skill.

Percent of paraprofessionals who feel skillful to a great extent at performing specific tasks, by level of education



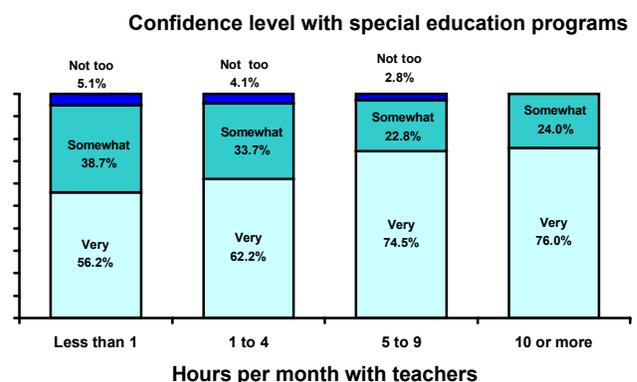
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Who supervises and supports paraprofessionals?

Fifty-eight percent of paraprofessionals are supervised by a special education teacher or related service provider; 37% are supervised by a school or district administrator, and 3% are supervised by a non-special education teacher. Regardless of the position of their supervisor, the majority of paraprofessionals (89%) feel they have the support they need.

Contact with professionals in the school has a positive effect on paraprofessionals. Those who spend more time meeting with teachers on lesson planning, curriculum development, guidance and counseling, evaluation of programs, or other collaborative work related to instruction feel more confident in their ability to implement special education programs. Furthermore, paraprofessionals who participate in school, district, or agency committee meetings report higher ratings in their ability to implement education programs and in their overall performance.

Level of confidence as a function of time meeting with teachers



SPeNSE, which was sponsored by OSEP and conducted by Westat, included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators, special and general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraprofessionals in spring and fall 2000. For more information, see www.spense.org.

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