

Informing the Debate

Michigan Applied Public Policy Brief Paraeducator Training, Supervision, and Evaluation in Michigan

Authors

Sarah N. Douglas
Ryan P. Bowles

About the Michigan Applied Public Policy Briefs

Informing the Debate

The paper series, *Informing the Debate*, is generated out of grant-funded, policy-relevant research sponsored by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR).

The IPPSR program, Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program or MAPPR, generates research on current issues held in urban communities with special attention to Michigan. Policy researchers author summary briefs of their research outcomes and their implications. The funded research projects and related policy briefs focus on main headings of discussion being held in the policy arena.

When developing the paper series initiative in 1992, the topics of the papers were submitted following a two-day meeting with leaders from the business sector, nonprofit agencies, foundations, and university faculty and staff. That group evolved into the Urban Research Interest Group.

The Urban Research Interest Group recognized the pressure on urban core leaders to make critical decisions that continue to impact people long into the future. A commitment to generating background research to add to the core of debate on possible solutions to complex, urban problems was made.

The expected outcomes of the paper series include discussion that fosters and strengthens multidimensional connections between the policy, academic, and practitioner community. The series continues to cultivate research interest in policy-relevant issues for consideration of decision makers in urban communities.

Additional information about IPPSR, the Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR) Program, and related publications as well as call for proposals is available on the website, www.ippsr.msu.edu.

Informing the Debate

MAPPR Policy Research Brief

Paraeducator Training, Supervision, and Evaluation in Michigan

Authors

Sarah N. Douglas
Human Development and Family Studies
Michigan State University

Ryan P. Bowles
Human Development and Family Studies
Michigan State University

Sponsor

The Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Matthew Grossmann, Ph.D., Director
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science
Michigan State University

Series Editors

Ann Marie Schneider, M.S.
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR) Grant Program
Administrator
Michigan State University

Emily Stanewich
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Communications Assistant
Michigan State University

© 2018 Michigan State University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Paraeducators (e.g., educational assistants, paraprofessionals, aides) have become an essential part of educational services for children with disabilities (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco & Pelsue, 2009). However, despite their prevalence in educational settings, paraeducators frequently lack the skills required to support students with disabilities (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002). Lack of training and supervision are common challenges noted within the field (Carter et al., 2009; Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016; Griffin-Shirley & Matlock, 2004). High turnover and low wages are also cited as challenges in paraeducator employment (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

Although federal law outlines the need for proper training, supervision, and evaluation of paraeducators, little guidance has been provided about how this looks in practice (Breton, 2010). The most recent federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, makes some progress in providing specific policies and recommendations, requiring states to identify and sustain evidence-based professional development systems for paraeducators with paraeducator input. Additionally, numerous educational organizations have highlighted the skills and knowledge needed by paraeducators in the field. Furthermore, researchers have called for all states to create policies and guidelines related to paraeducators (Goe & Matlach, 2014). Many states have responded by adopting paraeducator standards or creating certification programs for paraeducators (Beale, 2001; Gaylord, Wallace, Pickett, & Likins, 2002). Michigan, however, lags far behind in its attention to paraeducator issues and alignment of policies with federal law.

Given the lack of attention in Michigan related to paraeducator issues, we conducted a study to learn about the paraeducator related experiences and perspectives of administrators, teachers, and paraeducators across Michigan. Findings from this study indicate a number of areas where Michigan can improve paraeducator related policies and practices. Specific policies related to paraeducator training are needed; schools and school districts vary widely in the amount of training paraeducators receive, the content included in trainings that do occur (including connection to current paraeducator duties), and who provides training. Some districts have very limited training, while others have created some training opportunities, although even these are not sufficient to meet the needs of paraeducators. Findings from this study also highlight a lack of resources and administrative support dedicated to paraeducator training. In districts where training is provided, it is often voluntary (i.e., using unpaid time) and/or available for only a limited time. Additionally, there is a lack of training for teachers related to their supervisory and training responsibilities with paraeducators. These findings all point to improper training and supervision of paraeducators across Michigan which has resulted in adequate support to students with disabilities.

Findings within the study also note a need for policies and tools to improve paraeducator evaluation. Within most districts paraeducator evaluations occurred once a year at the end of the year. They were most often conducted by the principal or another school administrator, sometimes with minimal or no involvement of the supervising

teacher. The evaluation was usually in the form of a written report and sometimes included a short verbal discussion of performance, but the impact on paraeducator performance was limited by its brevity and timing. Teachers and paraeducators were dissatisfied with the level of transparency in the evaluation process. Administrators noted a lack of tools to support paraeducator evaluation (resulting in the use of teacher evaluation tools), and a lack of time to devote to paraeducator evaluation.

Many benefits of the utilization of paraeducators were noted in schools across Michigan. Paraeducators were seen as vital to the inclusion of students with disabilities, helping to increase performance and social interactions for students with disabilities. Paraeducator supports for children with disabilities and inclusive practices increase compassion and empathy in students without disabilities. Paraeducators help students with disabilities learn self-advocacy skills, and advocate for students who have not yet developed skills to advocate for themselves. Paraeducators also provide essential supports to teachers by helping with classroom management, including behavioral supports for students with behavioral challenges, and by providing individualized instruction to students within the classroom, allowing teachers to focus on whole group instruction. Paraeducators were also noted to support flexibility in the delivery of educational services.

Despite the benefits noted with paraeducator utilization in Michigan, many challenges were highlighted. Paraeducator pay, hours, and benefits do not match the everyday demands of paraeducators in Michigan. This results in difficulty with paraeducator recruitment, high turnover, and employment shortages. This is also likely tied to a lack of paraeducator professionalism as noted by administrators (i.e., issues with attendance, punctuality, confidentiality). Furthermore, teachers, paraeducators, and other educational professionals lack clarity in their roles related to paraeducators, including what tasks are appropriate for paraeducators and what tasks should not be considered in the purview of paraeducators. Finally, paraeducators do not receive adequate recognition for their work and continued contribution to the education of students with disabilities.

Given these findings, we offer policy recommendations in several areas. First, we recommend policies related to improving paraeducator work conditions, such as benefits for all paraeducator positions, involvement of teachers in the hiring of paraeducators, dedicated meeting time to support ongoing training of paraeducators, and professional pathways for paraeducators. Policies should also be developed in Michigan related to paraeducator training and supervision, to include mandates to ensure sufficient training for all paraeducators that are aligned with specific paraeducator duties. Policies should include the creation of clear team roles related to paraeducators and improved pre-service training for teachers and administrators to supervise and evaluate paraeducators. Finally, policies should be put into place to ensure high quality practices for paraeducator evaluation. The evaluation process should be more transparent, more frequent, consist of written and verbal components that paraeducators can use to improve performance, use evaluation tools that are specific to the roles of paraeducators, and involve of supervising teachers in the evaluation process.

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Paraeducators work in educational settings under the direction of a teacher and other educational professionals to support children across the U.S. (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Paraeducators have become an essential part of educational services for children with disabilities (Carter et al., 2009). In fact, paraeducator employment has increased at twice the rate of teacher employment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013) with estimates indicating that approximately 12% of school employees are paraeducators (Hoffman & Sable, 2006). The increase in paraeducator employment has been attributed to a shortage of qualified special education teachers and a rise in inclusive practices (Carter et al., 2009).

Historically paraeducators have supported teachers in non-instructional roles, such as by completing clerical duties within the classroom (Pickett, 1986). However, today paraeducators support the instruction, personal care, functional living skills, and behavior management of children with and without disabilities (Chopra & French, 2004; Douglas et al., 2016). For example, in an early childhood setting a paraeducator might be called a “classroom aide” and assist a teacher in classroom management, instructional tasks, and social skill reinforcement for a large number of students, or a paraeducator might be referred to as a “one-on-one aide” and support toileting, functional skills, communication development, and behavioral needs of a single student with a disability.

Relevant Research Related to Paraeducators

Despite the increased use of paraeducators and their expanding roles, paraeducators often lack the skills required to support students with special needs in academic and functional tasks (Giangreco et al., 2002). Researchers have noted that paraeducators frequently lack appropriate training (Griffin-Shirley & Matlock, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001), with reports that some paraeducators do not receive any training (Carter et al., 2009; Patterson, 2006). Teachers have recognized that paraeducators with limited skills not only provide insufficient support for students with disabilities, but can also act as a barrier to effective instruction (Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003). Therefore, teachers have emphasized the urgent need for improved training for paraeducators (Douglas et al., 2016).

Existing research points to challenges with employment, supervision, and evaluation of paraeducators. School districts report high paraeducator turnover, often due to low wages and insufficient training (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Researchers have also expressed concern over improper utilization of paraeducators. Giangreco and Broer (2005) specifically raised issues with the excessive use of one-on-one paraeducators for children with disabilities, pointing out that the least qualified individuals are often assigned to work with the students who have the most needs. Furthermore, teachers have reported limited preparation for their supervisory duties with paraeducators and noted challenges with paraeducator evaluation practices (Douglas et al., 2016). As a result, teacher supervision is typically informal and instruction to paraeducators generally revolves around specific assignments (Morgan, Ashbaker, & Young, 2001). Research by Chopra and colleagues

(2011) highlighted that paraeducators are only effective when the teacher provides a clear definition of roles and guidance within the classroom.

Legislation and Policies

The increasing roles of paraeducators have been recognized by national organizations and in federal legislation. In 2004, the Individuals with Disability Education Act required state educational associations to “establish and maintain qualifications...to ensure [paraeducators] ...are appropriately prepared and trained.” However, no guidance was provided as to what constitutes “appropriate training” (Breton, 2010). The more recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 provides more specificity, requiring states to identify and sustain professional development systems for paraeducators that are evidence-based, intensive, collaborative, data driven, personalized to the paraeducator, and designed with paraeducator input. Professional organizations have also begun to outline the skills and knowledge needed by paraeducators through the creation of paraeducator standards. The Council for Exceptional Children (2015), National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), International Reading Association (2010), American Federation of Teachers (1998), and National Education Association (2005) have all created paraeducator standards or competencies specific to their mission (e.g., early childhood, reading supports, special education). Likewise, many states have adopted paraeducator standards or created paraeducator certification programs (Beale, 2001; Gaylord et al., 2002). In a policy statement prepared for the American Institutes for Research – Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, Goe and Matlach (2014) called for all states to create policies and guidelines related to paraeducators, including hiring procedures (e.g., hiring criteria, job orientation, initial training), paraeducator standards, supervision guidelines, ongoing training, and recognition programs.

Compared with leading states in the US, Michigan has neglected paraeducator issues and trails in developing legislative guidelines that address paraeducator preparation, employment, and supervision. Despite the important role paraeducators play in special education settings, current Michigan special education law only provides brief mention of paraeducators (Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education, 2016): the law provides a definition of paraeducators, stipulates that intermediate school districts must articulate qualifications for paraeducators, and states that teachers must be provided with pre-service training to learn communication and collaboration skills for work with professionals, including paraeducators. Beyond these brief mentions, Michigan has no standards for paraeducator performance or training, and few guidelines to direct the employment, training, and supervision of paraeducators. This is in contrast to many other states, who have paraeducator standards and guidelines in place related to paraeducators (Gaylord et al., 2002).

To further explore the current policies and procedures in Michigan related to paraeducators, we interviewed three individuals at the Michigan Department of Education who could speak specifically and in-depth about the topic. During the semi-structured interviews, we asked questions regarding current policies related to paraeducator

employment, training, and supervision. We also asked for insight into existing gaps in current legislation that should be addressed. Across all three interviews, a recurring theme was discovered: *there are no state-level policies regarding paraeducators currently in place*. The only policy that applies to paraeducators is not specifically about paraeducators: all personnel who work or volunteer in a school must be fingerprinted and have a background check completed before they can begin. All specifications for paraeducator hiring, employment, and supervision are determined at the local level, in individual schools and school districts. The role of the Michigan State Department of Education related to paraeducators is primarily passive. Interviewed individuals indicated providing some guidance to local schools when requested, but that guidance is not uniform in nature or broadly disseminated, and adherence to recommendations or guidelines is not mandated. Two of the individuals interviewed indicated a gap between research recommendations and actual practices. For example, one interviewee highlighted the paradox that often paraeducators are placed with students with the highest need, while the teacher, who has more training, spends less time with the student. The overall consensus was that the state should create and oversee policies to ensure high quality education for children with disabilities in Michigan.

PARAEDUCATORS IN MICHIGAN: A RESEARCH PROJECT

Given the lack of attention in Michigan to paraeducator related issues and the limited research addressing paraeducator supports, we conducted a study to gather information about paraeducator practices in Michigan to inform policy recommendations that will fit Michigan educational systems. To ensure our data reflected the perceptions and experiences of educators across Michigan, we used a rigorous participant selection process using data from the National Center for Education Statistics to select elementary schools in rural, town, suburban, and city settings. Each category was further classified into 3 subcategories (e.g., large, midsized, small for city). Randomly sampled schools within the various classifications were contacted for participation in an online survey. First, administrators in the randomly sampled schools were contacted via email and provided with a link to complete the survey. Within the survey they were asked to nominate teacher participants who served students with disabilities and worked with paraeducators. Next, nominated teachers were invited via email to complete the survey. Within their survey, teachers were asked to nominate paraeducators who worked within their classrooms. Finally, nominated paraeducators were invited via email to complete the survey. In total, our sample included 202 participants: 85 administrators, 78 teachers, and 39 paraeducators all working with students at the elementary level (i.e., kindergarten thru grade 6). See Table 1 for details about participant demographics.

Table 1
Survey Demographic Information (n = 202)

Characteristics	% (n)	Characteristics	% (n)
<i>Position</i>		<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
Administrator	42 (85)	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.5 (1)
Teacher	39 (78)	Black or African American	6 (13)
Paraeducator	19 (39)	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	2.5 (4)
		Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.5 (1)
<i>Gender</i>		White	86 (174)
Male	17 (35)	Arabic	0.5 (1)
Female	80 (161)	Armenian	0.5 (1)
Undisclosed	3 (6)	India	0.5 (1)
		Undisclosed	3 (6)
<i>Age</i>			
18-25	3 (7)		
26-32	10 (19)	<i>Area Type</i>	
33-40	20 (40)	City	22 (45)
41-50	38 (78)	Rural	24 (48)
51-60	19 (38)	Suburb	34 (69)
More than 60	7 (14)	Town	19 (39)
Undisclosed	3 (6)	Unreported	1 (1)
<i>Highest Degree</i>			
High School/GED	6 (12)	<i>School Type</i>	
Associate's Degree	5 (11)	General Education	87 (177)
Bachelor's Degree	21 (42)	Special Education	12 (24)
Master's Degree	59 (119)	Unreported	1 (1)
Doctoral Degree	7 (15)		
Undisclosed	2 (3)		

We created a survey to address critical questions about the role of paraeducators, including practices, benefits, and challenges. Each survey included demographic questions for participants (e.g., position, education, experience, certification, district), as well as rating scale and open-ended questions about paraeducator practices (i.e., policies, employment, utilization, training, supervision, evaluation). Surveys were tailored to the position of each participant. For example, administrators were provided with surveys to gain information about district and school policies related to paraeducators, evaluation procedures for paraeducators, administrative models to provide support to teachers and paraeducators, training programs for paraeducators, and challenges employing paraeducators. Teachers were provided with surveys to gain information about their

training for supervision duties with paraeducators, current supervision practices with paraeducators (including on-the-job training), administrative support for supervision and training of paraeducators, involvement in evaluation for paraeducators, and challenges overseeing paraeducators. Paraeducators were provided with surveys to gain information about their duties, training, supervision, and challenges they face. All versions of the survey were reviewed by experts in the area of paraeducator issues to ensure that the survey content was relevant and comprehensive.

Following data collection, qualitative and quantitative data analytic techniques were utilized to identify administrator, teacher, and paraeducator perspectives on the roles of paraeducators, and inform policy recommendations. During data analysis we focused on identifying common and divergent themes among administrators, teachers, and paraeducators across Michigan.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Paraeducator Training at the Beginning of the School Year

Paraeducator training and supervision is a challenge across Michigan and statewide policies are needed to streamline practices. Within surveys teachers and administrators clearly highlighted a lack of consistency in paraeducator training. Specifically, the training opportunities for paraeducators before school begins varied widely. One teacher indicated that in her school, training is not provided before the school year begins: “we don’t meet until after the school year has started.” Lack of money and time allocated to paraeducator training was also noted. One paraeducator stated: “I see a lot of new hires who have limited experience, and they struggle with finding ways to support the students they are hired to provide service for. Those struggles could be minimized with proper training.” Similarly, an administrator stated: “We do not do a good job with this. We lean on school social workers to provide basic information on student assignments based on past experiences and IEP notes/goals etc. prior to school starting. We also provide Non-Violent Crisis Prevention training prior to the school year starting. We need to do more....but money for training is always hard to find.” Unfortunately, many of the training opportunities that were provided at the beginning of the year were voluntary or available for only a limited time. An administrator stated: “some professional development opportunities may be available during the summer, prior to the start of school, but they are voluntary. We also provide occasional professional development to paraprofessionals during the school year. Our teachers usually communicate with their paraprofessionals prior to the start of school, but again it is voluntary.” A teacher reported: “I am not included in the beginning of the year preparations of the paraeducators. They have separate training days from the teaching staff. The first contact I have with them is the first day of school, just prior to the arrival of the students. If the paraeducator has been in my room previous years, we can talk outside of the work day.”

Although systematic training was not the norm, those who did provide training within their school or district most often indicated a standardized approach for paraeducators

provided by the district, intermediate school, or a teacher. These trainings often included topics such as CPR, Medicaid billing/documentation, and crisis prevention intervention. One administrator stated “They participate in district professional development prior to the start of school. We also compensate para[educator]s to participate in additional training for students who require extra supports to meet their needs.” A teacher indicated “before school begins, I meet with paraeducators and provide a folder that contains all information they need to know in regards to the student(s) they are working with. I review the IEP, behavior plans, and accommodations they should be receiving in the classroom.” A few indicated a hands-on approach to paraeducator training before the beginning of the school year, facilitated by the administrator and/or teacher. One administrator noted: we “usually have an in-service for special education paraeducator staff. Meetings with case managers and teachers. Review of plans for specific children. Meetings with specialized staff such as the autism spectrum disorder teaching coordinator, adaptive physical education teacher, occupational therapist, physical therapist, etc.” A teacher described her approach as “before school starts I create a tentative schedule for each paraeducator in our building. I meet with the rest of the special education department prior to school starting to make sure all students on IEPs with para[educator] support are covered. The principal also takes a look at the schedule at this time. I then set up a meeting prior to the first day of school to meet with all paraeducators. Most of the time the principal does not show up to this meeting even though she is invited. I like to have admin[istration] support in case I have a paraeducator that is upset with their schedule. At the meeting we hand out schedules...We also give each [paraeducator] an ‘IEP at a Glance’, a shortened version of the IEP with all the main points that the paraeducator would need to help support the student/students.”

Day to Day Training and Paraeducator Supervision

Paraeducator training and day to day supervision also varied widely. Although day to day training and supervision were most commonly provided by teachers, a few districts clearly indicated this as the administrator’s role. For example one administrator stated that general education paraeducators “have coaches that work with them continually across the school year and provide fidelity checks.” A teacher in another district indicated “Most training and supervision is above the teacher. It is handled at the administrative level.” Other participants described a joint system with the teacher providing less formal support and an administrator providing formal feedback. One administrator described the process in this way: “Teachers and/or directors provide overall day-to-day supervision. They also get feedback from other staff members that work directly with aides.” Another teacher was more descriptive of her role: “My [paraeducators] do a great job and I tell them every day. I will give them feedback ‘on the fly’ when appropriate (i.e., show them how to use equipment or how to work with a student on something specific) or I will sit down and have a conversation with them after the students leave if the matter is more serious. I also do a classroom team meeting once a month where we all sit down and talk about current classroom issues and get on the same page about things. Also in the case of a severe medical or behavior incident, we will debrief after school.” Another teacher saw the need to streamline the training process, including day to day training: “There needs to be time

allowed to train paraeducators. This often falls on the special educators alone who have a multitude of tasks on their plate and they may not be given additional time to provide this type of training. It would be beneficial for districts to provide general training on disabilities and professionalism. It would be great if special educators were given time to prepare professional development activities for paraeducators or additional time to train them on instructional practices. It often seems like this type of training happens on the fly.”

The methods employed in day to day training and supervision in schools also varied widely. Some schools have regular observations, while others conducted observations less frequently or as needed. Some school staff stated that no formal process existed to address day to day training needs. One paraeducator highlighted her negative experience due to lack of formal policy: “The teacher rarely does an observation of my performance. The only training I've received has been on the job training where I fulfill the needs and wishes of the teacher. The only feedback I've ever gotten was negative because I disagreed with teachers.” Other participants indicated that the process at their school was informal. An administrator indicated that “day to day supervision is, for the most part, under the direction of the classroom teacher where the [paraeducator] is assigned.” A teacher described her role with the paraeducator: “We work in the same classroom together most of the day. I observe her and provide feedback when necessary. I answer her questions and explain instructional materials when necessary. We are constantly discussing student needs and behaviors.” A paraeducator stated: “training depends upon the special education teacher we work with. Some are far more interested and helpful in making sure [paraeducators] are supported than others.”

A few challenges were discovered in the area of day to day training and supervision. First, it is clear that training systems across the state are not uniform. Some participants indicated there were clear formal systems in place, while others relied on informal systems or indicated little to no day to day training or supervision for paraeducators. One paraeducator shared her training experiences: “I have not received much training or feedback in my current position. I do have over 10 years of experience in another district and I think they feel I have enough experience to do my job which is normally one on one with a student who is pretty easy to deal with. I feel that in general feedback and training are key to being successful. *There needs to be a system so the paraeducator knows if they are doing what is needed and expected.* There have been times when I sense I'm doing something wrong...so I will seek guidance or advice from the classroom teacher or special education teacher. Usually this works well and produces good results. I have been to training in the past and it has always proved to be helpful.” Furthermore, administrators repeatedly indicated that teachers are not well prepared for their supervisory role and teachers indicated limited time for supervision in the classroom. Participants highlighted these challenges. An administrator stated: [supervision] “is done through the teacher supervisors who are not always well-equipped for this role.” A teacher noted: “left to teachers, time is very limited to train and provide feedback.”

Within the quantitative data provided by participants, teachers provided higher ratings for training and supervision of paraeducators than administrators (see Table 2 for data related to training for assigned tasks). For example, 42% of administrators disagreed or

strongly disagreed that teachers ensure paraeducators have appropriate training for assigned tasks. Some of these variations were attributed to the different roles within districts. For example, one administrator clearly indicated that paraeducator training “is the responsibility of the administrator.” However, others experienced challenges even when roles were well defined. An administrator indicated that they were “not sure [about the training provided] by all teachers.” Teachers, on the other hand, only indicated a lack of training for paraeducators 24% of the time (i.e., disagree or strongly disagree that they ensure training for paraeducators).

Table 2
Percent of teachers and administrators who believe that teachers ensure paraeducators have appropriate training for the tasks they are assigned to carry out

	Teachers % (n)	Administrators % (n)
Strongly Disagree	10.8 (7)	9.4 (6)
Disagree	13.8 (9)	32.8 (21)
Neutral	29.2 (19)	20.3 (13)
Agree	33.8 (22)	34.4 (22)
Strongly Agree	12.3 (8)	3.1 (2)

Table 3 illustrates the perceptions of paraeducators related to training provided by teachers. Nearly 16% of paraeducators felt that they never had appropriate training from teachers for the tasks they were assigned. The majority (47%) only felt they had appropriate training on some days.

Table 3
How often paraeducators feel teachers provide appropriate training for the tasks they assign

	Paraeducators % (n)
Never	15.6 (5)
Some Days	46.9 (15)
Most Days	18.8 (6)
Everyday	18.8 (6)

Some barriers to effective training and supervision were time, current system structure that limited training delivery, and lack of involvement of teachers in the training process. Different teachers provided the following insights: “I wish there were more time and training available for our paraeducators”; “I train them ‘on the job’ as well as I can, but I have no control over their formal training”; “I’m not responsible for extra training. I share what I know with the [paraeducator] in my room. I don’t have the authority to send them to training”; “The district should provide more training to paraprofessionals.” These

inconsistencies appeared to stem from the lack of clarity in the teacher supervisory role (see Table 4). Overall, the data indicated that teachers felt they understood their supervisory role, but administrators felt less confident that teachers understood their supervisory roles.

Table 4

Percent of participants who believe that teachers have a clear understanding of their responsibilities related to overseeing the work of paraeducators

	Teachers % (n)	Administrators % (n)
Strongly Disagree	0 (0)	1.6 (1)
Disagree	3.1 (2)	7.8 (5)
Neutral	12.3 (8)	17.2 (11)
Agree	43.1 (28)	54.7 (35)
Strongly Agree	41.5 (27)	18.8 (13)

Rating scales within the survey also sought to understand supervisory practices of teachers in the area of observations and providing feedback to paraeducators. In these areas there was some disagreement among teachers, administrators, and paraeducators. When provided with the statement “I conduct observations of paraeducators as they work with students.” 43% of teachers indicated they did this most days or everyday. However, administrators did not feel this was done as often: 34% of administrators indicated teachers never conduct observations. Similarly, when asked about feedback practices with paraeducators, teachers consistently indicated they provided feedback at high levels (see Table 5). However, administrators and paraeducators did not feel feedback occurred at these same levels.

Table 5

Percent of participants who believe that teachers provide feedback to paraeducators regarding their performance

	Teachers % (n)	Administrators % (n)	Paraeducators % (n)
Never	9.4 (6)	15.4 (10)	21.2 (7)
Some Days	42.2 (27)	53.8 (35)	54.5 (18)
Most Days	28.1 (18)	18.5 (12)	15.2 (5)
Everyday	20.3 (13)	12.3 (8)	9.1 (3)

Key Findings: Paraeducator Training

- Policies and practices in Michigan related to paraeducator training vary widely across schools and school districts.
- There is a clear lack of administrative support, funding, and time allocation for paraeducator training.

- Teachers are unprepared and struggle in their supervisory/training roles with paraeducators.

Paraeducator Evaluations

In the area of formal evaluation, participants provided a general consensus that formal evaluations usually occur only once a year at the end of the year, and are conducted by the principal or other administrator. In many cases, paraeducators received feedback via mail only after the school year was over. Often, paraeducators and teachers stated that paraeducators were not evaluated formally, or that they were unaware of who conducted the evaluation. One paraeducator described: "There isn't a formal evaluation. Your evaluation is mailed to you over the summer. Last year I never received an evaluation." When a formal evaluation process was in place, some administrators, teachers, and paraeducators described the evaluation as a basic observation that produced a written report. In some but not all cases this also included a small verbal discussion between the paraeducator and evaluator. Administrators indicated frustration with the lack of paraeducator specific evaluation tools, and as a result often used teacher specific evaluation tools for paraeducators. Administrators and teachers also indicated that the policies, procedures, and guidelines for paraeducator evaluation were specific to each district. Some participants reported specific district evaluation policies for paraeducators, while others reported no district policies for paraeducator evaluation and a lack of knowledge of the evaluation process.

Many administrators discussed concern that paraeducators received the least amount of time and consideration in their evaluations, due to the many other responsibilities and evaluations that administrators have with other educational staff. One administrator stated "since principals have been required to now evaluate all teachers every year, [paraeducator evaluations have] been pushed aside...It seems only when problems develop is evaluation considered." When asked about paraeducator evaluation, another administrator simply said he had "too many teacher evaluations to make this a realistic option."

Another important finding highlighted in the data across all participant groups was the lack of teacher participation and transparency in the evaluation process. Administrators, teachers, and paraeducators all pointed out that although the teacher supervisors spent the most time with paraeducators, they had little involvement during the evaluation process, and if they did provide input or feedback during the evaluation process, it was provided directly to the administrator and not to the paraeducator. This lack of involvement and transparency in the evaluation process was further highlighted by another teacher who indicated that the evaluation is "performed by the principal independently, results are shared only. Input is given only after the observation." However, some teachers discussed how they found it hard to be a part of the evaluation process due to the close working relationship they have with the paraeducators. One teacher stated: "I do not do evaluations. I can say it is hard to give feedback because of hurt feelings on the part of the paraeducator...A lot depends on the personalities involved and the level of trust".

Key Findings: Paraeducator Evaluation

- Evaluations most often occur yearly at the end of the year, and conducted by the principal or other administrator, and most often a yield written report sometimes with an accompanying verbal discussion of performance.
- Lack of transparency in evaluation procedures
- There is a lack of tools to support paraeducator evaluation, leading administrators to often use teacher evaluation tools.
- Supervising teachers are often not involved or only indirectly involved in the paraeducator evaluation process.

Benefits of Paraeducators

Administrators, teachers, and paraeducators all highlighted important benefits of paraeducator for students with disabilities. The most common benefit was that paraeducators support inclusion for students with disabilities and help them achieve success. For example, one administrator highlighted that paraeducators allow students with disabilities “to participate in general education classes with less frustration” and to “learn at their level while being exposed to grade level content.” A teacher stated that “the biggest benefit in providing [paraeducator] support is allowing students to find more success in the general education setting that they wouldn't otherwise experience.” Another teacher noted “increased social interactions between student and peers.” These supports led to “increased student performance and self-esteem.” One paraeducator noted the most rewarding part of the position was “see[ing] the progress [students] make.”

Inclusion is important not just for students with disabilities, but also for typically developing children. Exposure to children with disabilities supports compassion and empathy. One paraeducator highlighted this benefit: “It is amazing to see how general education students view children with disabilities. They include them in everything and want to help them all the time! If others don't understand and make fun of them, we work through it and work together to figure out how to include the kids in some way. Students absolutely look at the teacher and paraeducator for direction on how to treat these kids, they emulate us many times. We must be aware that we are huge role models to the students!”

The second benefit that was commonly noted was paraeducator support to teachers, both special education and general education, to manage classrooms, behavior challenges, and allow for individualized instruction. One teacher said: “the extra support is so valuable. I cannot tell you how wonderful it is to have an extra set of hands helping out.” Paraeducators “allow the teacher to focus on the whole class rather than one student taking the majority of their time.” Paraeducators also identified one-on-one support for the students as an important benefit they provide: “students who require one-on-one support are able to receive that help.”

Administrators, teachers, and paraeducators all identified several other benefits of paraeducator supports in schools. They noted that paraeducators provide vital behavioral

management for students because they can “consistently address behavioral concerns” and “deescalate behavioral problems before they become safety hazards.” Such support allows teachers to focus on all the students they are responsible for, allowing “increased learning time/increased student academic success.” Paraeducators also provide support for basic needs in feeding and personal hygiene for students with disabilities, which fosters long-term independence.

Paraeducators noted their role as an advocate for students as an important benefit, although administrators and teachers did not note this as a benefit. Many children with disabilities have “not yet mastered self-advocacy skills” and paraeducators can support development of those skills and step in as an advocate when the student is unable to have his or her needs met. Two paraeducators also noted the important role of acting as a linguistic bridge for students. Some students are nonverbal or partially verbal, and in these cases the paraeducator may act as an interpreter for the student’s nonverbal communication, such as between English and American Sign Language. In other cases, the paraeducator is responsible for supporting the child’s use of a communication device, including programming pages to “provide various choices, from test questions to lunch options.”

Administrators and teachers both noted the benefit of flexibility. Paraeducators have “schedules and responsibilities that are flexible”, which “allows them to step in and out of different situations as students need it.” Paraeducators can move to wherever support is needed by, for example, taking a student struggling with behavior for a therapeutic walk while the teacher continues teaching in the classroom. However, paraeducators did not recognize this flexibility as a benefit, but instead as a challenge. Some paraeducators felt that the flexibility in their work created opportunities for abuse and expectations that paraeducators perform inappropriate roles within the school setting. For example, one paraeducator stated that administrators “will want to use you as a sub in classrooms in the absence of the teacher. Not cool.”

Key Findings: Paraeducator Benefits

- Paraeducators support the inclusion of students with disabilities, leading to increased student performance and social interactions for students with disabilities, and increased compassion and empathy among students without disabilities.
- Paraeducators advocate and support the development of advocacy skills in students with disabilities.
- Paraeducators support teachers in classroom management and support behavioral management for students with behavior challenges.
- Paraeducators provide individualized instruction to students.
- Paraeducators allow for flexibility in the delivery of educational services, although the flexibility comes with a potential for abuse.

Challenges of Paraeducators

Administrators, teachers, and paraeducators also identified a number of challenges. Consistent with previous research, all three groups noted low pay as a substantial challenge. One paraeducator said “I could get a job at McDonalds making what I make after 15 years” in the school system. The low pay is often accompanied by no benefits and/or strict limits on hours to ensure that the paraeducators are not eligible for benefits. One paraeducator described the pay as insufficient to provide a living wage. Low pay led to many ancillary challenges, including “excessive turnover”, difficulty “keeping quality people”, and a “shortage” of paraeducators. Administrators noted additional problems with recruitment; one said, “The pay is so low that it is difficult to find quality candidates to work with our neediest students.”

Administrators, teachers, and paraeducators also noted lack of training as a major challenge. Because of limits in hours and pay, there were few opportunities for paraeducators to receive necessary training. One administrator said, “There is never enough time to provide training between teachers and paraeducators.” The lack of training can lead to serious concerns when supporting individual students. As one teacher put it, “Paraeducators receive little training. They usually have no prior knowledge about the student they will be working with until a couple days before school begins.” The lack of training is associated with concerns about appropriate behavior management for difficult students. A teacher said, “I would LOVE for them to have more knowledge of the different disabilities. I would also love to provide more formal training with behavior management strategies and academic training.”

Another common challenge was the lack of clear roles. Because paraeducators can serve in many capacities, there can easily be confusion and disagreement about the administrator, teacher, and paraeducator roles and expectations. This concern was identified by many teachers and paraeducators, but less often by administrators. However, one administrator said, “Sometimes paraeducators overstep boundaries because they don’t understand their roles clearly.” One teacher noted that “When everyone’s on the same page, the classroom is very effective. If teachers and paraeducators are not working well together, it can make for a hostile environment that adversely affects student progress.” This was echoed by a paraeducator who pointed to “conflicting information about how things are supposed to be handled. What are my specific duties and how much support needs to be given within the guidelines of the IEP?”

Administrators and paraeducators also recognized the inherent difficulty of the job. Being a paraeducator is physically demanding. One paraeducator said she was “exhausted at the end of the day.” The job can include undesirable tasks like toileting, and as one administrator noted, “sometimes severely behaviorally impaired students injure paraeducators.”

A common complaint from administrators and teachers was the lack of paraeducator professionalism. Multiple administrators indicated “attendance and punctuality” as a

“challenge with paraeducators.” Several administrators noted challenges with confidentiality. Paraeducators tend to be drawn from the area in which the school is located, and have close ties to the community. As one administrator stated, “the line between neighbor, friend, and professional gets blurred.” Similarly, a teacher stated that “I have had [paraeducators] in the past violate confidentiality. We live in a small community and student privacy must be maintained.”

Besides low compensation and the difficulty of the job, paraeducators also experienced negative work environments. The negativity can come from increasing need without increasing staffing or pay. One paraeducator said, “there are just so many needs, and we seem to have more and more students every year with special needs. It’s easy to get frustrated by the end of the work day.” Paraeducators often receive little recognition for their hard work: “another challenge is the lack of respect and appreciation from some teachers and administration...a lot of what we do goes unnoticed and is not acknowledged. As paras we are undervalued by some as to the extent of our abilities.” Paraeducators often do not feel like they are treated as valuable and knowledgeable members of the educational team. They “don’t get included in meetings that involve the students [they] work directly with.” Another paraeducator emphasized: “I am the person in the trenches doing the work every day and getting ...little chance to give input.”

Key Findings: Paraeducator Challenges

- Paraeducator pay, hours, and benefits do not match the demands of the job, resulting in difficulty with recruiting, high turnover, and a shortage of paraeducators.
- Administrators note issues with paraeducator professionalism, including attendance, punctuality, and confidentiality.
- There is a lack of clarity about team roles related to paraeducators.
- Paraeducators lack training to support their duties with students with disabilities.
- Paraeducators lack recognition for their work and contributions to the education of students with disabilities.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR MICHIGAN

Practices to Improve Paraeducator Work Conditions

Based on the results from this study there are a number of policy steps that should be taken to improve paraeducator working conditions overall.

- Policies should be put in to place to improve the pay for paraeducators across Michigan. This includes policies that ensure benefits for each position, with no option for hourly caps to avoid providing benefits to paraeducators. We recognize that financial resources are limited in schools currently, but the lack of pay and benefits will continue to lead to poorer paraeducator recruitment, retention, and training, and poorer student outcomes.

- Districts and intermediate units should consider policies, if not already in place, to provide substitutes for paraeducator positions during absences. This will likely necessitate appropriate pay for these positions as well. A permanent roaming paraeducator substitute position is a potential option.
- Policies should be put in place to allow professional pathways for paraeducators. This might include a certification requirement, linked to higher pay when certification is reached, or paraeducator to teacher pathways.
- Policies must be put into place to ensure teachers and paraeducators have dedicated time to meet together, with compensation provided for both teachers and paraeducators. This might include involvement of paraeducators in IEP meetings, or regular meetings for continued training and feedback to paraeducators.
- State policies should provide clear definitions for team roles related to paraeducators. This might include a mandate for clear and specific written roles and responsibilities for each position at the district level for paraeducators, and for administrators and teachers regarding paraeducator supervision and evaluation duties. Written roles and responsibilities should be updated at least yearly or as assignments are changed during the year. Vague statements such as “additional duties as assigned” should be avoided.
- Policies should be put into place to involve teachers in paraeducator hiring and assignment. This will help ensure a good paraeducator/teacher match within positions and supervisory relationships.
- Policies should be put into place to prevent the removal of paraeducators when other needs arise in the school. Schools should implement other approaches to address these challenges that utilize existing substitute or teacher positions within the school/district.
- Policies should be implemented to support scheduling of paraeducators and ensure appropriate breaks and support for strenuous tasks (e.g., use of dual lift, rotation of roles to facilitate breaks)
- Policies should be put into place to improve the visibility and recognition of paraeducators in schools. This might include a paraeducator of the year award at the state, district, or school level.

Paraeducator Training and Supervision

Given the wide variance from the survey data that was apparent from district to district, Michigan would benefit from statewide policies to provide uniformity in paraeducator training and supervision. This should include the following policies:

- Michigan would benefit from statewide guidelines and mandates for paraeducators to ensure more training for all paraeducators. Policies should mandate training for all paraeducators before entering the classroom, yearly training before the beginning of the school year, and pathways to paraeducator certification that is linked to improved pay. Additionally, mandated training throughout the year specific to individual paraeducator roles are needed, especially in the areas of behavior management, child specific and disability specific needs. One way to support this might be the creation and funding of a mandatory statewide

paraeducator conference in the summer to ensure access to high quality training for all paraeducators across Michigan.

- Policies should be outlined to clarify the roles of team members related to paraeducator training and supervision. These policies should be transparent to all team members to avoid the situation detailed by one paraeducator participant: “I unfortunately do not know what the policies and procedures are related to paraeducators.” Policies should include clear recognition of the paraeducator as a core member of the educational team for students with disabilities.
- Finally, policies should be put into place for all teachers and administrators to ensure pre-service preparation to support their roles with paraeducators in educational settings.

Paraeducator Evaluation

The current evaluation process for paraeducators is school- or district-specific and much variability exists, but in general paraeducators are not receiving evaluations or timely feedback on their progress. Therefore, the following policies are recommended:

1. Policies should outline the frequency and timing of evaluations. Based on the suggestions from participants, ideally evaluations would occur more than once a year and would be conducted in a timeframe that allows paraeducators to implement feedback. Policy should also be created to provide guidance on the format of paraeducator evaluations. This might include observation of paraeducators in the classroom and written and verbal feedback. Administrators indicated that “there are no clear cut rubrics to evaluate” paraeducators. As such, it would be important to create evaluation tools that are specific to paraeducators, so administrators do not inappropriately evaluate paraeducators with teacher evaluation tools. One administrator emphasized: “our evaluation tool is in need of a major overhaul. Because of its limited scope, it creates a challenge in being able to evaluate the professional growth of each [paraeducator] from year to year.”
2. Along with the creation of a statewide policy regarding the evaluation process and format, there also needs to be a clearly stated policy in regards to the roles of each team member within the evaluation. Many administrators indicated challenges with evaluation since they were not there to regularly observe their work. However, the teacher supervisor who interacts with the paraeducator on a daily basis was often not involved in the evaluation, or only asked informally for their input. The roles and expectations of administrators, teachers, and paraeducators throughout the process should be clearly stated, and teachers should be more be expected to engage in the evaluation process.

Finally, the paraeducator evaluation process should be transparent. Teachers and paraeducators both indicated that they either did not know what the process was, or they were only aware of the process after the evaluation occurred. Policies should clearly state the evaluation process and the process should be provided to all team members.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

While the broad policy changes we recommend will take substantial time, resources, and legislation to implement we recommend two areas for immediate action. First, a committee should be formed at the state level to facilitate policy discussions related to paraeducator employment, utilization, training, and supervision across Michigan. This committee should include a variety of stakeholders such as researchers, paraeducators, teachers, administrators, parents, related service providers, individuals with disabilities, etc. One of the first actions of such a committee would be to draft paraeducator policies for Michigan and distribute to intermediate units/educational service agencies, and districts for feedback. Secondly, the state should develop an informational document with recommendations for paraeducators related to training, supervision, and evaluation to disseminate to intermediate units, districts, and schools across the state.

CONCLUSION

This study clearly highlights the lack of consistency across Michigan when it comes to the training, supervision, and evaluation, of paraeducators. It is obvious from the experiences of administrators, teachers, and paraeducators that the state of Michigan would benefit from clearly stated policies and procedures for paraeducators to streamline training opportunities, preservice training for administrators and teachers regarding their supervisory roles, and establish uniform evaluation procedures. Statewide policies in these specific areas would create cohesion around the use and roles of paraeducators. It is obvious that paraeducators are an extremely useful and important piece of the educational system, and defining these policies and making them statewide and available to all education personnel will ensure that paraeducators are used within the context that they would be most beneficial.

REFERENCES

- American Federation of Teachers. (1998). *Standards for a profession*. AFT, Retrieved from <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/psrpstandards1998.pdf>
- Beale, E. W. (2001). Analysis of state standards for paraprofessionals -Statistical data included.
Journal of Instructional Psychology, 28, 244-2.
- 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.
- Chopra, R. V., & French, N. K. (2004). Paraeducator relationships with parents of students with significant disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*(4), 240-251.
- Chopra, R. V., Sandoval-Lucero, E., & French, N. K. (2011). Effective supervision of paraeducators: Multiple benefits and outcomes. *National Teacher Education Journal, 4*(2), 15-26.
- Council for Exceptional Children. (2015). *What every special educator must know: Professional ethics and standards* (7th ed.). Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- Douglas, S.N., Chapin, S.E., & Nolan, J.F. (2016). Special education teachers' experiences supporting and supervising paraeducators: Implications for special and general education settings. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 39*(1), 60-74.
- Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 20 U.S.C. § 1177.
- Fisher, M., & Pleasants, S. L. (2012). Roles, responsibilities, and concerns of paraeducators: Findings from a statewide survey. *Remedial and Special Education, 33*(5), 1-11.
- Gaylord, V., Wallace, T., Pickett, A. L., & Likins, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Impact: Feature issue on paraeducators supporting students with disabilities and at-risk, 15*(2). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration.
- Giangreco, M. F., & Broer, S. M. (2005). Questionable utilization of paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: Are we addressing symptoms or causes? *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 20*(1), 10-26.
- Giangreco, M. F., Broer, S. M., & Edelman, S. W. (2002). "That was then, this is now!" Paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Exceptionality, 10*(1), 47-64.
- 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.

- Griffin-Shirley, N., & Matlock, D. (2004). Paraprofessionals speak out: A survey. *RE:view: Rehabilitation and Education for Blindness and Visual Impairment*, 36, 127-136.
- Hoffman, L., & Sable, J. (2006). Public Elementary and Secondary Students, Staff, Schools, and School Districts: School Year 2003-TAB. NCES 2006-307. *National Center for Education Statistics*.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1400.
- International Reading Association. (2010). *Standards for reading professionals*. IRA, Retrieved from <https://literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/standards/standards-for-reading-professionals/standards-2010-role-1>
- Kent-Walsh, J., & Light, J. (2003). General education teachers' experiences with inclusion of students who use augmentative and alternative communication. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 19(2), 104-124.
- Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (2016) Rule 340.
- Morgan, J., Ashbaker, B. Y., & Young, J. R. (2001). *Teaming, supervision, and evaluation: Teacher-paraeducator team perspectives of their teaching*. Paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education in Dallas, TX.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs*. NAEYC. Retrieved from <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ProfPrepStandards09.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics (2013). *Characteristics of public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States: Results from the 2011-2012 schools and staffing survey*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013312.pdf>
- National Education Association. (2005). *NEA paraeducator handbook*. NEA. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/05espparahandbook.pdf>
- Patterson, K. B. (2006). Roles and Responsibilities of Paraprofessionals: In Their Own Words. *Teaching Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(5), n5.
- Pickett, A. L. (1986). Paraprofessionals in Special Education: The state of the art. *National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Special Education*.
- Riggs, C. G., & Mueller, P. H. (2001). Employment and utilization of paraeducators in inclusive settings. *The Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 54-62.

Informing the Debate

Michigan Applied Public Policy Research
(MAPPR)

Institute for Public Policy and Social Research

www.ippsr.msu.edu

@IPPSR

Michigan State University