

Transition of Paraeducators to Special Education Teachers: Successes and Challenges

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The Paraprofessional Research and Resource Center, The PAR²A Center

- Grant funded research and training center
- Concerned with the issues of employment, training and career development of paraeducators.
 - Training, Career Ladder and Research grants

Purpose of the Session

This session will provide an overview of successful paraeducator-to-special education teacher career ladder programs from two perspectives: research and practice.

Both perspectives provide the opportunity to learn more about designing and implementing successful career ladder projects that help to put more paraeducators into the teacher recruitment pipeline to teach in high-need schools and hard-to-fill positions.

Hard to fill Teaching Positions

- Attempts to increase the supply of teachers for high need districts and high-need subjects have fallen short
 - Shortages continue in poor and rural districts as well as alternative schools and facilities that serve students with special needs
- “No Dream Denied” -The shortage is only a symptom of the real problem, teacher retention (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future - NCTAF, 2003).

Why Recruit Paraeducators as Future Teachers ?

Paraeducators represent a promising source of prospective new teachers because they are:

- Already an integral part of the instructional process – know the challenges
- Live in the community and are culturally more similar to students
- Work experience is mostly in shortage areas
- Highly likely to enter and stay in teaching and rated more highly by principals than other first year teachers
- More willing to take positions in target area schools and more likely to remain

(Clewell & Villegas, 2001, Darling-Hammond, 2000; Nunez & Fernandez, 2006; Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004; Villegas & Davis, 2007)

Barriers to Paraeducators Completing College

- Academic
- Social
- Financial
- School Site Personnel and School District
Bureaucracy

Academic Barriers

- Self-doubt, fear of failing
- High school grades were lackluster
- Took some college, but didn't excel
- Traditional teacher prep programs lack flexibility
- Long time since being in school
- Poor study skills
- Poor time management skills
- Test anxiety
- Technology anxiety

Social Barriers

- Family time, commitments and expectations
- Demands of full-time job and part-time studies may create family tensions
- Work schedule
- Feelings of isolation in university setting

Financial Barriers

- Paraeducators are not highly paid.
- Because of their financial situation, paraeducators clearly need help to continue their education.
- Financial aid, however, is not easily available for undergraduates.
- They are hesitant to take on more debts.

School Site Personnel and School District Bureaucracy

- Paraeducators often treated as "second-class citizens"
- Site administrators and teachers may indicate willingness to support paraeducators to pursue teaching career, but when the time comes for teaching assistants to leave to attend class, this support dissipates

Components of Successful Career Ladder Programs

- **Social**

Cohort groups, family support activities, mentor teachers, school district partners, professional development, carpooling, babysitting, personal counseling

- **Financial**

Tuition, students fees, books, living stipends, paid student teaching, employment alternatives

- **Academic**

Basic skills assessment, tutoring, gradual coursework introduction, academic advising, field experiences, disability services, test preparation, on-site classes

Career Ladder Projects at The PAR²A Center

- CBETT and CBETT-II (1999-2008)
Collaborative Bilingual Education
Teacher Training Projects
- **TOP-SET (2004-2008)**
**Transition of Paraeducators to
Special Education Teachers**
- **TOP-SET *ALP (2007-2011)**
**through Alternative Licensure
Program**

Statewide Networking and Community Outreach

- State Department of Education
- School Districts - **53**
- Alternative Schools/Agencies or Facilities and charter schools -**27**
- Boards of Cooperative Education Services - **5**
- Two and four year colleges - **13**
- Alternative Licensure Programs - **5**

Selection Criteria

- Not based on GPA alone
- Letters of recommendation from teachers and administrators who:
 - Are Aware of paraeducator's competence in classrooms
 - Assure that applicants have demonstrated potential as future teachers
- Paraeducator applicant's quality of written expression in a personal statement expressing their intent to become a special education teacher
- Special Education director signs a nomination form with assurance of employing or considering the candidates for open position in the districts

Full Array of Support Services

We addressed the social, academic, and financial needs of adult, nontraditional students to assure participant success!

Services included:

- ***Counseling / Advising*** at several different stages and levels
- ***Cohort groups*** – learning communities
- ***Annual Student Meeting and Family Activity*** – sharing and celebration of candidate success
- ***Financial Assistance*** - tuition, fees, testing, stipends for books and participation in professional conferences.
- ***Professional Development Opportunities*** – as attendees as well as presenters

Full Array of Support Services...continued

- **Tutorial Support** - referrals to colleges' tutoring centers as well as personal tutors for second language learners for courses and test prep
- **Flexible Course Scheduling** - to accommodate students work schedules in schools.
- **Variable course offerings/structure** - classroom, online, guided independent study, accelerated classes
- **Program Coaches** - in addition to program faculty to ensure individualized site based program to address candidate's needs
- **Mentor Teachers** - direction, encouragement and tutorial support.
- **Project Consortium** -representatives from school districts, colleges and universities, state department of education and coordinators of career ladder projects, serves as a project advisory body that guided all aspects of the project.

Monitoring Quality of Project Services

Summative and Formative evaluation: Integral part of the projects

- *Evaluation goal 1: Document participants' progress toward completion of the coursework and licensure requirements*
 - *Extensive data bases*
- *Evaluation goal 2: Determine teaching quality, effectiveness of training, and project services.*
 - *Participant survey*
 - *Phone interviews*
 - *Mentor and coach evaluations of the candidate*
 - *Candidate evaluation of the mentor and coach*
 - *Portfolio review*
- *Evaluation goal 3: Track the retention and success of program graduates in instructional setting, serving students with special needs, three years beyond the term of the grant*
 - *Annual update from the district and building administrators*

Program Completion and Retention

- **72** paraeducators have transitioned to special education teacher positions through our project.
- **28** have pursued Master's degree.
- **90%** are working in the districts/schools that nominated them.

Selected Quotes from Career Ladder Participants

“Participation in this program has allowed me to achieve my goal of attaining my teaching degree. Without the financial support provided, as a divorced mother of three, living in a rural community, I could not have attempted this degree.”

Selected Quotes from Career Ladder Participants

"It has given me the opportunity to realize my dream of becoming a special education teacher. With all of the support I was able to do this now not down the road. My students have been making gains all year long with me."

Selected Quotes from Career Ladder Participants

“I am gaining more knowledge and respect for the position I am planning on taking. My family sees me achieving success toward a goal I have had for some time. The children I work with are gaining from what I am learning in class and able to implement.”

Selected Quotes from Career Ladder Participants

“I don't have any feedback other than positive. I have to share with you that the learning curve the first couple of weeks felt like it's absolutely vertical. The challenges of learning as you're going, preparing lesson plans, learning the lesson plans, and balancing emotion and mental overload are daunting. On the other hand the support, encouragement, and praise you get as you're going along help fuel the drive to forge”

Selected Quotes from Career Ladder Participants

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Questions and Discussion

- If you currently have a Paraprofessional to Teacher career ladder program, please share with us your experience & challenges?
- If you currently don't have a Paraprofessional to Teacher career ladder program, what information from this presentation will be helpful for you to create such as program?

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