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# EXCEPTIONAL NEWS



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## Paraprofessional Training Project

By Robert L. Morgan, Gregg Gassman,  
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Melinda returned from her first day of school only to hear the inexorable question from her mother: "How was school today, dear?" Melinda assured her mother that all was well. As she headed outside to play with some new friends, her mother asked, "How was your teacher, Ms. Smith?" Melinda grabbed a cookie and related that Ms. Smith was fine, and so was her other teacher, Ms. Richmond. "Wait!" her mother called. "Two teachers?" "Yes," Melinda replied, opening the door. Perplexed, her mother queried further. Why two teachers? Wasn't one enough? Melinda, with growing impatience, explained that Ms. Smith was, of course, the classroom teacher, and that Ms. Richmond was also a teacher, or some kind of "helper."

Melinda's synopsis of the role of a paraprofessional educator like Ms.

Richmond seems as clear and concise as most. Indeed, the role of paraprofessional educators (or classroom aides, educational technicians, teaching assistants, para-educators, etc.) is sometimes vague and ill-defined. While paraprofessional educators have been invaluable resource personnel in special education classrooms over the past 20 years, their training, certification standards, qualifications, and skills vary considerably.

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## Developing State Standards for Special Education Paraprofessionals

By Alan Hofmeister

This project was conceived as a direct response to a legislative request for state standards for paraprofessionals. For the past three months, USOE (Utah State Office of Education), school districts, and higher education staffs have been discussing goals, activities, and priorities in response to the legislative request for these standards. Based on these discussions, a three-year project was initiated.

### Purpose

The end product of the three-year project will be a pilot-tested plan entitled "A Blueprint for Standards for Special Education Paraprofessionals in Utah Schools." The standards will clarify the goals and associated resources for a

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## Training Project

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Some paraprofessional educators participate in extensive training on techniques of instruction, characteristics of students with disabilities, and related matters; others learn as they go. Some are certified based on their state's standards for paraprofessionals; others work in states without standards. Some may have career advancement opportunities; others have none. Melinda's mother will probably have additional questions. Many questions remain unanswered.

### Towards Systematic Paraprofessional Educator Training

In a recent survey of rural special education programs in the western region, Passaro, Pickett, Latham, and Wang (1991) found that over 90% of paraprofessional educators wanted more training in areas such as managing behavior, understanding students with disabilities, and specifying the roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessional. Moreover, 16% reported that they had received no training whatsoever to assist them in their current positions. Paraprofessionals working in other areas have similar training needs (Moore, McCuller, & Salzberg, 1988; Morgan, 1990).

A four-year project recently implemented by Utah State University's Department of Special Education is designed to address the training needs of paraprofessional educators. The Paraprofessional Educator Curriculum Project is developing a video-assisted curriculum to provide a paraprofessional with the needed skills to deliver instruction and to be an

effective member of the child study team. A consortium of national experts, district representatives, classroom teachers, and paraprofessional educators is identifying the curriculum content. The curriculum will be designed to teach skills that are commonly required of paraprofessional educators working with children and youth with disabilities. Skills may include delivering instruction, managing behavior, preparing class materials, supervising students, understanding the roles and responsibilities of other personnel in special education, and maintaining ethical standards.

The curriculum will combine print and video material. Print materials will provide information on a variety of topics and skills, including instructional and behavior management procedures, the IEP process, and communicating with teachers and parents. Video materials, which may be delivered through either videodisc or VHS

formats, will show the appropriate applications of skills in various classroom situations. The viewer will watch simulations, make decisions regarding appropriate applications, or solve common problems arising in school contexts. The paraprofessional may then apply these skills in role-play activities or other in-class exercises. After reviewing print and video material, the paraprofessional educator will apply the procedures with pupils in the classrooms while receiving supervision and feedback from the trainer or supervising teacher. Finally, the paraprofessional will demonstrate competence in performance-based assessments conducted in the classrooms. At this stage, the emphasis will be placed on having the paraprofessional educator repeatedly practice and demonstrate newly-learned skills.

The curriculum is being developed in five stages. First, a national advisory board is determin-

ing the curriculum content. Second, project staff will develop, evaluate, and revise the print and video material. Third, local school districts in Utah will field test components of the curriculum. The district personnel will provide valuable feedback on how to revise curriculum components to make them (a) more effective and efficient in training paraprofessional educators and (b) more practical for application in the classroom. Fourth, districts in two other states will evaluate the complete curriculum package. Feedback from these districts will shape the final version of the curriculum. Fifth, after final revisions, project staff will disseminate the curriculum nationally. While portions of the curriculum may be available within two years, the complete curriculum will be finalized and disseminated in 1994-1995.

This project is funded through a grant awarded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services of the U. S. Department of Education. The principal investigators are Dr. Charles Salzberg of the Department of Special Education and Dr. Sarah Rule of the Outreach and Dissemination Division, Center for Persons with Disabilities, Utah State University. Robert Morgan is Project Coordinator. This videodisc project follows two similar projects directed by these investigators. In the first project, a videodisc-assisted curriculum was developed to teach instructional skills to preservice-level teacher trainees. In the second project, a videodisc-assisted curriculum was designed to help inservice teachers address behavioral and learning problems of at-risk students in their classrooms.

Project staff will coordinate

activities with another paraprofessional educator training project currently being conducted at Utah State University (described in this issue) so that the resulting training materials are comprehensive and well-integrated. Collectively, training materials from the paraprofessional educator training projects will provide consumers with valuable resources and extensive training opportunities. These resources and materials can be readily adapted to classrooms serving students with disabilities and across numerous, broad-based applications.

The paraprofessional educator curriculum produced by this project should assist both new and experienced paraprofessionals. It should equip them with basic skills to work more effectively with a variety of students having disabilities. Since teachers, parents, and students like Melinda rely heavily on paraprofessional educators, this curriculum will help ensure that high quality instruction is provided. ■

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## Training and Support Needs of Paraprofessionals in Rural Special Education Settings

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### Abstract

Over 1,000 surveys were distributed to randomly selected paraprofessionals, teachers, related service personnel, and administrators throughout three of the nation's most sparsely populated states to study the training and support needs of paraprofessionals in rural settings. The need for additional training is apparent. Over 90% of the paraprofessionals surveyed requested assistance in behavior management, understanding students with disabilities, and defining the role of paraprofessionals. Respondents also need further training in various instructional strategies and the IEP process.

During the last decade, the number of special educators graduating from personnel preparation programs across the country has decreased by 35% (Clearinghouse for Professionals in Special Education, 1989). Furthermore, 10-15% of the special educators in some states are leaving the profession (Metzke, 1989). In the 1985-1986 school year U.S. schools were short 27,474 special education teachers

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