
Paraprofessional Turnover and Retention in Inclusive Programs

Hidden Costs and Promising Practices

GAIL GHERE AND JENNIFER YORK-BARR

ABSTRACT

In recent years, education policies have focused on raising the standards for paraprofessional qualifications, supervision, and development. Given the increasingly problematic rates of paraprofessional turnover, focusing on the retention of effective paraprofessionals is of equal importance. In an effort to understand the reasons for and costs of turnover and to identify strategies that increase the likelihood of retention, 53 district and school employees from six schools in three school districts were interviewed. The findings indicated that the costs of turnover are felt at every level within a school district: central office, school, team, and student. Also suggested were strategies for increasing retention, including ensuring a threshold wage, focusing on job matching early in the employment process, providing ongoing support and direction, and developing a team culture in which paraprofessionals feel valued.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, with its reauthorization in 2004, compelled states and districts to create personnel development and supervision systems to support the paraprofessional workforce.

The literature on paraprofessionals has grown significantly since the mid-1990s, increasing our understanding of roles and responsibilities (Carroll, 2001; Minondo, Meyer, & Xin, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997), supervision and development (French, 1997; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996; York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghere, 2005), determining paraprofessional support for students (Freschi, 1999; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999; Mueller & Murphy, 2001), and preparing licensed staff to supervise paraprofessionals (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). Research gaps remain regarding the effectiveness of using paraprofessionals to improve student outcomes; the ways in which paraprofessionals are best hired, assigned, and supervised (Blalock, 1991; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001); and the effects of turnover.

This study focuses on the issues of paraprofessional turnover and retention. Given the size of the paraprofessional workforce and the central role that these employees often play in educational programs, the ramifications of turnover on students and entire programs are potentially enormous. This is especially true in inclusive programs, where paraprofessionals play essential roles in supporting students with disabilities (French, 1999; French & Pickett, 1997; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001) but often do not work immediately

DESCRIBED METAPHORICALLY AS A "REVOLVING door," paraprofessional turnover and concerns about its effects have been noted for 2 decades (French & Chopra, 1999; Frith & Mims, 1985; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002). It is estimated that approximately 290,000 special education paraprofessionals are employed in schools, with many playing an increasingly prominent role in the instruction of students with disabilities (Likins, 2002). This growth is occurring despite controversy regarding the desirability of placing greater reliance on paraprofessionals to provide educational services for students with disabilities (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). The

proximal to special education teachers for much of the school day (Ghere, 2003).

The two primary research questions are as follows:

1. What is the impact of paraprofessional turnover on districts, schools, teams, and students?
2. What strategies do districts and schools use to attract and retain a quality paraprofessional workforce?

The findings begin to fill the gap in the research literature related to the costs and impact of paraprofessional turnover. Employee turnover and retention are, in essence, opposite sides of the same coin. The organizational costs related to turnover are the reverse of the gains an organization receives from retaining quality employees. It is estimated that the cost of replacing an employee varies between 70% and 200% of the departing employee's salary (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2001). Three types of costs are incurred when an employee leaves an organization (Harvard Management Update, 2000). First, there are the direct replacement expenses for recruiting, interviewing, and training each new employee. Second, there are the indirect costs during the transition period that affect the workload, morale, and productivity of the remaining employees, as well as customer satisfaction. In schools, these "customers" could be conceived as the students, parents, and educators who rely on paraprofessional support for meeting student needs. Finally, there are the costs of lost opportunities. The time and energy invested in each new hire results in lost opportunity costs because that time is not available for other organizational needs.

Another factor to consider when employees leave is the inherent loss of explicit and tacit organizational knowledge (Droege & Hoobler, 2003). *Explicit knowledge*, acquired through formal and informal training, refers to organizational policies and procedures and to the content knowledge essential to a position. *Tacit knowledge* includes insights and understandings about a job and its organizational culture that are developed through experience, observation, and conversations with colleagues. Of the two, tacit knowledge is the most challenging for new employees to gain and for organizations to replace, because it is learned through working in the organization (Droege & Hoobler, 2003; Harvard Management Update, 2000).

Limited data are available on paraprofessional turnover, due in part to inconsistencies in how districts report paraprofessional employment statistics (Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003). Early studies noted that a significant number of paraprofessionals had less than 2 (Blalock, 1991) to 4 years (Elrod, Insko, & Williams, 1993) of experience. Through follow-up with the nonrespondents to their survey, Riggs and Mueller (2001) found that more than 50% of their sample ($N = 4,201$) were no longer employed as paraprofessionals. Of the respondents still employed as paraprofessionals, 60%

had 6 or more years of experience. A smaller study of 21 general and special education paraprofessionals found that the mean tenure of the "stayers" (i.e., those who remained on the job) was 14 years, whereas the mean tenure of the "leavers" (i.e., those who had left their positions in the 2 years previous to the study) was 5.9 years (Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris, 2003). Together, these results raise the question whether the composition of the paraprofessional workforce is shifting, with a portion being relatively stable with greater longevity, whereas another portion has a high turnover rate. One of the many unknown variables is the effect of local economic conditions on these trends.

Several explanations have been offered for paraprofessional turnover, including inadequate wages, few opportunities for career advancement, and a lack of administrative support and respect (Frith & Mims, 1985; Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & Hong Bo, 1994; Pickett, 1990; Tillery et al., 2003). Ambiguity in paraprofessional roles and the resulting stress also negatively affect retention (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Giangreco et al. (2002) noted that both the frequency and timing of turnover, such as mid-year versus at the end of the school year, were issues particularly for paraprofessionals assigned to work with one student for an entire day.

Several employment strategies have been offered for increasing the likelihood of good paraprofessional hires and reducing turnover. Blalock (1991) proposed recruitment strategies, such as identifying substitute paraprofessionals and volunteers as potential applicants. The quality of the interview is considered pivotal because it presents an opportunity for increasing an applicant's understanding of the program's philosophy, the students who are served, and the roles and responsibilities of the position (Carroll, 2001). Furthermore, it creates that initial opportunity for building a relationship with the prospective employee (Blalock, 1991).

The orientation process is another occasion to be intentionally supportive of paraprofessionals (French, 1997). A layered approach includes a district-level orientation that introduces new employees to policies and procedures; a school-level orientation that includes a tour, staff introductions, and an overview of building procedures; and a direct service team orientation that, at a minimum, clarifies roles and responsibilities and student programs (Carroll, 2001). Unfortunately, many paraprofessionals do not receive any type of orientation (French, 1997). This is particularly disconcerting given that paraprofessionals view a formal orientation as a sign that they are valued and respected (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001). When paraprofessionals feel respected and supported in their work by their colleagues, a higher level of morale is evident, making turnover less likely (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Similarly, staff development has been identified as a variable that enhances paraprofessional retention and improves workforce quality, whereas a high rate of turnover adversely affects the development of a skilled paraprofessional workforce (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

METHOD

A multisite case study was designed to provide the opportunity to compare and contrast findings across the cases, thereby increasing the precision, stability, and validity of the findings and conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The bounded unit (Patton, 2002) of each case study was a school district, with a total of three school districts participating. A systems perspective (Ghere & York-Barr, 2003; Senge, 2000) was adopted, so that policies and practices at various levels of a school district (e.g., district, site, team) and their influences on paraprofessional turnover and retention could be understood.

Sample and Procedures

The purposive sample (Patton, 2002) was constructed in three stages. First, three school districts were identified. Two university researchers with extensive backgrounds in inclusive education recommended five school districts recognized as having high-quality inclusive education programs in particular schools in the respective districts. Selection was limited to midsize districts, so that policies and practices could be more reasonably tracked across different levels of a system. The criterion for deciding on just three of the five districts was the identification of both an elementary and a secondary special education teacher in each respective district who (a) was viewed as effectively directing programs that supported students with disabilities in general education classrooms for most or all of the school day; and (b) directed the work of at least two paraprofessionals. One of the five districts could not

identify both an elementary and a secondary teacher who met these criteria. Another district chose not to participate for undisclosed reasons. The remaining three districts became case study participants.

Second, six teachers (one elementary and one secondary teacher from each district) were requested to participate. All six special education teachers initially agreed to participate in the study. One teacher subsequently opted out of the study for personal reasons. That district recommended another teacher, who consented to participate. Third, key informants (Patton, 2002) were identified by the six special education teachers and by site and central administrators. These were individuals who played important roles in supporting the inclusive programs at the building and district levels in each district. All of the 53 identified informants agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1). There were six special educators, ranging in experience from 3 to 25 years, and 27 special education paraprofessionals with from less than 1 year to more than 18 years of experience; nine special education administrators; seven principals; and four special education building coordinators or lead teachers.

Setting. The three upper midwestern districts and their six schools are referred to by pseudonyms. Waterview school district is located in an out-of-state city, approximately 60 miles from a major metropolitan area, and enrolled 10,640 K-12 students, of whom 25.0% qualified for free or reduced lunch, 15.4% for special education services, and 3.0% were English language learners (ELL). Forest and Prairie school districts are suburban, located 30 miles apart on opposite sides of an urban area. The Forest district had 21,743 K-12

TABLE 1. Participants Involved in the Multisite Case Study by School District

Waterview school district		Forest school district		Prairie school district	
Title	n	Title	n	Title	n
District-level participant					
Director of student services	1	Director of SE	1	Director of student services	1
Elementary SE coordinator	1	Elementary SE coordinator	1	Elementary SE coordinator	1
Secondary SE coordinator	1	Secondary SE coordinator	1	Secondary SE coordinator	1
SE lead teacher	1				
Building-level participants					
SE teachers	2	SE teachers	2	SE teachers	2
Principals	2	Principals	2	Principals	2
Elementary assistant principal	1	Secondary SE building coordinator	1	Secondary SE lead teacher	1
Secondary SE department chair	1	Paraprofessionals	6	Paraprofessionals	6
Paraprofessionals	15				
Total	25	Total	14	Total	14

Note. N = 53. SE = special education.

students, of whom 19.4% qualified for free or reduced lunch, 9.5% for special education, and 3.9% as ELL. The Prairie district had 11,365 K-12 students, of whom 14.1% qualified for free or reduced lunch, 11.2% for special education, and 3.3% as ELL.

All three elementary schools (one in each district) served students in Grades K-6. The secondary schools included two high schools (one Grades 9-12; one 10-12) and a junior high school (Grades 7-9). Table 2 lists the overall student enrollment, special education student enrollment, and number of special education teachers and paraprofessionals in each school. In all six schools, most students with disabilities were included in general education classrooms for most or all of the day. Three of the special education teachers served students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities or autism. Their schools—two elementary and one high school—used categorical service delivery models, in which the licensure of the teachers corresponded with the students they served (e.g., teachers licensed in cognitive disabilities only taught students with cognitive disabilities). The other three special education teachers, located in one elementary and two high schools, implemented cross-categorical service delivery models. These teachers, regardless of their licensure area, served students with a range of disabilities, including mild-moderate cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities (LD), and emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).

Almost exclusively, these schools assigned paraprofessionals to programs rather than to individual students. Although some paraprofessionals were assigned to work primarily with one student for most or all of a school day, these were the exceptions. Forest school district had changed its policy a decade earlier to hire only program paraprofessionals and to eliminate the employee category for paraprofessionals who worked with individual students. This change was made to allow the reassignment of paraprofessionals if the students they supported were absent, to minimize students becoming

dependent on one adult, and to reduce constant adult presence whenever possible so that peers could be more proximal.

Procedure. The 53 key informants participated in either individual or group interviews that were conducted by the first author over a 4-month period during the second half of a school year. Administrators and teachers were interviewed individually using a semistructured interview protocol. Three semistructured interview protocols with similar content and parallel construction were developed: one for the special education directors, supervisors, and coordinators; one for the principals; and one for the special education teachers. Wording was modified to reflect respective role differences. Protocol content was based on themes identified in the literature and clustered into five areas: (a) participant's background (e.g., professional experience, interests); (b) the school and the inclusive program (e.g., school demographics, special education program organization, inclusive education description); (c) roles and responsibilities (e.g., instructional duties, typical schedule, description of collaboration and teaming with colleagues, determining level of paraprofessional support for students); (d) employing, directing, and supporting paraprofessionals (e.g., employment and orientation process, contracts, staff development, extent and reasons for turnover, differences between teacher and paraprofessional roles), and (e) system supports for inclusive education (e.g., policies and procedures, key people, resources, system challenges). All three protocols were piloted with individuals who held the same positions as the participants. Feedback was used to revise the questions and process (see Note). Administrator and coordinator interviews were conducted during the school day. The special education teachers were paid \$100 for their participation during after-school hours. Individual interviews ranged in length from 1.5 to 3 hours.

The paraprofessionals participated in structured group interviews with other paraprofessionals who worked in the

TABLE 2. Student Enrollment and Number of Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals in Each School

School	Total enrollment	Special education		
		Students	Teachers	Paraprofessionals
Waterview school district				
Streamside Elementary	736	106	8	24
Ocean High	1595	205	19	29
Forest school district				
Timberland Elementary	686	60	4	5
Woodlawn High	1764	116	9.5	8.5
Prairie school district				
Rolling Hills Elementary	631	84	11.5	32
Horizon Junior High	831	119	9	11

same school. Structured group interviews rely on the interactions among group members to create an environment where participants feel comfortable to share their ideas and perceptions about a specific topic (Kvale, 1996). The protocol focused on their (a) background (e.g., experience, education); (b) description of current position (e.g., responsibilities, schedules); (c) employment process (e.g., recruitment, interview, orientation, contracts); (d) staff development (e.g., topics, frequency, relevance); (e) supervision (e.g., supervisors, means of communication, frequency of meetings); and (f) paraprofessional turnover (e.g., extent, perceived causes). The protocol was piloted with a special education paraprofessional who was not employed by any of the participating districts. The feedback was used to develop follow-up questions that probed for greater detail.

Seven paraprofessional group interviews, each with two to five participants, lasted approximately 1.25 hours. After each question was posed to the group, participants individually responded in round-robin fashion, after which open discussion ensued, allowing all the paraprofessionals to add to their responses. As needed, the interviewer probed for clarification. Each paraprofessional was paid \$25.00 for her or his participation during after-school hours.

After each interview, the researcher reorganized her notes noting initial themes, key quotations and events, processes, strengths, and challenges. Using the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), attention was placed on identifying similarities and discrepancies across interviews. The researcher probed these areas in subsequent interviews. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. An initial coding scheme was developed by using the verbatim transcript from a pilot interview. Emergent themes from the interviews were added later to the coding scheme. Each interview was coded using NVivo (QSR International, 2000).

The data were analyzed in three stages after all of the interviews were completed. First, each interview transcript was analyzed individually. Second, data across the interviews within each school district were analyzed to develop a complete picture of the events, processes, and relationships among the factors in each district and the individual schools in that district. Finally, data from across the three cases (i.e., school districts) were analyzed to identify key findings, similarities, and differences. To minimize the potential for misinterpretation, the accuracy of the data description and analyses were intentionally addressed by (a) using verbatim transcripts; (b) following up with participants as needed to clarify data; (c) triangulating findings across the interviews within a district and across districts to identify themes and to note conflicting findings; and (d) constructing a data trail so that the findings could be rechecked or reanalyzed.

RESULTS

Two of the districts, Waterview and Forest, experienced a high level of special education paraprofessional turnover in

general, although turnover varied across schools within each district. All three districts had difficulty filling positions in programs that supported students with significant disabilities. Reacting to the rate of turnover, one special education supervisor exclaimed that "what happens . . . over the course of the year is that you can hardly keep up with [it]. . . . You're just desperately trying to get qualified people in place."

Quantifying paraprofessional turnover was challenging for both Waterview and Forest districts. The previous year at Waterview, they had hired 101 special education paraprofessionals, which was 38% of that workforce. Of the 101 new hires, 32 were hired for new positions, whereas 69 were hired as a result of turnover in existing positions. Forest school district employed approximately 330 special education paraprofessionals. During the year of this study, they posted approximately 190 special education paraprofessional openings because of turnover and also to fill vacant positions in programs with more challenging students. Some of the openings were for repeated turnover in the same positions.

Costs of Paraprofessional Turnover

The direct costs of the turnover were high in terms of the actual number of hours invested in hiring and developing each new paraprofessional. To determine the costs associated with turnover, one has to consider the effort invested in employing (e.g., recruiting, interviewing, orienting) and developing each paraprofessional. Table 3 summarizes estimates of the time that district and school staff invested in each new paraprofessional hire from recruitment through the point at which teachers determined that the new employees had reached proficiency working with students. The total amount of time from recruitment through district special education orientation invested in each new paraprofessional hire ranged widely, from 4.5 to 38.5 hours depending on each district's process. If more than one staff member was typically involved in a step, then the estimates were multiplied by that number. Because the number of people involved varied depending on availability, a range of time is provided in Table 3. The estimates were determined by having the interviewees identify the steps of the employment process in which they were involved or knowledgeable about and then estimating the amount of time involved in each step. There were no direct recordings of the actual time involved.

Recruitment Through Interviewing. Each district used somewhat different recruiting, screening, and interviewing processes, resulting in significantly varied amounts of time expended, ranging from 1.5 to 13.5 hours. Waterview, for example, used a more intensive, centralized process; Forest and Prairie used more decentralized processes.

Waterview expended much effort on the front end of the process to improve the quality of applicants. Their more centralized process involved the district special education supervisors screening the applications, which included a writing

TABLE 3. Estimated Time Investment for Each New Paraprofessional Hire

Step	School district			All districts
	Waterview	Forest	Prairie	
Recruiting, screening, interviewing	9–13.5 hrs	5–7.5 hrs	1.5–2 hrs	1.5–13.5 hrs
District orientation	4 hrs	3.5 hrs	3 hrs	3–4 hrs
Orientation checklist	0.5–1 hr	0.5–1 hr	n/a	0–1 hr
District SE orientation	0–3 hrs	7.5 hrs	20 hrs	0–20 hrs
Job-embedded development	1–4 months	up to 3 months	1–12 months	1–12 months

Note. SE = special education; n/a = not applicable.

sample; checking references; and coordinating the interviews. Qualified applicants were required take a standardized reading and math test. Applicants were interviewed by a district special education supervisor and a central office or building administrator who together made the decision to hire. If a principal was involved in the interview, then a new hire might simply be assigned to a special education team. If not, hiring often was delayed pending the principal or site special education teacher meeting and approving of the applicant.

Waterview's more centralized approach resulted in a relatively standardized process across the district and was viewed as contributing to hiring more qualified paraprofessionals. Also viewed as contributing to their success was raising the entry level hourly wages. The special education director stated, "Our interview process is better. Our background checks are better. I'm feeling comfortable with our pool of candidates now certainly in comparison to what we had before." There were, however, disadvantages with this centralized approach. A tremendous amount of time was required of district special education supervisors. Moreover, the role of the principal in employment decisions was somewhat diminished.

In contrast to Waterview, Forest and Prairie districts decentralized much of their paraprofessional hiring processes. The district office advertised the positions, but the principals were charged with screening applications, checking references, interviewing, and hiring. Principals often delegated parts of this process to other school personnel. An advantage of this more decentralized process was the ability to customize the process to address site-specific needs, which in turn resulted in greater variability in employment practices across schools in the same district. A secondary coordinator spoke about how filling some positions was quite challenging: "Right now . . . [there are] close to 20 secondary paraprofessional positions [the schools] haven't been able to fill. The positions go for quite a long time, advertised in a lot of different ways, but there's just no applicants." To recruit ap-

plicants for programs that served students with more complex disabilities, two schools asked volunteers or individuals on the district hiring list to work as substitutes in these programs prior to encouraging them to apply for the positions. Emphasizing the value of this strategy, a coordinator said,

We have some pretty significant students here . . . and not everybody wants to do that type of work. . . . One of the things we've found . . . it isn't that [applicants] are not interested, they don't know. They've never worked with the population. They don't understand. So we have tried several different options to reduce the stress of hiring, which is we ask for subs first . . . that has been an unbelievable asset. We've found one, two, three of our people that way, and we wouldn't trade them for the world.

Most administrators and teachers viewed an interview as essential for identifying the optimum person for a position. The interview provided an opportunity for special educators and a prospective paraprofessional to meet, exchange information about the specific nature of the work, and address questions and concerns early in the employment process. In this way, decisions made by school personnel about whether to hire and decisions made by the applicant about whether to accept a position were better informed. Almost universally, the teachers preferred to leave a position unfilled rather than hire a person who was not viewed as a good fit.

A coordinator noted that teachers want "staff that work well together . . . and respect the students [rather] than to have just a body." The special educators felt that administrators might be able to assess an applicant's general qualifications, but that the special educators were the most qualified to "assess the fit" of the person for a particular special education team. Involving special education teachers in the paraprofessional interviews was also viewed as important for enhancing

retention. Explaining this connection, a coordinator shared that

I think it is a feeling/tone both on the part of the assistant and on the part of the teacher, an implied ownership [that] "I've chosen you." . . . I think that teachers are more interested in seeing the assistants [be] successful when they selected them. And, I think [paraprofessionals] are more interested, for lack of better words, [in] pleasing or succeeding for the people who selected them.

Orientation. Once hired, most paraprofessionals in all three districts were provided with district- and site-level orientations, although significant variations were evident across districts in terms of the amount of time invested in orientation and building-level development efforts. All districts provided a 3- to 4-hour mandatory district-level orientation that focused on general policies and procedures. Two districts required the use of a building orientation checklist that served as a guide for paraprofessionals to become acquainted with the school in which they would be working. District-level special education orientations in the respective districts varied between 0 and 20 hours depending on when a paraprofessional was hired and on the breadth of topics covered in the orientation. Paraprofessionals hired in September often received more training in a timely manner than those hired later in the school year. The Prairie school district invested about 20 hours per paraprofessional in their district-level special education orientation to address training recommendations made by the state department of education, such as legal foundations of special education, characteristics of learners, and instructional practices. The other districts focused on topics that were more specific to delivering special education services, such as roles and responsibilities, respectful interactions with students, and communicative aspects of behavior.

Team-level and student-level orientations provided the most job-specific information and were conducted by members of the special education teams to which the paraprofessional was assigned. These orientations were considered key for inducting new employees. Most of the special educators prepared information packets about the individual students with whom the paraprofessional would be working. Some paraprofessionals had the opportunity to shadow a teacher or paraprofessional, although this was more the exception than the rule. Summarizing what many shared, a paraprofessional recommended that "if it's possible to follow somebody that [is doing your] job and work with the same kids that would be really helpful. . . . I mean for a week, not just a day." Having time to shadow helped paraprofessionals clarify their responsibilities and bring to the forefront questions related to performing their job competently.

Despite the recognized value of the team- and student-level orientations, teachers assumed responsibility for these

added duties but received little or no support for doing so. One district had an informal policy of hiring a substitute teacher to release the special education teacher to spend an entire day working directly with a new paraprofessional. The district hesitated, however, to bolster this informal practice with formal policy because of the costs that would be incurred. A special education director also explained that the shortage of substitute teachers posed a significant limitation to implementing such a policy. Moreover, she noted that when a paraprofessional was hired, some principals freed a special education teacher to meet with the paraprofessional for a 1-hour overview of the job responsibilities.

Teachers estimated that it took between 1 and 12 months for new paraprofessionals to become proficient at working with students. During this period, each new paraprofessional needed extensive direction and job-embedded development to gain the knowledge and skills to support specific students. This range varied, in part, due to the complexity of the individual student's needs, the number of environments the paraprofessional worked in, the baseline skills of the paraprofessional, and her or his capacity to learn new material and work with students. The responsibilities of the paraprofessionals in these programs were extensive and included supporting students' academic, communication and social, and functional skill development; assisting with the management needs for individual students; serving as communication links among teachers; and, sometimes, providing general school and program support. Substantiating the amount of time it takes to feel comfortable, a paraprofessional explained that "you walk in on the first day of school and [the students are] getting off the bus, and you just pray that everything clicks [because] . . . it takes a good two or more months to get to know the kids."

Several administrators spoke about the critical role that teachers play in paraprofessional development. A special education director said, "We must have the primary trainers . . . be seen by the paraprofessionals as [the] special education teachers. [The teachers] have to be trained how to supervise paraprofessionals and how to convey the information to paraprofessionals . . . on a day-to-day, plus on a growth basis." Job-embedded development took many forms, including coaching in the instructional context, providing building or team level inservices, and using multiple means of communication to share timely information. In three schools, the special education teachers met regularly with their paraprofessionals, providing mini-inservices as part of the meetings. Various strategies were used to support the meetings. One district specified contractually that paraprofessionals would be paid for 2 hours per month to participate in team and building meetings and trainings. Another strategy was to contractually require 8 hours of development annually for each paraprofessional. Paraprofessionals could apply to have their before- and after-school trainings used toward meeting this requirement. Another strategy was to reallocate the school

funds that were "banked" when a paraprofessional had been absent and a substitute had not been hired.

Impact of Paraprofessional Turnover

Impact on Programs. When paraprofessional turnover occurred, a ripple effect ensued that touched entire programs. As one principal explained, turnover "impacts the entire program because we have a program that demands a full complement of teachers as well as paraprofessionals. . . . No one is sitting around twiddling their thumbs." Often, substitute paraprofessionals did not exist. A special education director had contracted with an agency that year to secure four paraprofessionals each week to staff programs that served students with complex needs. When understaffed, makeshift systems for covering responsibilities were necessarily developed. The teachers prioritized coverage for those students with the greatest needs or at the greatest risk. Health and safety needs received the highest priority in terms of staff coverage, with instructional priorities being of secondary importance. These transitional strategies altered the schedules of many staff and students. Sometimes, major program components were put into limbo until coverage was found.

Impact on Staff. Turnover placed a huge strain on the special education teachers, in particular. Special education teachers and, at the secondary level, special education coordinators invested a significant amount of time in training temporary personnel as well as the new hires. Attesting to the stress, a lead teacher said, "It's very difficult when [special education teachers] need to take the time . . . to train the brand-new [paraprofessional]. . . . Those teachers cannot do it all. . . . They can't physically do it all." Similarly, a secondary principal commented, "It's really frustrating for the teachers because they . . . don't want to be in the business of retraining somebody."

Another disruptive effect of paraprofessional turnover was on relationships among team members. Effective inclusive education programs are built on a foundation of collaboration. Changes in personnel can result in extra demands and miscommunications that have the potential to jeopardize effective working relationships. When paraprofessionals changed, new routines, relationships, and understandings needed to form. Paraprofessionals needed to not only learn about individual students, but also about the spoken and unspoken expectations in various classrooms. Both the special and general education teachers had to reinvest to make the new relationships successful.

Impact on Students. The impact of paraprofessional turnover was also felt by students in terms of program continuity, as previously described, and relationships with the adults. Administrators and teachers reported that when students had strong and positive relationships with paraprofessionals, turnover resulted in a significant loss for these

students. A teacher explained, "You finally get your system running and the kids become comfortable, and then [the paraprofessional] leaves. . . . [The students] don't like change. . . . They trust [the paraprofessional] and then it changes. . . . [Paraprofessionals] are a big part of the kids' lives." This loss was especially difficult when turnover occurred during the school year rather than at the end of the year when a change in personnel was more expected.

Reasons for Paraprofessional Turnover and Retention

Low wages and poor benefits were viewed as the primary reason for paraprofessional turnover. All three districts had recently raised their hourly wage, and two had improved benefits in an effort to attract higher quality applicants and reduce turnover. Waterview raised their starting pay 40% from \$6.50 to \$9.00 per hour; Forest had a starting rate of \$10.65 per hour. Prairie paid higher wages to paraprofessionals who worked in programs that served students with severe cognitive or emotional disabilities. In all three districts, the maximum hourly rate for paraprofessionals was reached in 5 to 8 years. A Waterview coordinator shared that subsequent to increasing wages, they were attracting applicants who might "entertain the notion of [the job as] being a career . . . versus a stop-gap measure." Noting the domino effect of increasing wages in a tight budget era, a special education director said, "So what will happen is we'll have to cut teachers somewhere else. We'll have to cut [paraprofessionals] somewhere else." Moreover, two districts had compressed their wage schedules to control costs when the wages were increased, so that the paraprofessionals reached the maximum wage in fewer years.

Other reasons for turnover clustered into four categories. First, paraprofessionals left simply because of normal life events, such as entering college, retirement, relocation, or health issues. Second, turnover occurred because paraprofessionals chose to change positions within the district. One special education teacher had lost 9 out of 14 paraprofessionals the previous year partly because several transferred to a new program in the district. Third, the demanding nature and the stress incurred in the work were viewed as affecting paraprofessionals' decisions to leave. This was felt to be particularly true for young employees with limited work experience, who may not have fully understood their responsibilities prior to accepting the position. Finally, a principal commented how conflicts within a special education team increased paraprofessional turnover and absenteeism. Conflict exacerbates the already demanding nature of the work. At his previous school, paraprofessional retention improved after a cohesive special education team was developed. He explained, "most of the reason that people [left] wasn't the challenge that the kids presented, it was conflicts with the team. . . . [People] really have to work very closely together and . . . if there's any friction there that's . . . exacerbated by the dynamics of the work . . . people would just say 'I'm out of here.'"

Even though two districts reported a high degree of paraprofessional turnover in general and all three districts reported difficulty in filling positions, four of the six schools in the study indicated that such turnover was low. In two schools in Waterview, the low turnover was attributed to collaborative team cultures as well as to more qualified applicants due to wage increases, a more thorough early employment process, and identifying individuals known to enjoy working with the students. In another school, a principal surmised that their paraprofessional workforce had been stable that year because they were an older group of employees who may not have been the primary income earners for their families. The paraprofessionals in these low turnover schools spoke of feeling supported and respected by their colleagues. They valued the collaboration within their special education teams and respected the teachers who directed their work. "Open communication, mutual respect, no hidden agendas, [and being] student-focused" are the ingredients a teacher described for successful teaming. A paraprofessional noted that developing collaboration within the special education team is particularly important in inclusive education programs "because every year we work with different [general education] people." The paraprofessionals also shared that working in classrooms where the general education teachers took ownership of the education of students with disabilities increased their job satisfaction. By contrast, a paraprofessional described the discomfort felt when working in classrooms where students were not accepted by the teacher: "You are feeling sorry for the child you are with and . . . you just don't feel like being there."

DISCUSSION

Limitations of the Study

Readers should consider the following limitations in the interpretation and application of the findings. First, the geographic, size, cultural, and economic factors of the districts and their respective schools may not be representative of other school systems. These factors, plus the small number of cases, suggest that application of the findings may be limited especially to large urban districts or small rural districts. Second, the lack of observational data and document review disallowed triangulation with the interview data. Concurrence across multiple data types would have bolstered the findings and their application. Despite these limitations, however, readers are invited to consider the implications for practice and research that follow.

Implications for Practice

Similar to a pebble dropped in a pond, the turnover of even one paraprofessional creates a ripple effect that spreads throughout an inclusive education program and its personnel. Repeated paraprofessional turnover creates continuous ripples.

In this study, paraprofessional turnover was found to redirect personnel effort from ongoing instruction and program improvement to recoupment and redevelopment work. The costs of turnover were evident at the district, school, team, and student levels within the systems studied. The process of replacing paraprofessionals drains valuable time and energy from the proactive work of special education teams. When turnover is a regular phenomenon, the costs to programs and people challenge the view that paraprofessionals are a cost-effective means of providing educational services (Blalock, 1991) and the view that paraprofessionals allow special education teachers to concentrate on job responsibilities that only they are qualified to fulfill (French, 1999). Of greatest concern is the discontinuity created in the education of the students when effective paraprofessionals leave. Unless turnover is addressed, program discontinuity and ineffectiveness are likely to result.

Given the impact of paraprofessional turnover, greater attention to retention is warranted. The findings yield several targets that could improve the retention of qualified paraprofessionals: threshold wages, job matching, and ongoing support. Many of these strategies do not require excessive expenditures of funds. Furthermore, it can be argued that proactive efforts to increase paraprofessional retention ultimately are more effective than efforts spent continually responding to turnover.

Wage Increases to at Least Threshold Levels. Previous literature has suggested that poor wages and benefits are a major factor in paraprofessional turnover (Pickett, 1990; Tillery et al., 2003). This study corroborated this finding and further suggested that wages must reach a threshold (which varies depending on the local economic conditions) at which paraprofessional positions are attractive relative to other employment opportunities. In one district, for example, when the wages were raised, both the quality and the number of applicants for paraprofessional positions increased, suggesting that a local wage threshold had been reached. Other practices aimed at attracting a quality paraprofessional workforce had been largely ineffective. Although job satisfaction stemmed in part from positive working conditions, supportive relationships, and making a difference for students, most interviewees acknowledged that wages must first reach a certain threshold so that paraprofessionals do not leave because they cannot afford to stay.

Raising paraprofessional wages, however, is not without potential drawbacks. Increasing entry-level wages can also result in reaching maximum wage rates in just a few years if wage scales are compressed to balance budgets, as occurred in two districts in this study. Raising wages for less experienced paraprofessionals also could inadvertently contribute to turnover, as more experienced employees view such increases as inequitable (Giangreco et al., 2002). Moreover, a special education director commented that paraprofessional or teacher positions would need to be cut to offset the wage increases. This study suggests that given the high costs of

turnover, it is reasonable to consider the trade-offs in increasing the quality and stability of the paraprofessional workforce at the expense of reducing the size of the paraprofessional workforce. Reducing teaching positions, however, may ultimately reduce program quality.

Early Focus on Job Matching. Evident in this study were specific strategies undertaken to increase the likelihood of an effective match between a potential paraprofessional employee and the demands of the work. Arguably, a focus on job matching early in the employment process will increase retention. Both administrators and teachers recognized that if they did not make good hiring decisions, those hires had a much greater likelihood of turnover. In the present study, both formal and informal processes were used in an attempt to attract qualified applicants.

Various strategies were employed to increase the likelihood of an effective job match. These findings supported the view that a productive strategy for recruiting paraprofessional applicants is to tap existing community and school networks (Blalock, 1991). One such strategy, used in two schools, was to hire potential paraprofessionals first as substitutes. Both schools felt strongly that this positively affected their ability to identify potential applicants who were well matched with the position and team. Bringing in substitutes was particularly effective in the programs for students with more significant needs, where positions were hard to fill. Requiring a writing sample and taking basic reading and math competency tests were other strategies used in determining an applicant's potential to support academic learning.

In each of the school districts, the interview was considered pivotal in the employment process. Although the decision to hire legally falls to an administrator, most schools viewed the special education teacher as having a critical role in the interview and decision-making process—a finding also noted in the literature (Blalock, 1991; York-Barr et al., 2005). Ironically, and perhaps shortsightedly, the high paraprofessional turnover served as a deterrent to the involvement of special education teachers in interviews because of the time away from other responsibilities.

Ongoing Support of Paraprofessionals. Contrary to popular opinion, higher wages alone did not appear sufficient for the retention of paraprofessionals. This finding is supported by research indicating that the culture of an employee's work environment directly effects the decision to remain (Harvard Management Update, 2000). Motivation for quality work performance largely stems from positive working conditions, strong communication, supportive relationships, and the sense that one is making a difference (Taylor, 2003). Four of the six schools in the study had low paraprofessional turnover. Examining their practices suggests that paraprofessionals were viewed as important team members. Paraprofessionals in these schools spoke of working in a

climate of respect and collaboration. Team conversations focused on student learning, and paraprofessionals had opportunities to offer their insights. Creating a culture of respect and collaboration, striving for manageable assignments and schedules, and fostering job-embedded learning can decrease the likelihood of turnover. It is important to note that the special education teachers were largely viewed as the creators of such positive team cultures.

All of the districts experienced difficulty filling paraprofessional positions in programs for students with more complex disabilities. However, two of the programs in this study with low paraprofessional turnover served students with complex needs. They found that if they could attract qualified people to these positions, a collaborative and supportive culture had the potential of reducing the stress of demanding positions, thereby reducing turnover. In addition to increasing the likelihood of retention, a collaborative culture has the advantage of minimizing some of the negative effects of paraprofessional turnover, because the tacit knowledge of the paraprofessional is shared in the team context.

The manageability of paraprofessional assignments and schedules has been identified as influencing turnover (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). For example, assignment to programs—as opposed to individual students—decreases the potential for burnout (Giangreco et al., 2002). Such assignments are also viewed as minimizing the likelihood that a student becomes dependent on a single adult (Freschi, 1999; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). Assigning paraprofessionals to programs also increased the flexibility of programs to meet a variety of student needs.

Particularly evident in this study was the importance of school- and team-based job-embedded development customized to support paraprofessionals in meeting the needs of individual students. Job-embedded development assumes that the most powerful learning occurs in response to authentic and immediate job demands (Sparks & Hirsch, 1997). Working directly with paraprofessionals in practice contexts creates a bridge from general knowledge to hands-on practice. This expenditure of special education teacher time was viewed as a worthwhile investment that resulted in a more effective employee with a greater likelihood of retention. For each paraprofessional who left a district, this time was not only lost but actually cost a program because the special education teachers' time was not available for other instructional and organizational needs.

Implications for Research

Given the high costs of paraprofessional turnover for school personnel, fiscal resources, programs, and students, additional research is called for to continue to study how best to effectively use this vital resource. First, a study that specifically delineates, measures, and compares the costs associated with turnover and retention would clarify our understanding and help direct future decision making about cost allocations.

The question might be, "If districts invest in retention efforts, will cost savings be realized?" Second, a large-scale study that seeks to determine correlates of job matching could decrease attrition due to poor matches. The leading question might be, "What applicant variables correspond with subsequent effective work as a paraprofessional?" Third, an analysis of wage thresholds or ways in which wage threshold formulas are determined in local communities could help answer the question, "What wage threshold is essential if we are to attract qualified applicants?" Fourth, exit interview studies of paraprofessionals who leave their positions would offer responses to the question, "Why do paraprofessionals leave their positions, and what could be done to increase retention?" Fifth, studies that more specifically focus on the resources and strategies used to create an inclusive and supportive work culture for paraprofessionals could help us address the question, "If a collaborative learning culture is presumed to increase retention, how do schools and educators go about creating such a culture?" Sixth, the involvement of central and site personnel in the paraprofessional employment process begs the question, "What employment practices are most efficiently and effectively carried out by central office personnel, and which are more efficient and effective at the site level?" Seventh, the costs of turnover focus attention on the decisions that inclusive programs make in regard to allocating their personnel resources and on the question whether continually expanding a portion of the workforce that has high turnover is wise policy. The question might be, "What is the optimum resource allocation between special education teachers and paraprofessionals in inclusive programs?" The context limitation of this study being constrained to suburban school districts requires an examination of such questions in urban, cooperative, and rural districts. Finally, given the systems perspective of the study, it is logical to project that several of the findings are applicable to other types of special education programs, not only to those that are inclusive. Further research in these areas is also warranted.

Conclusions

The quality of a student's educational experience depends on the quality of the staff surrounding and supporting the student and his or her learning. In inclusive education programs, paraprofessionals are key supporting players whose work directly affects students. We can no longer afford to ignore the hidden costs of paraprofessional turnover for programs, staff, and students. The focus must shift from dealing with paraprofessional turnover to fostering paraprofessional retention. The findings from this study offer specific strategies in this regard. The development of an effective paraprofessional workforce begins with the employment of well-qualified applicants, followed by the provision of a coherent and relevant induction process, then extended with ongoing direction that supports continuous development in the context of a collaborative culture. ■

GAIL GHERE, PhD, is a lead resource in the Special Education Department in the Saint Paul Public Schools. Her interests include inclusive schooling, collaborative teamwork, and program evaluation. **JENNIFER YORK-BARR**, PhD, is an associate professor of educational policy and administration at the University of Minnesota. Her current research and teaching interests include teacher leadership, professional development, collaborative instructional teamwork, and inclusive schooling. Address: Gail Ghere, Saint Paul Public Schools, 1021 Bandana Blvd. East, Suite 131, Saint Paul, MN 55108; email: gail.ghere@spps.org

NOTE

Interview protocols are available from the first author upon request.

REFERENCES

- Blalock, G. (1991). Paraprofessionals: Critical team members in our special education programs. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 26, 200-214.
- Carroll, D. (2001). Considering paraeducator training, roles, and responsibilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34(2), 60-64.
- Droege, S. B., & Hoobler, J. M. (2003). Employee turnover and tacit knowledge diffusion: A network perspective. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 15(1), 50-66.
- Elrod, G. F., Insko, L., & Williams, L. (1993). A descriptive study of instructional assistants in rural and remote Eastern Oregon: Implications for professional development. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 12(4), 22-29.
- French, N. (1997). Management of paraeducators. In A. L. Pickett & K. Gerlach (Eds.), *Supervising paraeducators in school settings: A team approach* (pp. 91-169). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- French, N. (1999). Paraeducators: Who are they and what do they do? *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 32(1), 65-69.
- French, N., & Chopra, R. (1999). Parent perspectives on the roles of paraprofessionals. *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 24, 259-272.
- French, N., & Pickett, A. L. (1997). Paraprofessionals in special education: Issues for teacher educators. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 20, 61-73.
- Freschi, D. (1999). Guidelines for working with one-to-one aides. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 31(4), 42-45.
- Frith, G. H., & Mims, A. (1985). Burnout among special education paraprofessionals. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 17(3), 225-227.
- Ghere, G. (2003). *Employing, directing, and supporting paraprofessionals in inclusive education programs for students with disabilities: A multi-site case study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- Ghere, G., & York-Barr, J. (2003). *Employing, developing, and directing special education paraprofessionals in inclusive education programs: Findings from a multi-site case study*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration.
- Giangreco, M., & Broer, S. (2005). Questionable utilization of paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: Are we addressing symptoms or causes? *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 20, 10-26.
- Giangreco, M., Broer, S., & Edelman, S. (1999). The tip of the iceberg: Determining whether paraprofessional support is needed for students with disabilities in general education settings. *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 24, 281-291.
- 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, 47-64.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., & Broer, S. M. (2001). Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement of paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 67, 485-498.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., & Broer, S. M. (2003). Schoolwide planning to improve paraprofessional supports. *Exceptional Children*, 70, 63-79.

- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., Broer, S. M., & Doyle, M. B. (2001). Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children*, 68, 45-63.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., Luiselli, T., & MacFarland, S. (1997). Helping or hovering? Effects of instructional assistant proximity on students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 64, 7-18.
- Glasser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Harvard Management Update. (April, 2000). *Employee retention: What managers can do*. Boston: Harvard Business School.
- Kaye, B., & Jordan-Evans, S. (2001). Retaining key employees. *Public Management*, 83, 6-12.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Likins, M. (2002). Effective training for paraprofessionals. *Impact*, 15(2), 6-7.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Minondo, S., Meyer, L., & Xin, J. F. (2001). The role and responsibilities of teaching assistants in inclusive education: What's appropriate? *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 26, 114-119.
- Mueller, P., & Murphy, F. (2001). Determining when a student requires paraeducator support. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(6), 22-27.
- Passaro, P. D., Pickett, A. L., Latham, G., & Hong Bo, W. (1994). The training and support needs of paraprofessionals in rural special education. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 13(4), 3-9.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pickett, A. L. (1990). *Paraprofessionals in education: Personnel practices that influence their performance, training needs, and retention*. New York: City University of New York, Center for Advanced Study of Education.
- Pickett, A. L., & Gerlach, K. (1997). Paraeducators in school settings: The future. In A. L. Pickett & K. Gerlach (Eds.), *Supervising paraeducators in school settings: A team approach* (pp. 263-267). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Pickett, A. L., Likins, M., & Wallace, T. (2003). *The employment and preparation of paraeducators: The state of the art—2003*. National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals. Retrieved September 28, 2005, from <http://www.nrcpara.org>
- QSR International. (2000). NUD*IST Vivo [Computer software]. Melbourne, Australia: Author.
- Riggs, C., & Mueller, P. (2001). Employment and utilization of paraeducators in inclusive settings. *The Journal of Special Education*, 35, 54-62.
- Senge, P. (2000). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sparks, D., & Hirsch, S. (1997). *A new vision for staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Taylor, C. (2003). The tides of talent: New studies reveal some surprising factors behind why the best employees leave or stay. *Training and Development*, 4, 34-40.
- Tillery, C. Y., Werts, M. G., Roark, R., & Harris, S. (2003). Perceptions of paraeducators on job retention. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 26, 118-127.
- Wadsworth, D. E., & Knight, D. (1996). Paraprofessionals: The bridge to successful inclusion. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 31, 166-171.
- Wallace, T., Shin, J., Bartholomay, T., & Stahl, B. J. (2001). Knowledge and skills for teachers supervising the work of paraprofessionals. *Exceptional Children*, 67, 520-533.
- York-Barr, J., Sommerness, J., Duke, K., & Ghore, G. (2005). Special educators in inclusive education programmes: Reframing their work as teacher leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 9, 193-215.

Assessment for Effective Intervention

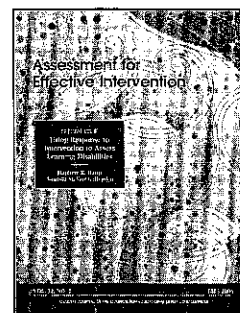
Editors: Nick Elksnin and Linda K. Elksnin

Assessment for Effective Intervention (AEI) presents manuscripts relevant for educational diagnosticians, special educators, school psychologists, academic trainers, and others interested in psychoeducational assessment. Each article in AEI clearly communicates the empirical evidence that has direct and timely implications for practitioners. Published quarterly, AEI provides critical analysis of practitioner-developed assessment procedures, as well as papers that focus on published tests.

AEI regularly features articles that:

- describe the relationship between assessment and instruction;
- introduce innovative assessment strategies;
- outline diagnostic procedures;

- analyze relationships between existing instruments; and
- review assessment techniques, strategies, and instrumentation.



AEI is the official journal of the Council for Educational Diagnostic Services.

ISSN 1534-5084 • Published Quarterly

Subscriptions:

Individual \$48	Institution \$80
Foreign Individual \$65	Foreign Institution \$100*

*all prices effective 1/1/07



PRO-ED, Inc. • 8700 Shoal Creek Blvd. • Austin, Texas 78757-6897 • ph 800/897-3202 or 512/451-3246 • fax 800/FXPROED • All PRO-ED products are sold on a 30-day approval. Shipping and handling: U.S. add 10%, Canada add 15%, others add 20%.