



Draft Brief UMDI Paraprofessional Study

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) Applied Research and Program Evaluation group was engaged to conduct a study of the use of paraprofessionals to provide special education services in Vermont public schools. The study, required by legislation and cosponsored by the Vermont Agency of Education and the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, began in late July 2014 and will conclude with a final report in March 2015. This study is intended to enhance public understanding of the role and impact of paraprofessionals, as well as the conditions surrounding and influencing their use in the delivery of special education services in Vermont public schools.

An interim report was prepared in January. It synthesized patterns of paraprofessional use; factors influencing decisions related to paraprofessional use; and degree of interest in reducing paraprofessional use; as reported through surveys and site visits. This brief is intended to summarize certain key findings that were presented in the interim report (January) and highlight questions to guide discussion of the Agency's and the legislature's next steps in anticipation of the March report.

What was learned: Select Key Findings (January)

The question of how and to what extent paraprofessionals are used is situated in a larger conversation about the delivery of special education services overall and the roles of *all* educators within it. There are varying understandings of the purposes of special education, how to achieve inclusion and what inclusion "looks like." The scope of the study was limited to the paraprofessional question, but these broader issues are all inter-related.

Patterns of use and density: Paras assume a wide a range of responsibilities across the state: monitoring IEPs and 504 plans, primary responsibility for instructional planning and behavioral planning, direct instruction, primary responsibility for managing students' behavioral issues. The study identified a number of relationships that may warrant further consideration. These relationships are based on correlation analysis and do not imply cause and effect; they are just relationships:

- **Size and paraprofessional use:** As the size of a school increases, so does the number of paraprofessionals, particularly those who deal with behavior issues. In larger schools there is also a tendency to use co-teaching teams to monitor, plan, instruct, and have primary responsibility for students with behavioral issues.
- **Supervision and paraprofessional use:** There is a relationship between the degree to which paraprofessionals are supervised consistently, and the density of paraprofessional use: As consistency of supervision of paraprofessionals goes up, density of paraprofessional use goes down.
- **Behavioral issues and paraprofessional use: relationships between density of use, kind of use, and cost considerations**
 - Administrators' perception that there are a large number of behavioral issues is positively correlated with a large number of behavior-focused paraprofessionals:
 - When principals perceive that they have a disproportionately large percentage of students with behavioral issues, more paraprofessionals are engaged.
 - The belief that there are a large number of behavioral issues is also positively correlated to cost considerations:



- Specifically the perception that paraprofessionals cost less than special educators and that direct service is reimbursable. The extent to which these factors influence decision making increases when principals perceive that they have a disproportionately large percentage of students with behavioral issues.
- Conversely, the perception of large number of behavioral issues is negatively correlated with the decision to hire special educators because they are the most qualified. When principals perceive that they have a disproportionately large percentage of students with behavioral issues, this factor is less influential in their decision.
- As the consistency of implementation of school-wide behavior programs goes up, the density of paraprofessional use goes down. Note that the relationship does not reflect presence or absence of a program, but rather consistency of implementation across the supervisory union.

Decision Factors: When to use a paraprofessional

Survey results showed that the factor that most commonly influences administrators to use a paraprofessional is the belief that a paraprofessional is the appropriate support for the student in question. Other influential factors are that paraprofessionals offer flexibility and expediency (administrators can use the role for multiple purposes, the paraprofessional's periods of employment can vary, and the paraprofessional provides an immediate responses to temporary or unanticipated situations).

The factor that most commonly influences administrators not to use a paraprofessional is the belief that the quality of instruction is best assured by a special education teacher.

Discussions suggested other influential factors as well: long-standing traditions of paraprofessional use, an established "culture" within which paraprofessional use has been normalized, and varying notions of "inclusion" and the role of *all* educators within that vision, including paraprofessionals.

Interest in reducing paraprofessional use

Almost all superintendents and special education directors surveyed would like to reduce the number of paraprofessionals in their SU "to some extent." About half of principals shared this interest in reducing the number of paraprofessionals.

What we don't yet know

The March report will explore relationships between patterns of paraprofessional density and use, and academic and behavioral outcome measures.

The researchers are developing a preliminary typology of paraprofessional use. This analytic strategy will delineate clusters of schools that have similar models of paraprofessional use. Ultimately, these clusters can be used in statistical analysis to identify differences in outcomes, based on different models of paraprofessional use. Differences will be explored in the March report.



Considerations

The research team has appreciated full cooperation with the Agency of Education in all aspects of study implementation thus far. Most recently, the team has been able to procure most data anticipated from the start. However, the Agency and the researchers acknowledge the limitations of these data, as follows:

- Locus of data: School-level data were not available on a consistent basis.
- Timeliness of the data: The study necessarily relies on 2012 NECAP data (2013 data are not complete due in part to SBAC testing and other district data may reflect bias in self-selection). This is particularly important for the study, given recently initiated changes to governance and administrative structure.
- Behavioral data: Disciplinary instances are not consistently reported by schools.

Questions

How could the Agency and the legislature best position themselves to maximize the learnings of the study may yield?

Would certain steps enhance the ability to understand the extent to which current special education delivery strategies—including but not limited to the use of paraprofessionals—are effectively meeting students' academic and overall needs?

The study revealed a strong perception that behavioral incidences are on the rise and that the seriousness of those behaviors is increasing. How might this issue be better understood?

Considerations that may be offered in the March report and/or that administrators and policy makers may take up independently, include:

- Continued improvement of AoE data systems and structures. For example, revisiting the timing of student assessments: Vermont's current testing cycle (fall administration) measures student achievement from the prior school year; improved consistency of behavior incident data collection.
- Collection of data at the school level (although the prevalence of single-school districts complicates this issue).

A strengthened statewide data system could be one part of the state's movement toward more frequent and sensitive assessments or other benchmarking activities. This could assist policy makers and others to better understand how the system is serving students and the kinds of adjustments that may be needed.

The findings forthcoming in the March report could be conceived of as a set of initial "baseline" for subsequent studies, building on the learnings and questions generated.