



**School Practitioner
Listserv**

**A Weekly Community of Practice Network
for Sharing and Interchange**



May 22, 2017

How are staffing patterns for student & learning supports changing?

- >Comments from Colleagues in the Field
- >Center’s Perspective

Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

Featured Set of Center Resources on

- >Staffing learning supports

**Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested.
The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.**

**For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of
the weekly exchange, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

**For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>
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May is Mental Health Month – This year's theme is Risky Business.

Note: In keeping with the National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports, this is being sent to and forwarded by over 114,000 school and community stakeholders concerned about (1) daily matters confronting schools, (2) promoting whole child development and positive school climate, and (3) the transformation of student and learning supports.*

How are staffing patterns for student and learning supports changing?

In researching staffing patterns in schools across the country, we find a growing number of job titles such as aides, paraprofessionals, interventionists, advocates, liaisons, helpers, etc.. At the same time, we see a diminishing number of traditional student support personnel (e.g., counselor, nurse, psychologist, social worker, etc.).

The following excerpt from a news story gives the long-standing and ongoing financial rationale for the use of paraprofessionals (and for not employing student and learning support professionals):

With schools facing what must feel like ever-shrinking budgets and the ever-present reality of layoffs, paraprofessionals are showing their value. The general director of special services, said paraprofessionals are “critical” because they are becoming increasingly important to the educational process. Not only that, but their salaries don’t break the bank. The average para makes about \$10.60 an hour, which comes out to a little less than \$15,000 a year if the employee works a full-time slate during the nine-month school year. The average classroom teacher in the school district makes about \$42,700. The majority of paras in the district are assigned to special education students, and other paras work with students who are learning the English language or any of a number of other specific needs areas. Paras are another set of eyes and hands to help improve the learning process for students. Paras are a great aid as a unique tool to help accomplish things that a classroom teacher may not have the time or resources for. Inclusion paras work in a general education environment. They may have tasks ranging from keying a child to stay on task and organized to taking a student or a group aside after a discussion to help reinforce the lessons. Paras also can go a long way toward helping students achieve federal standards on state testing from which no student is exempt....

<http://cjonline.com/news-local/2011-12-05/school-districts-value-paraprofessionals>

Clearly, this trend is controversial. It is, however, likely to continue for the immediate future. So, fundamental concerns must be addressed. These include how to develop the functional relationship among the various personnel, how to ensure effective supervision and continuing education, how to eliminate the fragmentation and counterproductive competition for sparse resources. And from our perspective, a critical matter is how to engage all those concerned about learning, behavior, and emotional problems in working together to develop a unified system of interventions that enhances equity of opportunity for “every student to succeed.”

Comments from Colleagues in the Field

Using paraprofessionals as a specific focal point, we reached out to a range of student support professionals and asked them three questions. Here is a sample of responses:

(1) How do student support professionals in your schools work to train, supervise, and support paraprofessionals?

>“In the schools that I’m most familiar, paraprofessionals serve the functions that are described in the article. Primarily, they are assigned to students with unique or severe issues that need support to fulfill a goal on their IEP or intervention plan. Good paraprofessionals can become indispensable to a teacher since they build a relationship with their students and can learn to anticipate student behavior/needs. They often work closely with the teacher to plan activities and strategies to help students. That said, to my knowledge, the only training and support given these folks comes from the supervising teaching. In fact, most paraprofessionals are dismissed from potentially helpful teacher workshops since they would need to be paid to attend and schools strive to save every dime possible.”

>“This requires a great deal of planning and collaboration on the part of our support staff. Our special education cooperative provides some job-specific training but the majority of the training, supervision and support is conducted by our professional staff who build the time into their weekly and daily schedules. We have a teacher mentor-coach who also works with new professional staff to help them structure this critical collaborative time. Finally, I would

add that our building administrators have started to allocate specific structured time with our paraprofessionals for formal communication and to determine support needs. This serves as a critical connector to our MTSS planning that often focuses on communication between professional staff only.”

- >“In our district, the school psychologists are part of the teacher's unit so we are not generally considered to be supervisors although our responsibilities place us often in that position. I am occasionally involved in providing for a para specific skill recommendation for some of the students who have behavior intervention plans but my experience is that without the pre-requisite baseline frame of reference the skills are difficult for the para to implement and, in the end, I have no authority to require anything from anyone. The site support staff is able to work with paras that have the buy-in needed to shift their behavior in response to any training that I might do.
- >“Currently at the school I work at I am able to witness much of the interaction between professionals and paraprofessionals. For one thing, the professionals attempt to train the paraprofessionals during weekly meetings. Although this sounds great in theory, I have attended a couple of their meetings and not much training takes place since it is a tendency for the attendees to get off topic. Aside from these weekly meetings, they have individualized planning sessions with the paraprofessionals. I have not attended these meetings but I believe that this is a perfect way for the paraprofessionals to get personalized one-to-one trainings. One area that I have noticed that needs improvement is the communication between professionals and paraprofessionals. There have been various occasions where miscommunication has led paraprofessionals a little lost or misguided in what they are responsible for doing on campus. With this said, I believe that there can be more resources for paraprofessionals on campus not just that provided by the district.”

(2) What problems arise in moving to increase the number of paraprofessionals and how can these problems be addressed?

- >“Schedule limitations often prevent paraprofessionals from being as well-trained in intervention strategies as our professional staff. This creates a challenge for professional staff and administrators to find time to train and also develop delivery schedules. We also find that the lower level qualifications for paras (which is linked to the greater affordability) results in the need to teach work ethics and soft skills. Just as we find we need to develop these skills in our children of poverty, we have the same need in positions that attract minimum-wage employees.”
- >I do not believe that increasing the numbers of paraprofessionals based on budgetary shortfalls is a viable or reasonable solution for students. As the article points out, most have a high school education — not a degree. Having more adult bodies in the room can help to a point, but these adults need the appropriate training, support and experiences to help them ensure student success, which most districts do not provide. There is an obvious reason why teachers are paid more than paraprofessionals. Increasing the numbers of paraprofessionals isn’t a substitute for having a trained teacher. Similarly, using paraprofessionals to support students is not the same as having the services of a counselor, social worker or nurse. There are needed skill sets involved that paraprofessionals simply don’t have, even when they are caring and committed to their jobs. Budgets will always be challenging, but it is up to school leaders to first balance the needs of the students with the best possible supports budgets will allow. Then it is their responsibility to bring these issues of shortfalls to the public and work toward changing policies and funding practices that prevent students from getting the education they need. There are no easy answers, but providing a well-rounded education and student supports needed for learning is what all our kids need and deserve. I think the ‘balance’ depends entirely on the needs of the students. Hopefully, these needs are documented and supported with data so that funds for one type of student support is not ‘competing’ with other types of supports when budgets are tight.”

>“Para-educator responsibilities vary greatly, i.e. g-tube feedings, change diapers, help implement behavior intervention plans, contain and deescalate aggressive and/or self-destructive behavior challenges, load students of all sizes into walkers, gait trainers, standers and other equipment, walking the students around site while monitoring for heat and dehydration, possible seizure activity..... they chase after students, work with eye-gaze response boards and other assistive technology devices. Needless to say they are difficult to retain at such a low salary. The paras are absent frequently and sometimes injured due to lack of appropriate training or unsuitability to perform the tasks for which they are assigned. I have advocated for the para's to be employed by level of need or requirements of the position and then provided staff development to grow skills for specific assignments.. Pay them more and provide some benefits to the ones being 'grown' for the more intensive needs. For instance, the strata might be 'non-verbal and ambulatory'; verbal and emotionally disturbed'; medically fragile, verbal and non-ambulatory'; mildly impaired general education push in support' and so on... but, sadly, the para providing life maintenance activities for the profoundly disabled student is earning the same as the para that supports a student in writing a paragraph under teacher direction.

Paras that are '6 hours' do have benefits and are a greater part of the teacher driven 'team' however they are few, typically long term RSP room aides. Our elementary schools do not have an Assistant Principal unless they have the sixth grade on site, no matter how many special ed classes are part of the principal's IEP responsibilities. So, the RSP is often pulled to the office to handle situations when the Principal is not able to. Thus, the six hour aide remains in the RSP classroom with the students.

I have met with paras to support their understanding of behavior and to present a few response-style options hoping to promote positive student growth. Predictably, the following week the para is absent and the sub has often never worked with a student presenting the particular challenges. That para does not come back the following day and a different sub comes in. This carousel of staffing change is counterproductive to the type of supports our most challenging students require. Trust and consistency are a foundation benchmark against which student growth is measured. The benefit of a para educator, as in all human related matters is a function of the values and motivations of the individual. I believe that paying someone less than a living wage without benefits severely limits the pool of potential applicants. The recruitment and retention of individuals willing to do the required activities does demand more staff development and more pay.”

>“One of the problems that has already been identified in the article is the lack of funding. Many of the paraprofessionals that get hired through the school system may not even get the proper training they need since they will not be staying in the position for long depending on the type of funding the school receives. Another potential issue may be that once the paraprofessionals are hired, they must be distributed fairly through the campus given their specialty. I have seen this happen in our school, such as in the Special Ed classes where certain teachers complain that they are not getting as much paraprofessional support as other teachers/Special Ed classes. To avoid such problems, all teachers should have a say in the designation of the paraprofessionals instead of it being solely determined by the people doing the hiring.”

(3) How do you see the role of professional student support staff moving from services to leadership (training, supervising, staff development, etc.)

>“I believe the potential for this lies in the power of building leadership to support any systemic change within a building or even a district. I've often articulated that the most influential and essential position in school improvement is the building principal. The principal can support (and enforce) the implementation of staff collaboration structures that have fidelity and lead to shared leadership. In my opinion. And I have a couple who do!”

- >“Ideally, I believe that dedicated paraprofessionals could become an integral part of the staff if they received training, were included in teacher workshops and understood how to network (and were paid to work) with counselors, social workers, nurses and other student support professionals. Their ‘student load’ is small so they often develop very close relationships and learn things about their students’ family, friends, peers and other people in their lives. The information they have could be helpful to Learning Supports professionals, if only they understood when and how to make appropriate connections with these people. While this type of system could cost the district a bit more in terms of hourly wages, it could be incredibly helpful to students if all the people that deal with a child have the same information.”
- >“I believe that the role of professional student support staff moving from services to leadership roles is possible with the proper training. I see that many of the professionals, at least in school I work for, have the potential to take on more roles but lack the guidance to do so. This usually happens when the school does not have the right personnel to conduct the trainings or when they do have the right people they do not prioritize such trainings to take place. With this said, the transition from services to leadership can take place with time and the adequate support.”

UCLA Center’s Perspective

With the upheaval in public education, the ways in which schools address student and learning supports are changing and therefore so are the roles and functions of school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and various other personnel. *What will it all look like in the coming years?* That probably depends on whether student support professionals approach the future reactively or take the lead in restructuring systemic reform. It seems clear to us that a reactive stance will lead to dire consequences. Thus, our emphasis is on framing new directions and encouraging a transformative approach on the part of all concerned.

If student and learning support professionals are ever to move out of the margins and become essential to school improvement, they must find their ways to district and school leadership (decision making and planning) tables and lead the way in redefining their roles and broadening their functions. While not ignoring the needs of those they have traditionally worked with, they must

- show their relevance for the well-being of all students
- help end the continuing myth that teachers can do it without a well-designed in-classroom and schoolwide system of student and learning supports
- play a greater role in supervising and providing continuing education for all staff with respect to preventing and providing special assistance to allay learning, behavior, and emotional problems
- lead the way in teaming with all involved stakeholders to transform the current fragmented approach into a unified system and begin to develop that system into a comprehensive learning supports component that enhances equity of opportunity at every school.

Clearly, all this has major implications for changing professional preparation and credentialing, and here too affected professionals must display considerable leadership.

For more on the Center’s perspective on all this, see:

- >*Framing New Directions for School Counselors, Psychologists, & Social Workers*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/report/framingnewdir.pdf>
- >*School Improvement Requires Developing, Supporting, and Retaining Quality Teachers*
Teachers can’t do it alone! <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring12.pdf>
- >*Needed: A greater role for learning support staff at inservice at every school*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter03.pdf>

- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* -- Available at this time as a free resource. Download at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf>
- > *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. From Cognella – <https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>
- > *Preparing all education personnel to address barriers to teaching and learning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/preparingall.pdf>

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Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives:

**What's your perspective on the above matters?
Recommendations for strengthening the status of
student and learning support personnel?**

Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Featured Set of Center Resources on >Staffing for learning supports

In addition to the resources cited already, links to a range of resources from our Center and from others can be accessed using the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on

> *Staffing for learning supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/staffingsupp.htm>



*Information is online about the

National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Also online is the report from the National Summit on the

*Every Student Succeeds Act and
Learning Supports: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching
to Enhance Equity of Opportunity* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/summitreport.pdf>

NEW! Interested in school improvement, see

> *Transforming Student and Learning Supports:
Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System.*

From Cognella – <https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>

Also, available at this time as a free resource is a preliminary draft of another new book entitled:

> *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* –
Download at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf>

THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!

For new sign-ups – email Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.

We post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange* on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm> and on *Facebook* (access from the Center's home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)
