Legal, Ethical Competencies, Evaluation and Training for
Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals in education can also be known as paraeducators, para-pros teacher assistants or teacher aides. For more than 50 years, special education assistants have typically assisted teachers in the classroom by providing student’s individual assistance with lessons, helping maintain discipline and performing various clerical duties. Many distinct assignments involved assistance with the implementation of the Individual Education Program (IEP). Paraprofessionals may also supervise students on the playground, at lunch or on the school bus. Some paraeducators work exclusively with special-needs students within the autism spectrum but are also assigned to other populations identified in the IEP.

The Individuals with Education Act (IDEA, 2006) requires that each state provide standards for paraeducators. The state may allow municipalities, school districts or specific schools to set their own standards for paraprofessionals but specifies caveats. The IDEA specifies specific information on related personnel, including special education assistants in the 2006 Amendments’. Further, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the leading organization for special education professionals, has proposed specific competencies for special education assistants. This session will provide current information and encourage dialogues regarding these competencies and their applicability to individuals on the spectrum. Discussions revolving around IDEA’s choices for accommodations and modifications in the students’ Individual Education Program (IEP) are presented. This includes specific training and limited access to paraprofessionals due to an increase in inclusive placements and a trend to use a classroom assistant to assist the general education teacher with all special needs individuals.

Highlights of the requirements of para-pros, highlighting both the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), include:

- Providing contiguous personnel preparation, training, and professional development designed to provide support and ensure retention of special education and general education teachers’ and adjunct personnel such as paraprofessionals.

These parameters provide guidelines regarding job responsibilities for the special education assistant in the least restrictive environment identified for each individual within the spectrum. A state may determine that the paraeducator requires certification or minimally hold a General Education Diploma (GED). Evaluation of the paraprofessional’s effectiveness is not normed nationally. Therefore, the paraprofessional’s competency level will vary in the classroom as well as the assessment of their effectiveness with special needs children, youth, and young adults.

The most noteworthy national study to-date, directed by the Department of Education in 2003, was the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE). Considered a milestone study at the time, the
report reviewed the job of paraprofessionals over the past 50 years (Annual Report to Congress). Although responsibilities varied, a few of the following activities were reported:

- providing instructional support in small groups;
- providing one-to-one instruction;
- modifying materials;
- implementing behavior management plans; and,
- collecting data on students.

The qualifications and training for paraprofessionals working with individuals on the spectrum and other individuals varies. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has established qualifications for special education assistants that will be reviewed during the session; however, there is limited literature that describes the implementation of these competencies or evaluation of these qualifications in the public schools.

Implications of the recent Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Part B, 2006) include, for the first time in the law, specific requirements for both paraprofessionals and related services personnel. The context of the thirty-six separate IDEA regulations for paraprofessionals will be introduced and discussed. Examples of the IDEA regulations include training, supporting and monitoring paraprofessionals based on specifically delineated criteria. The IDEA is also supporting assisting paraprofessionals to become special education teachers based on various types of training. (Note that pending passage of No Child Left Behind will be consistent according to legal literature.) The revisions to IDEA directed toward paraprofessionals will require evidence-based training and the dissemination of materials.

Discussions will include the evidence-based training parapros’ would require and sharing information from the audience addressing practices that are currently in place throughout the country.

A power point and handouts are available for participants that will detail the description of this session in further detail.