Getting Down to FACTS

Paraeducators in California: Current Trends and Recommendations for Policy

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Paraeducators, non-certified school employees who work under the direct supervision of credentialed teachers or administrators (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; McDermott et al., 2024), devote substantial time to providing instructional and behavioral support for students with disabilities. Their responsibilities are remarkably diverse. Various reports document their involvement in activities ranging from one-on-one academic support, communication and social skill instruction, and community-based instruction to assisting with students' personal care and fulfilling clerical duties (Bernal & Aragon, 2004; Carter et al., 2009). Critically, these paraeducators work closely with students—with 97% reporting providing one-on-one instruction to students multiple times per week (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009). In many schools, paraeducators have become the front-line providers of instruction and behavior support for many students with the most intensive needs.

Schools across the United States are increasingly relying on non-certified educators to support students' learning and behavioral needs. From 1990 to 2018, the number of teachers in US schools increased by 7.8% (i.e., from 2.4 millions to 3.2 million); whereas the number of paraeducators (including those who provide in general education and special education settings) increased by 108.5% during the same time period (i.e., from 395,960 to 825,630). This trend is also reflected in the number of paraeducators in U.S. schools who provide services to students with disabilities through special education services. Recent data indicate that in the 2021-2022 school year over 540,000 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) paraeducators were employed across Parts B and C of IDEA, a figure that has grown by 23.2% over the past decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). In fact, most schools employ more

special education paraeducators than special educators (Giangreco, Hurley, & Suter, 2009), with a ratio of approximately 1.1 paraeducators for every one special education teacher (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Schools' use of paraeducators continues to increase due to standards-based reforms, changing service delivery models, and economic pressures (Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Walker & Smith, 2015). Given their sheer numbers and the critical nature of their roles, paraeducators represent an indispensable component of the special education service delivery model.

Despite their growing prevalence and importance, the paraeducator workforce faces significant challenges related to a pervasive lack of training and support. It is problematic that paraeducators receive such limited initial or in-service training on basic instructional practices (Breton, 2010), particularly when they are often essential providers of instruction. The fact that most have never received in-service training on the basic instructional strategies they are expected to implement means they are unlikely to possess the knowledge and skill necessary to effectively meet the needs of the students they serve (Brock & Carter, 2015; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001).

Unfortunately, federal law provides little specific guidance on the training and supervision of paraeducators (Mason et al., 2021). As a result, training efforts have been described as informal, individualized, idiosyncratic, and haphazard. When training is provided, it frequently consists of one-time workshops without the necessary follow-up, monitoring, or performance feedback needed to build and sustain instructional skill (Bernal & Aragon, 2004; Walker et al., 2017). This issue is compounded by the fact that the special education teachers who are tasked with supervising paraeducators often report feeling underprepared for this role (Biggs et al., 2019; Breton, 2010). The situation is problematic; as Brock and Carter (2013) noted, “asking paras to work with students absent adequate training and support is unethical and unfair to both students and the paras” (p. 212).

This lack of professional support, coupled with low salaries and ill-defined roles, predictably contributes to challenges with job retention (Carter et al., 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Previous reports examining state-level data have indicated annual attrition rates for paraeducators as high as 28%-40%--rates frequently higher than that of special education teachers (Gilmour, Aniagyei-Cobbold,

& Theobald; 2026). Further, Kaler and Theobald (2026) demonstrated that, in the state of Washington, paraeducators who were men or individuals of color were more likely to exit the workforce compared to their female and white colleagues. The resulting cycle of recruiting, hiring, and onboarding new staff consumes district resources that could otherwise be invested in more substantive training initiatives (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). This creates a problematic system where schools must rely on their most under-supported personnel to provide instruction to their most vulnerable students, a practice that directly challenges the ability of schools to deliver a free and appropriate public education (Suter & Giangreco, 2009).

Fortunately, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that, with the proper support, paraeducators can learn and effectively implement evidence-based strategies to improve student outcomes (Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). The critical question is not *if* paraeducators can be effective, but *how* schools can best prepare and support them. Research indicates that to be effective, paraeducators require explicit training in evidence-based practices (EBP), a clearly defined supplemental role, and ongoing monitoring and supervision from a trained educator (Brock & Carter, 2013; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). This training must move beyond one-time workshops to incorporate key components such as modeling, role-play, and repeated performance feedback (Brock & Anderson, 2021).

Several states are implementing "grow-your-own" initiatives to create pathways for paraeducators to become certified teachers, addressing workforce shortages with experienced, community-embedded candidates. Edwards and Kraft (2025) reviewed 94 “grow-your-own” programs, including many that focus on paraeducators, and highlight the promise of these programs while also offering suggestions for improving the effectiveness, focus, and generalizability of the training. Colorado is one example with its Paraprofessional to Teacher Advancement Pathway (P-TAP) and Teacher PREP program, which allow participants to maintain their paid roles while receiving financial aid, mentoring, and placement in high-need schools. Similarly, Massachusetts offers the Paraprofessional Teacher Preparation Grant Program to provide financial assistance for this transition.

These programs leverage the classroom experience and local ties of paraprofessionals to build a stable, dedicated teaching force.

Other states focus on formalizing the paraeducator career itself through structured certification and competency standards. Maine and Washington utilize tiered systems where higher qualifications, such as increased college credits, lead to advanced certification levels (e.g., Maine's Ed Tech I-III). Minnesota employs a competency-based model, requiring paraeducators to demonstrate proficiency in nine core areas through verified training and state exams. These structured career ladders are built upon common entry requirements, which typically include a high school diploma plus an associate's degree, a set number of college credits, or a passing score on a standardized assessment like the ParaPro. Policymakers in California could conduct a more comprehensive review of these types of programs to inform training efforts in the state.

The potential for positive impact highlights the need for additional empirical work to explore the "most efficient, effective, and engaging means for delivering these initial and ongoing PD opportunities" (Carter et al., 2009, p. 356). Investing in high-quality professional development (PD) may represent one way to transform paraeducators from an under-used resource into an effective component of the instructional workforce and improve services for students with exceptionalities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003).

Purpose. The purpose of this report is to provide an understanding of the current state of affairs regarding paraeducators in the state of California. This is critical as a majority of what is known about the status of paraeducator employment comes from analyses of data from other states (e.g., Washington, Oregon) or national resources that include only minimal specific details related to position type, professional development, and other key information. We will summarize currently available state data regarding paraeducators. We will then provide a deeper dive into one district in the state to offer additional detail and context. This deeper dive includes an analysis of district data related to paraeducator employment, a paraeducator survey, and a series of focus groups. Next, we will examine extant research literature focused on enhancing knowledge and skill for paraeducators to offer guidance for California policy makers related to future PD and training for paraeducators within the

state. We conclude with policy recommendations to more effectively prepare paraeducators to support students with disabilities in California.

Current Snapshot of Status of Paraeducators in California

Collecting definitive data regarding the status of paraeducators in California poses several challenges due to the ways that paraeducators are classified across the various databases (e.g., paras providing support to students with disabilities are often lumped into a broader category of "Instructional Aide" and many data sources report "Full Time Equivalent (FTE)" status instead of headcounts of employed paraeducators). Beyond these challenges, data that are collected at the state level are relatively basic.

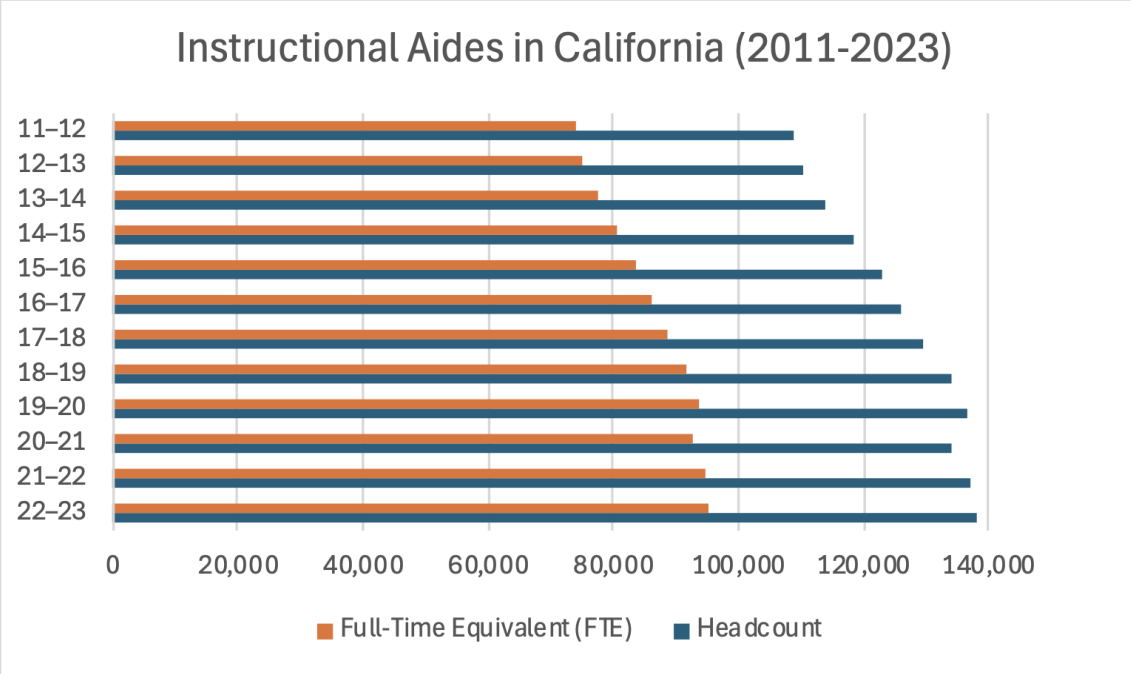
According to the most recently available data from the California Department of Education (See Table 1 and Figure 1; CDE; https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/staffdemo.asp), the number of staff members categorized as instructional aides (which includes paraeducators and other non-certified staff), has increased from 108,826 individuals to 137,858 individuals from 2011-2012 to 2022-2023, an increase of 25.7%. As of May 2023, approximately 14.6% of individuals classified as "teaching assistants" in the U.S. were employed in the state of California (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Further, California consistently employes a higher number of paraeducators per student compared to other states (e.g., 1 paraeducator per 12.13 students in California compared to a national average of 1 paraeducator to 13.85 students; Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). In terms of FTE, the increase went from 73,763 FTEs in 2011-2012 to 95,348 in 2022-2023, an increase of 29.3%. These data clearly show that most paraeducators are employed part-time. The number of FTE positions is consistently about 69-70% of the total number of people hired. This is because many work short days (<6 hours per day) and are not employed for the full year, which in turn limits their pay and access to benefits.

Table 1. Instructional Aides in California (2014-2025)

School Year	Headcount	Full-Time Equivalent (FTE)
11–12	108,826	73,763
12–13	110,314	74,834
13–14	113,878	77,288
14–15	118,522	80,483
15–16	122,866	83,556
16–17	126,104	86,103
17–18	129,584	88,427
18–19	134,196	91,894
19–20	136,547	93,656
20–21	133,962	92,729
21–22	137,284	94,849
22–23	137,858	95,348

Source. California Department of Education.

Figure 1. Instructional Aides in California (2014-2025)



Source. California Department of Education.

In order to more closely examine trends in paraeducator staffing, data were extracted for staff members who were officially designated as “paraprofessionals” (excluding staff categorized as “office/clerical staff” and “other staff” (https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesstre.asp). In these data (see Figure 2), there has been a steady increase in the FTE number of instructional aides who were categorized as paraeducators within the state from 2014-2015 (73,219.50 FTEs) to 2024-2025 (106,833.46 FTEs). This represents a 45.9% increase in paraeducator FTEs across a decade. In comparison, the number of special education teachers in the state increased at a rate of 24% during a similar timeline (i.e., 31,041 special education teachers in 2014-2015 to 38,459 special education teachers in 2022-2023). In addition to an increase in combined FTE, the paraeducator workforce has also become increasingly diverse, with non-White paraeducators rising from 58.1% in 2014-2015 to 69.6% in 2024-2025, a trend primarily driven by an increase in paraeducators who identify as Hispanic and a decrease in those identifying as White (see Table 2). However, the percentage of paraeducators who identified as Black decreased by 2.7% across this same period. [Note: The US Census categorizes Hispanic as an ethnicity rather than a race. For the purposes of this report, we are using the categories used in our various data sources.] Interestingly, as highlighted in Table 3, the racial demographics of paraeducators in 2024-2025 more closely reflect the racial backgrounds of the student population, including students enrolled in special education, compared to the teacher workforce.

Table 2. Paraeducator Racial Demographics in California (2014-2025)

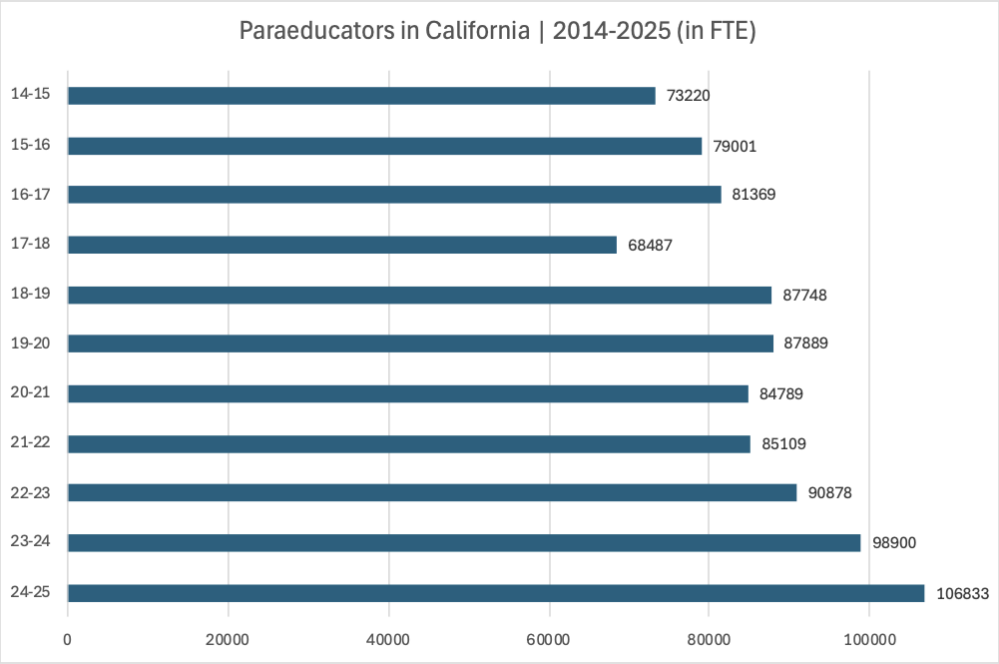
Year	African American	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Filipino	Hispanic	White	Multiple or No Response
14-15	9.1%	0.7%	4.5%	0.6%	1.7%	38.8%	41.9%	2.6%
15-16	8.7%	0.7%	4.6%	0.5%	1.8%	40.4%	40.9%	2.3%
16-17	8.6%	0.8%	4.7%	0.6%	1.9%	41.1%	39.6%	2.8%
17-18	9.8%	0.8%	4.7%	0.6%	1.8%	41.7%	37.8%	2.9%
18-19	8.3%	0.8%	5.1%	0.6%	1.8%	42.6%	37.6%	3.3%
19-20	7.6%	0.8%	5.0%	0.6%	1.8%	42.8%	36.3%	5.1%
20-21	7.9%	0.8%	5.1%	0.5%	1.8%	43.0%	35.1%	5.8%
21-22	7.6%	0.8%	5.4%	0.6%	1.9%	45.4%	34.4%	4.0%
22-23	6.8%	0.9%	5.6%	0.5%	1.8%	45.5%	33.2%	5.5%
23-24	6.7%	0.8%	5.8%	0.5%	1.8%	47.9%	31.4%	5.0%
24-25	6.5%	1.0%	6.0%	0.5%	1.8%	47.0%	30.4%	6.7%

Note. Categories determined by California Department of Education.

Table 3. Racial Demographics for Students, Teachers, and Paraeducators in California for 2024-2025

Race	All Students		Students in Special Education		All Teachers		Paras	
African American	281,645	4.9%	59,683	6.9%	10,014	3.5%	6,944	6.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	24,822	0.4%	4,885	0.6%	1,431	0.5%	1,068	1.0%
Asian	586,566	10.1%	44,913	5.2%	18,026	6.3%	6,410	6.0%
Filipino	127,978	2.2%	13,946	1.6%	5,150	1.8%	534	0.5%
Hispanic or Latino	3,257,893	56.1%	525,115	60.7%	74,965	26.2%	50,212	47.0%
Pacific Islander	23,214	0.4%	2,720	0.3%	858	0.3%	534	0.5%
White	1,159,523	20.0%	163,882	18.9%	155,080	54.2%	32,477	30.4%
Two or More Races	276,901	4.8%	38,068	4.4%	3,720	1.3%	7,158	6.7%
Not Reported	67,679	1.2%	12,001	1.4%	16,881	5.9%	*(Included in 'Two or More Races')*	
Total	5,806,221		865,213	14.9%	286,126		106,833	

Figure 2. Paraeducators in California (2014-2025)



Source. California Department of Education.

Summary. The paraeducator workforce in California has seen substantial growth, though precise tracking is complicated by inconsistent data classification. According to state data, the FTEs of paraeducators increased by a remarkable 45.9% over the past decade (2014-2025). This expansion significantly outpaces the 24% growth rate of special education teachers during a similar timeframe, indicating a growing reliance on paraeducator staff in schools. In addition to its growth, the paraeducator workforce has become increasingly diverse, with non-White staff growing from 58.1% to 69.6% over the last decade. As a result, the racial and ethnic demographics of California's paraeducators now more closely mirror the state's student population than the teacher workforce does.

Deeper Dive into One District

Due to limitations of available state-level data, we decided to conduct a 'deeper dive' into one California school district to further understand the current status of paraeducators in the state. We opted to focus on one Bay area school district with whom our university has an established partnership

due to the limited resources available for this project. While this convenience sample does limit the generalizations that can be made from the data, we believe that they are informative for the purposes of this report. In the 2024-2025 academic year, the partner district served about 14,000 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, including transition services for students with disabilities through age twenty-one. Slightly more than 2,000 students (15.3%) received special education services in the district. The student body is diverse with most students being Hispanic or Latino (38.1%), Asian (31.1%) or White (15.9%); 22.1% are English Learners, and 32.6% qualify as socioeconomically disadvantaged. [Retrieved from https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/; https://www.caschooldashboard.org/]

District Data

An analysis of district-level data for 519 paraeducators, collected on October 13, 2025, provides a snapshot of their placement and roles (See Table 4). Overall, the most frequent assignments were to special education settings (34.7%) and one-on-one student support (30.6%), with a majority of staff (58.8%) located on elementary campuses. A more granular look reveals how these roles vary by campus type. At the secondary level, paraeducators were more likely to serve in specialized roles: in middle schools, 43.8% provided one-on-one support and 17.2% worked in special day classes, while in high schools, these figures were 34.4% and 27.1%, respectively.

Table 4. Assignment by Role and Campus Type

Assignment	All	Elementary	Middle School	High School	Other
Role					
Special Education	34.7%	34.6%	35.9%	34.4%	34.5%
Special Day Class	9.4%	2.7%	17.2%	27.1%	6.9%
One-on-One	30.6%	29.6%	43.8%	34.4%	15.5%
General Education	6.4%	5.7%	3.1%	1.0%	22.4%
PK/TK	12.3%	20.9%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%
Other	6.6%	6.6%	0.0%	3.1%	19.0%
Campus Type					
Elementary	58.0%				
Middle School	12.3%				
High School	18.5%				
Other	11.2%				

As shown in Table 5, paraeducator employment is characterized by part-time work, with an average FTE of 0.727 (ranging from 0.63 to 0.938). An analysis of their tenure shows an average of 5.36

years of total service in the district (longevity) and 4.17 years in their current role (seniority). The wide ranges for both longevity (from less than a year to 34.9 years) and seniority (from 0 to 30 years) highlight a significant degree of variability in experience across the workforce. Analysis shows that while FTE is largely consistent, paraeducators in general education roles work significantly fewer hours, averaging an FTE of 0.45. Experience levels also vary by assignment. Paraeducators at the secondary level (middle and high school) demonstrate slightly higher longevity and seniority. Conversely, those providing one-on-one support and those assigned to PK/TK settings have, on average, the lowest years of service.

Table 5. FTE, Longevity, and Seniority by Role and Campus Type

		All	Special Education	Special Day Class	One-on-One	General Education	PK/TK	Other	Elementary	Middle School	High School	Other
FTE	M	0.73	0.75	0.75	0.73	0.45	0.75	0.80	0.73	0.74	0.73	0.69
	(SD)	*(0.1)*	*(0.0)*	*(0.0)*	*(0.1)*	*(0.2)*	*(0.0)*	*(0.1)*	*(0.1)*	*(0.5)*	*(0.1)*	*(0.2)*
Longevity (Yrs)	M	5.36	7.28	8.28	2.34	5.71	3.44	8.38	4.84	5.96	6.76	5.08
	(SD)	*(6.2)*	*(6.8)*	*(8.6)*	*(2.9)*	*(5.9)*	*(3.6)*	*(7.7)*	*(5.7)*	*(6.3)*	*(7.8)*	*(5.4)*
Seniority (Yrs)	M	4.17	5.44	5.81	2.16	4.90	2.75	6.42	3.91	4.62	5.09	3.50
	(SD)	*(5.6)*	*(5.9)*	*(7.0)*	*(2.8)*	*(5.1)*	*(3.5)*	*(6.7)*	*(5.2)*	*(5.0)*	*(6.3)*	*(4.0)*

***Summary*.** To understand the paraeducator workforce in California, an analysis was conducted on data representing 519 paraeducators within a single, diverse Bay Area school district. The findings show that most paraeducators were assigned to elementary campuses, primarily serving in special education settings or providing one-on-one student support. Overall, this workforce is characterized by systemic part-time employment and significant variability in experience, with longevity and seniority often differing based on campus level and specific role.

Paraeducator Survey

To further understand PD and training, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction, we administered a survey to all 519 paraeducators in our partner district during the 2025-2026 academic year. A survey participation link was sent from central office staff via email to all paraeducators. Two follow-up reminders were sent approximately two and four weeks after the initial email. Participation was optional and anonymous. All paraeducators were notified that they would be entered into a raffle to

receive one of twenty-five $25.00 gift cards if the overall participation rate was sufficiently high (i.e., 50%). We received completed surveys from 146 paraeducators resulting in a response rate of 28.1%. We deemed this response rate to be sufficient and issued the raffled gift cards.

The 146 paraeducators who completed the survey were predominately female (91.1%; See Table 6). The most frequently reported races were Asian (35.6%), White (26.0%), and Hispanic or Latino (19.9%). Paraeducators ranged in age from their twenties to seventies, with the majority falling between 30-59 years of age. Fifty percent of paraeducators reported only being fluent in English; 47.3% reported being in fluent in English and at least one other language; and four reported being fluent only in a language other than English. The most common other languages spoken by paraeducators were Spanish (n=25), Hindi (n=20), and Other (n=42; e.g., Tamil, Telugu, Marathi). Many paraeducators had completed education beyond high school, with a majority indicating their highest level of education was a Bachelor's or Master's degree (54.1%).

Survey data indicates that paraeducators' primary functions were classroom support (45.2%), one-on-one support (32.2%), and resource support (22.6%). While a majority (57.5%) were placed in general education classrooms, significant portions also worked in specialized settings like special day classes (30.1%) and resource rooms (30.8%), with their efforts predominantly focused on elementary-aged students (52.7%). Highlighting the multifaceted nature of their assignments, many respondents also reported working in more than one classroom type (32.3%), holding multiple roles (13.0%), and supporting students across various grade levels (11.0%). Regarding work history, respondents had worked an average of 4.87 years (SD=5.04) in their current position, 7.57 years (SD=6.93) years as a paraeducator, and 8.03 years (SD=7.39) in the district. A majority (57.5%) had worked in another role in the district and 71.9% had other professional experiences prior to becoming a paraeducator.

A comparison of the demographics of the survey respondents to the broader district population reveals several key similarities and differences, suggesting that the survey sample may not be fully representative of the district’s entire paraeducator workforce. The survey respondents represent a

highly educated and experienced group, with a majority (54.1%) holding a Bachelor's or Master's degree and reporting an average of over seven years of experience. Also, the racial and ethnic composition of the respondents differs from that of the student population they serve; Hispanic or Latino paraeducators are significantly underrepresented in the survey (19.9%) compared to their proportion in the student body (38.1%), while Asian (35.6%) and White (26.0%) respondents are overrepresented. The percentage of Asian paraeducators in this sample is also substantially higher than the percentage represented across the state. Also, consistent with broader trends in education support roles, most respondents were female (91.1%). It is worth noting that the demographic differences in race and education level suggest that the survey likely captured a more formally educated and tenured subset of the district's paraeducators, a critical consideration when interpreting the findings.

Table 6. Survey Respondent Demographics

Gender	n	%
Woman	133	91.1%
Man	8	5.5%
Non-binary/Gender fluid	1	0.7%
Other	0	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	4	2.7%
Race		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0.0%
Asian	52	35.6%
Black or African American	3	2.1%
Hispanic or Latino	29	19.9%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0.0%
Middle Eastern or North African	2	1.4%
White	38	26.0%
Another Identify	4	2.7%
Prefer not to answer	12	8.2%
Mixed Race	6	4.1%
Age		
20s	14	9.6%
30s	23	15.8%
40s	48	32.9%
50s	38	26.0%
60s	13	8.9%
70s or older	3	2.1%
Prefer to not answer	7	4.8%
Language		
English Only	73	50.0%
English and Other	69	47.3%
Other Only (Not English)	4	2.7%
Education		
High School	16	11.0%
Some College	34	23.3%
Associate's Degree	13	8.9%
Bachelor's Degree	55	37.7%
Master's Degree	24	16.4%
Other	4	2.7%

Table 7. Survey Respondent Roles, Classroom Types, and Grade of Supported Students

Role		
One-on-one	47	32.2%
Classroom	66	45.2%
Itinerant	2	1.4%
SDC	10	6.8%
Resource / RSP	33	22.6%
Therapeutic	3	2.1%
Other	5	3.4%
One role	127	87.0%
2+ roles	19	13.0%
Classroom Type		
General education	84	57.5%
SDC	44	30.1%
Resource / RSP	45	30.8%
Preschool	22	15.1%
Therapeutic	6	4.1%
Other	7	4.8%
One classroom type	99	67.8%
Two or more classroom types	47	32.2%
Student Grade		
PreK	25	17.1%
Elementary	77	52.7%
Middle School	33	22.6%
High School	25	17.1%
Post Secondary	6	4.1%
Other	2	1.4%
One grade	130	89.0%
Two or more grades	16	11.0%

Note. Percentages were calculated on respondent sample (n=146) thus percentages sum to greater than 100% due to paraeducators who reported greater than one role, classroom type, or grade.

Next, paraeducators were asked to report on their professional PD experiences related to sixteen common topics. This involved a two-part inquiry. First, participants indicated whether they had received PD or training for each topic. Second, if they had received training, they were asked to evaluate its (a) effectiveness, defined as learning the intended content, and (b) value, defined as whether the information improved their on-the-job performance.

Table 8 summarizes the responses to these questions. The topics are presented in the first column, rank-ordered by their average value rating. The subsequent columns detail the percentage of respondents who reported receiving or not receiving training for each topic. As is common in survey research, there were minor discrepancies in response rates between the effectiveness and value sections. For participants who did receive training, the table then presents their evaluations. They rated both the effectiveness and value of each topic on a scale of "Minimal=1," "Moderate=2," or "Very=3." The data are displayed as the percentage of respondents for each rating, alongside the average rating for both dimensions.

Analysis of the survey data reveals clear patterns in PD participation and perceived quality. The highest percentage of paraeducators (80-95%) reported receiving training on mandated reporting, understanding behavioral intervention plans, and interpreting IEPs and 504 plans. Conversely, the fewest paraeducators (44-56%) reported receiving PD on topics such as mathematics instruction/support, personal care, multi-tiered systems of support, and strategies for working with multilingual and English learners.

Regarding the quality of the training, paraeducators rated PD on mandated reporting, confidentiality and ethics, and first aid/CPR certification as the most effective. The topics rated as least effective included literacy or reading instruction/support, understanding IEPs and 504 plans, working with multilingual and English learners, and implicit bias and equity training. Finally, when asked to assess value, paraeducators identified mandated reporter training, first aid/CPR certification, collaboration, and physical restraining as the trainings that most improved their ability to perform their job. The least valuable topics included working with multilingual and English learners, literacy and reading instruction/support, MTSS training, and implicit bias and equity training. A small number of respondents indicated receiving PD or training on other topics, with content on personal wellness, personality dynamics, and self-care receiving positive ratings for effectiveness and value.

*T*able 8. Effectiveness and Value of Professional Development and Training

	Effectiveness							Value						
Topic of Professional Development or Training	No training or PD	Yes training or PD	Minimally effective	Moderately effective	Very effective	M	SD	No training or PD	Yes training or PD	Minimally vaulauble	Moderately valuable	Very valuable	M	SD
Mandated reporter training	5.5%	94.5%	8.0%	26.1%	65.9%	2.58	0.64	5.5%	94.5%	10.9%	25.4%	63.8%	2.53	0.69
First aid / CPR certification	36.3%	63.7%	17.2%	26.9%	55.9%	2.39	0.77	35.6%	64.4%	13.8%	20.2%	66.0%	2.52	0.73
Collaboration / working with other educators	22.6%	77.4%	17.7%	29.2%	53.1%	2.35	0.77	23.3%	76.7%	17.0%	25.0%	58.0%	2.41	0.77
Physical restraining	41.1%	58.9%	17.4%	31.4%	51.2%	2.34	0.76	39.0%	61.0%	18.0%	25.8%	56.2%	2.38	0.78
training	45.2%	54.8%	17.5%	35.0%	47.5%	2.30	0.75	41.8%	58.2%	18.8%	24.7%	56.5%	2.38	0.79
Other	84.9%	15.1%	18.2%	27.3%	54.5%	2.36	0.79	90.4%	9.6%	28.6%	7.1%	64.3%	2.36	0.93
Understanding behavioral intervention plans	15.1%	84.9%	17.7%	44.4%	37.9%	2.20	0.72	15.8%	84.2%	17.9%	31.7%	50.4%	2.33	0.76
Mathematics instruction/support	47.3%	52.7%	24.7%	35.1%	40.3%	2.16	0.80	51.4%	48.6%	19.7%	28.2%	52.1%	2.32	0.79
Social-emotional learning	21.2%	78.8%	20.0%	44.3%	35.7%	2.16	0.73	28.1%	71.9%	18.1%	31.4%	50.5%	2.32	0.77
prevention	21.9%	78.1%	14.0%	39.5%	46.5%	2.32	0.71	19.9%	80.1%	24.8%	21.4%	53.8%	2.29	0.84
Personal care	56.2%	43.8%	26.6%	28.1%	45.3%	2.19	0.83	52.1%	47.9%	21.4%	28.6%	50.0%	2.29	0.80
Confidentiality and ethics	32.2%	67.8%	11.1%	38.4%	50.5%	2.39	0.68	28.1%	71.9%	21.0%	32.4%	46.7%	2.26	0.78
Understanding IEP and 504 plans	18.5%	81.5%	23.5%	39.5%	37.0%	2.13	0.77	19.2%	80.8%	19.5%	36.4%	44.1%	2.25	0.76
Working with multilingual and English learners	55.5%	44.5%	30.8%	26.2%	43.1%	2.12	0.86	54.8%	45.2%	24.2%	27.3%	48.5%	2.24	0.82
Literacy or reading instruction/support	40.4%	59.6%	25.3%	35.6%	39.1%	2.14	0.79	42.5%	57.5%	21.4%	33.3%	45.2%	2.24	0.79
MTSS training	52.7%	47.3%	31.9%	36.2%	31.9%	2.00	0.80	54.8%	45.2%	24.2%	36.4%	39.4%	2.15	0.79
Implicit bias and equity training	22.6%	77.4%	26.5%	43.4%	30.1%	2.04	0.76	27.4%	72.6%	25.5%	36.8%	37.7%	2.12	0.79

We next asked respondents to rank order eight common PD formats from 1 (most preferred) to 8 (least preferred). The most preferred formats based on average rating (see Table 9) included in-person group training, small professional learning communities, and on-going coaching. Independent reading and review of materials was the least preferred format. And, although not highly rated on average, asynchronous online video training was ranked in the top three choices by 41% of respondents. The variability in paraeducators' preferences for various PD formats, indicated by the large standard deviations and the range of topics identified in the top three, was relatively high and no patterns in preference and job role or campus setting were identified.

Table 9. Professional Development Formats

Professional Development Formats	M	SD	Top 3
In-person group training	3.42	2.69	59.1%
Engaging in a small professional learning community with other paraeducators	3.72	2.29	51.2%
On-going coaching	4.18	2.14	41.5%
One-on-one, individualized support	4.38	2.15	37.5%
Online group training (e.g., Zoom)	4.38	2.17	37.0%
Completing activities on my job and reviewing with a coach or guide	4.45	2.06	35.3%
Asynchronous online videos	4.54	2.30	41.0%
Indepdendent reading and review of materials	4.91	2.13	30.2%

Following the topic-specific questions, the survey prompted paraeducators to reflect on various statements related to their PD more broadly. Participants rated their level of agreement with eleven statements using a five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 3 = Neutral, and 5 = Strongly Agree). The average responses for each statement are presented in Table 10. Overall, paraeducators reported high agreement with the statements. The highest-rated items (M = 4.14–4.48) were those related to effective communication with colleagues and a clear understanding of district policies, procedures, and expectations. The statements that received the lowest agreement ratings were those regarding

confidence in implementing behavior support strategies and the perception of receiving adequate training to perform one's job effectively.

Table 10. Evaluation of PD and Training

Evaluation of Professional Development and Training	M	SD
I believe I effectively communicate with the educators with whom I work.	4.48	0.80
I understand the policies and procedures that relate to my role as a paraeducator.	4.22	0.91
I believe the educators with whom I work effectively communicate with me.	4.21	1.02
I understand the district's expectations for me in my role as a paraeducator.	4.14	0.93
I have opportunities for ongoing professional development that improve my skills.	3.99	1.06
I believe the educators with whom I work understand the district's expectations for me in my role as a paraeducator.	3.94	1.09
I feel confident implementing the academic support strategies learned during training.	3.93	1.00
I believe the educators with whom I work understand the policies and procedures that are related to my role as a paraeducator.	3.93	1.05
I feel supported by my school or district in my professional growth.	3.93	1.13
I feel confident implementing the behavior support strategies learned during training.	3.88	1.03
I have received adequate training to perform my job effectively.	3.77	1.33

Next, paraeducators rated their agreement with twenty statements related to their perceived effectiveness in performing various job duties and their satisfaction with their job performance. Using a five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), their responses were generally high, indicating strong levels of self-reported self-efficacy. The areas of greatest perceived strength included building positive and supportive relationships with students, communicating with teachers, feeling confident in their job performance, and making a meaningful difference in students' learning

outcomes. In contrast, the lowest average ratings were for statements concerning effectively managing student behavior, feeling respected or valued as part of the team, de-escalating challenging behaviors, and being comfortable communicating with students' families when appropriate.

The survey concluded with questions regarding future professional goals. A majority (78.1%) indicated a desire to continue in their current role in the next academic year. On a scale of 1=Very interested to 5=Not interested, the average rating was 1.33 (SD=0.71). About a quarter of respondents (24.7%) indicated that they were considering other roles within the district. Only 4.1% of paraeducators indicated they were considering taking a role outside of education; 6.8% were unsure about their plans for the next academic year. When asked to reflect on career development in the next 3-5 years, a little more than half (56.8%) aimed to continue as a paraeducator. Many paraeducators (30.1%) were interested in pursuing a credential in teaching or special education; while 23.3% were interested in pursuing another career in education, and 6.8% were interested in pursuing a career outside of education. Returning to school for additional training was a goal for 12.3% of paraeducators and 17.1% were unsure of their plans.

Table 11. Efficacy and Satisfaction

Efficacy and Satisfaction	M	SD
I am able to build positive and supportive relationships with students.	4.72	0.53
I communicate effectively with the lead teacher or classroom instructor.	4.64	0.56
I feel proud to be a paraeducator and of the work I do.	4.64	0.61
I feel confident in my ability to perform my job well.	4.62	0.61
I feel capable of maintaining a safe and inclusive learning environment.	4.61	0.62
I believe I make a meaningful difference in students' learning outcomes.	4.6	0.60
I feel motivated to continue improving as a paraeducator.	4.54	0.70
I am satisfied with my current job performance.	4.52	0.71
I can effectively adapt learning activities to meet students' individual needs.	4.5	0.65
I am able to assist students in achieving their academic goals.	4.5	0.67
I understand my role and responsibilities within the instructional team.	4.46	0.76
I feel comfortable sharing observations about students' progress with school staff.	4.43	0.83
I feel prepared to provide one-on-one or small-group instruction effectively.	4.4	0.78
The staff I work with communicate effectively with me. (e.g., the lead teacher or classroom instructor).	4.38	0.83
I feel confident supporting students in understanding classroom material.	4.37	0.81
I collaborate effectively with other school staff and specialists.	4.36	0.80
I can effectively manage student behavior in the classroom.	4.23	0.78
I feel respected and valued as part of the educational team.	4.15	0.96
I feel confident de-escalating challenging student behaviors.	4.12	0.82
I feel comfortable communicating with students' families when appropriate.	3.68	1.25

Summary. Our survey of 146 paraeducators was conducted to understand their PD needs, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. The respondents represent a highly educated, experienced, and diverse group who reported high overall job satisfaction and felt particularly effective in building supportive student relationships and communicating with colleagues. However, the findings reveal a potential disconnect between these relational strengths and their preparedness for key instructional and behavioral duties. This gap corresponds directly with their lowest areas of self-reported confidence—specifically, managing and de-escalating challenging student behaviors—and is compounded by a feeling of not always being respected or valued as part of the professional team.

This disconnect is largely explained by patterns in the PD they receive. Training on compliance-based topics like mandated reporting was common and rated as effective, whereas PD was often lacking and deemed less valuable in crucial areas such as mathematics, literacy support, and strategies for multilingual learners. Despite these challenges, most paraeducators are highly committed to their roles and plan to continue in their positions. To better address the identified gaps in their practice, they expressed a clear preference for interactive and ongoing PD formats, such as in-person group training, small professional learning communities, and coaching, over more passive methods.

Focus Groups

To gain a comprehensive understanding of paraeducators' working conditions and needs, we conducted five focus groups with 17 employees in the partner district. To ensure a range of viewpoints, we recruited participants from various professional roles: campus-level site administrators (n=4), district-level trainers (n=4), union representatives (n=2), district special education leaders (n=3), and teachers (n=4). We designed focus groups to be role-specific with participants who shared similar responsibilities being brought together for each group.

Guided by a series of open-ended questions, the discussions centered on paraeducator effectiveness, the quality of their PD, and potential enhancements to training, policy, and other support systems. Each 60-minute session was conducted either in-person (n=2) or via Zoom (n=3). Data were captured through detailed notetaking in all sessions; four of the five groups were also recorded and

transcribed via Zoom, with the exception of the special education leaders' session per the participants' request.

A multi-step thematic analysis was conducted on the focus group transcripts and notes to ensure the rigor and validity of the findings. The process began with an initial analysis by focus group leaders, who identified emergent themes within each participant group. Next, a comprehensive coding of the approximately 300 pages of transcripts was performed to find quotations that either supported or conflicted with these initial themes.

To enhance and cross-validate this analysis, an AI tool (Gemini 2.5 Pro) was used to independently identify key themes and recommendations across the entire dataset. The research team then triangulated these three sources—facilitator notes, coded transcripts, and the AI summary—to synthesize and verify the perspectives. For further validation, a researcher who had not participated in the coding, audited the analytical process and findings. Finally, we conducted member checking by providing written summaries to participants, who were invited to give feedback to confirm their views were accurately captured. Any minor discrepancies were resolved through team discussion to ensure the final manuscript was a faithful representation of participant responses. Summaries of themes and recommendations across focus groups are presented in Tables 12 and 13.

Table 12. Focus Group Themes

Focus Group Themes
Campus-Level Site Administrators
Inconsistent & Insufficient Training: Paraeducators learn "on the fly" as training is often optional, irrelevant, and not supported by a budget.
Role Ambiguity: The paraeducator role is "wonky" and "unclear," with responsibilities varying significantly. Teachers are also not trained to manage other adults.
Systemic Barriers: Inefficient hiring processes, inflexible substitute policies, and hourly pay structures hinder training and effective deployment.
Poor Integration & Retention: Paraeducators often feel "segregated" and excluded from school culture, leading to retention issues.
District Trainers
Absence of Professional Standards: A lack of clear standards for what makes an effective paraeducator makes coaching subjective and evaluations generic.
Siloed Training: Teachers and paraeducators are rarely trained together, and there is no follow-up support system to ensure new skills are implemented.
Undefined & Undervalued Role: An "overqualified" workforce is underutilized due to a lack of career pathways, and their work with the most vulnerable students is devalued.
Union Representatives
Lack of Role Differentiation: The district treats all paraeducators as interchangeable ("a para is a para is a para"), preventing strategic deployment and specialized training.
Disconnected "One-and-Done" Training: Siloed training without joint planning time prevents teams from aligning on new strategies.
Failure of Site Leadership: Principals often have a "not my job" mentality toward paraeducators, leading to flawed and "terrible" evaluations.
Disempowerment: Paraeducators are disempowered by rules preventing direct communication with parents and confusion about their role as mandated reporters.
District Special Education Leaders
Professional Isolation: The "silo-ness" of the role prevents the development of a professional community and shared best practices.
Fragmented Training: Professional development is a "one-off" problem, lacking the depth and joint application needed for real skill development.
Dependence on Supervisor Competence: Paraeducator success is tied to skilled teachers and administrators, who themselves often lack adequate special education training.
Union as a Barrier: The union is seen as "very adult centric," protecting individuals in a way that can be detrimental to student needs.
Teachers
Lack of Joint Planning Time: The absence of structured, paid time for collaboration forces teams to operate "on the fly" and prevents effective onboarding.
Parallel Training in Separate Rooms: A flawed training model where paras and teachers are not trained together on curriculum and pedagogy leads to misalignment.
Paraeducator's Paradox: Paraeducators are strong at building relationships but often lack the skills to deliver effective instruction.
Facade Inclusion & Devaluation: The system devalues paraeducators with "obscene" compensation and benefits, undermining the district's inclusion model.

Table 13. Focus Group Recommendations

Focus Group Recommendations
Campus-Level Site Administrators
Standardize & Fund Mandatory Training: Include a minimum number of paid annual training hours in all contracts, supported by a state-level foundational curriculum.
Create a "Para-to-Sub" Pathway: Develop a streamlined pathway with an appropriate pay structure for qualified paraeducators to serve as substitute teachers.
Promote Teacher-Paraeducator Collaboration: Require training on collaboration in teacher/admin prep programs and fund dedicated joint planning time.
Streamline Hiring: Use grants and technical assistance to help districts centralize and improve hiring and onboarding.
District Trainers
Establish Statewide Standards & Certification: Create a clear standard of practice and a tiered certification system to professionalize the role.
Develop a Statewide Induction & Mentorship Program: Implement a mandatory, paid program to provide critical coaching and follow-up support.
Mandate Training on Supervision: Require and fund training on paraeducator supervision and collaboration for all teachers and administrators.
Fund Joint Planning Time: Provide dedicated, paid time for teacher-paraeducator teams to collaborate.
Union Representatives
Mandate Minimum Para-to-Student Ratios: Establish protected staffing ratios in specialized classrooms to ensure student safety and support.
Establish Role Classifications & Certification: Create a state framework for specialized roles and a tiered, on-the-job certification pathway.
Mandate & Fund Joint Collaboration Time: Identify the lack of paid, joint planning time as the single greatest barrier and demand state action to fund it.
Strengthen Paraeducator Autonomy: Issue state guidance affirming their status as mandated reporters and create channels for appropriate communication with families.
District Special Education Leaders
Establish Mandatory State Certification & Standardized Roles: Create a short, practical certification course, standardized job descriptions, and a statewide salary schedule.
Strengthen Training for Leadership: Mandate more robust special education training for administrators and require union leaders to get certified in collaborative problem-solving.
Create a Dedicated State Funding Stream: Fund paraeducator support systems to allow for substitutes and dramatically shorten the hiring process.
Teachers
Restructure Compensation & Benefits: Significantly increase pay, establish a professional salary schedule, and provide benefits on par with other school employees.
Mandate & Fund Joint PD & Planning Time: Require that paraeducators be "trained side-by-side" with teachers and fund dedicated time for collaboration.
Require Job-Specific Onboarding: Mandate that all paraeducators complete job-specific training before beginning work with students.Address
Failures in Inclusion: Move beyond the "facade" by providing funding, clear definitions, and accountability for high-fidelity co-teaching models.

Campus-level site administrators: Themes. Across elementary, middle, and high school levels, administrators identified several themes regarding the role, support, and integration of paraeducators. A primary concern was the inconsistent and insufficient training provided to them. There was a strong consensus that paraeducators are "effective considering the training that they're provided," but that this training is ultimately inadequate for the complex demands of their roles. Administrators reported having little to no involvement in or knowledge of the district-led training their paraeducators receive, which is often seen as irrelevant to their specific campus roles. Consequently, much of the learning was

viewed as being inconsistent "on-the-job training," leaving paraeducators to learn "on the fly" and unprepared for unique situations. This creates a significant gap between their responsibilities—such as running small instructional groups or implementing de-escalation strategies—and their formal preparation. As one administrator explained, they "don't always have the skill to do that, because they haven't learned, [it] hasn't been taught."

Related to this issue is the great ambiguity surrounding the paraeducator's role, which one administrator described as "wonky" and "very unclear." Responsibilities vary significantly between one-on-one aides and classroom paras, and across different school sites. This lack of clarity is compounded by the fact that teachers are often not trained on how to effectively manage or support another adult in the classroom. One principal observed, "My weakest paraeducators are often with teachers who don't know how to manage adults," leading to awkwardness and insufficient use. This ambiguity creates unclear boundaries, with both teachers and paras unsure of the paraeducator's scope of responsibility, leaving them to wonder, "Am I allowed to talk to other kids?"

Administrators also highlighted systemic and structural barriers that hinder paraeducator effectiveness. Because paraeducators are hourly staff, any training outside contracted hours is optional, creating a budgetary and logistical challenge for sites that wish to implement required PD. As one principal stated, "If it is optional, many don't join." The district's inefficient hiring process was another major bottleneck, often taking six weeks or more and placing a significant strain on site staff. Furthermore, administrators expressed deep frustration with inflexible substitute policies that prevent qualified paraeducators—some with advanced degrees—from serving as substitute teachers. This was seen as a nonsensical barrier, especially when a paraeducator who knows the students and classroom "could be a better sub than the people we can legally hire," an issue worsened by pay structures that administrators stated would cause them to lose money if they did sub for a day.

Ultimately, these challenges contribute to issues of school culture and professional integration, which directly impact retention. Administrators noted that paraeducators often feel "segregated" from certificated staff and excluded from the larger school community, as they are not consistently included

in staff meetings or PD. A "random" and unwelcoming onboarding process can make new hires feel like outsiders from day one. The administrators concluded that retention is closely linked to paraeducators feeling valued and engaged, while turnover is driven by a combination of the high cost of living and the daily stress of managing challenging student behaviors.

Campus-level site administrators: Recommendations. Based on the challenges identified, administrators provided several policy recommendations. First, the administrators believed there is a critical need to standardize and fund mandatory paraeducator training. Given that current training is often optional, inconsistent, and a budgetary burden on school sites, the workforce is not adequately prepared for its duties. This group recommended that a minimum number of paid annual training hours should be included within all paraeducator contracts. The administrators felt that districts could lead in this effort. However, they also suggested that this effort could be accompanied by state support for a standardized, foundational curriculum for new hires covering essential topics such as classroom management, instructional support, de-escalation techniques, and understanding IEPs.

Next, administrators urged the creation of a flexible "para-to-sub" pathway and career lattice. Current policies that prevent qualified paraeducators from serving as substitute teachers represent a missed opportunity to address critical substitute shortages with existing, trusted talent. In their view, the district could create a district-managed substitute pool for paraeducators. Additionally, they suggested that the state could create an emergency credential or a streamlined pathway for experienced paraeducators to serve as substitutes, paired with a compensation structure that ensures they do not lose pay for doing so.

Administrators also felt that policies must be enacted to promote teacher and paraeducator collaboration. A paraeducator's effectiveness is highly dependent on the supervising teacher, yet teachers receive little training on how to manage or collaborate with them, and there is no dedicated time for joint planning. State policy should require that teacher and administrator preparation programs include robust training on this topic. Additionally, the state and district should fund and incentivize dedicated, joint planning time for teacher-paraeducator teams.

Finally, administrators felt strongly that systemic inefficiencies in hiring and onboarding need to be addressed. The current slow and burdensome process places an excessive administrative load on school sites, delaying student support and stressing staff. State leaders should provide grants, guidance, and technical assistance to help districts centralize and streamline these processes, which would reduce time-to-hire and create a more welcoming experience for new employees.

District trainers: Themes. A focus group with four district-level special education trainers, including Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs) and a Paraeducator Trainer, provided a "boots-on-the-ground" perspective that revealed deep-seated frustration with the lack of structures to support paraeducators. The most consistent theme was the absence of a defined professional standard for what constitutes an effective paraeducator, a void that impacts every facet of their work. One TOSA described that it is difficult to support paraeducators “when you don't have a standard," making coaching subjective and hindering the ability of support staff to be effective. Without a clear "goal" to work toward was viewed as resulting in inconsistent expectations across classrooms and makes formal evaluations feel generic and disconnected from student needs.

The lack of a consistent framework to guide paraeducators PD and support is worsened by systemic silos and a lack of collaboration. Participants described a critical flaw wherein "we rarely get the teachers and the paras to train together," undermining efforts to build cohesive teams. This group indicated that there is no system for follow-up or implementation support after training, meaning new skills are not integrated into practice because the necessary "triangulation is not there" between the paraeducator, teacher, and student support team. This leads to a "hand-off" model where paraeducators are assigned to a student rather than integrated into a team, fostering isolation.

Consequently, the paraeducator role is both undefined and fundamentally undervalued. Unclear job descriptions in a "horrendous" hiring process mean new hires often don't know the specific demands of a position, leading to high rates of internal transfers. This creates a paradox where a "very overqualified" workforce, including individuals with advanced degrees, has its talent untapped due to the lack of a defined career pathway. District trainers expressed that the staff working with the most

vulnerable students "kind of get the least value," a sentiment tied to a broader "culture of special education" that is often not well understood by site leadership. These issues are further compounded by the collective bargaining agreement, which creates confusion around teacher supervision roles and what practices are legally permissible, often driving paraeducator responsibilities over educational best practice.

District trainers: Recommendations. Based on the challenges identified, district trainers' insights point to several policy recommendations. The foundational recommendation is to establish statewide standards of practice and a tiered certification system for paraeducators. Addressing the root cause of inconsistency, a clear standard would professionalize the role and create a foundation for accountability. This could be modeled on systems like Washington State's, allowing paraeducators to earn a "cleared" certification on the job, which would increase professionalism and provide a measure of success without creating a prohibitive barrier to entry.

To support this professionalization, this group of educators also urge the development of a statewide paraeducator induction and mentorship program. Because, in their view, district trainers cannot support everyone, a structured, mandatory, and paid induction program—similar to those for new teachers—would provide the critical follow-up and coaching that is currently missing. Furthermore, since paraeducator effectiveness depends on their supervisors, the state should mandate and fund training on paraeducator supervision and collaboration for all teachers and administrators. This would require specific coursework in all credentialing programs to build the capacity of the "quarterback" to effectively lead the classroom team. Finally, to make this collaboration functional, district trainers recommend that the state fund and incentivize dedicated, joint planning time for teacher-paraeducator teams. Participants identified the lack of paid time to collaborate as the single biggest barrier to effective teaming, and this structural change is essential to breaking down silos and building a truly collaborative support model.

Union representatives: Themes. The focus group with leadership from the local paraeducator union provided a distinct perspective on the working conditions and professional identity of

paraeducators. A central theme was the district's failure to formally differentiate paraeducator roles, a problem summarized as "a para is a para is a para." Because job identifies are not often specified, paraeducators are often used as interchangeable "band-aids" rather than being strategically deployed to "tap into their best skills," a missed opportunity to align staff strengths with student needs. This issue also complicates training, as there is a recognized need for more robust academic instruction in areas like foundational reading and math that cannot be effectively targeted without clear role definitions.

This lack of clarity contributes to what participants called the "one-and-done" trap of disconnected training. A major flaw in the system is that teachers and paraeducators are trained in separate silos and then expected to implement new strategies without any collaborative time. The problem is intensified by misaligned calendars and the absence of joint preparation time, which prevents even basic team orientation.

Union representatives believed that these issues are compounded by a failure of site-level leadership. They noted that principals often operate with a "not my job" mentality, believing paraeducators "live under special ed" and therefore do not require the same level of supervision or support. This perception often leads to a flawed evaluation process described as "terrible" and "weird," where assessments are often based on "personality conflict and not based on professional outcomes." Inconsistent messaging from the district about how paraeducators should be used and supported further complicates efficient and effective use of paraeducators.

Ultimately, these difficulties limit paraeducators' abilities to meet student needs. A striking example is the confusion around their legal duties as mandated reporters, reflecting a message that they are "not able to... act independently." This disempowerment is further reinforced by the unwritten but strictly enforced rule that they cannot speak directly with parents, which undermines the relationships they build with students and treats them as assistants rather than as capable, professional team members.

Union representatives: Recommendations. Based on their experiences, the union representatives' feedback points to several policy recommendations for state leaders. A foundational recommendation is to mandate minimum paraeducator-to-student ratios in specialized classrooms. This would establish a protected baseline of support to ensure student safety and continuity of services, preventing essential staff from being stretched too thin or eliminated during budget cuts.

To further professionalize the role, union representatives strongly advocated for the state to establish a framework for paraeducator role classifications and a tiered, on-the-job certification pathway. This structure would move beyond the generic "para is a para" model, allowing for specialization, targeted training, and a clear path for professional advancement.

Crucially, for these specialized teams to be effective, representatives believe the state must also mandate and fund dedicated, joint collaboration time. Participants identified the lack of paid, student-free time for teachers and paraeducators to plan together as the single greatest barrier to implementing best practices and overcoming the current, ineffective model of siloed training. Further, this group believes that state-level policy must be used to strengthen paraeducator autonomy and reverse a culture of disempowerment. This includes issuing explicit guidance that affirms their standing as individual mandated reporters and exploring policies that create structured, appropriate channels for communication between paraeducators and families, thereby recognizing their professional dignity and vital role in a student's daily life.

District special education leaders: Themes. A discussion with district leadership highlighted challenges in the paraeducator support structure, focusing on the professional isolation of staff and the need for more competent supervision. A core problem identified was the "silo-ness" of the paraeducator role, which prevents the development of a cohesive professional community and leads to a disconnected workforce. While stop-gap measures like "itinerant paras" have been introduced, leaders see a deeper need to create "job alike" programs to build a sense of team and share best practices.

This isolation is compounded by a "one-off" training problem. Administrators characterized the district's PD as fragmented and superficial, lacking the depth and sustained application needed for true skill development. They noted that even with improved onboarding, paras "often get trained but can’t apply or reflect," a failure largely attributed to the lack of joint training with their supervising teachers.

The effectiveness of paraeducators was seen as critically dependent on the competence of the certificated staff who supervise them. Participants observed that paraeducator success is often tied to having a "good teacher as a role model," while high turnover is linked to placement with "unskilled teachers who can’t support" them. This deficit extends to site administrators, who often receive as little as "1 hour of speed training" and are therefore ill-equipped to support or evaluate special education staff.

Finally, district leadership identified the union as a systemic barrier to implementing student-centered practices. They described the union's focus as "very adult centric," feeling that it often moves to "protect the person" in a way that can be detrimental to student needs. This perception of overprotection, combined with a view that union leaders lack sufficient training to work collaboratively, leads administrators to see the union as more of a "barrier than help" in addressing performance issues.

District special education leaders: Recommendations. Based on the challenges they face, the special education leaders’ feedback points to several policy recommendations for state leaders. A foundational recommendation from this group is to establish a mandatory statewide paraeducator certification program. This would not be a lengthy credential, but rather a short, practical training course to ensure a baseline of competence and professionalize the role. To complement this, leaders urge the state to standardize paraeducator job descriptions and create a statewide salary schedule to reduce the inequity and workforce instability caused by "staggeringly different" pay and roles across districts.

Additionally, this group stressed the need to strengthen the support systems around paraeducators by mandating more robust training for those in leadership positions. This includes significantly increasing the special education training requirements for all administrative credentials and requiring union leadership to obtain certification in areas like alternate dispute resolution to foster more collaborative, student-centered problem-solving.

Finally, to make these changes viable, district special education leaders called for a dedicated state funding stream specifically for paraeducator support systems. This funding is seen as essential to allow districts to make local improvements by creating a system of substitutes and providing districts with the means to dramatically shorten the current, months-long hiring process.

Teachers: Themes. A discussion with teachers revealed a deep appreciation for the essential role of paraeducators, coupled with significant frustration over systemic failures in collaboration, training, and professional recognition. The most dominant theme was the critical lack of structured, paid time for teachers and paraeducators to plan together, forcing them to operate "on the fly." This absence of joint planning time prevents meaningful onboarding for new paras, who are forced to "pick up on the go," and limits communication to rushed, impromptu moments. Teachers identified this as a fundamental scheduling and funding problem that hinders the creation of a cohesive instructional team.

This professional isolation extends to training, which teachers described as a flawed model of "parallel training in separate rooms." They complained about missed opportunities for alignment when paras are not trained alongside teachers on curriculum and pedagogy, leaving both groups operating from different paradigms. This problem is particularly acute in specialized programs where "generic" district trainings are not applicable, placing the burden of retraining on teachers who have no dedicated time to do so.

As a result of these gaps, teachers identified a "paraeducator's paradox": while paras are highly valued for their strengths in building relationships and managing behavior, they often lack the skills for

"delivering good instruction," such as scaffolding and foundational pedagogy. Ultimately, teachers attributed these failures to a system of "facade inclusion" that devalues its frontline staff. They expressed cynicism that the district's inclusion model is a "lie," unsupported by true co-teaching, and were acutely aware of the "obscene" compensation and poor benefits offered to their paraeducator colleagues, which contributes to the loss of experienced staff.

Teachers: Recommendations. Based on their daily experiences and frustrations, teachers' feedback points to several policy recommendations for state leaders. A primary recommendation is to fundamentally restructure paraeducator compensation and benefits to professionalize the role. Teachers argue that the state must take the lead in significantly increasing pay, establishing a robust salary schedule that incentivizes longevity, and providing benefits on par with other school employees to address the disparity for staff supporting students with the highest needs.

Equally critical is the need to mandate and fund paid, joint PD and collaborative planning time, which teachers cited as the single greatest barrier to effectiveness. Teachers believe that state policy must require that paraeducators are "trained side-by-side" with teachers on curriculum and pedagogy, and it must also fund structures that create "shared planning time" to end the current ineffective model of "on the fly" collaboration.

To ensure paraeducators are prepared for these roles, teachers also call for a mandatory, job-specific onboarding and training requirement that must be completed before an employee begins working with students. Finally, these individual and team-based supports are situated within a broader call to address system-wide failures in inclusion implementation. Teachers urge state leaders to move beyond the current "facade" of inclusion by providing clear definitions, funding, and accountability for high-fidelity co-teaching models, including robust training for all team members.

Similarities and Discrepancies Across Focus Groups. A resounding consensus emerged across all focus groups for the state to establish a professional infrastructure for paraeducators where one currently does not exist. The most universally cited recommendation was for the state to create a

framework for professionalization through mandatory, funded training and certification. Participants identified the lack of a professional standard as the root cause of inconsistent expectations, and they advocated for a state-mandated, on-the-job certification program, standardized onboarding, and job-specific training to replace the current insufficient model of "on-the-job" learning.

An equally critical and unanimous recommendation was to mandate and fund dedicated, joint collaboration time. Every group identified the lack of paid, student-free time for teachers and paraeducators to plan together as a critical barrier to effectiveness, rendering PD ineffective and preventing the integration of paras into the instructional team.

Finally, all groups called for state action to define and differentiate paraeducator roles to solve the "para is a para" problem of ambiguity and underutilization. This call for clarity was inextricably linked to the need for professional compensation, with participants urging the state to establish a standardized statewide salary schedule and minimum staffing ratios for specialized classrooms. Together, these policies aim to address the profound inequities in pay, stabilize the workforce, and ensure adequate support for students.

While a strong consensus emerged on top-line policy recommendations, the focus groups' different professional roles revealed several points of tension and divergent perspectives. The most significant point of conflict was the role of the union. District administration was highly critical, describing the union as an "adult centric" barrier that "overly protected" underperforming staff. In contrast, union leaders positioned themselves as essential advocates, while teachers offered a more nuanced view, acknowledging the union's vital role in protecting staff while also criticizing its lack of knowledge on issues like inclusion.

Disagreements also arose over accountability for flawed paraeducator supervision. While teachers, TOSAs, and union leaders were direct in their criticism of site administrators for their lack of special education knowledge and disengagement, the administrators themselves focused on the immense administrative burden of the hiring process that falls on them. Nuances also appeared in the

discussion of compensation. Although all groups agreed it was an issue, teachers and union leaders framed low pay as a moral failure, whereas administrators noted that even their district's regionally high pay is insufficient to retain staff. Finally, teachers were uniquely vocal and cynical about the district's implementation of inclusion. They expressed a deep frustration that the district was promoting an inclusion model without providing the training, staffing, or resources to implement it with fidelity, a level of frustration not as explicitly stated by the other groups.

Similarities and Discrepancies Between Focus Groups and the Paraeducator Survey. A comparison of the findings from the paraeducator survey and the focus groups reveals both a strong convergence on core systemic problems and several important differences in perspective that add critical nuance to the data. It appears that both data sources paint a picture of a committed but under-supported workforce. The survey finding that paraeducators feel least respected or valued as part of the professional team aligns directly with focus group themes of being "segregated," undervalued, and facing a "crisis of autonomy." Similarly, the survey data showing a lack of training in crucial instructional and behavioral areas is strongly corroborated by the universal focus group consensus that training is "inadequate," inconsistent, and relegated to "on-the-job" learning. Both data sets also point toward a shared solution, with the survey preference for ongoing coaching and small professional learning communities mirroring the focus group demand for an end to ineffective, "one-and-done" workshops.

Interestingly, despite this broad agreement, the two data sources diverge in several key areas, particularly regarding perceptions of effectiveness and the root causes of systemic failures. The most striking difference emerges in what teachers in the focus groups termed the "paraeducator's paradox." While paraeducators in the survey reported their lowest levels of confidence in managing and de-escalating challenging student behaviors, teachers identified behavior management as a relative strength, contrasting it with what they perceived as a lack of skill in "delivering good instruction." This may reflect an interpretation of “behavior management” focused on strong student-paraeducator relationships instead of management of challenging behavior. Furthermore, the perception of training quality differs; the survey shows paraeducators rated compliance-based trainings as highly effective

and valuable, whereas the focus groups offered a more cynical, overarching dismissal of the entire PD system as fragmented and disconnected from practice. One reason for this may be that the survey provides insight into the how paraeducators perceive their own areas of strength and need, whereas the focus groups capture deeper, systemic challenges—such as siloed training, a lack of joint planning time, and ambiguous roles—that hinder the efficacy of paraeducators in supporting the needs of students.

Review of Literature

To supplement data collected through the other activities, we conducted a search of the literature to identify relevant meta-analyses and other systematic reviews. Our purpose for including this synthesis of research was to provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educational leaders, and educators to address the concerns and related recommendations highlighted through the various data collection efforts for this project. Our search yielded a set of eight recent studies that provide a comprehensive and multifaceted assessment of educator training and support within special education. These studies collectively highlight a strong evidence base for what constitutes effective training, affirm the critical role of paraeducators, and expose a significant gap between researcher-led interventions and the practical realities of school settings. The convergent findings point toward an urgent need to shift from resource-intensive, externally driven models to sustainable, school-based systems of coaching and collaboration, all while recognizing the foundational importance of the professional relationships between educators. A summary of implications from research is included in Table 14.

The evidence base is firmly anchored by two large-scale meta-analyses that establish the robust effectiveness of high-quality practitioner training. The review by Brock and Carter (2017), which analyzed group-design studies, determined that educator training has a large, positive impact on implementation fidelity, yielding a mean effect size of g = 1.08. A key finding was that the *components* of training—specifically a combination of modeling and performance feedback—were significantly more important than the total duration of training. Reinforcing these conclusions from a single-case design perspective, Brock et al. (2017) synthesized 118 studies and found a very large effect size (d = 2.48), identifying a package of modeling, written instructions, and verbal feedback as the components

most consistently linked to success. Together, these papers provide a clear, evidence-based roadmap for designing PD that produces observable changes in educator practice.

Building upon this foundation, several reviews confirm that paraeducators, when given high-quality training, are highly capable of implementing complex interventions with fidelity and achieving positive student outcomes. The meta-analysis by Walker et al. (2021) focused on paraeducator-delivered behavioral interventions and found they were highly effective at improving student behavior. Critically, this review identified key moderators, noting that interventions were significantly more effective when delivered in inclusive settings and for students in early childhood. Extending these findings to academics, the review by Martin, Lemons, and Haddad (2025) concluded that paraeducators, equipped with scripted curricula and ongoing supervision, could effectively implement systematic early literacy interventions, leading to significant student gains in skills like word reading and spelling. These reviews collectively challenge outdated notions of paraeducators as mere assistants and reposition them as vital instructional agents.

While the efficacy of training is clear, other reviews delve into the methodological rigor and practical challenges of implementing specific, complex interventions. The systematic review by King, Glazek, Ross, and Green (2025) examined the use of Behavioral Skills Training (BST) to prepare staff to implement Functional Communication Training (FCT), a notoriously difficult intervention. They found that while BST was highly effective, the overall quality of the research was low, with only one study meeting original What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards. Also, the training was exceptionally resource-intensive, averaging over four hours across seven sessions, highlighting a major barrier to dissemination in real-world school settings. This study serves as a critical reminder that even evidence-based training methods face significant hurdles related to research quality and feasibility.

The profound gap between research and practice is a central theme in two other critical reviews. Zarate and Barcus (2023), reviewing training programs for paraeducators supporting students with challenging behaviors, concluded that most researcher-led training models were simply not feasible for schools to implement independently. More alarmingly, they discovered that over half of the

studies failed to measure or report on "training treatment adherence," meaning the fidelity of the training delivery itself was unknown, severely compromising the replicability and scientific integrity of the findings. In an attempt to address this sustainability crisis, Borosh et al. (2023) reviewed the emerging literature on a more feasible "pyramidal" model, where special education teachers train paraeducators. While finding this school-based approach effective, they identified a new research gap: studies consistently failed to detail how the teachers themselves were prepared to be effective coaches, leaving a critical component of the model unexamined.

Finally, providing a crucial and complementary perspective, the scoping review by Stoffers et al. (2025) shifts the focus from procedural training to the underlying teacher-paraeducator relationship. The authors found the existing literature is overwhelmingly centered on managerial aspects like role clarity and task delegation. Essential relational dynamics such as mutual respect, professional well-being, and job satisfaction were significantly understudied. Most importantly, the review revealed a near-total absence of research connecting the quality of the adult working relationship to student or classroom outcomes. This finding suggests that without a foundation of positive collaboration and mutual respect, even the most technically proficient training models may fail to be implemented effectively. In sum, this collection of research presents a clear mandate: while the science of training is well-established, future efforts must prioritize building sustainable, school-based coaching capacity that is methodologically rigorous, contextually feasible, and grounded in strong professional relationships.

Table 14. Summary of Implications from Research

Key Finding from the Literature	Supporting Studies & Specifics	Implications for Practice	Implications for Future Research	Implications for Policy
1. High-Quality Training is Highly Effective	**Brock & Carter (2017); Brock et al. (2017):** Training has a large, positive impact. Active components (modeling, feedback, instructions) are more important than total training time.	Adopt Behavioral Skills Training (BST) with modeling, practice, and feedback as the standard for PD. Measure success by observable changes in practice, not "seat time."	Connect changes in educator practice to student outcomes. Measure long-term maintenance of skills post-training.	Shift PD requirements away from tracking hours and toward incentivizing outcome-based models that require active components.
2. Paraeducators are Vital Instructional Agents	**Walker et al. (2021); Martin, Lemons, & Haddad (2025):** When well-trained, paraeducators can effectively implement complex behavioral and academic interventions with fidelity.	Treat paraeducators as capable instructional agents, not just assistants. Provide them with scripted curricula and ongoing supervision.	Study a wider range of interventions and diverse student populations (e.g., secondary schools, different disabilities).	Update vague laws (e.g., IDEA) to define clear, minimum standards for the rigor and content of paraeducator training.
3. A Major Gap Exists Between Research & Practice	**King et al. (2025); Zarate & Barcus (2023):** Researcher-led interventions are often too resource-intensive and not feasible for schools to implement independently.	Move away from relying on external experts and toward sustainable, in-house "train-the-trainer" (pyramidal) coaching models to build internal capacity.	Study the effectiveness of training when delivered by school personnel under authentic school conditions, not by researchers.	Redirect funding from one-off workshops toward building and supporting sustainable, school-based coaching structures.
4. Methodological Rigor is Often Lacking	**Zarate & Barcus (2023); King et al. (2025):** The research base suffers from low-quality designs and a frequent failure to measure or report "training treatment adherence" (the fidelity of the training itself).	Be critical consumers of research and prioritize models with a strong evidence base for both the intervention and the training method.	Increase the use of high-quality experimental designs (e.g., RCTs). Consistently measure and report the fidelity of training delivery.	Encourage funding bodies to require higher methodological standards and transparent reporting for sponsored research.
5. Teacher Preparation for Supervision is Inadequate	**Borosh et al. (2023); Martin et al. (2025); Zarate & Barcus (2023):** Teachers are rarely prepared to train, supervise, or provide feedback to paraeducators. Studies of "train-the-trainer" models often fail to detail how the teacher-trainers were prepared.	Provide direct instruction and coaching for teachers on how to supervise, delegate, and collaborate effectively with paraeducators.	Investigate and document the process used to prepare school-based trainers in pyramidal models.	Mandate that all teacher certification programs include required coursework and practicum experience on supervising and collaborating with paraeducators.
6. Relational Dynamics are Foundational but Understudied	**Stoffers et al. (2025):** The literature focuses on managerial tasks, ignoring crucial relational dynamics like mutual respect and well-being. There is no research connecting the quality of the teacher-paraeducator relationship to student outcomes.	Intentionally cultivate positive working relationships. Co-develop clear roles and responsibilities and foster a positive team culture.	Investigate the impact of the teacher-paraeducator relationship quality on implementation fidelity and student outcomes.	Implement policies that guarantee scheduled, common planning time for teachers and paraeducators to collaborate.

Implications for Practice. The collective recommendations for practice from this body of research converge on a clear, actionable framework for improving educator effectiveness and student outcomes in special education. This framework requires a fundamental shift in how PD is designed, delivered, and sustained, moving away from traditional, passive models toward active, job-embedded coaching that is supported by strong relational foundations and systemic school capacity.

At the core of these recommendations is a call to adopt principles of Behavioral Skills Training (BST) as the standard for PD. The studies, particularly those by Brock and Carter (2017), Brock et al. (2017), and Borosh et al. (2023), clearly suggest that all training aimed at changing practice must include the active components of modeling, rehearsal (or practice), and direct performance feedback. Practitioners are urged to measure the success of PD not by the number of hours completed, but by observable changes in educator behavior in the classroom. This competency-based approach, as highlighted by King, Glazek, and Green (2025), requires a significant commitment of time and resources and should not be mistaken for a brief, one-off workshop. To facilitate this, providing paraeducators with structured, scripted curricula for evidence-based interventions is also recommended as a powerful tool to support their implementation fidelity (Martin, Lemons, & Haddad, 2025).

A second recommendation is the urgent need to move toward sustainable, in-house training models. The reliance on outside researchers for training, identified as a critical flaw by Zarate and Barcus (2023) and Walker et al. (2021), is deemed impractical for real-world school settings. Consequently, the literature strongly endorses the adoption of pyramidal or "train-the-trainer" systems, where skilled school personnel—such as special education teachers, instructional coaches, or lead paraeducators—are equipped to provide ongoing coaching and support to their colleagues. This shift is seen as essential for building internal capacity, increasing the sustainability of evidence-based practices, and reducing dependence on external experts.

This move toward in-house coaching necessitates a third critical area of practice: explicitly preparing teachers for their roles as supervisors and collaborators. Multiple reviews (Zarate & Barcus, 2023; Martin et al., 2025; Stoffers et al., 2025) note that teachers are rarely prepared to effectively

train, supervise, or provide feedback to paraeducators. Therefore, a key recommendation is for preservice teacher education programs and in-service PD to include direct instruction and practical experience in supervision, delegation, and coaching. Adopting non-hierarchical, collaborative coaching models, such as Practice-Based Coaching, is also recommended to foster a partnership-oriented dynamic and navigate the potential relational challenges highlighted by Borosh et al. (2023).

Finally, the recommendations emphasize that technical training cannot succeed without a strong relational foundation. Drawing heavily from Stoffers et al. (2025), there is a strong call for schools to be more intentional about cultivating positive working relationships between teachers and paraeducators. This includes practical steps such as collaborating at the beginning of the school year to clearly define roles and responsibilities, revisiting these agreements regularly, and fostering a positive team culture through activities like staff celebrations. In essence, the recommendations advise that the successful implementation of any evidence-based practice is contingent not only on the technical skill of the implementer but also on the clarity, respect, and collaborative spirit that define the professional environment in which they work.

Implications for Future Research. The recommendations for future research from this collection of studies suggest goals for the next generation of inquiry—one that prioritizes real-world feasibility, methodological rigor, and a more holistic understanding of the factors that influence student success. A recurring theme is the urgent need to close the research-to-practice gap by studying training models implemented under authentic school conditions. Across multiple reviews (Walker et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2025; Zarate & Barcus, 2023), researchers are implored to move beyond studies where they themselves act as the trainers. Future research must examine the effectiveness of training when it is delivered by school personnel, such as special education teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators, to determine if positive outcomes are achievable and sustainable without the intensive support of an external research team.

To address this challenge of sustainability, researchers are strongly encouraged to investigate the effectiveness of feasible, school-based training structures like pyramidal or "train-the-trainer"

models. While initial research reviewed by Borosh et al. (2023) is promising, it also highlights a critical gap in which future studies must not only assess the effectiveness of this model but also document and measure the fidelity of the process used to prepare the school-based trainers themselves. Additionally, a consistent recommendation is the need to move beyond short-term implementation measures and incorporate long-term follow-up to assess the maintenance of skills—for both the educators being trained and the trainers who coach them (Brock & Carter, 2017; Borosh et al., 2023). This focus on long-term sustainability and the resources required to achieve it is essential for generating findings that are truly useful to practitioners and policymakers.

Alongside the push for feasibility, the literature issues a strong call for improving methodological rigor and transparency in reporting. Several authors (Stoffers et al., 2025; Zarate & Barcus, 2023; King et al., 2025) recommend an increase in high-quality experimental designs, such as randomized controlled trials, to establish clearer causal links. More critically, researchers are urged to improve the precision of their reporting. Zarate and Barcus (2023) highlight a major flaw in the current literature, demanding that future studies consistently measure and report on "training treatment adherence"—that is, the fidelity with which the training protocol itself was delivered. This, combined with calls for better measures of implementation fidelity (Brock & Carter, 2017) and more detailed descriptions of participants and settings (Walker et al., 2021), is seen as fundamental to ensuring that studies are replicable and that the evidence base is sound.

Finally, researchers are encouraged to significantly broaden the scope of their investigations to create a more complete picture of the educational ecosystem. A crucial and repeated recommendation is the need for more studies that explicitly connect changes in educator practice to meaningful student outcomes, both academic and social-emotional (Brock et al., 2017; Stoffers et al., 2025). The current literature is often limited to adult-level outcomes, leaving the ultimate impact on students assumed rather than proven. Additionally, future research should explore a wider range of interventions beyond communication-based strategies (Zarate & Barcus, 2023), include more diverse student populations with underrepresented disabilities (Walker et al., 2021), and examine different contexts, such as secondary schools (Stoffers et al., 2025). Lastly, researchers should investigate understudied but critical

variables, including the impact of the teacher-paraeducator relational quality on implementation and the role of educator well-being and retention in sustaining effective practices.

Implications for Policy. The policy recommendations emerging from this collection of eight studies present guidance for systemic reform. They call on policymakers at the district, state, and federal levels to move beyond a compliance-oriented mindset focused on tracking hours and credentials, and toward creating policies that actively build and sustain a culture of effective, evidence-based practice within schools. These recommendations cluster around three pillars: reforming professional preparation and development, clarifying roles and standards for paraeducators, and strategically allocating resources to support what works.

A foundational and recurring policy recommendation is the urgent need to reform teacher preparation programs. Multiple reviews (Walker et al., 2021; Borosh et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2025) identify a critical flaw in the current system—teachers are consistently unprepared for their role as supervisors, trainers, and collaborators with paraeducators. The unified call is for state and federal policy to mandate that all teacher certification programs include explicit coursework and required practicum experiences on how to effectively train, supervise, and foster collaborative relationships with paraeducators using evidence-based methods. This proactive change is seen as essential for building a workforce capable of leading in-house PD from the outset.

For in-service educators, the recommendations stress a rethinking of PD. Policymakers are urged to shift the focus of PD requirements away from mandating a specific number of "seat time" hours and instead incentivize and measure PD based on its ability to produce observable changes in educator practice and fidelity to evidence-based interventions (Brock & Carter, 2017). This involves redirecting funding away from ineffective, one-off workshops and toward supporting sustainable, in-house coaching structures like pyramidal "train-the-trainer" models (King et al., 2025; Walker et al., 2021). Policy should require that any funded PD incorporates proven components—specifically modeling, practice, and performance feedback—to maximize the return on investment (Brock et al., 2017).

Furthermore, there is a strong call to strengthen and clarify policy regarding paraeducators themselves. The vague language in federal laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires that paraeducators be "appropriately trained and supervised," is seen as insufficient. Policy should be updated to define clear, minimum standards for the rigor, content, and frequency of paraeducator training, emphasizing job-embedded, ongoing support over isolated events (Borosh et al., 2023; Zarate & Barcus, 2023). At the local level, districts are advised to create and disseminate explicit policies defining the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators to promote role clarity and cultivate work environments built on mutual respect (Stoffers et al., 2025).

Lastly, these recommendations highlight the need for strategic resource allocation. Policymakers are encouraged to provide the necessary support structures that enable effective practice. This includes implementing policies that guarantee scheduled, common planning time for teachers and paraeducators to collaborate without students present (Stoffers et al., 2025). It also means prioritizing the allocation of resources, including funding for joint training, to support the implementation of interventions in inclusive settings, where research shows they yield stronger student outcomes (Walker et al., 2021). By aligning funding, mandates, and professional standards with the evidence, policy can become a powerful driver for creating school systems that are truly equipped to support the success of every student.

Policy Recommendations

The findings from this report converge on a focused set of policy recommendations for the state of California. Although our data reveal a rapidly growing, increasingly diverse, and highly committed paraeducator workforce in our state, it appears that these professionals are constrained by a system that fails to adequately train, support, or value them. The disconnect between their critical role and the lack of professional infrastructure is profound. Fortunately, our findings—drawn from an analysis of state and district data, focus group discussions, and the broader research literature base—converge on a clear set of actionable recommendations that offer a comprehensive roadmap for building the professional infrastructure necessary to support paraeducators and, in turn, the students they serve. We structure the recommendations into three categories: Foundational, aimed at improving data

collection efforts; Tier 1, aimed at more immediate and fiscally conservative actions; and Tier 2, aimed at longer-term investments to support paraeducators. We believe that by implementing these systemic changes, policymakers can transform paraeducators from an underutilized resource into a well-supported, highly effective component of our instructional workforce, ultimately improving the quality of educational services for children with exceptionalities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003). A summary of the recommendations is included in Table 15.

Foundational Recommendation: Improve State-Level Data Collection and Sharing

Before implementing broad policy changes, the state should establish a robust system for collecting and sharing data on the paraeducator workforce. The California Department of Education (CDE) currently reports limited information on this population, with data that is insufficient for meaningful policy analysis at the district or school level. This gap was evident in our own research, which was hampered by the lack of centralized, disaggregated data, underscoring the urgency of this recommendation.

We recommend the state directs the CDE to expand its data collection to include, at a minimum: (a) Paraeducator demographics, role classifications, and assignments; (b) Compensation rates, hours worked, and contract status; (c) Recruitment, retention, and turnover rates by district and school; and (d) Participation in and completion of professional development and certification programs. These data should be disaggregated and made accessible to ensure equity, recognize the contributions of this vital workforce, inform targeted interventions, evaluate the effectiveness of new policies, and provide a precise, actionable understanding of the workforce landscape.

Tier 1: Immediate and Fiscally Conservative Recommendations

These recommendations focus on regulatory shifts and low-cost structural changes that can be implemented within current budget constraints to create immediate, meaningful impact. They are designed to establish a clear, professional foundation for the paraeducator role without requiring significant new state appropriations.

First, the state should establish a clear professional framework by standardizing roles and performance expectations. This begins by creating a statewide set of "Paraeducator Performance Expectations" (Para PE), modeled directly after the Teacher Performance Expectations (TPE), to define clear benchmarks for professional conduct, collaboration, and instructional support. Complementing this, the state must demarcate clear role classifications (e.g., Para 1: General Teaching Assistant; Para 2: Personal Care; Para 3: Specialized/Intensive Support). This framework must include a non-negotiable LRE clause, mandating that paraeducator support is student-focused, not setting-focused, and requiring that the paraeducator follows the student into the Least Restrictive Environment to provide necessary support.

Second, to ensure this new framework is effective, the state must revamp educator preparation to build supervisory capacity across the system. Paraeducator support and supervision must become a core competency within the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE) and CalAPA. Administrator preparation programs should be updated to explicitly train site leaders on how to manage, evaluate, and support non-certificated staff, defining them as the key figures responsible for fostering teacher-paraeducator collaboration. Simultaneously, teacher preparation programs for both general and special education credentials could better incorporate mandatory training on how to effectively manage, delegate to, and collaborate with paraeducators.

Third, to support these new standards, the state would benefit from creating a centralized repository of foundational, evidence-based trainings. By sourcing partnerships with universities and county offices of education, the state can develop and host comprehensive training modules tied directly to the new Para PE benchmarks. These trainings should include foundational academic strategies (e.g., phonics, literacy scaffolding) and standardized core competencies such as mandated reporting, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Finally, to address critical issues of morale and professional respect, the state should implement immediate, low-cost incentive programs. This could include establishing a "Paraeducator of the Year" award program at the school, district, and state levels to build professional pride. Furthermore, the

state could provide districts with "morale support" toolkits to guide school leaders in creating an environment where paraeducators feel valued as essential members of the instructional team.

Tier 2: Long-Term Systemic Investments

The recommendations in Tier 2 represent a longer-term vision for the full professionalization of the paraeducator role. Achieving this vision will require significant state investment and shifts in collective bargaining to build the stable, skilled, and sustainable paraeducator workforce that California's students deserve.

First, we recommend the state mandate and fund dedicated collaborative planning time. A unanimous recommendation across our focus groups was the critical need to break down the professional "silos" that isolate staff. The prevailing model of "on the fly" communication undermines the effectiveness of instructional teams and any professional development they receive. To address this structural barrier, we propose that the state create a specific grant program or adjust the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to provide districts with dedicated funds for a minimum of 60 minutes per week of paid, student-free collaborative planning time for every teacher-paraeducator team. This could be facilitated by moving toward an 8-hour workday for full-time paraeducators, ensuring this essential time is built into their paid day.

Second, the state must holistically professionalize paraeducator compensation, certification, and career pathways. To address the severe retention challenges and leverage the talent of the existing workforce, the state must invest in making the paraeducator role a viable, long-term profession. This involves three interconnected actions.

Establish a Statewide Salary Schedule. To combat the low pay, described as "obscene" by teachers in our focus groups, the state legislature should establish a statewide minimum salary schedule for paraeducators. This schedule must be tied to experience, role classification, and certification level to reward expertise and longevity.

Implement a Mandatory Certification Pathway. Building on the framework established in Tier 1, the state should require and fund a mandatory, on-the-job certification pathway for all paraeducators. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) could be directed to implement a tiered certification system that paraeducators complete while employed, with different levels corresponding to specific roles and responsibilities. County Offices of Education and university partners would be essential in providing the necessary coaching and competency assessments for this system.

Create and Fund Clear Career Pathways. To retain and capitalize on the talent of an experienced workforce, the state must expand funding for accessible career pathways. This includes evaluating and enhancing California's current Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program and exploring models from other states. The goal should be to provide robust financial and logistical support for experienced paraeducators seeking to become credentialed teachers—especially in high-need areas like special education—or to enter other specialized roles such as Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) or Occupational Therapist (OT).

Table 15. Policy Recommendations

Recommendation Category	Specific Recommendation	Key Actions & Details
Foundational	**Improve State-Level Data Collection and Sharing**	Direct the California Department of Education (CDE) to collect and share disaggregated data on paraeducators.
		Data should include: demographics, roles, compensation, retention rates, and professional development participation.
Tier 1:Immediate & Fiscally Conservative	**1. Establish a Professional Framework**	Create statewide "Paraeducator Performance Expectations" (Para PE), modeled after teacher standards.
		Standardize role classifications (e.g., General, Personal Care, Specialized Support).
		Include a non-negotiable Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause for student support.
	2. Revamp Educator Preparation for Supervision	Make paraeducator supervision a core competency for administrators (CAPE & CalAPA).
		Train administrators and teachers on how to effectively manage, delegate to, and collaborate with paraeducators.
	3. Create a Centralized Repository for Training	Develop and host free, evidence-based training modules tied to the new Para PE benchmarks.
		Trainings to include: UDL, PBIS, mandated reporting, and foundational academic strategies.
	4. Implement Low-Cost Incentive Programs	Establish a "Paraeducator of the Year" award program at school, district, and state levels.
		Provide "morale support" toolkits to guide school leaders in creating a valued environment.
Tier 2:Long-Term Systemic Investments	**1. Mandate & Fund Collaborative Planning Time**	Provide dedicated funds (via grants or adjusting the LCFF) for a minimum of 60 minutes/week of paid, student-free planning time for every teacher-paraeducator team.
	2. Professionalize Compensation, Certification, and Career Pathways	Salary: Establish a statewide minimum salary schedule tied to experience, role, and certification.
		Certification: Implement a mandatory, funded, on-the-job certification pathway.
		Career Pathways: Fund and expand programs for experienced paraeducators to become credentialed teachers or other specialists (e.g., SLP, OT).

Conclusion

Taken together, these recommendations represent an interconnected approach to reform. It is not enough to implement any single solution in isolation; rather, building a professional framework, providing evidence-based training and coaching, ensuring collaborative time, preparing supervisors, and professionalizing compensation are mutually reinforcing components of a sustainable infrastructure. By moving beyond piecemeal efforts and committing to this comprehensive strategy, California can build the capacity to ensure its rapidly growing paraeducator workforce is well-supported, highly effective, and fully equipped to improve the educational outcomes for all students, particularly those with the most intensive needs. By investing in these policies, California can build the sustainable, school-based capacity needed to ensure that all students receive the high-quality support they deserve.

This report reveals a contradiction in California's education system—a committed and rapidly growing paraeducator workforce is tasked with supporting the state's most vulnerable students; yet this workforce is systematically denied the professional supports needed to succeed. The five recommendations offer more than a series of disconnected fixes; they provide a connected blueprint for reform. Investing in this infrastructure—through professional certification, evidence-based training, collaborative planning time, skilled supervision, and fair compensation—is not just an investment in a workforce. It is a fundamental requirement for delivering on the state’s promise of a free, appropriate, and equitable education for all. By adopting this systemic approach, California can finally transform its paraeducators from an underutilized resource into a highly effective force for improving student outcomes, ensuring that every child receives the high-quality support they need and deserve.

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