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Alternatives to Overreliance or Inappropriate Utilization of Paraprofessionals in Special Education

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NOTE TO THE READER

This document includes information intended for school planning teams involved in using the process, *"Guidelines for Selecting Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals"* (Step 3). The aforementioned guidelines are available online at http://www.uvm.edu/~evolve/gsa.html. The information included in the following pages has been collected primarily from individuals in a variety of school districts in six different states (i.e., CO, MA, MI, MN, NY, VA, VT) where innovative service delivery options are being practiced as alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals. The information is based on the self-reports of those individuals about the work they are doing in inclusive classrooms in public schools. This document does not include a review of the existing professional literature.

　　We are making this document available on the internet because we intend to update it periodically throughout the life of our project (2002-2006) as new information becomes available to us. If you have information to contribute, please refer to the data gathering form on our website by clicking on the link labeled "Help us to identify service delivery alternatives" or email us at Michael.Giangreco@uvm.edu

DISCLAIMER & ENCOURAGEMENT

Disclaimer: The applicability of the ideas presented in this document may vary based on administrative practices (e.g., collective bargaining agreements, regulations, policies, approaches to funding special education). Therefore, we make no claims as to the appropriateness, legality, or funding of any particular approach in any specific state or local school. It is up to consumers of this information to determine its applicability to their own situation given its unique set of circumstances.

Encouragement: The administrative practices (e.g., collective bargaining agreements, regulations, policies, funding approaches) mentioned in the aforementioned *Disclaimer* are perceived by some people as barriers to innovation and quality education. You may encounter elements of administrative practices that you believe are interfering with sound educational practices or are making it more difficult for your school to serve all students in general education classes. The good news is that all collective bargaining agreements, regulations, policies and funding approaches are subject to change! If you identify an alternative that your team believes would be beneficial for students and your school, we encourage you to pursue changes in any administrative practices that are posing barriers. Explain your concern about the existing practice and propose an alternative. Don't be too quick to say, *"We can't do that because it's against the regulations"* or "*We can't do that because it won't be reimbursed as a special education cost by our state."* By its very nature, laws like the IDEA have a great deal of flexibility built into them and are also open to a great deal of interpretation. Similarly, IEP teams formed to address the needs of students with disabilities can be very influential. The IEP is a powerful tool, especially when you consider that States and school districts are not allowed to make policies or rules that interfere with the IEP team's individual decision-making authority. It's up to professionals and families working together to make the best use of whatever flexibility currently is available within our systems and then to push the systems to improve. By deferring judgment, sticking to ethical principles, following guiding values embedded in our laws, and doing what we think is appropriate for students, each of us may be able effect some real change in our part of the world. If we don't do it, who will?

WHAT LED TO EXPLORING THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVES

The information and experiences that led to our exploration of alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessionals and their inappropriate utilization in special education could fill a book. So rather than rehash it all here, we will just say that although we fully recognize the valuable role of appropriately trained and supervised paraprofessionals to assist in the provision of special education and related services, over a period of many years we have grown increasingly concerned that the least qualified staff (i.e., paraprofessionals) were being asked to assume ever increasing instructional, curricular, and behavior support responsibilities for students with a wide range of disability characteristics. Part of our concern has been that there is a growing double standard, whereby students with disabilities increasingly receive instruction from paraprofessionals, whereas students without disability labels receive ongoing access to fully certified educators. We are concerned that this is an indicator of low expectations for students with disabilities and their continued devalued status in schools and society.

While many of our colleagues around the country have appropriately pursued better training, support, and supervision of paraprofessionals (something we whole-heartedly support), there seemed to be an unspoken premise that the model of providing special education for students with disabilities in general education classes with a heavy dose of paraprofessional support was a good idea and one that just needed to be done better through better training, support, respect, pay, supervision, etc. The implied message was that *"the way"* to successfully include students with disabilities, particularly those with low incidence disabilities (e.g., autism, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, behavior challenges), was to assign a paraprofessional. A visit to many schools in the United States where students with disabilities are being included would seem to suggest that the paraprofessional model of special education support is a dominant and continually growing approach; often it is the exclusive approach.

Our review of the available research data, related literature, along with our own research led us to the conclusion that alternatives are desperately needed and that very little is currently published in professional journals that specifically relates to alternatives to overreliance on paraprofessional supports or the inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals. Refer to http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport/ for a chronological and alphabetical listing of related literature. It must be noted that the available professional literature offers virtually no student outcome or related data on the impact of the alternatives presented in this document. The description and study of these service delivery alternatives to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms are in early stages of development.

We hope the information listed on the following pages assists your team in adopting, adapting or inventing alternatives to overreliance or inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals as you educate students with and without disabilities. Sustained, meaningful change probably will require some combination of service delivery alternatives since it is likely that no single alternative will address the variety of needs presented in any particular school.

HOW THIS DOCUMENT IS WRITTEN AND ORGANIZED

This document describes 12 categories of alternative service delivery that have been identified to date. Others probably exist and hopefully will be added to this document at a future time. These 12 alternatives include:

1. Resource Reallocation: Shifting Resources from Paraprofessionals Positions to Special Educator or Related Services Provider Positions

2. Co-Teaching: Special Education & General Education Teachers

3. Dual-Certified General & Special Educator is Classroom Teacher who Serves as the Special Educator for a Small Number of Students with Disabilities in the Classroom

4. Building Capacity and Increasing Ownership of General Educators to Support Students with Disabilities

5. Reassigning Paraprofessional's Roles to Increase Professional Educator Time with Students with Disabilities (e.g., Paperwork Paraprofessional)

6. Differentiated Teacher Roles; All Instructional Faculty are Certified Educators

7. Improving Working Conditions of Special Educators, (e.g., caseload parameters)

8. Improving Working Conditions of General Educators, (e.g., class size & composition)

9. Peer Support Strategies: Social/Personal or Academic

10. Self-Determination: Involving Students with Disabilities in Determining Their Own Supports

11. Information Sharing (e.g., with families about paraprofessional supports, pros and cons)

12. Physical Placement & Rearrangement of Students with Disabilities within General Education Classrooms

For each alternative we briefly include: (a) Description of the Alternative, (b) Extent and Duration of Use, (c) Positive Aspects and Outcomes, (d) Concerns or Limitations, and (f) Other. Some program descriptions are composites or combine more than one service delivery option. In cases where more than one example is included we will describe variations. We have attempted to limit information to that which has been reported to us. The only exception to this is under the "Other" subheading where we have blended reported information with our own insights into this variation.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #1

Resource Reallocation: Shifting Resources from Paraprofessionals Positions to Special Educator or Related Services Provider Positions

Description of the Alternative:
Variation I
Special educators, classroom teachers and administrators initiated this alternative because paraprofessionals *"…were having too much responsibility for programming with the most challenging learners"* and because there were too many paraprofessionals for each special educator to supervise. Both concerns comprised the quality of services to students. Schools shifted funds previously earmarked for paraprofessional positions to hire certified special educators. The ratio of paraprofessional positions to special educator positions will vary based on the local compensation levels of paraprofessionals and special educators. For example, if it costs $50,000 for salary and fringe benefits to hire a special educator, it might require the resources currently directed toward four hourly paraprofessional positions at $12,500 per year. This is based on a paraprofessional working 30 hrs. per week at $9.00/hr. and receiving some benefits.

Variation II
The same approach can be used to reallocate resources to develop a *related service.* Recognizing that the list of *related services* in the *Code of Federal Regulations* is a non-exhaustive list, a couple of schools have developed literacy support services for students with disabilities. This fell under the provision of *"other developmental, corrective or supportive services that are required for a student with a disability to benefit from special education."* They hired general education certified teachers who specialized in literacy because they had the necessary knowledge and skills and were more easily found in an area where certified special educators were scarce. Since these individuals were providing a *related service* rather than special education they did not need to be certified special educators themselves.

Extent and Duration of Use:
The first variation is in use to support students with a variety of disabilities in several schools and has been for at least the last three years. The second variation mentioned (related services) is in very limited use primarily with students who have high incidence/mild disabilities.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
Variation I
• Increases the number of more highly qualified faculty without increasing costs
• Decreases caseload size of special educators (better working conditions)
• Decreases the number of paraprofessionals a special educator supervises
• Allows special educators to be assigned at grade levels
• Increases instructional contact time between special educators and students
• Increases collaboration between regular and special educators
• Improves quality of services for students on IEPs
• Reduces personnel "burn out"
• Reduces turnover in paraprofessionals who were retained

Variation II
- Increases quality and amount of literacy instruction offered by certified personnel
- Improves students' literacy outcomes

Concerns or Limitations:
Variation I
- Scheduling and juggling direct services and case management duties
- Crisis in the school (e.g., behavioral incident) pulls special educator from schedule
- Difficulty finding a sufficient supply of certified and qualified special educators

Variation II
- Difficulty convincing state officials that the service should be reimbursed as a special education cost because it could be a schoolwide support (though in this case the services were dedicated exclusively to students with disabilities)

Other:
Variation I
Some schools report anxiety by paraprofessionals when resource reallocation is considered, fearing job losses. Another school explained this was not a problem in cases where the extent of resource reallocation was less than the historical or projected turnover rate for paraprofessionals in the district. For example, one school reported a 50% turnover in paraprofessional staff annually. Resource reallocation being considered was less than the turnover rate, so no paraprofessionals hoping to stay employed at the school were in danger of job loss.

Variations I and II
Both of these variations highlight the importance of the IEP in terms of documenting needed supports and services. In the first variation, documenting the type and extent of direct special educator support, as well as indirect support through a paraprofessional is essential. Such information should be explicit enough to make personnel decisions and maintain accountability for service provision.

In the second variation, any resource reallocation that is suggested to support a related service must be documented on each IEP for students receiving that service. Additionally, any such documentation of a related must meet the IDEA criteria that the service be *"necessary for the student to benefit from special education"*. This option is inappropriate to use if it is merely a method for paying for generic school support services through special education dollars.

Any proposed innovation should have a strong educational rationale, families should have complete information about service delivery, any changes for specific students are subject to the IEP process. In general, the more innovative or outside the boundaries of traditional practice, the more schools should expect to have their practices scrutinized (e.g., by state monitors) and should have documentation to establish necessity and appropriateness of the services as well as ongoing documentation on student impact.

Co-Teaching: Special Education & General Education Teachers

Description of the Alternative:
Variation I
Special educator splits co-teaching duties, 50%, across each of two general education classrooms at the same grade level. Each general education classroom teacher has three or four students on IEPs in his or her class. When the special educator is in one room a paraprofessional is in the other (also split 50% across the two classrooms) to support the education of the students with disabilities. The special educator and classroom teachers work together as a teaching team.

Variation II
A special educator and all the students on his or her caseload (e.g., 6-12 students) are merged with one general education class and teacher. The special educator and classroom teacher work together as a teaching team. A paraprofessional may also be in the classroom, depending on the students' needs.

Extent and Duration of Use:
These variations have been in use to support students with a variety of disabilities in several schools for many years.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
Variation I Only
• Maintains close to a natural proportion of students with and without disabilities in each class

Variation I & II
• Increases collaboration between regular and special educators
• Increases instructional contact time between special educators and students
• Allows teachers and special educators to be creative and flexible in grouping
• Maintains reasonable caseload for special educators
• Minimizes the number of teachers with whom a special educator works
• Enables students to see adults modeling collaboration and problem-solving
• Provides students with access to different perspectives and teaching styles

Concerns or Limitations:
Variation I
• None noted by respondents

Variation II
• Creates classes with a disproportionately high number of students with disabilities, which can lead to a host of problems (e.g., the class being labeled as the "inclusion class"; stigmatizing for both students with and without disabilities; overcrowding)
• Sometimes creates classes with more than one student who has low incidence, severe disabilities (e.g., when a class of 6 students with autism are merged with one general education class).

Other:
Although the second variation is in use and has some positive aspects when compared to special class models, its drawbacks are substantial. The first variation is more consistent with exemplary and promising practices.

An International Perspective:
In Italy, a country that has embraced inclusive education for decades on a national level, they use a combination of alternatives that reduce their reliance on paraprofessionals. Italy is often cited as an example for having some of the most inclusive schools in the world. Rather than approaching inclusion incrementally, as we have chosen to do in the United States, they jumped in completely a few decades ago. At first they went through a somewhat chaotic period that they refer to as "integrazzione selvaggio" (translation: "wild integration"). They made things up as they went along and were committed to figuring out a way for inclusion to work.

They use a co-teaching model whereby a teacher and special educator (called the "sostengno") are in every class that includes a student with a disability. No more than two students with disabilities are in a class (it's the law) and no more than one with a severe disability. It is important to recognize that in Italy, only students with more moderate and severe disabilities are labeled "disabled". The majority of students we consider disabled in the USA (e.g., those with learning disabilities) are part of the general education system in Italy. Regular classes stay together with the same teacher for five years in a manner that people here might refer to as "looping." The sostengno/special educator works with the students who have disabilities and works with the teacher to assist other students as well. For the most part, paraprofessionals provide supports such as personal care and mobility assistance, rather than instruction. Instruction is the responsibility of the sostengno/special educator and teacher.

This approach keeps special educator responsibilities manageable, provides support to general educators, and ensures that students with disabilities have ongoing instructional access to qualified educators.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #3

Dual-Certified General & Special Educator is Classroom Teacher who Serves
as the Special Educator for a Small Number of Students
with Disabilities in the Classroom

Description of the Alternative:
Note: This example combines Alternative #3 with Co-teaching (Alternative #2), though it could be used without a co-teaching model.

The following is a verbatim description from a respondent:
"I team-teach in a primary multi-age classroom (students would typically be in grades 2 and 3). Both my teaching partner and I are dual certified in elementary and special education. We teach in a double classroom with 42 children. The students in both homerooms are taught together throughout the day without indication of a traditional grade level. We incorporate dynamic grouping, which includes the flexible and fluid use of cooperative learning groups, interest groups, small teacher-directed groups, and small student-directed groups. Groups may be heterogeneous, random, or based on the activity. Special education services are provided within the context of daily instruction. In fact, we find that it is easier to individualize instruction, match specialized instruction to classroom activities and instruction, and provide modifications and individualized instruction in an ongoing nature."

Extent and Duration of Use:
This alternative was initiated by teachers and special educators and has been in use since 1995. It is being used across multi-age classrooms at the elementary and middle school grades. Over the years students with a wide variety of disabilities (e.g., autism, mental retardation, learning disability, traumatic brain injury) and functioning levels have been educated in this model.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
• Flexibility in service delivery
• Allows for better responsiveness to students' needs
• Specialized and individualized instruction can occur throughout the day
• Allows for creative planning and problem-solving
• Ensures that the classroom teacher works with all students in the class
• Maintains natural proportion of the number of students with and without disabilities

Concerns or Limitations:
• None noted by respondents
• Availability of dual certified educators

Other:
Based on discussions with the reporting teacher/special educator, this alternative is one that has worked well for several years and is among the most innovative and exciting the authors have encountered. Keep in mind that the example described here was

teacher-initiated and sustained because it has been working well for these particular teachers. To the best of our knowledge, this model is rarely used. In part, because of the relatively small number of dual certified educators. We have encountered many dual certified educators who are functioning exclusively in the role of regular education teacher and who bring their special education background to that role. But we have encountered a very small number who are, in essence, wearing two hats by their own choosing.

Also, this model raises a variety of issues about accountability for special education services and raises issues regarding special education funding, particularly in reimbursement models. In some states and locales such a model may fit within existing policies and procedures. In others it may be outside the existing boundaries. It may be within the regulations and considered a special education expense or it may be an acceptable practice, but not considered allowable for special education reimbursement. If this is an option your school is interested in pursuing, we suggest that you confront these questions head on. Get clarification from the appropriate individuals in your school and state about how this model (or any alternative you are considering) may fit within your system. If it does -- great! If it doesn't, don't be too quick to give up on it. Some states offer "Innovative Program Waivers" that, given an approved plan, allows schools to try innovative practices and collect impact data. This is how service delivery, regulations, and funding practices change. In a discussion we had with a state education official from a mid-Atlantic state, he explained that waivers for innovations, such as the one described here, require:
• Full Parental Knowledge (Families of students with and without disabilities in the class)
• A clear plan and educationally sound rationale
• Documentation that demonstrates a clear match between the specialized instruction, supports and services written in the IEP and what the student is actually getting
• A data collection plan to document the impact of the service delivery on student outcomes (e.g., standardized test scores, progress toward IEP goals, alternative assessment documentation)

We concur that these are reasonable expectations designed to protect a student's right to a free, appropriate public education and simultaneously are designed to challenge the boundaries of existing systems. Lastly, if we really want *all* teachers to be able to work with the full range of students in their classrooms, there may come a time that it makes sense for all or most teachers to become dual-certified. Imagine the flexibility this would provide in schools. Such a grand change would require changes in state certification requirements and correspondingly in personnel preparation programs at colleges and universities.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #4

*Building Capacity and Increasing Ownership of General Educators
to Support Students with Disabilities*

Description of the Alternative:
This alternative is based on the notion that in order for students with disabilities to be successfully included and educated in general education classes, the general education teacher must play a substantive role. Through administrative leadership the administrative team of general and special education administrators began by establishing an expectation that classroom teachers should be directly involved in teaching students with disabilities in their classes. First, they facilitated this expectation by ensuring that general educators were working in collaborative teams with other teachers, special educators, and related services providers. This arrangement allowed team members to learn from each other and support each other in their work with students. Secondly, the teachers were provided with ongoing staff development in critical areas. For example, one of the schools that pursued capacity building focused their efforts on differentiated instruction and other approaches that would build teachers' skills to work with mixed-ability groups.

Extent and Duration of Use:
This type of alternative is being used in a variety schools across grades levels to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities and address the differentiated needs of many non-labeled students.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
- Increased ownership and involvement of teachers with students who have disabilities
- Decrease in the number of paraprofessionals hired to work in general education classes
- More integrated delivery of special education services
- More inclusion of students in general education class activities

Concerns or Limitations:
- Requires a substantial amount of time and energy to initiate and sustain

Other:
It is a not unusual for schools to establish teaching teams of various sorts or to provide staff development to build the capacity of their teachers. What is unique in this example is that the administrative leadership and the capacity building for the general education teachers was specifically initiated, at least in part, to address the burgeoning numbers of paraprofessionals in the school system and the corresponding problems associated with it. More broadly, the effort was made to ensure that the general education system had enough capacity that students were not unnecessarily or inappropriately being referred for special education services. This district also reported a decrease in the percent of students labeled "disabled". They attribute this, in part, to strengthening general education and bolstering their schoolwide educational support system that is available to all students.

Whereas the example described in Alternative #3 (Dual Certified Educators) was teacher-initiated, this example was administratively initiated. It highlights the importance and impact of leadership. The role of leadership cannot be underestimated when considering, selecting, and implementing alternative service delivery approaches. This example of leadership is even more potent because it relies on collaboration between a special education administrator (based in the system's central office) and building-based general education administrators (e.g., principals and assistant principals).

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #5

Reassigning Paraprofessional's Roles to Increase Professional Educator Time with Students with Disabilities (e.g., Paperwork Paraprofessional)

Description of the Alternative:
In an effort to alleviate some of the paperwork burden on special educators, the principal of the school (a former special educator himself), developed a paraprofessional position that reassigned an existing paraprofessional from working with students to doing logistical and clerical tasks that were being done by special educators. Examples include: (a) sending notifications to families, (b) scheduling IEP and team meetings, (c) making scheduling contacts, (d) maintaining student database, (e) maintaining student files, (g) tracking important dates (e.g., triennial reviews, IEP dates), and (h) general clerical work (e.g., photocopying, ordering supplies).

Extent and Duration of Use:
This type of alternative has been in use in a small number of schools for at least the past three years to provide paperwork support for students who are eligible for special education.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
• Improves working conditions for special educators and raises their morale
• Reduces paperwork burden on special educators and the corresponding stress
• Better and more central organization of paperwork
• Creates more time for special educators to spend teaching
• More integrated delivery of special education services
• More inclusion of students in general education class activities

Concerns or Limitations:
• Can be challenging to manage the paraprofessional's time across multiple special educators to ensure equity

Other:
This alternative may be part of a package of alternatives to re-establish the role of the special educator as a professional who works directly with students who have disabilities. In some school districts the role of the special educator has become almost exclusively that of case manager and supervisor of paraprofessionals. Many special educators express dissatisfaction with a role that is exclusively or predominantly that of case manager. They report entering the profession to work with students, not to push paper. It is one of the primary reasons that the number of special educators becoming general education teachers far exceeds the number of teachers becoming special educators.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #6

Differentiated Teacher Roles: All Instructional Faculty are Certified Educators

Description of the Alternative:
The main component of this alternative is to assign a second licensed teacher to every classroom in the school district, in primary and elementary grades, for all or part of the school day. These individuals are known as "Learning Resource Teachers" (LRT). They do much of the work that used to be done by less qualified paraprofessionals (e.g., instruct individuals or groups, guide independent study, enrichment or remedial work) under the direction of the classroom teacher. The model was initiated by a district-wide task force charged with the task of making suggestions to reduce class size and teacher/student ratios while maximizing instructional resources in classrooms.

Classroom teachers and LRTs work as a team, though the classroom teacher is in the leadership role. Although the LRTs have strong instructional focus to their role, they do not have the same level of responsibility as classroom teachers for: (a) overall planning, instructing, monitoring, and assessing of students; (b) communication with families; or (c) professional responsibilities such as school or district committee work. LRTs work in a supportive role to implement classroom instruction under the direction of the teacher. Because of these differences in responsibilities, the rate of pay for LRTs is an hourly rate; they are not salaried employees. The numbers of hours a day they work and the number of days a year they work is also less than the classroom teacher. The resulting costs are more than those paid for paraprofessionals, but less than those paid for classroom teachers with full responsibilities.

Extent and Duration of Use:
We are only aware of one school district that is using this model. This alternative has been in place since 1993. It is listed here as an alternative because it was implemented, in part, because the district's planning committee recognized that the type of instructional work they were asking paraprofessionals to do (e.g., instruct groups) required the knowledge and skill of a trained educator. It must be noted that this model is exclusively a regular education model. The initiating district has not generalized its application to special education services. The LRT position does not replace special education teacher or paraprofessional staffing for students with disabilities, but the LRTs are available to provide ongoing assistance to students with special needs as members of inclusive classrooms. In presenting this alternative, we are hopeful that other schools may adapt the model for use with a broader set of students, including those with disabilities.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
- Teachers report using a wider variety of instructional strategies such as whole group, small group, and individual instruction
- More use of hands-on learning activities
- More small group enrichment and remediation
- Individualized behavior intervention
- Teachers feel that they have been able to increasingly personalize learning experiences

- Teachers note benefits in addressing academic, social and behavioral needs in a more timely manner
- Increases active engagement and interaction between and among teachers and students
- Decreases sense of teacher isolation

Concerns or Limitations:
- As state and district budgets have been strained the LRT program has been reduced in scope from K-6 to K-3
- The program is vulnerable to both state and local funding issues
- Over time there may be challenges finding a ready pool of applicants for LRT positions
- Staff development for classroom teachers regarding the supervision of another adult in the classroom is an ongoing need

Other:
This alternative represents an interesting option where a district is spending more and hopefully is getting a better return. Is it better to pay a low wage to an untrained person or pay a higher wage to a more highly qualified person? This alternative demonstrates a strong commitment to increasing the capacity of classrooms teachers and improving their working conditions.

Given the new educational requirements for paraprofessionals identified in the new "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation and the presumed ripple effect this may have on the upcoming reauthorization the IDEA, schools are being required to hire more qualified support staff. With the two-year college requirement of NCLB presumably will come higher wages for those paraprofessionals. It becomes a smaller leap paying for two additional years of education and hopefully hiring a certified teacher.

We suspect that there is an untapped pool of licensed educators who could fill LRT-type positions who otherwise would not be willing to work as a paraprofessional because of the lower pay and lower status. We think that this option may appeal to: (a) early career teachers who did not land a job as a classroom teacher; (b) mid-career teachers who may have taken a leave to raise children, but who are unwilling to work for paraprofessional wages, or (c) late-career teachers who love working directly with students, but have had their fill of committee work, parent conference nights, and writing lesson plans.

We hope this innovative service delivery approach will spawn some variations to address special education services as well.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #7

Improving Working Conditions for Special Educators
(e.g., Caseload Parameters)

Description of the Alternative:
The main component of this alternative is simple and straightforward; to limit the caseloads of special educators so they can actually work with students and so that their experience encourages them to stay in the field rather than falling victim to burnout. In the schools that reported this alternative they purposely limited the caseloads of special educators to 10 or under and attempted to minimize the number of grade levels and individual teachers with whom the special educator interacted.

Extent and Duration of Use:
This has between going on for many years in some school districts where school leaders are keenly aware of the need for special educators to have a manageable caseload size.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:
• More instructional time with students
• More collaboration with teachers and related services providers
• More time to support families
• Higher morale and better retention of special educators (less burnout)
• Reduces the number of paraprofessionals that need to be hired, trained and supervised

Concerns or Limitations:
• Access to a sufficient number of certified special educators

Other:
In an era where general education is concerned about reducing class size, it is ironic that many special educators have caseloads that nearly match or sometimes exceed the number of students without disabilities that classroom teachers are expected to teach. Add to the sheer volume the increased numbers of adults the special educator needs to collaborate with to address student needs. These special educators often are asked to work across grade levels and subject matter that would not be expected of general educators -- sometimes even across buildings. In addition to their students on IEPs, many special educators have an additional caseload of students on 504 Plans or those considered "at risk". Given the volume and intensity of needs, is it any wonder that special educators are leaving the field in droves?

Improving Working Conditions for General Educators
(e.g., Class size and Composition)

To date, no one has submitted a specific example of how they are attempting to address overreliance on special education paraprofessionals by improving working conditions for regular education teachers. Some of the most common approaches to supporting general education teachers are: (a) lowering class size; (b) ensuring that the composition of the class does not disproportionately include students with disabilities, those with high support needs, or those "at risk"; (c) ensuring that from year to year teachers share students who have special needs so that associated work is equitably distributed.

Within the general education literature there has been some ongoing study specifically exploring the utilization of paraprofessionals and issues of class size through Project STAR in Tennessee. This project's data supports lower class size and questions the value of utilizing paraprofessionals for instructional support. In directing you to this work, we are making no judgments about the research or its conclusions -- we leave that to each of you to decide for yourselves. We include it here because it is one of the most extensive and ongoing data collection efforts about the utilization of paraprofessionals in general education, serving many of the same functions we expect of special education paraprofessionals. If you wish to explore these data further the references are listed here:

Boyd-Zaharias, J., & Pate-Bain, H. (1998). *Teacher aides and student learning: Lessons from Project STAR.* Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.

Finn, J.D., & Achilles, C.M. (1999). Tennessee's class size study: Findings, implications, misconceptions. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 21*, 97-110.

Gerber, S.B., Finn, J.D, Achilles, C.M., & Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2001). Teacher aides and students' achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23*, 123-143.

If you have an example to add in the space below, we look forward to hearing from you.
Description of the Alternative:

Extent and Duration of Use:

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:

Concerns or Limitations:

Other:

Peer Support Strategies: Social/Personal or Academic

Description of the Alternative:
Variation I
A "Learning Lab" is offered as a schoolwide support where any high school student who needs extra supports can get adult or peer tutoring. Students in need of support may receive individual or group support. The Lab is equipped with current technology. The Lab is general education staffed and funded, though its resources are available to students with and without disabilities. Students attend during study halls, before and after school, or at other agreed upon times. This approach was not initiated to address paraprofessional issues, but is presented because it can.

An important aspect of this model is that it supports students across all ranges of ability. For example, the lab can be supporting a student who has difficulty with elementary computation as well as group of advanced calculus students working through a particularly challenging problem or other preparing for SAT exams. By making the Lab more heterogeneous, in terms of students served, it avoids the common problem of the "Learning Lab" (or whatever it is called in your school) becoming stigmatized like a "special education classroom". Additionally, the Lab is located in a central and valued location in the school, making it highly visible and welcoming for both students and faculty to come in.

Such models are not unusual in schools, though their use as a potential alternative to paraprofessional support is less common.

Variation II
This alternative is a peer-to-peer support system for students educated in a public school program for students with disabilities, including in general education classes. Support peers receive an orientation and ongoing adult monitoring and support. They assist their classmates who have disabilities in social and academic ways. Like Alternative #1, this approach was not initiated to address paraprofessional issues, but is presented because it can. It is designed to provide reciprocal benefits to students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Students with disabilities benefit from peer modeling, relationship building and academic support as well expanded opportunities to socialize, communicate and demonstrate learning competencies. Peers without disabilities benefit in the areas of empathy, responsibility, leadership and communication.

Peers are eligible to receive course credit. For example, in one school it was an elective course for 7th and 8th grade students. Sometimes the peers are the same age, sometimes they are cross-age (e.g., high school students assisting middle school students).

Extent and Duration of Use:
Variation I has been in place for over a decade with a wide range of students with and without special needs in high school grades. Variation II also has been in place for over a decade in grades 4-12.

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:

Variation I
- Provides an alternative to the old study hall model
- Student, faculty and family acceptance of the model
- Heterogeneous grouping
- Models of good academic behaviors by peers
- Improves student success and self-esteem
- Can be an important support to early career teachers

Variation II
- Peers tend to be less intrusive (stigmatizing) in general education settings
- Some general education teachers find it easier/more comfortable to direct the activities of students than those of another adult (e.g., paraprofessional)
- Increases teacher involvement with students who have disabilities
- Sometimes students with disabilities will do things for peers that they won't do for an adult
- Provides positive modeling
- Helps establish social relationships
- Peers are a good source of information on what's cool and what's not
- Peers often come up with creative and useful ideas
- Helps students with disabilities feel accepted and builds confidence
- Reciprocal social and academic benefits for students
- Creates "Hidden Safety Supports" in the school, students looking out for each other

Concerns or Limitations:

Variation I
- Difficulty keeping up with the demand for the services, too many students want to make use of the Lab
- Peer tutoring component presents logistical and managerial challenges
- Senior privileges (to be off campus when not in class) decreases availability of tutors

Variation II
- Time consuming and requires extensive organization, supervision and work to sustain
- Some peers can be overly helpful or bossy
- If peers provide too much support students can become too dependent on them and lose skills
- Peers can be underused in situations where paraprofessionals are unwilling to relinquish some level of involvement or control
- Exercised to ensure that peers are only providing appropriate supports

Other:
Peer supports have been around a long time and the literature includes many examples. Few existing peer support models have been developed specifically to address overreliance on paraprofessionals. This can be initiated by examining roles that paraprofessionals currently play that might be appropriately carried out by peers. Some of the same problems that exist with paraprofessionals can exist with peers (e.g., over dependence), so merely changing from one set of people to another is not sufficient. Plans must be made to ensure quality natural supports.

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #10

Self-Determination: Involving Students with Disabilities in Determining Their Own Supports

To date, no one has submitted a specific example of how they are attempting to address overreliance on special education paraprofessionals through self-determination, involving students in determining their own supports.

We did have a phone conversation with a parent who shared information about the experiences of her daughter (who has Down Syndrome) when she was in high school (she recently graduated). This young lady, we'll call her Barb (not her real name), had been successfully included in general education classrooms with classroom support for years. When she started high school it was the school (not the family) that insisted Barb have a paraprofessional assigned to her full-time. Her mother explained, "It was a battle I wasn't willing to fight" so she agreed to the service though she felt it was not needed.

During her freshman year in high school, this arrangement worked out reasonably well from the perspective of Barb and her family. The paraprofessional was a young woman, not much older than Barb -- so the support was more peer-like. This person was skilled at giving Barb room and knowing when to back-off.

During Barb's sophomore year in high school the paraprofessional left and was replaced by a person who the parent described as "on her like velcro!" The parent explained that this second paraprofessional was very intrusive. She was always "telling her what to do", "insisting that she leave class early", and "making a spectacle" of Barb.

Barb's mother explained, "Barb fought back". She displayed behaviors that she had never displayed before. Barb "took off" (ran away) from the paraprofessional, called her names, even left school and went home. Barb's mother felt that the communicative intent was clear, but no one was paying attention and Barb was not expressing her wishes in socially acceptable ways.

Eventually the second paraprofessional quit and a team meeting was convened to make a decision of what would happen next. With some assistance (in terms of preparation), Barb communicated to the team that she "…didn't like being bossed" and "… didn't want an aide." The team agreed and Barb did not have an individual paraprofessional for the rest of her time in school. She exhibited no further "behavior problems." As a result, her mother reported that Barb was more "academically connected to the classroom because there was not an intermediary between her and the teacher." Her only regret was that this situation was only an individualized decision for Barb, it did not have a generalized impact on changing the system in terms of systematically involving students in helping to determine their own supports.

If you have an example to add in the space below, we look forward to hearing from you.

Description of the Alternative:

Extent and Duration of Use:

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:

Concerns or Limitations:

Other:

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #11

Information Sharing (e.g., with Families About Paraprofessional Supports)

To date, no one has submitted a specific example of how they are attempting to address overreliance on special education paraprofessionals by sharing information with families. We speculate that some families request individual paraprofessional supports without being fully informed about their benefits and potential drawbacks. It may decrease overreliance or inappropriate utilization if families were more fully informed and involved in the decision-making process.

If you have an example to add in the space below, we look forward to hearing from you.

Description of the Alternative:

Extent and Duration of Use:

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:

Concerns or Limitations:

Other:

EXISTING ALTERNATIVE #12

Physical Placement & Rearrangement of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom

To date, no one has submitted a specific example of how they are attempting to address overreliance or inappropriate utilization of special education paraprofessionals by exploring physical rearrangements in the classroom. Existing research data documents that many students with disabilities are physically isolated within the classroom from peers and class activities. We suggest exploring the current status of these physical arrangement and making changes that facilitate the inclusion of the student in the life of the classroom.

If you have an example to add in the space below, we look forward to hearing from you.

Description of the Alternative:

Extent and Duration of Use:

Positive Aspects and Outcomes:

Concerns or Limitations:

Other:

If you have examples to share, please contact:

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