



A Union of Professionals

Paraprofessionals and Student Achievement

What the Research Says

According to the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, interest in employing “teacher aides” began in the mid-1950s, when “two research projects were undertaken to assess the appropriateness of employing teacher aides as one way to provide teachers with more time to plan and carry out instructional activities.”¹ Since then, spurred by growing student populations and congressional action on Title I, Head Start and P.L. 94-142 (now known as IDEA), paraprofessional employment has grown to more than 1 million. Still, little qualitative research exists—beyond anecdotal commentary from teachers and paraprofessionals—to evaluate paraprofessionals’ effectiveness in supporting instruction.

One notable recent research effort, the Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project, was intended to study the effect of smaller class size on student achievement. The STAR project’s unintended consequence, however, was to damage the public’s opinion of the work of paraprofessionals. Its summary report included a finding that “Aides² were less effective than small classes in enhancing student performance at each grade level.”³

The full technical report, entitled *The Lasting Benefits Study*, sought to determine if the benefits of smaller classes continued into later years. It found that even after reaching the seventh grade, students who had been in smaller classes performed better. Students from larger classes with teacher aides performed at the same rate as the control group. The summary and the full technical report are commonly used as “evidence” that paraprofessionals have no effect on increasing student achievement.

Others have looked at the STAR datasets and reached conclusions that differ significantly from the original STAR report:

“The Teacher Aide Puzzle: Student Achievement Issues. An Exploratory Study.” C.M. Achilles et al. Paper presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association, 1993. Since logic suggests that classes with aides should outperform non-aide classes, Achilles and his co-authors reanalyzed the Project STAR data. They corrected for some class sizes that had slipped “out of range” by either adding or subtracting students over the course of the year. They also focused the analysis on students who had been retained in grade. This research indicated that classes with dedicated aides often are the best for retained pupils, even better than classes with small class size.

“Do Teacher-Aides Improve Student Performance? Lessons from Project STAR.” John Folger and Carolyn Breda. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, 1990. Later published in the *Peabody Journal of Education*. This paper unpacks the issues involved in linking student performance to the presence of paraprofessionals. Focusing on students from low-socioeconomic (SES) families, the authors found that in the first grade, the presence of dedicated aides was associated with higher achievement than in the control group. But the most important findings concerned the nature of the comparisons. The researchers found that classrooms in the control group had an aide present for 17.9 days a month, versus approximately 24 days for full-time paraprofessionals. In other words, this was a comparison not between classes with aides and those without aides, but between classes with full-time aides and those with part-time aides. The report noted, “Aides did not have to be certified, or have any specific educational background. There [were] ... no special training programs for

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them.” The report also pointed out, “Most aides received no special training in their duties, and teachers did not have any training in how to utilize an aide effectively.”

Additional research on the use of classroom assistants and research on effective programs also contradict the notion that paraprofessionals do not make a difference. Key to their positive effect, though, is adequate and on-going professional development and training, and appropriate assignment and supervision. We also know that training in collaborative practices for teachers and paraprofessionals further supports their effectiveness in the classroom.

“Partners-in-Reading: Using Classroom Assistants to Provide Tutorial Assistance to Struggling First-Grade Readers.” *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 333-349 (July 2003). This program was used in North Carolina elementary schools for first-grade students who could not be accommodated in Reading Recovery. The aides who did the tutoring received training in appropriate techniques and strategies. At the end of both first and second grade, students tutored by aides had scores comparable to those of students tutored by Reading Recovery teachers, and significantly better than those in the control group.

Programmed Tutorial Reading Project, Indianapolis, Indiana. It Works. ERIC, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C., 1969. The results of this 40-year-old program were reviewed by Robert Slavin in *Show Me the Evidence: Proven and Promising Programs for America's Schools*. The program provided students with 15 or 30 minutes of one-to-one attention per day, as a supplement to regular instruction. The tutors, usually paraprofessionals, were trained in specific strategies to provide reinforcement and to move the students through the material according to their responses. Evaluations indicated that the program generated effect sizes (a standardization of student achievement data) that were as much as 0.57 greater than were found in control groups, when utilizing 30-minute tutoring sessions. The effects were smaller when 15-minute sessions were used. The program also documented substantial reductions in retentions. Note that the Tennessee STAR project had an effect size of 0.25.

Teaching All Children to Read. M.A. Wallach & L. Wallach. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. The Wallach Tutorial Program is another program discussed in Slavin's *Show Me the Evidence: Proven and Promising Programs for America's Schools*. The program provided students with one-half hour of tutoring per day for a year. The curriculum emphasized phoneme identification skills. Tutoring began as a separate component to the overall reading program and was incorporated into classroom instruction as the year progressed. The two studies that have compared students in this program with control groups found achievement gains for the students with paraprofessional tutors. The effect sizes range from 0.64 to 0.75, depending on the test used.

CSRQ Center Report on Elementary School Comprehensive School Reform Models. Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center. Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 2006. This is one of several reviews to analyze student achievement in Success for All (SFA) schools. The review found that SFA, along with Direct Instruction, was one of the most effective evidence-based programs in America's schools. Tutoring by paraprofessionals was one of the main components of Success for All. Note also that paraprofessionals worked with small groups as part of the Direct Instruction program. In each case, the paraprofessionals had professional development that was designed to enable them to make a difference in student achievement.

Special Strategies for Educating Disadvantaged Children. Sam Stringfield et al. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1997. This report focused on identifying strategies to improve achievement in Title I students. The analysis found that three programs were associated with improved achievement: the Comer Talent Development Program, Success for All and METRA. Success for All and METRA both used paraprofessionals as tutors.

One of the most recent references to the STAR report comes from a column in the *American School Board Journal* (October 2004), in which Barnett Sturm, superintendent of Lakeland Central School District in New York, cites STAR and proposes eliminating paraprofessionals from our schools. In response, AFT executive vice president Antonia Cortese called for “an empirical study, along the lines of STAR, on the work of paraprofessionals. I’m confident such a study would show that the nation’s 1 million paraprofessionals are making a big difference for students.”

¹National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, “Paraeducator State of the Art: Historical Perspective (1950’s-1980’s),” <http://www.nrcpara.org/report/historical> (accessed on 5/11/2007).

² The AFT uses the global term “paraprofessionals” for staff who support instruction in classrooms. Most reports use the term “aides” and we have retained the original language when referencing these reports.

³ *The State of Tennessee’s Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) Project Final Summary Report, 1985-1990*; Elizabeth Word, et al. Nashville: Tennessee State Department of Education, 1990.