

OPTIMISE Paraeducator Action Team Recommendations

Define the problem or challenge:

Discover what professional development needs paraeducators have in order to be successful in their job and create resources and a pathway that will give them options to possibly be a teacher one day.

In early 2022, a Task Force, now branded OPTIMISE (<https://optimise.education>), was established in the State Aid Act to generate a set of recommendations focused on the recruitment, preparation, and retention of special educators. Based on data collected by OPTIMISE and the identified barriers to attracting, preparing and retaining special educators, an Action Team around making recommendations regarding the shortage of paraeducators was convened.

After meeting with Institutes of Higher Education, Directors of Special Education, practicing teachers, and paraeducators from around the State of Michigan, the Paraeducator Action Team proposes the following recommendations to ensure as a state that we are incentivizing (1) paraeducators receive training, fair compensations, and opportunities for advancement, (2) teachers understand their role as supervisors of paraeducators, and (3) administrators are prepared to facilitate programs and evaluation tools for paraeducators.

Recommendation #1: Create statewide training, providing all districts (regardless of resources or location) access to high quality professional learning for paraeducators.

The statewide training should support a train the trainer model and occur in regional locations to ensure equity and ease of access. This training should be based on the CEC Paraeducator competencies.

- **Level 1:** Targeting all paraeducators employed by a district that focuses on (approximately 10 hours):

- roles and responsibilities
 - professional and ethical practices
 - teacher/ paraeducator teams
 - academic supports
 - behavior supports
- **Level 2:** Targeting paraeducators assigned to work closely with individuals with disabilities. Builds on the initial training and focuses on (approximately 10 hours):
 - Collaboration
 - Data driven planning
 - Instruction in behavior and academics
 - Intervention
 - **Level 3:** Designed to build on the first two trainings and focuses on (approximately 8 hours):
 - Supporting family engagement
 - Assisting with instructional planning
 - **Registered Behavior Technician:** This would include the 40 hours of coursework required to become a RBT, to provide behavioral interventions under the supervision of a BCBA or BCaBA.
 - Measurement and data collection
 - Assessment
 - Skill acquisition
 - Behavior reduction
 - Documentation
 - Professional conduct

Rational:

One of the main barriers to providing high quality professional learning for paraeducators is the lack of capacity for each district to develop and deliver quality training on their own. This creates a lack of equity and opportunity across the state. If a statewide model exists, at low cost and in a hybrid on-demand format, it could be easily replicated regionally. A pilot program similar to this model was just developed by the Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education and the training sites sold out immediately. There is a strong desire to do this training statewide, we just need to give people the tools.

This type of training lends itself to ‘badging’ and allows districts to consider bargaining pay for paraeducators based on knowledge and skills instead of just seniority (see recommendation #5).

Resources needed: Development of this training should be grant funded. Then districts or ISDs would pay to have a trainer trained at the state level and then have the flexibility to create their own training model within their ISD or district. This ensures high quality training and consistent messaging at a low cost and within local control.

Recommendation #2: Education Program Providers (EPPs) should address paraeducator training in teacher education programs:

The standards for the preparation of special education teachers should include the following content on communicating, consulting, and collaborating with paraeducators: (a) roles and responsibilities of the paraeducator, (b) delegation of tasks, (c) instructional strategies, (d) assessment and evaluation of a paraeducator, and (d) facilitating ongoing professional development for a paraeducator.

Note: This recommendation is reflected in the current proposed special education teacher preparation standards for all EPPs in Michigan.

Recommendation #3: Begin a campaign for Retired Certified Teachers to work as Paraeducators

OPTIMISE and the Michigan Department of Education should add recruitment of retired teachers to return to work as paraeducators as part of their campaigns that are already in place. OPTIMISE utilizes its website and social media in a campaign to enhance the profession. Additional work should be included to recruit retired teachers to help fulfill the large number of vacancies in the role of special education. Likewise, the Michigan Department of Education campaign should include additional language and video seeking retired teachers who do not want to return to the field as a teacher but may want to return as a paraeducators.

Recommendation #4: Create a statewide scope and sequence for High School CTE programs to prepare students to graduate from high school with the skills needed to become a paraeducator.

The Michigan General Education/Teacher Preparation (13.0000) CTE program is designed to prepare future educators. A statewide scope and sequence of curriculum should be developed to prepare future paraeducators that aligns with the professional learning mentioned in recommendation #1. This training could be used by CTE programs offering this course to help high school students understand the role of paraeducator and leave high school ready to apply for an open position.

Recommendation #5: Paraeducator compensation should be tied to knowledge and skills, not just seniority.

Schools and students have a need for paraeducators with specific skill sets. There are circumstances where there is time for individuals to be trained to perform these tasks and other situations that require an immediate hire of an individual who already has that skill set. Paraeducators who have a growth mindset and are given opportunities to earn badges for professional learning (such as those described in recommendation #1), should receive compensation for those added skills. Most union contracts allow for increased pay based on seniority. This recommendation suggests a payscale that allows for movement for both seniority and acquiring new skills. Additionally, paraeducators should receive the same health and ancillary benefits as professional staff.

As of FY 2023, more than half of all paraeducators in Michigan had been in their position for three years or less (Michigan's Register of Educational Personnel Data 2022-23). Retaining paraeducators in Michigan is difficult. Providing a livable wage for these workers could increase retention across the state.

Recommendation #6: Continue legislative support for Paraeducator to Teacher Pathways.

To ensure the continuous growth of paraeducators who seek to become general and/or special education teachers, we are also asking for continued funding for paraeducators to enroll in public or private EPP paraeducator-to-teacher programs which are specifically designed to address the academic and social-emotional needs of non-traditional college students. These programs should include after-school/weekend/summer schedules designed for a working adult alongside research-based wraparound supports to assist paraeducators through the teacher licensure program. These wrap-around services could include (1) extra academic instructional supports, (2) childcare (3) travel expenses for on-campus components, and (4) cost of course materials and technology.