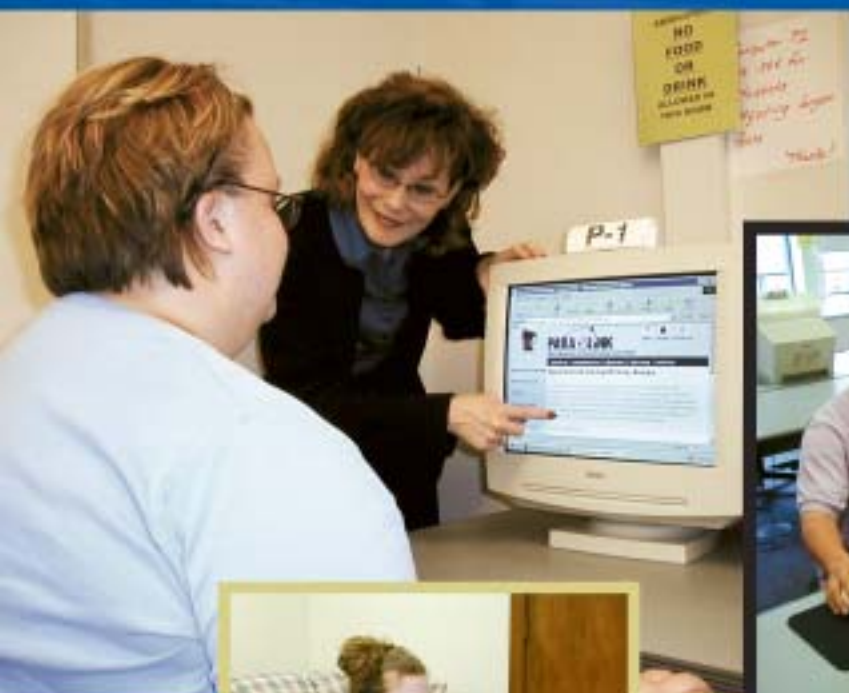


PARAeLINK

Where Minnesota Paraprofessionals Learn Online



A Guide for Facilitators



PARA eLINK: Where Minnesota Paraprofessionals Learn Online.

A Guide for Facilitators was prepared at the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.



PARA ELINK DIRECTOR:

Teri Wallace, Ph.D.
 Institute on Community Integration
 University of Minnesota
 111A Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE
 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455
 612/626-7220, phone
 612/625-6619, fax
 walla001@umn.edu
 http://ici2.umn.edu/para

Prepared by Teri Wallace with contributions from Zoe Cohen, Marianne Fillhouer, Kristin Moffitt, and Donna Patterson.

We would like to acknowledge the input and support of the members of the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium. Their expertise and guidance make our work more relevant.

This document was published in part through the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, State Improvement Grant A23A000016 via the Minnesota Department of Education. The opinions contained in this documents are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education.

Minnesota Department of Education
 Barbara Jo Stahl
 Division of Special Education
 651-582-8659
 651-582-8729 (Fax)
 barbara.stahl@state.mn.us

To request additional copies and alternate formats, contact -
 Publications Office
 Institute on Community Integration
 University of Minnesota
 109 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE
 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455
 612/624-4512
 Web: <http://ici.umn.edu>
 E-mail: publications@icimail.education.umn.edu

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We hope that you will use this document to build infrastructures to prepare, support, and recognize your paraprofessional workforce...

Teri Wallace (University of Minnesota) and Barbara Jo Stahl (Minnesota Department of Education)

Recent changes in federal legislation (1997 Amendment Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) require preparation and training of paraprofessionals to perform special education services and to work in Title I programs. These changes have increased the attention of many individuals to the design and development of programs to prepare paraprofessionals.

Minnesota has a long history of working on issues facing paraprofessionals. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Education spearheaded the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium nearly 13 years ago in collaboration with the Institute on Community Integration in the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development. The Consortium has provided leadership in the development of an infrastructure to support paraprofessionals. Much has been accomplished already, as we continue to do more to support paraprofessionals.

This booklet is intended to introduce you to a bit of history and various resources available to help you prepare and train paraprofessionals. Specifically this booklet includes information regarding:

- Minnesota Competencies for Paraprofessionals.
- The development of Para eLink (Minnesota's online training for paraprofessionals).
- Strategies for building career ladders and working with educational partners.
- Tips for facilitating successful online learning using Para eLink.
- Models of local implementation.

Paraprofessionals reported having received training in reading (46%), writing (33%), and math (43%).

(Wallace, Stahl & Johnson, 2003)

Minnesota Paraprofessional Competencies

Sixty-four percent (64%) of the paraprofessionals reported having a job description and half reported having an annual performance review.

(Wallace, Stahl & Johnson, 2003)

Eighty-eight (88%) of the paraprofessionals reported feeling like a valued member of the instructional team.

(Wallace, Stahl & Johnson, 2003)

Minnesota has developed a set of core competencies needed by all paraprofessionals working with students in Minnesota schools. In addition, several areas requiring additional knowledge and skill have been identified and competencies articulated. These competencies provide the basis from which training has been developed. In addition, a skill assessment and training plan have been developed that align with the competencies (Wallace, Bernhardt, Utermarck, 1999). The document, Minnesota Paraprofessional Guide, is being used across Minnesota as a tool to develop local systems of in-service preparation and systems of needs assessment and documentation.

Core Competency Areas

1. Philosophical, Historical, and Legal Foundations of Education
2. Characteristics of Learners
3. Assessment, Diagnosis, and Evaluation
4. Instructional Content and Practice
5. Supporting the Teaching and Learning Environment
6. Managing Student Behavior and Social Interaction Skills
7. Communication and Collaborative Partnerships
8. Professional and Ethical Practices
9. Academic Instructional Skills in Math, Reading and Writing

Specialized Competency Areas

1. Early Childhood
2. Job Coach/Tech Tutor
3. Behavior Management
4. Physical and Other Health Impairments
5. Autism

Development of Resources for Preparation and Training of Paraprofessionals

There are a variety of resources and strategies available for the preparation and training of paraprofessionals. Specifically, we want to share with you the resources developed under the guidance of the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium. Several tools are available online at ici2.umn.edu/para. You will find a complete list of competencies, an inventory, portfolio, as well as other information. In addition, the development of an online option has been the focus of recent efforts and occupies the focus of the remainder of this booklet. The following are the steps used in the creation of Para eLink.

1. Development of an Advisory Committee of teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and representatives from Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) and MDE. This group heard from a national expert on web-based learning and shared their questions, concerns, and more.

2. Based on the questions of the Advisory Committee and the needs of Para eLink development staff, a technology needs assessment was conducted to examine the technology hardware, computer access and use, and online training interest of paraprofessionals across Minnesota.

SOME KEY FINDINGS

- Access to a computer - 94% (school), 78% (home)
- Access to email - 81% (school), 72% (home)
- Access to Internet - 87% (school), 72% (home)
- Uncomfortable using computer - 9%
- Uncomfortable getting information from the Internet - 17%
- Interested in participating in online training - 88%

3. Development of an instructional design appropriate for paraprofessionals was based on their technology needs and specific content requirements, making particular use of technology based enhancements. (Guiding principles used to prepare Para eLink are listed below.)
4. Regular review and input by members of the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium.
5. Pilot training conducted with 11 paraprofessionals, 6 in North St. Paul and 5 in Marshall leading to broad support for Para eLink and key improvements.
6. Preparation of strategy to document acquisition of knowledge and skill competencies.
7. Development of training for facilitators from districts and MnSCU colleges interested offering Para eLink to paraprofessionals.

What is Para eLink?

The Para eLink is an online curriculum used to prepare and train paraprofessionals, based on the Minnesota Competencies. We advocate a structured approach to online training that relies on a facilitator to guide both the online and face-to-face components in a cohesive training strategy. However, the Para eLink is just one tool you might choose; it is flexible enough to be combined with other competency-based training already in use.

Para eLink offers targeted, modular solutions meant to be used in self-directed study in conjunction with facilitated group learning. Just like traditional classroom training, successful online training must be relevant to the learner, have clear objectives, include appropriate feedback, and address different learning styles.

Effective facilitation of the Para eLink is based on a hybrid model that includes real-time work—in a classroom or in a chatroom—and asynchronous work. Asynchronous means that the teacher and/or paraprofessional learners are “time independent.” For example, e-mail activities, discussion board postings, or reading material on a computer and then taking an interactive quiz at home are asynchronous.

Because this model may be new to learners and facilitators alike, this booklet shares tips about how to make the experience work.

Guiding Principles of Para eLink

- Competency based content
- Documentation of competencies
- Facilitator required
- Flexible, modular content
- Increased number of learning choices and opportunities
- Interactivity
- “Just-in-Time” training
- Minimal technology requirements: free software and basic Internet connection
- Resource section to promote further exploration
- School and district based activities
- Technical section for general requirements
- Time and location flexibility

Para eLink Terminology

Competency Area

A group of related competencies used as an organizing framework.

Competency

A statement identifying a particular knowledge or skill needed for paraprofessionals to work successfully in educational settings. Each online unit is based on one or more of the competencies.

Unit

A unit includes lessons aligned with a competency or set of competencies.

Lesson

A component of a unit, consisting of important information and activities relating to a particular topic. The number of lessons varies in each unit.

Lesson Reinforcement

A short quiz and/or activity after each lesson. These are intended to reinforce learning using immediate feedback. We do not capture scores or review online quizzes.

Instructional Unit Organization

Each Competency Area Includes:

1. Introduction

Each unit begins with a brief introduction of the competency that will be covered and a list of objectives. The objectives are the skills and knowledge a paraprofessional may gain through completing the unit.

2. Lessons

Each unit contains several lessons. The lessons break down the information that the unit covers into discrete topics. The number of lessons varies in each unit and often ties directly to the paraprofessional’s district or specific job or intended job.

3. Lesson Reinforcement

Each lesson is followed by a reinforcement activity, e.g., individual written assignment, group activity, online quiz, or combination. The intent of reinforcement activities is to provide feedback to the paraprofessional learner. Results from online

quizzes will not be viewed or recorded by anyone else. These self-assessments provide a quick review of the material and offer opportunities to apply knowledge and skills in the paraprofessional's workplace. Some of the activities include printable worksheets and forms that may be kept as resources for the paraprofessional.

4. Summary

A brief summary follows the completion of all of the lessons within a unit. The summary provides a concise overview of the material covered in the unit.

In addition to the four areas listed above, each competency area includes:

- 1. Explore section** – is optional and intended to promote independent exploration. The explore section includes resources and ideas for exploring related areas or topics in more depth.
- 2. Competency area review** – includes a knowledge test and set of activities that the paraprofessional should demonstrate to the facilitator. This provides the information needed for documentation of the paraprofessional's knowledge and skill.
- 3. Facilitator Supplement** – includes possible activities, worksheets to print off, and others resources for facilitators.

General Benefits of Online Learning

Online learning offers new and exciting benefits. As mentioned in the Guiding Principles for developing the Para eLink, online learning provides an increased number of learning choices and opportunities as well as time and location flexibility. Furthermore, online learning is particularly well suited to 1) address learning style differences, 2) build bridges to reinforce classroom or on-the-job training, and 3) provide opportunities for both individual and group work.

Tips for Facilitators

The following are beliefs, understandings, and skills that facilitators should have to be effective in their role. Some may be acquired as the facilitator engages in the role.

- Broad competence using a computer and Internet
- Knowledge of staff development
- Skill/talent/facility to balance self-directed and teacher-directed learning
- Ability to provide support and feedback in a variety of settings—online, in person, and in groups
- Knowledge of the individuals in the group they are facilitating
- Knowledge of Para eLink
- Proficient communication skills, both in person and in writing
- Ability to establish and use community-building tools (e-mail and discussion boards)
- Understanding of Para eLink content and the roles of paraprofessionals
- Knowledge of school and district policies related to paraprofessionals
- Belief in the value and benefits of online learning
- Ability to secure district support, such as the time and technical support needed to provide Para eLink
- Ability to organize systematic approaches for paraprofessionals to use Para eLink (syllabus, schedule)
- Resources to implement a learning management system (i.e., competency documentation) within district

Tips for Learners

The following are beliefs, understandings, and skills that learners should have to be successful. Some may be acquired as the paraprofessional pursues online learning.

- Willingness and interest in professional development
- Motivation to be a self-directed learner
- Basic knowledge of computers, including e-mail and Internet access
- Satisfactory communication skills and the willingness to use them in person, in writing, and online
- Capability to adapt to group and individual learning strategies
- Ability to advocate for own learning needs

Infrastructure Development and Model Implementation

The development of a sustainable infrastructure for the preparation and training of paraprofessionals is critical. There are a variety of strategies that can be pursued in order to meet this goal and each relies on the development of partnerships.

The following must be considered as the infrastructure is established.

Creating a Model for Para eLink Implementation

Para eLink is a resource for districts and colleges. Its implementation has wide adaptability. In fact, it could look quite different in each Minnesota location in which it is implemented. A few examples are listed below to prompt consideration.

Example #1: A district staff development specialist works with a group of paraprofessionals. A schedule is established indicating group session times and locations and individual work assignments (the units each learner should complete on his/her own), expectations for online discussions, opportunities for demonstration of skill competencies, and other information needed to ensure active, engaged participation. The group works through all core competencies systematically.

Example #2: A MnSCU instructor offers some Para eLink competency areas and units as components to a credit generating degree program.

Example #3: A district special education assistant director conducts a skill assessment of district special education paraprofessionals using the knowledge and skill reviews at the end of each Competency Area in Para eLink. In doing so, a targeted professional development plan is determined for each paraprofessional based on his or her unique needs. A plan is set for assisting paraprofessionals as they work through the competency areas; peer groups are organized to work together.



Sample Schedule for Units 1-7

August 27 (3:00 – 4:30pm) Group session to introduce Para eLink and provide overview to training schedule and complete Unit #1 as a group.

August 28 – Sept 7th Online completion of Units #2-#6 on individual schedule.

September 8 (3:00 – 4:30pm) Demonstrate Competency #4 during group session. Complete Unit #7 as a group. And so on.

Example #4: A MnSCU college’s customized training department collaborates with a district to offer competency-based training to paraprofessionals through the use of Para eLink. The district pays the college to facilitate and document competence of the paraprofessionals participating in the training.

Working with Educational Partners

Improving the knowledge and skills of any workforce involves many groups, including: institutions of higher education, unions, district staff development personnel, site management teams responsible for allocation of staff development resources, school boards, state education agencies, and others. It is important to work with all groups from the beginning to establish a local plan that benefits paraprofessionals within the context of the district goals and activities.

Creating a Career Ladder

The development of a career ladder recognizes both the need for competent paraprofessionals in Minnesota schools as well as the career option for interested individuals to continue on the ladder to become a teacher. The proposed career ladder illustrated here is based on the core and specialized competencies for paraprofessionals. MnSCU colleges are key leaders in the development of career ladders.



Paraprofessional Career Ladder/Pathway

Articulation Agreements (4-year Degree Granting IHEs)

AA Degree includes ____ General Education Credits plus the Following ____ Credits

Specialized Diploma (____ Credits) includes Field-Based Training (____ Credits)

Transition FOCUS	Early Childhood FOCUS	Behavior FOCUS	Academic Inclusion FOCUS	Cultural Competency FOCUS
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Courses requirements are based on the Specialized Competencies for Paraprofessionals working in Minnesota Schools. (Developed within each of the tracks listed above)

Core Certificate (____ Credits)

Courses requirements are based on the Core Competencies for Paraprofessionals working in Minnesota Schools. (Developed within each of the tracks listed above)

Articulation Agreements (High Schools)

Where to Begin

1. Contact Regional Low Incidence Facilitators – see contact information below.
2. Identify district or school level support for your efforts.
3. Establish a syllabus or tentative schedule of group and online sessions.
4. Articulate procedures for securing paraprofessional participation.
5. Set up group meeting location with Internet access and technology support.
6. Conduct at least one group session to introduce paraprofessionals to Para eLink before individuals begin working independently.
7. Establish procedures for documenting completion and performance.
8. Contact your local MnSCU college. Some colleges offer credit generating courses and programs to address training needs. Others offer training through their Customized Training departments in coordination with districts. Partnership between school districts and MnSCU colleges can lead to mutual benefits.

FY2003 LOW INCIDENCE REGIONAL FACILITATORS

REGION 1 & 2

Brenda Ackerson
224 East Bridge
Warren, MN 56762
Phone: 218/745-5628 Ext. 248
Fax: 218/745-5886
Email: backers@wao.k12.mn.us

REGION 3

Pat Brandstaetter
Northeast Service Cooperative
8633 South Eighth Street
Mt. Iron, MN 55768
Phone: 218/748-7606
Fax: 218/741-1719
Email: pbrand@nesc.k12.mn.us

REGION 4

Dennis Ceminski
Lakes Country Service Cooperative
1001 East Mt. Faith
Fergus Falls, MN 56537
Phone: 218/739-3273
Fax: 218/739-2459
Cell: 218/838-0623
Email: ceminski@lcsc.org

REGION 5 & 7

Earl Mergens
North Central Service Cooperative
200 First Street N.E., Suite 1
Staples, MN 56479
Phone: 218/894-5462
Fax: 218/894-3045
Email: Earlm@ncscmn.org
Email: louisef@ncscmn.org

REGION 6 & 8

Bob Braun
Southwest/West Central Service Coop.
1420 E. College Drive
Marshall, MN 56258
Phone: 507/537-2252/507 or 507/537-2240
Fax: 507/537-7327
Or 507/537-7663
Email: bob.braun@swsc.org

REGION 9

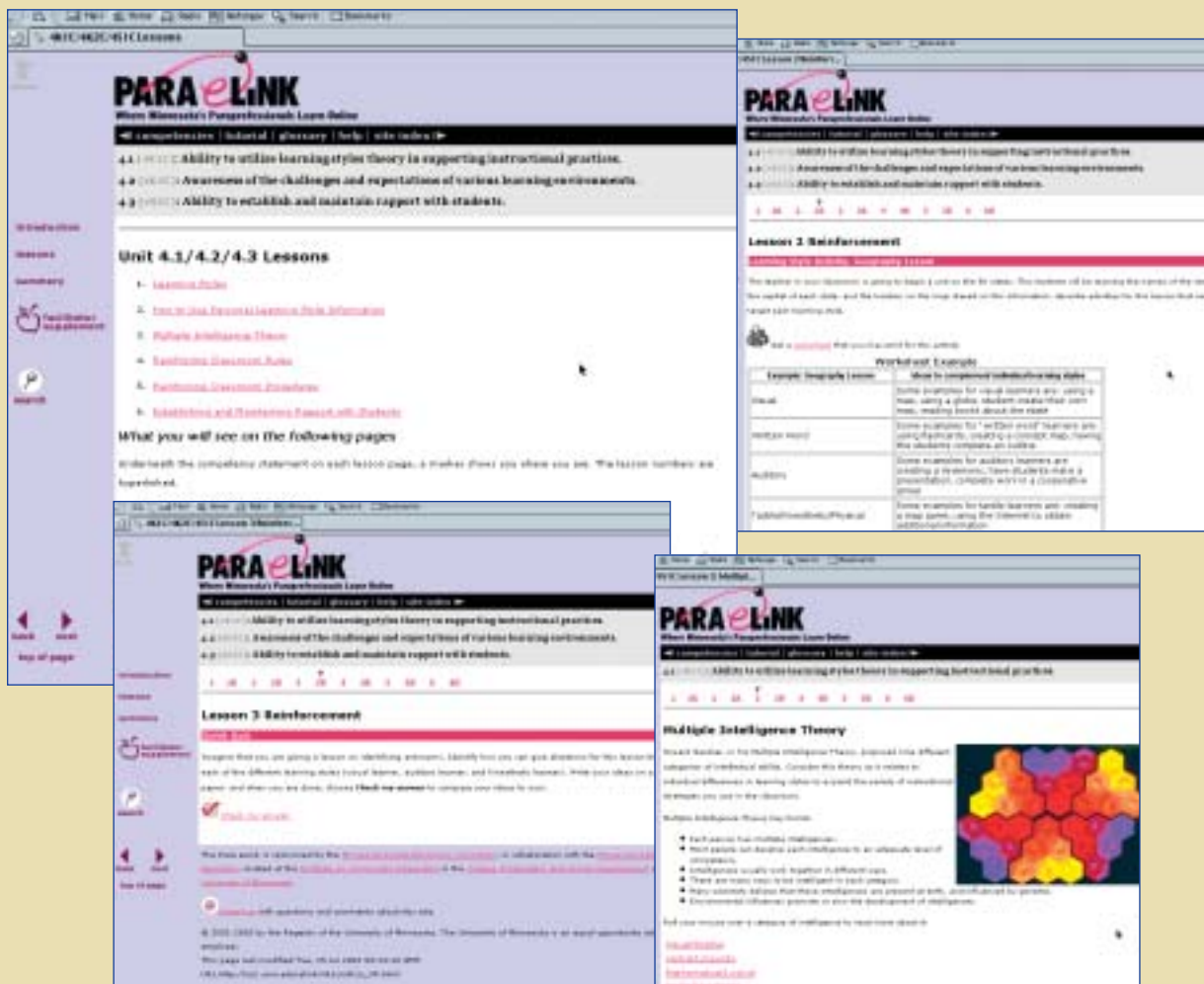
Linda Watson
South Central Service Cooperative
1610 Commerce Drive
N. Mankato, MN 56003
Phone: 507/389-2123
Fax: 507/389-1772
Email: lwatson@mncsc.org

REGION 10

Jean Davis
Region 10 Special Education Programs
615 SW 7th Street
Rochester, MN 55902
Phone: 507/287-1346
Fax: 507/280-4762
Email: jedavis@rochester.k12.mn.us

REGION 11

Judy Wolff
Metro ECSU
4001 Stinson Blvd. NE, Suite 210
Minneapolis, MN 55421
Phone: 612/638-1524
Fax: 612/706-0811
Email: jwolff@ecs.k12.mn.us



In the final analysis, schools cannot adequately function without para-educators, and paraeducators cannot adequately function in schools that lack an infrastructure that supports and respects them as viable and contributing members of instructional teams.

(Daniels & McBride, 2001)

Resources and References

Daniels, V.I., & McBride, A. (2001). Paraeducators as critical team members: Redefining roles and responsibilities. *NASSP Bulletin*, Vol. 85, No. 623.

Wallace, T., Stahl, B.J., & Johnson, S. (January, 2003). *Status Report II: Preparation and Supervision of Paraprofessionals in Minnesota*. Find report at: <http://ici2.umn.edu/para>.

Wallace, T., Bernhardt, J., & Utermarck, J. (1999). *Minnesota Paraprofessional Guide*. Minneapolis, MN: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota (funded by contract with Minnesota Department of Education).

Strategies for Paraprofessionals Who Support Individuals with Disabilities: Six modules for preparing paraprofessionals in Minnesota. To order, contact the Institute on Community Integration or see at <http://ici2.umn.edu/para> under resources.

