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Utah Special Education Advisory Panel (USEAP) Recommendation to the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) on the Recruitment and Retention of Special Education Paraeducators

Throughout the State of Utah, paraeducators play a vital role in providing special education to children with disabilities. Yet, local education agencies (LEAs) throughout the State are scrambling to recruit and retain paraeducators, revealing a gap between LEA practices and paraeducators' professional needs, specifically, that current LEA practices are not meeting the professional needs of paraeducators. Moreover, having these needs go unmet negatively impacts the education process, not only for students with disabilities, but for special education teachers, other school staff, and the families of these students.

Strikingly, the general recruitment and retention practices for paraeducators varies widely from LEA to LEA, and even within a given LEA. To address this issue, and to better meet the needs of paraeducators across LEAs, USEAP tapped stakeholders across the State to share those practices that have been successful in their recruitment and retention of paraeducators. Promisingly, the practices stakeholders shared have been very informative in how to best go about meeting the needs of paraeducators.

Based on these promising practices, USEAP recommends:

- 1) That the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) develop a list of best practices for LEAs to help recruit and retain paraeducators, which would include:**
 - a. Understanding and Valuing the Role of Paraeducators
 - i. Talking with teachers about the ongoing and evolving need for and role of paraeducators
 - ii. Recognizing the nexus between the recruitment and retention of paraeducators and the retention of special education teachers
 - iii. Implementing a "long-term commitment" to paraeducators (some of the best special education teachers started as paraeducators)
 - iv. Recognizing the high of costs of turnover of paraeducators in recruitment and training of paraeducators, the burden on teachers, and the effect on students
 - b. Recruiting Paraeducators Practices
 - i. Using a community approach to recruitment, recruiting through each school's local contacts/parents/relatives, email lists, Parent Teacher

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Associations (PTA) school community councils, etc. (This direct, community recruitment appears to be the most effective, but perhaps least used approach.)

- ii. Recruiting paraeducators at universities/colleges and perhaps even students nearing graduation from high school
 - iii. Considering elevated classification of paraeducators, given the often challenging environment
 - iv. Increasing salary wages and/or benefits where possible
 - v. Including paraeducator recruitment in teacher/educator recruitment fairs
 - vi. Including paraeducators' role/profession in career options discussions
- c. Retaining Paraeducators Practices
- i. Training paraeducators prior to starting their job
 - ii. Creating administrator and paraeducator relationships, not simply administration of paraeducator requirements checklists
 - iii. Ensuring the paraeducator's role is valued and the job is protected, so that they are not quickly pulled from their responsibilities to cover others school staffs' responsibilities
 - iv. Looking for alternative work or training for those paraeducators who may want to work during the summer
 - v. Providing effective mentoring paraeducators
 - vi. Ensuring paraeducators' expertise (voice) is captured in data gathering for students during Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team decisions

2) That the USBE require LEAs to submit an annual supply and demand report on special education teachers and paraeducators.

The need for paraeducators has never been as recognized so broadly, nor has their need ever been higher. They are often the front-line staff implementing IEP goals, spending significant one-on-one and small group time with students, and providing important support to the teachers and overall program. The lack of paraeducators is threatening the ability to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE); as a result, in some cases FAPE is very likely already being denied.

Experienced paraeducators contribute to the retention of special education teachers, to the successful implementation of IEPs, and to providing quality education to students with

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disabilities. By providing LEAs with best practices and by having LEAs submit an annual list of open positions, USBE will have the data necessary to better target practices and supports to specific needs.