

District Sees Dramatic Increases in Paraprofessional Certification After Implementing Online Test Preparation Program



Xenia Community Schools in Ohio places a high priority on staff development throughout all of their schools with teachers attending 10,579 hours of staff development courses and workshops and support staff earning over 2,436 hours of staff development in the last year. Even with this commitment to professional growth, the district needed to establish new programs to help their staff meet the new NCLB requirements for teacher and paraprofessional certification.

There are approximately 40 paraprofessionals assisting in instructional roles within the district. Ohio has adopted the ETS ParaPro paraprofessional assessment as the state-mandated requirement for paraprofessional certification and Xenia needed a way to help the 40 paraprofessionals pass this certification test.

The district felt it was important to provide support to their paraprofessionals so they could continue the valuable assistance they provide for students. Many of Xenia's paraprofessionals needed some tutoring and test preparation practice in order to achieve this goal and Title I Coordinator, Kathy Napier and other key instructional personnel, set about finding appropriate resources.

According to Ms. Napier, the district felt an obligation to offer their support staff help in meeting the highly qualified paraprofessional mandate and reducing any fear that the paraprofessionals had over meeting the certification requirements and keeping their jobs. She did not want them to have to search out resources or go to the university for classes. Belinda Daye serves as a paraprofessional at Central Middle School in the Xenia district. She heard a lot of fear and resentment from her colleagues in regard to the requirements. "Many had been serving as paraprofessionals for over 15 years and have been successful at providing instructional assistance and now the

government was requiring that they take a test to prove their abilities or risk losing their jobs. We were very appreciative that the school and district were providing support tools and giving them options for certification," Ms. Daye said she has seen many schools that do not provide any support and the paraprofessionals just have to do it all on their own.

Ms. Napier attended a training meeting at a Regional Center and a colleague from another district told her about a new program they were using called the PLATO ParaPro Preparation Package offered in partnership with ETS. When Ms. Napier heard that the program was tutorial in nature and that the paraprofessionals in her district could work at their own pace and even access the simulated test and online tutorials from home, she and her colleagues decided to take the districts' word and bring the package into the district.

The district started offering the paraprofessional package in a 30-computer lab in the summer of 2003. Any paraprofessional employed but the district was eligible to take part in the program in preparation for taking the actual ParaPro assessment.

One of the biggest obstacles for the program was that many of the paraprofessionals were initially panicked because it was delivered over the computer and many were not fluent in general computer use. Up-front training was offered on computer and program usage to any paraprofessionals needing it to ensure their successful use of the PLATO Learning program. According to Napier, "At first only a few paraprofessionals were technology savvy so there was a lot of fear going into the program. However, with the initial training and easy navigation of the PLATO Learning program, their comfort level soon rose and they were able to work on the simulated tests and tutorials on their own." Ms. Daye felt that this training was key to the program's success. "Many would not have been comfortable logging on and would not have had the capability of working on their own without the training up front."

Once the paraprofessionals were comfortable using the technology, they completed the pretest, which is a simulated version of the ParaPro state-mandated exam. The pretest models both the content and format of the actual exam and then provides online tutoring for any areas where skills were not at certification level. The paraprofessionals had access during the day over the summer and had the option of logging on to the tutorials or practice tests at home. Many spent 4 hours in the lab each day and then would go home and work on additional practice activities. The paraprofessionals found that the tutorials helped increase their skill acumen in all areas assessed on the test because the tutorials were assigned based on their personal skill gaps, providing a truly individualized learning experience. "As a user and facilitator, I loved it. The most beneficial aspect was the lessons delivered after I took the practice test and that is the consensus from all participants," said Daye.

The school district saw immediate evidence that the preparation package was a great support tool and found a strong correlation between the simulated exam, online tutorials, and the content covered on the actual test. "After taking the actual exam, many of the paraprofessionals said that the PLATO ParaPro simulated test was actually more difficult," said Napier. "I told them this was a benefit because it made them buckle down and try harder and the real test seemed easier because they were well-prepared." In fact, the paraprofessionals were so prepared for the test that the district saw pass rates even greater than they had hoped. Of the 16 paraprofessionals initially enrolled in the summer preparation program, 15 passed the exam on their first try.

Ms. Napier also saw a decided change in the confidence level of the paraprofessionals after their use of the PLATO Learning ParaPro Preparation package. "Having the simulated test delivered over the computer allowed them to feel more comfortable and assured when going in to take the actual test because it is delivered on the computer. Their confidence level was greatly improved. All those who took the test and passed are being mentors and peer cheerleaders—giving encouragement to those who are feeling less secure getting onto the program."

As a result of the increased pass rates and increased confidence level after the initial summer program; the district has decided to offer the preparation program to a second set of paraprofessionals during the 2003-2004 school year. Many of last year's success stories, including Ms. Daye, will serve as peer mentors providing technology support, training and motivation for the paraprofessionals now entering the program and working toward certification.