



# Paraprofessionals: An Essential Piece to the Puzzle

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Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) continues to recognize paraprofessionals as essential personnel in assisting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia to reach their highest potential. Since 2012, over 8,000 paraprofessionals have taken the VCU-ACE online course: **Autism Spectrum Disorder for Paraprofessionals: Providing Effective Instruction and Supports**.

The course is designed to provide paraprofessionals:

- The skills and knowledge needed to support students with an ASD in the school setting.
- An overview of the potential roles and responsibilities the paraprofessional may be asked to deliver.
- Information about how to carry out their responsibilities while maintaining respect for the students and exhibiting sensitivity to beliefs, values, and cultures.
- An overview of ASD, including primary and secondary characteristics.
- Information regarding the development and implementation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
- Knowledge of educational modifications and accommodations, as well as educational strategies used to support students with ASD.
- An understanding of interfering behaviors which students with ASD may demonstrate and effectively supporting the student to reduce these behaviors and increase positive skills.

This course was developed by VCU-ACE personnel in response to the need for comprehensive training for paraprofessionals working with students with ASD in Virginia, as well as House Bill 325 and the Virginia Department of Education's (VDOE) **Training Standards for Paraprofessionals Assigned to Work with a Teacher Who Has Primary Oversight of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder**.

School division personnel across Virginia have found training paraprofessionals through course work and the use of the Training Standards is fundamental to building a good foundation in their classrooms for students with ASD rather than just a requirement for those individuals who need to meet the requirements outlined in HB325 and the Training Standards. We also know training alone will not make the difference we hope to see. We have to put training into practice.

Many school divisions already implement strategies such as professional development planning, coaching, and communities of practices which assist with implementing and sustaining evidence-based practices. School administration and teachers who work with the paraprofessionals, as well as Autism

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Specialists in divisions have used what they have learned through our online learning tools, trainings, and other opportunities through VCU-ACE to determine long-term strategies to help sustain practices around the training that many of the paraprofessionals have received to make sure fidelity of implementation is taking place.

Some examples that have been implemented by school divisions across the state include:

- monthly meetings for paraprofessionals with their teachers to discuss evidence-based practices,
- time to plan with teachers around evidence-based practices in ASD, and
- bi-monthly community of practices in ASD that include whole teams.

Nationally, the trend continues to be aligned with our same principles to keep training a focus. As the growing needs of students and schools change so do the roles of our paraprofessionals. An article entitled:

***Getting Educated: Paraeducators, published by the National Education Association, discussed who paraeducators are today and their changing roles.***

It refers to the paraeducator as “working alongside” of the teacher and assisting the team in a variety of ways. This is ensuring that the para is a piece of the puzzle. The article further discussed three important myths in educating paraeducators. Specifically, it mentions, “Assisting in a classroom or school isn’t challenging. There’s no need for professional development.”<sup>1</sup>

We definitely know that this is a myth. That is why VCU-ACE has developed free online training for paraprofessionals and professionals, as well as family members to access in Virginia. There are states who have also developed certificate and/or licensure programs for paraprofessionals to ensure quality, ongoing professional development so they are a piece of their school’s puzzle to meet the ever-changing roles for the paraprofessional and the definition of the their role in the Every Student Succeeds Act. There are a variety of ways a division can include the paraprofessional in planning, coaching, and implementation of the professional development and training they receive. Knowing that they are an essential piece to the puzzle is the first step.

VCU-ACE is proud to continue to support the professional development needs of paraprofessionals across Virginia which will only help support our students!

## **REFERENCE**

1. <http://www.nea.org/home/18605.htm>. Getting Educated: Paraeducators. National Education Association. Accessed on January 4, 2017. Wi



**For additional information  
on ACE, visit our website:**

**[autismcenter@vcu.edu](mailto:autismcenter@vcu.edu)**

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