TO: Illinois State Board of Education

FROM: Robert E. Schiller, Superintendent
       Christopher Koch, Director

Agenda Topic: Information Item: Test Preparation for Paraprofessionals

Materials: None

Staff Contact(s): Michael Long

Purpose of Agenda Item

- To update the State Board on paraprofessional test preparation opportunities; and
- To inform the State Board of the status of paraprofessional test development.

Expected Outcome of Agenda Item

- State Board members will be apprised of the latest developments in test training and test development.

Background Information

At its January meeting, the State Board of Education adopted guidance on paraprofessional assessments to meet qualifications defined by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Subsequently, this guidance was distributed to school districts, teacher unions, community colleges and senior institutions, regional superintendents, and others. Feedback received by staff has been positive and appreciative, commending the State Board on its foresight.

In January, Board members also learned of the collaborative efforts of the Illinois Community College Board, the Board of Higher Education, the State Board of Education, teachers, administrators, community college personnel, and others in the development of a two-year degree program for paraprofessionals. The first draft of the proposal has been submitted for comment.

Board members in January directed staff to report on the efforts of various entities in providing test preparation opportunities for teacher aides to enhance their probability of
success on the assessments recognized by the Board. Similarly, the State Board requested an update on the development of the qualifying assessments, the standards setting process, and the identification of passing scores.

**Analysis and Implications for Policy, Budget, Legislative Action and Communications**

**Analysis of Training Opportunities**

Staff has learned that the Chicago Teachers Union, the Illinois Education Association, and the Illinois Federation of Teachers plan to offer workshops and other local and regional activities to assist teacher aides in their preparation for the “ParaPro” or “WorkKeys” assessments. The CTU indicated it is “actively preparing to provide prep classes for the educational support personnel,” although specific plans have not been finalized as yet. Similar expressions of intent have been received from the IEA and the IFT.

Staff has met with representatives of the Illinois Community College Board to discuss the possible role of two-year institutions in offering test preparation opportunities. Community colleges are interested in offering this service and consider it an important adjunct to the proposed two-year paraprofessional preparation program under development. Community College Board staff also are investigating the possibility of providing an on-line “packaged” test preparation module.

The Illinois Virtual High School represents an electronic medium for the delivery of test preparation assistance. The network presently affords test preparation for the ACT by subject area as well as an interactive math tutorial. This would seem to represent a viable model to assist paraprofessionals.

While the IVHS represents an appropriate platform, a curriculum would need to be developed and funds set aside for production and technology. According to State Board personnel, subsidies will need to be considered as well. The cost of participating in an on-line test preparation opportunity should be controlled to make it affordable to paraprofessionals.

Several regional superintendents have indicated an intention to offer test preparation workshops. Some regional offices have expressed an interest in partnering with community colleges in this endeavor, and State Board and Community College Board staff will expect two-year institutions to partner with teacher unions, regional offices of education, school districts, and other entities engaged in test preparation assistance.

**Analysis of Test Development**

Soon after the January meeting of the State Board, ACT announced modifications to its “WorkKeys” assessment to include an evaluation of the paraprofessional’s “ability to assist in the instruction of reading, writing, and mathematics or reading readiness,
writing readiness, and mathematics readiness” as required by the No Child Left Behind Act. Work is continuing on the Instructional Support Inventory that will be used to assess the “ability to assist instruction” component. ACT will have paraprofessionals review the domains and items on this instrument during the week of February 10, and will conduct focus groups in several locations across the nation between February 17 and February 28. Illinois will participate in this process.

The groups will develop anchor for the rating scales to be used and will discuss the weighting and scoring of items. Development is on schedule for this work to be completed on March 14, 2003. If so, ACT will be able to share recommendations with the State Board at its March meeting.

A standard-setting panel of 15 to 20 teachers and paraprofessionals is being assembled for the ETS “ParaPro” assessment. The group will convene on February 25, and their recommendations will be shared with ETS after the meeting. The testing company will review the panel recommendations and develop suggested cut scores to share with the State Board at its March 19 meeting.

Policy, Budget, and Legislative Implications

Paraprofessional assessments will help to ensure high quality personnel. Costs for test administrations will be assumed by individuals or school districts permitted by the testing companies to administer the assessments.

Communication

State Board staff will continue to apprise educational stakeholders and partners of the development of the paraprofessional assessments. The agency will use its communications’ network to inform paraprofessionals of test preparation opportunities as soon as these have been made available.

**Pros and Cons of Various Actions**

This report does not require action by the State Board of Education.

**Superintendent’s Recommendation**

No recommendations regarding test preparation or cut scores are being made at this time.

**Next Steps**

Staff will continue to provide all necessary assistance to facilitate the determination of passing scores on the assessments developed by ACT and ETS. Work also will continue on identifying appropriate criteria and funding for entities that design and offer test preparation workshops for paraprofessionals.