TO: Illinois State Board of Education

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

Agenda Topic: Action Item: Paraprofessional Assessment Guidance and Timeline

Materials: Draft Guidance for Local Districts on Paraprofessional Assessments (Attachment 1)
           Paraprofessional Assessment Timeline (Attachment 2)
           "ParaPro" Assessment Information (Attachment 3)

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Purpose of Agenda Item

- To provide an opportunity for Board members to discuss and approve the Draft Guidance on Paraprofessional Assessment and the proposed timeline for implementation of paraprofessional assessment procedures.

Expected Outcomes of Agenda Item

- To approve the Draft Guidance on Paraprofessional Assessment and the Paraprofessional Assessment Timeline;
- To authorize staff to disseminate the guidance document to local districts, regional offices of education and other external stakeholders; and
- To authorize staff to proceed with the activities detailed in the Paraprofessional Assessment Timeline.

Background Information

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) allows paraprofessionals that serve in instructional assistance capacities three (3) options to demonstrate qualifications in order to be hired after January 8, 2002 into programs supported by Title I funds:

- Complete at least two years of postsecondary study at an institution of higher education; or
- Obtain an associate’s (or higher) degree; or
Meet a rigorous standard of quality and demonstrate, through a formal State or local academic assessment, the knowledge of and ability to assist in the instruction of reading, writing, and mathematics or reading readiness, writing readiness, and mathematics readiness.

In Illinois, a teacher aide performs the functions of the federally defined paraprofessional. The federal law stipulates that paraprofessionals hired with Title I funds before January 8, 2002 and serving in instructional assistance capacities must meet these qualifications by January 8, 2006. Paraprofessionals who do not provide instructional assistance (e.g., lunch room monitors, playground supervisors, etc.) are not subject to these requirements.

Prior to the federal legislation, sections 1.630 b) 1) and 25.530 d) 1) of the Illinois Administrative Code required that teacher aides secure an approval from the State Board of Education in consultation with the State Teacher Certification Board by completing “at least thirty (30) semester hours of college credit in a recognized institution of higher education.” In response to the No Child Left Behind Act, the State Board must amend these sections of the Administrative Code to align the new requirements with the federal statute. To translate two years of postsecondary study into semester hours, State Board staff has requested and received guidance from the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). These agencies affirm that 60 semester hours correlates to two years of postsecondary preparation.

To address the long-term needs of school districts and paraprofessionals, the State Board is collaborating with the Community College Board in the development of a state-wide training curriculum. The purpose of the program is to prepare individuals to function as a paraprofessional in a school setting, and the proposed model is based upon paraprofessional standards developed by the American Federation of Teachers. When the program is available, completion will result in an Associate’s of Applied Science (AAS) degree and recognition as a Paraprofessional Educator.

The State Board/Community College Board partnership includes a Paraprofessional Task Force composed of representatives from community colleges, regional offices of education, Title I paraprofessionals, Title I teachers, the IEA and the IFT, teacher preparation colleges and universities, Community College Board staff, and State Board staff. The work of the task force has been efficient, recommending a model curriculum in late 2002. It is anticipated that the program will become available in 2003. It will be presented to the Community College Board, the Board of Higher Education, and the State Board in the spring 2003.

Although the development of the proposed degree program represents a long-term solution to the paraprofessional issue, it does not offer a short-term solution to current teacher aides and the school districts that employ them. In order to provide an immediate option, State Board staff recommends the utilization of an assessment as allowed by the federal statute. The following guidance is proposed:
The “ParaPro” assessment, developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), will be accepted by the State Board of Education as an appropriate measure of the requisite knowledge and abilities that paraprofessionals must demonstrate in order to meet requirements in NCLB.

The "WorkKeys" assessment, developed by the American College Testing Service, Inc. (ACT), will be considered for similar acceptance when ISBE is able to verify that it aligns with the NCLB requirement pertaining to the assessment of “the ability to assist in instruction.”

ISBE will adopt the United States Department of Education (USDE) guidelines for local assessment and require that districts adhere to these criteria and submit assurance statements to the agency if the district chooses to use the local assessment option which is offered in the federal law.

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

Analysis

School district administrators have reported that although many teacher aides in Illinois have acquired the requisite 30 semester hour approval described earlier, most personnel fall short of the qualifications stipulated by the federal law. Those serving as special education aides have not been required by Illinois to acquire the approval, and these individuals typically have fewer than 30 semester hours. Because the State Board has not maintained data on the number of approvals issued, it is difficult to determine the extent of the paraprofessional qualification issue.

To comply with the federal law, teacher aides, administrators and other district personnel await guidance from the State Board of Education. These individuals support the use of an assessment to meet the paraprofessional requirements defined by No Child Left Behind. The advantages of an assessment are cost effectiveness and the ability to implement the test quickly thereby allowing districts to retain and employ qualified individuals. The cost of the “ParaPro” assessment, according to ETS, is $40.

Regional offices of education, community colleges, and the teachers' unions stand ready to provide mentoring classes and workshops for teacher aides to assist them in preparing for a paraprofessional assessment. The Paraprofessional Task Force views the assessment option as an important short-term solution which will dovetail with the longer-term option of a statewide curriculum for paraprofessional preparation programs based upon standards developed by the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT standards have been used in the design of the ETS “ParaPro” assessment.

Twenty-one states have committed to the adoption of the “ParaPro” assessment, and five states have expressed interest in using "WorkKeys." A few of these states have
decided to adopt both assessments. Many states are in an exploratory process similar to Illinois.

An early autumn status report developed by the American Federation of Teachers details the activities of other states. Beyond the 21 states committed to the ETS assessment, several states have formed partnerships with institutions of higher education to develop assessments and/or coursework to address the paraprofessional requirements. In a few states, large school districts have partnered with community colleges to provide an associates’ degree program for paraprofessionals. A few states have indicated that some school districts have developed assessments, and the states will be providing detailed guidance to all districts on the issue of local assessments. Other state activities include the use of existent basic skills or general education competency tests and the development of job profiles and rubrics to guide appropriate evaluations and professional development opportunities for paraprofessionals. The American Federation of Teachers is updating the status report.

The No Child Left Behind qualifications can be affirmed through a local academic assessment as well as a statewide instrument. Guidance developed by the United States Department of Education identifies nine criteria that states should consider in approving local assessments. (See Attachment 1, pages 3 and 4.) Importantly, one criterion requires evidence that the assessment is valid and reliable. Staff proposes the issuance of the federal guidance as criteria for school districts in their consideration of the development of a local assessment.

Policy Implications:

The federal law presents a multitude of challenges for state and local educational agencies. In the particular area of paraprofessional requirements, the State Board has an opportunity to provide maximum flexibility to local districts and paraprofessionals not only in meeting the law, but also in supporting increased standards for teacher aides. By allowing the use of a nationally recognized assessment, as well as locally developed assessments that follow USDE guidelines, the State Board can provide a flexible, supportive, standards-based approach to paraprofessional assessment that will meet the federal requirements and will align with the degree program under development by the Community College Board and its partners.

The standard-setting process for “ParaPro” is a crucial step in ensuring legal protection for the agency. In order for the state to defend the ‘passing score’, a standard-setting study must be performed. The Educational Testing Service has committed assistance and financial support to the State Board in this process. For instance, Illinois educators serving on the panel will be reimbursed for their expenses by ETS, although the State Board will absorb the costs to school districts of hiring substitutes.

After the panel has suggested a state standard for the “ParaPro”, staff will present the recommendation to the State Teacher Certification Board and the State Board of Education for adoption. Pending acceptance of the standard, current and future
paraprofessionals will be able to take the test to meet the qualifications of No Child Left Behind. If the “WorkKeys” assessment is modified in the near future, ACT will work with agency partners in developing a job profile of a paraprofessional and in standards setting.

Budget Implications:

There are no budget implications for the agency as the testing fee will be borne by districts or individuals taking the assessment. However, local school districts could experience a fiscal impact if they absorb the costs of the assessment. Budget implications also could be felt as local districts attempt to hire new paraprofessionals with higher qualifications, particularly in special education.

Legislative Action:

There is no need for legislative action.

Communications:

The Guidance document will be placed on the State Board's NCLB website. Electronic distribution via the Superintendent’s weekly bulletin is advised as well. Regional superintendents, district and building administrators, special education directors, higher education, the Community College Board, the Board of Higher Education, the teacher unions, and all other stakeholders will be informed through their respective associations. The communications should clearly explain how the test has been nationally developed, the standards-setting process, the cost, potential testing sites, and the timeline for probable availability.

**Pros and Cons of Various Actions**

**Pros:** Local districts and teacher aides will appreciate State Board action on this important issue. Coupled with the development of a paraprofessional training program at the community college level, a paraprofessional assessment will afford an acceptable and immediate option to meeting the qualifications specified in No Child Left Behind. Moreover, prompt State Board action will likely encourage most districts to use a state recognized assessment rather than developing a local assessment with the attendant difficulties in determining reliability and validity.

**Cons:** If the State Board were to decide not to accept the “ParaPro” assessment or, pending adequate modifications, the “WorkKeys” assessment, a financial and personnel burden would be placed on local school districts and teacher aides seeking to be qualified under the No Child Left Behind Act.

**Superintendent’s Recommendations**

The State Board should:
• approve the Draft Guidance on Paraprofessional Assessment and the Paraprofessional Assessment Timeline;
• authorize staff to distribute the guidance document to local districts, regional offices of education, and other external stakeholders; and
• direct staff to proceed with the activities as defined in the Timelines’ document.

Next Steps

Staff will disseminate the Draft Guidance document to the State Board’s external partners, will contact the Educational Testing Service to commence the standards-setting process, and will convene a standards-setting panel. Pending recommendations from the panel, staff will report back to the State Teacher Certification Board and the State Board in March for final action.