Draft Guidance for Local School Districts:
Paraprofessional Assessment
January 2003

Background and Requirements

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) allows paraprofessionals (i.e., teacher aides) who serve in instructional assistance capacities three (3) options to demonstrate qualifications in order to be hired after January 8, 2002, into programs supported with 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.

Paraprofessionals working in programs supported with Title I funds and hired before January 8, 2002, who serve in instructional assistance capacities, are required to meet these criteria by January 8, 2006. Teacher aides who do not serve in instructional assistance capacities 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 Code to align the 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 statewide training curriculum. The purpose of the program is to provide training that prepares 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 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.

**Paraprofessional Assessment Information**

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 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.*

**The “ParaPro” Assessment**

The “ParaPro” assessment for prospective and practicing paraprofessionals measures skills and knowledge in reading, mathematics, and writing, as well as the ability to apply those skills and knowledge to assist in classroom instruction. The test consists of 90 multiple-choice questions across the three subject areas of reading, mathematics, and writing. Approximately two-thirds of the questions in each subject area focus on basic skills and knowledge, and approximately one-third of the questions in each subject area target the application of those skills and knowledge in a classroom context. The test questions are arranged by subject area, with reading first, then mathematics, and, finally, writing.

The test is available through paper and pencil administrations at specified test sites and via the internet at participating school districts. The test will be given six times each school year at ETS’ national Praxis test centers, which are typically colleges and universities. The internet-based test is administered via secure internet service only in participating school districts. The test fee is $40. and will be borne by districts or individuals taking the assessment.
The test will yield one overall scaled score and six sub-scores. Three of the sub-scores will be related to reading, writing and mathematics skills levels, and three will be related to the application of these skills to classroom instruction. Scores will be reported by mail to examinees using the paper and pencil version approximately four weeks after the test administration, and for the internet-based test, unofficial scores are available on the screen to the test taker at the conclusion of the testing session. These examinees will also receive official scores approximately two weeks after the test date. ETS will notify the Local Educational Agency (LEA) via e-mail when a test has been completed so that the district can view the results on the secure website.

The State Board of Education will conduct a standard-setting process, in partnership with ETS, in order to establish a statewide cut score. This process will involve paraprofessionals and Title I teachers participating on a panel that is trained to set a statewide standard defining successful completion of the “ParaPro” test. The travel costs for the standards-setting group will be reimbursed by ETS, with the State Board responsible for the district reimbursement of substitute teachers.

Within a month of this study, ETS will communicate a recommended standard to ISBE and the State Teacher Certification Board; this recommended standard will be reviewed by the two boards for final approval, probably in March.

Pending acceptance by the State Board of Education, districts that are interested in providing the “ParaPro” internet-based test to paraprofessionals should contact ETS directly to receive information on required procedures to make the test available to individuals. Specific testing centers are being identified by ETS for the paper and pencil version of the test. This information will be provided to districts by ETS upon request.

Information on local assessments

The most recent Draft Non-Regulatory Guidance from the United States Department of Education (November 15, 2002) on Title I Paraprofessionals offers specific information regarding the use of a local assessment for this purpose. In section C-5 it is stated that:

“Ensuring that all paraprofessionals have the qualifications required in section 1119 is the responsibility of each LEA, working in tandem with the State to ensure that those paraprofessionals who would demonstrate their competence by passing a State or local assessment are assessed in ways that meet the requirements of that section.”

The U.S. Department of Education recommends the following guidelines for the states to apply in approving local assessments. Based on guidance received to this point, ISBE adopts these nine criteria and requires that school districts observe each:

1. The paraprofessional assessment is expected to evaluate paraprofessional candidates at a level equivalent to the second year of college.
2. For a paraprofessional hired after January 8, 2002, the assessment must be administered and passed before an individual is hired to work as a Title I paraprofessional.
3. The law does not require a paper and pencil test, but there must be evidence that the assessment is valid and reliable.

4. The assessment results must be documented (i.e., a record of the assessment and an individual’s performance on the assessment).

5. The assessment must ensure that more than just basic skills are assessed. The law requires that the test cover subject knowledge of reading, writing and math as well as “the ability to assist in instruction.”

6. LEAs have flexibility in the determination of the content and format of any assessment of paraprofessionals, although the expectations cited in NCLB must be observed. While an appropriate assessment might be entirely a written test, it alternatively could be a combination of a written test on content (reading, writing and math) and a demonstration of competence in instruction (assessed through observations via a series of rubrics).

7. The content of the assessment should reflect both the State academic standards and skills expected for a child at a given school level (elementary, middle, or high school), as well as the ability of the candidate to assist in instructing students in the content.

8. The assessment should be rigorous and objective; each evaluation should have a standard that the candidate is expected to meet or exceed. These standards for evaluation must be applied to each candidate in the same manner.

9. The results of the assessment should establish the candidate’s competence as a paraprofessional relative to the standards in Section 1119 (c) (1) (C), or target the areas where additional training and staff development may be needed to help the candidate succeed at meeting the standard before they are hired. The results must be documented and the LEA must retain the documentation.

LEAs that choose to develop local assessments for paraprofessionals will be expected to meet the above criteria and electronically submit an assurance statement to ISBE that all criteria have been met. It is anticipated that the assurance statement will be filed on the new Illinois Educator Information System that tracks the qualifications of teachers in relation to NCLB’s “highly qualified” standards. The State Board is currently considering procedures to assure compliance with the assurance statement.

Transferability of scores

Paraprofessionals that complete local assessments will only be eligible for employment in the district that administers the assessment. Local assessment results will not be transferable to other districts within the state, unless districts develop regional or area testing agreements that allow transferability of scores between and among the participating districts. Paraprofessionals that meet the state standard for the “ParaPro” test will be able to transfer score results when changing district employment within Illinois because a state-wide standard will be established for the definition of successful performance on the assessment.