To: Dr. Debbie Pitman, Area Superintendent of Elementary Curriculum
From: Rohan Taneja
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Re: Duke School Research Partnership Brief on Teacher Assistant Strategies

Teacher Assistants in Durham Elementary Schools: Identifying Roles and Areas of Improvement

Administrators in the Durham Public School District requested information on the roles that teacher assistants (TAs) play in elementary school classrooms and new strategies for improving the effectiveness of TAs in the district. This brief includes an overview of a review of research on TA effectiveness as well as findings from a survey of elementary school principals in the Durham Public School District. It accompanies a more extensive research paper that includes a literature review and a description of the survey findings, as well as policy recommendations for the district administration.

Overview
There are currently approximately 1 million full and part-time TAs employed nationally in elementary and secondary schools, and the number of TAs in classrooms nationally is expected to grow by about 10 percent by 2018 (Occupational Employment Statistics, 2010). One major cause for this increase is a greater emphasis on school accountability, resulting in the need to prepare students for standardized tests and provide extra help to students performing poorly. This pressure has also increased the range of duties that TAs perform, including an overall trend towards a more instructional role (Groom, 2006). From a budgeting standpoint, TAs provide a lower-cost method of decreasing pupil-to-teacher ratio in schools that do not have the funds to employ more full-time teachers (Using instructional aides as an alternative to reducing class size, 1991).

National Trends
Hiring Standards and Impact of No Child Left Behind
Most districts nationally require that TAs have a high school diploma. Other common requirements are previous job experience working with children, a valid driver’s license, and the ability to pass a background check. However, if a school is identified as Title 1, TAs are often required to have a 2-year college degree. Some colleges now offer majors and certificates geared towards becoming a TA (Hanushek, 1997; "Overview: Elementary and Secondary Education Act," 2011). Many districts provide tuition reimbursement for such programs under the condition that they work as a TA in the school for a certain number of years after graduation.

In North Carolina, 70% of school boards have implemented the No Child Left Behind qualification requirements for Title I schools; TAs in these schools must have a secondary high school diploma or its equivalent and work under the supervision of a

1 Schools that have identified 35 percent of their students as being disadvantaged or at risk qualify for Title 1 funding
highly qualified teacher\textsuperscript{2}. Furthermore, TAs that instruct in Title I schools need an associate's degree or two years of study at an institute of higher education ("Title I Teacher Assistants," 2011). No Child Left Behind has also had an indirect impact; many districts require additional instructors to meet the Act’s requirements for basic student skills on each grade level (Matthis, 2003). Lowering the teacher-pupil ratio has been shown to improve student performance (Hanushek, 1997), and hiring TAs is a cost-effective method of lowering this ratio.

**Roles**

TAs play several distinct roles in classrooms, and provide a range of benefits including increased classroom efficiency, providing additional instruction time for teacher, and even direct involvement with parents. A review of previous research yielded a list of five distinct TA roles (Kerry, 2005): preparing classroom activities, individual and small group learning, clerical tasks, managing study behavior and student evaluation. The literature on each role is expanded upon below.

**Preparing Classroom Activities**

TAs are involved in many preparatory activities that help give teachers more interaction time and increase assistant involvement in the instructional process. Preparatory tasks include preparing lesson materials, preparing books and worksheets, and setting up equipment. In addition to directly helping make sure that lessons run according to plan, these tasks help give teachers more time for student interaction. TAs will also help manage drills; they organize students into groups, explain directions, help make sure students are on task with the given activity, and a variety of other roles. Help in the set-up of student activities also helps involve TAs directly in instruction; teachers understand that assistants are aware of the methodology and desired outcome of a given activities, and assistants are thus valuable in actually aiding in the execution of classroom activities (Daniels & McBride, 2001).

**Individual and Small Group Learning**

Assistants implement and help design lesson plans in ways that are proven to increase student performance. TAs implement teachers’ lesson plans, and in certain cases assist teachers in the planning process. Research on small-group learning ranging from elementary school (J Reid, 1989) through college undergraduates (Weissglass, 1993) has indicated it can actually result in higher student performance in a variety of subjects including sciences, reading, and mathematics (Webb, 1991). Small-group settings facilitate student learning in multiple ways; they allow more individual attention from the instructor, and instructors are better able to assess students based on small-group observation. Students are also able to directly ask questions to help solidify concepts in a way that is often not possible in whole-group instruction (Webb, 1991).

\textsuperscript{2} To be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach.
Clerical Tasks

Clerical tasks help give teacher more interaction time and results in more time-effective execution of a variety of activities. Multiple studies on the efficacy of TAs have demonstrated a strong correlation between TAs performing clerical roles and increased student performance. Typical clerical roles include printing, filing, and copying papers (Kerry, 2005). Reasons include that this role results in increased interaction time between teachers and students and overall more time-effective preparation for classroom activities, distribution of exams, and sharing of homework assignments (S. B. Gerber, 2001).

Managing Student Behavior

TAs are heavily involved in behavior management and help make sure teachers can stay focused on class instruction. They play multiple roles: enforcing disciplinary action for individual students, ensuring correct behavior during classroom activities, monitoring children during recess hours, and even parental interaction. Having TAs focus on behavior management ensures that teachers do not have to correct individual disciplinary problems and can focus instead of whole class instruction (Daniels & McBride, 2001).

Student Evaluation

TAs evaluate students and even collaborate directly with parents, helping to bridge the gap between parents and teachers. They grade assignments and exams and use these data to determine which students require additional attention. TAs also directly interact with parents in some districts; research demonstrates that such relationships can be extremely effective in involving parents in the learning process. They often have strong ties to the local community, (S.U Marks, 1999) and can help bridge the gap in trust and understanding between parents and teachers (French, 1998).

National Goals and Concerns

Although TAs are a crucial part of elementary nationwide, a review of previous research points out several major concerns about their traditional use. Experts have identified several target areas that could result in more effective TA performance. These can be divided into two distinct subcategories, school-level goals and district level goals.

The following are several school-level goals that research from the literature review has identified:

• TAs should be given more extensive training on classroom instruction. They are often placed in instructional settings without adequate knowledge of instructional techniques, behavior management strategies, and procedures for student and class-level evaluation of progress (S. B. Gerber, 2001).
• Individual school districts need to clearly define roles and boundaries for TAs in the classroom, moving away from the traditional model of TAs filling a myriad of constantly shifting roles (Gerlach, 2003).
• Teachers need to be provided additional training in how to use their TAs, as they are often thrust into work with an assistant without adequate knowledge of the variety of roles that a TA can play in the classroom (Groom, 2006).
• TAs must play a larger school leadership role. Many districts are trying to involve TAs in grade-wide and even school-wide planning and strategy because of their experience in classrooms. Research has shown a strong correlation between TAs’ perceived sense of their work’s value and their impact on student achievement (G Butt, 2005).

The following are several school-level goals that research from the literature review has identified:
• Districts should establish a hierarchy within the TA workforce based on skills and experience ("Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities," 2011).
• Supervision and accountability systems for paraprofessionals should be put in place to monitor their effectiveness in the classroom ("Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities," 2011).
• Districts must work to develop collaborative relationships between teachers and their assistants. A positive, collaborative relationship actually results in a tangible improvement in student performance in the classroom (Daniels & McBride, 2001).
• Districts must compile data on TAs to share with state legislators. There is a disconnect between legislators that decide on education budgets and what actually occurs in the classroom between a TA and teacher, what the needs are for individual schools, etc. Most school districts do not perform collect data on TA roles and performance, so it is difficult to create an accurate picture when appealing to lawmakers (Crampton, 2001).

Survey of Elementary School Principals
A survey was sent to each of the 30 Durham Public School elementary school principals to assess the roles TAs play in their classrooms, major concerns related to TAs, and strategies for more effective TA use. The survey questions focused on seven areas: the number of TAs by grade level, TA tasks by grade level, funding, hiring, training, changes over time, and other concerns. Highlights from the findings are presented below.

Number of Teacher Assistants by Grade Level: All respondents indicated TA use in their kindergarten and first grade classrooms. However, both the number of TAs and the proportion of classrooms with their own TA decline significantly after second grade.

Teacher Assistant Tasks by Grade Level: Principals reported that TAs were least likely to lead instructional activities for the whole classroom and perform evaluation tasks. Providing emotional support, monitoring tasks, assisting with whole classroom
instructional activities, and behavior management tasks were among the most frequent across all grade levels.

**Funding:** Most principals do not use additional funding sources; for those who do, examples included local funding, Title 1 funds, cutting into the tutoring budget, and reducing technology purchases.

**Hiring:** Most categorized hiring requirements as “just right.” Specific suggestions indicated that school-level flexibility in the actual selection of TAs should remain in place, but a staff development list of DPS standards would be helpful. Most respondents stated that the district should play a greater role after TAs are selected in terms of providing centralized training.

**Training:** The majority respondents indicated that training programs for both TAs and teaching training in assistant use either did not exist or were “poor.” Specific suggestions for TA training included student monitoring and technology. Suggestions for teacher training programs included training on how to use TAs in instructional activities, how to clearly define TA classroom roles, and how to build a collaborative relationship with one’s assistant.

**Changes Over Time:** Respondents indicated that most instructional roles had become more important since the No Child Left Behind Act was implemented in 2001. The two categories in which a significant number of respondents indicated lessened importance were administrative tasks and monitoring tasks.

**Other Concerns:** There were three major categories of responses when principals were asked about their other major concerns: funding for TAs and inadequate numbers, lack of ongoing professional development for TAs, the need to increase the role of TAs in actual instructional support.

**Policy Recommendations**

Based on the survey results and a review of previous research, three recommendations are proposed for the district:

**Consider implementing a district-wide training program**

The most widely cited concern that principals had was inadequate training for TAs in classrooms. A task force of TAs, teachers, principals, and administrators may be helpful in developing a training curriculum.

Principals who responded to the survey highlighted potential components of a training program. Suggestions included a shadowing program in which new assistants observed more experienced ones as well as preliminary training with one’s assigned teacher, a similar shadowing program for teachers to learn from other teachers with assistants, and training in technology use and addressing students’ medical needs. Using these suggestions as well as a collaborative process in establishing a training program on the district level may help improve TA efficacy without additional hiring costs.
Clarify policy recommendations for the appropriate roles for teacher assistants

The district can draft a list of potential TA roles, as well as areas that are strictly under the purview of the teacher. A formal list of recommendations may provide new ideas for TA use teachers may not have thought of, as well as clarify appropriate roles that TAs may perform.

Connect teacher assistants to professional development opportunities

Because individual principals have been responsible for such opportunities in the past, and creating opportunities for collaboration between principals and with administrators could thus be a valuable first step. Once administrators and school leaders determine valuable professional development opportunities, a program can be developed to help inform TAs of such opportunities.

References


