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Paraprofessionals in the Education Workforce

This module reports on work conducted by Anna Lou Pickett, National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, Center for Advanced Study, City University of New York. This work is funded by the federal Office of Special Education Programs. The citation for this paper is as follows.

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FRAMING THE ISSUES

Amendments contained in the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) address issues connected with the growing reliance on paraprofessionals, with greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles in the delivery of special education and related services for children and youth with disabilities. State education agencies (SEAs) must now provide leadership in the development of standards to ensure that *all* personnel, including paraprofessionals, are adequately and appropriately prepared. Standards developed in accordance with State laws, regulations, or written policy *allow appropriately trained and supervised* paraprofessionals and assistants to assist in the provision of special education and related services.

Paraeducator, paraprofessional, teacher aide/assistant, education technician, transition trainer, job coach, home visitor -- these are just a few of the titles that school districts and other education provider systems have assigned to employees who: (a) provide instructional and other direct services to children, youths, and/or their parents or caregivers; (b) are supervised by teachers or other certified/licensed professionals who are responsible for diagnosing learner needs; planning, implementing, and evaluating programs to achieve learner needs; and assessing learner progress and program outcomes (adapted from Pickett, 1989).

The following scenarios describe situations that occur in classrooms nation-wide. They highlight the evolving roles of both paraeducators and the teachers who supervise them.

1. Greta, a first-year teacher, is working in an inclusive middle school science program. Susan, an instructional assistant with 20 years' experience in working with students with disabilities, and who is old enough to be Greta's mother, has been assigned to her classroom. Greta feels confident that she has the skills she needs to plan for and teach the students. But because she was not prepared at either the undergraduate or the graduate level to plan for and direct the work of paraeducators, she is uncertain about how to integrate Susan into curriculum and other classroom activities. Susan

is becoming increasingly unhappy because she feels that Greta does not appreciate the skills that she has developed over the past two decades.

2. For the first time in her ten-year career as a teacher, Meredith is working with a teacher assistant. She is pleased that Rosita has been added to the team because many of the students have limited English abilities. Meredith feels strongly that it is her responsibility as the teacher to take the lead in sharing information with parents. But she has noticed that many parents seem to feel more comfortable speaking with Rosita about their children than to her; she is becoming aware that Rosita seems to encourage the parents to speak with her, and this concerns Meredith a great deal.
3. Henry is a paraeducator who was hired to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education programs. He works with several teachers, each of whom has different expectations about what he should do in "their" classrooms. His duties vary from full responsibility for teaching "the special ed kids" in one class to, in another classroom, working with all the students whom the teacher feels will benefit from personalized attention, escorting "his students" to yet another class, and, in the fourth classroom, sitting in the back of the classroom doing nothing. Henry is confused about his roles and responsibilities, and when he mentions this to the teachers, they too seem confused. Henry is also concerned that he lacks the training necessary to work effectively with such a varied group of students. He has asked other paraeducators about job descriptions and training opportunities and has been told that there are none. And he is uncertain about whom he should speak to about his concerns.
4. Frances is an administrator responsible for her school district's staff development. A survey of personnel indicated a strong need to enhance the capacity of teachers and paraeducators to work as effective teams. She requested training resources on this topic from her State department of education's comprehensive system of personnel development and discovered that there are no statewide guidelines for the employment, placement, and supervision of paraeducators. Neither are there standards for competency based training for paraeducators nor for preparing teachers to work with them.

These case studies illustrate some of the issues examined in this module on paraprofessionals in the education workforce. The module is divided into three parts. Part 1 sets the stage with a brief review of the historical and contemporary factors that have led to increased paraeducator utilization in more demanding roles. Part 2 centers on critical policy questions and systemic issues requiring the attention of personnel in different jurisdictions with different responsibilities for ensuring the availability of an effectively supervised, highly skilled paraeducator workforce. Part 3 highlights promising practices and strategies for developing standards and systems to prepare teachers and paraeducators for their roles as members of program implementation teams.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: A LEGACY OF PROBLEMS AND PROMISE

Many of the current concerns about professional development practices and regulatory / administrative systems that have an impact on paraeducator performance, supervision, and preparation have their roots in policy decisions and events that took place four decades ago.

In the mid-1950s, a need to alleviate post-World War II shortages of licensed educators, and the fledgling efforts of parents of children with disabilities to develop alternatives to institutionalization stimulated interest in the employment of teacher aides. Two significant

research projects were undertaken to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of teacher aides as one way to enable teachers to spend more time in planning and implementing instructional activities. The first, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, took place in Bay City, Michigan. College educated, but unlicensed, teacher aides were recruited and trained to perform clerical, monitoring, and other routine classroom tasks. Acceptance was not automatic. Critics were concerned that teachers would be replaced with unqualified "cheap labor." In general, however, the reaction was cautiously optimistic, and the concept was adopted by other districts. At about the same time, Cruickshank and Haring (1957) documented the results of a project at Syracuse University designed to demonstrate the efficacy of teacher aides in special education. Although the results, like those in Bay City, were positive, it would be almost ten years before the benefits of paraprofessionals would be more fully tested and realized (Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1961; Gartner, 1971; Kaplan, 1977).

The late 1960s and early 1970s wrought social and organizational changes that had a profound impact on America's schools. Through the efforts of educators and advocacy groups, Federal legislative actions established programs such as Title I and Head Start to meet the needs of growing numbers of children and youth from economically and educationally disadvantaged family backgrounds. In 1975, parents and other advocates for the rights of children and youth with disabilities also achieved their goal of passing P.L. 94-142, the landmark Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which later became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Each of these legislative actions recognized the value of learner-centered, personalized education and services for children and youth with diverse ability levels, learning styles, and other education needs (although only P.L. 94-142 mandated individualized education plans).

During this period, to provide teachers in both general and special education with the assistance they required in order to develop and provide learner-centered and individualized programs, the employment of paraprofessionals gained momentum, and significant changes began to occur in their roles and specialties. While they still performed routine monitoring, clerical, and housekeeping tasks, paraprofessionals also reviewed and reinforced lessons and assisted students with other learning activities initiated by teachers (Fafard, 1974; Gartner, 1971; Pickett, 1989). In urban centers in particular, paraprofessionals who shared the culture and traditions of children and youth of diverse backgrounds served as liaisons between schools and families as a way to counter an emerging lack of confidence between the two (Gartner & Riessman, 1974).

At the same time that paraprofessional utilization expanded, there was also a growing awareness of the need to find ways to reduce barriers that prevented people from ethnic, cultural, and language minorities from entering the professional ranks. Then, as now, paraprofessionals were primarily women who were (re)entering the workforce and were also generally representative of the cultural, ethnic, and language minority groups in their communities (Pearl & Riessman, 1965). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Federal legislation, particularly the Economic Opportunities Act of 1964 and the Education Professions Development Act of 1967, played key roles in supporting and providing access to teacher education for paraprofessionals. One of the most effective and comprehensive personnel preparation initiatives was the Career Opportunities Program (COP).

In *From Aide to Teacher: The Story of the Career Opportunities Program*, Kaplan (1977) recorded the goals, models, and results of COP. Developed by the U.S. Office of Education, the mission of COP was to provide opportunities for "indigenous" community residents, working as paraprofessionals in the nation's low-income urban and rural areas to advance within the education professions and ultimately to improve the learning of children and youth in these schools" (p. 2).

The COP design for teacher recruitment and preparation represented a sharp break from teacher education practices. COP grants went to school systems that set priorities to meet local needs. Partnerships with schools of education in the form of subcontracts were established. Local education agencies (LEAs) selected candidates from their paraprofessional workforce who they determined could best serve their students, and identified the skills that would prepare them to be effective teachers. Institutions of higher education (IHEs) scheduled required courses to accommodate worker-student needs, tutored candidates for high school equivalency tests, conducted study groups to reinforce learning, and conducted classes off campus near students' homes.

The COP project lasted for seven years. It proved to be a viable approach that enabled more than 20,000 nontraditional students from under-represented groups to enter education professions. Indeed, many of the lessons learned through COP serve as a foundation for contemporary teacher preparation programs that recognize paraeducators as valuable recruitment resources (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

While local school systems and higher education agencies were actively engaged in developing flexible degree programs for paraprofessionals, ten State education agencies (SEAs) established credentialing and other regulatory procedures that set guidelines for paraprofessional employment and preparation. Some of these systems included criteria for training and career advancement; most did not. Rather than develop regulatory procedures, the vast majority of States chose to establish non-binding administrative guidelines that outlined appropriate duties for paraprofessionals and, in some cases, delineated supervisory responsibility. To an even more limited extent, LEAs began to develop job descriptions and personnel practices that included career ladders and training programs for those whose career choice was to remain a paraprofessional (Pickett, 1994).

With the decline of Federal fiscal support and leadership for paraprofessional employment and education in the 1980s, interest in developing standards and programs for improving paraprofessional performance and providing opportunities for career development all but evaporated. In fact, "they became the forgotten members of education teams" (Pickett, 1994, p. 2), even though their roles and responsibilities continued to expand. As the years passed, policies and systems concerned with paraprofessional employment, roles, and preparation became more and more unstructured (Pickett, 1989; 1994; 1996). Moreover, with the exception of Nebraska, no SEAs or IHEs were addressing issues of paraeducator supervision and its impact on teacher roles and responsibilities (Vasa & Steckelberg, 1987; Vasa, Steckelberg, & Ulrich-Ronning, 1983). As a result, in most States, standards for paraprofessional roles and responsibilities and professional development systems are almost nonexistent (Pickett, 1989; 1996).

THE PRESENT: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

A review of recent literature reveals that several factors and trends have converged to rekindle interest among policy makers, SEA and LEA administrators, and personnel developers in paraeducator roles, supervision, and preparation. First and foremost are the mandates in IDEA and State legislative actions that stress the need for individualized instruction and support services for children and youth with developmental, learning, physical, and sensory disabilities. Second are the provisions in IDEA, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994, and the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 that target the need to ensure that all personnel are adequately prepared for their roles and responsibilities. As noted earlier, IDEA requires States to establish standards to ensure that paraprofessionals are appropriately trained and supervised. States must also incorporate these training standards into their Comprehensive Systems of Personnel Development (Section 635[a]). Other significant factors include:

- Continuing initiatives to restructure education systems and practices to more effectively serve children and youth with disabilities and other special needs in inclusive general education programs (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & McFarland, 1997; Mueller, 1997; Pickett, 1996; Safarik, 1997);
- Increasing numbers of English-language learners enrolled in school systems nationwide. Paraprofessionals can provide familiarity with differing cultures and languages (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Macias & Kelly, 1996; McDonnell & Hill, 1993; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Pickett, 1995; Recruiting New Teachers, 1997);
- Continuing and growing shortages of teachers in all programmatic areas (American Association for Employment in Education, 1998; Genzok, Lavendez, & Krashen, 1994; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Recruiting New Teachers, 1997);
- Changing and expanding roles of teachers as classroom and program managers and leaders of program implementation teams (French, 1997; Vasa & Steckelberg, 1997).

How many paraprofessionals currently provide special education and related services to children with disabilities? Data on paraprofessionals are generally drawn from two sources. OSEP does not collect data on paraprofessionals as a separate category of service providers. Instead, States report the number of teachers, teacher aides, and related services personnel employed in their States. Paraprofessionals may be reported in either of the two latter categories. The number of teacher aides providing services to children with disabilities has grown significantly in recent years; this growth likely reflects the increasing use of paraeducators in special education.

In 1996-97, the number of teacher aides reported to be providing services to children and youth aged 3 through 21 was 237,206. This figure, which does not include paraprofessionals who were reported in the category of related services personnel, may be compared with the 357,082 teachers who provided services to these children in 1996-97. In the Part C program, 3,307 paraprofessionals provided services to children aged birth through 2 in 1996-97. These paraprofessionals made up nearly 11 percent of the workforce providing early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities.

The results of a survey of chief state school officers conducted in 1996 by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services (NRCPE) also provide data on the numbers of paraprofessionals in the special education workforce. Those results suggest that there are approximately 500,000 full-time-equivalency paraeducator positions in general, special, compensatory, and English-as-a-second-language (ESL/bilingual) programs administered by our nation's schools (up from 400,000 reported in a similar 1990 survey). Of that number, a minimum of 280,000 work in inclusive general, resource, and self-contained special education classrooms and vocational/transitional and early childhood programs serving children and youth aged 3 through 21 with disabilities. Another 100,000-plus are assigned to ESL/bilingual, Title I, and other compensatory (remedial) programs. The remainder work primarily in elementary classrooms, libraries, computer labs, and other learning environments, including early intervention services (Pickett, 1996). Ongoing work of the NRCPE and the investigations of several other researchers indicate that expanded employment of paraeducators will continue into the foreseeable future (Genzok et al., 1994; Macias & Kelly, 1996; NCES, 1995; Recruiting New Teachers, 1997).

It is important to note that current data are incomplete and thus do not provide a completely accurate picture of paraeducator employment. There are several reasons for this:

- Of the SEAs that do gather information and maintain databases about paraeducator employment, their concerns usually center on identifying paraeducators employed in

federally funded or State-mandated programs. Therefore, in many States, instructional paraeducators or related-services paraprofessional staff supported by local tax levy funds are not always included or are under-reported in SEA figures.

- Records maintained by most SEAs do not always indicate the programmatic areas or grade levels to which paraeducators are assigned. Thus, it is not easy to know how they are deployed and how many work in (a) preschool, elementary, middle/junior high schools, or secondary education; (b) Title I or other compensatory programs; (c) bilingual, multilingual, or ESL programs; (d) inclusive education, or more traditional self-contained classrooms, or other special education programs and related services (such as vocational/transitional programs, occupational/physical therapy or speech/language pathology, and early childhood programs).
- And, finally, data collected by SEAs rarely include information about paraeducator employment in Head Start and other early childhood education programs or early intervention home- and center-based programs administered by other agencies serving infants and toddlers with disabilities and other special needs that place them at risk.

This lack of data adversely affects the capacity of SEAs and LEAs to plan and implement policies and systems to improve the quality of paraeducator performance and to develop comprehensive cost-effective education programs for their paraeducator workforce that recognize the similarities in the skills required by all paraeducators.

While each of the factors cited earlier has contributed to increased employment of paraeducators over the past decade, probably the most significant are the initiatives to reshape and redefine teacher roles. No matter whether they work in center- or home-based early childhood settings, in elementary, middle, or high schools, or in general, compensatory, or special education programs, teacher roles and responsibilities in the instructional process are similar. Teachers are diagnosticians of learner needs, planners of age- and ability-appropriate lessons and instructional strategies, facilitators of learning, and assessors of learner performance. Starting with *Teachers for the 21st Century*, produced by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy in 1986, efforts to reform education practices have added new dimensions to traditionally recognized teacher responsibilities. Increasingly, teachers participate in school-based governance and decision-making. They help determine how best to allocate human and fiscal resources to meet learner needs, assist in aligning curriculum content to meet standards for learners established by SEAs, and, as members of individualized education and related services planning teams, collaborate with other school professionals, students, and parents to establish and implement learner goals and objectives. They frequently are also the primary liaisons between homes and schools (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; DeBoer, 1995; French & Pickett, 1997; Friend & Cook, 1996; Lieberman, 1995; Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Malgeri, 1996).

To help teachers effectively carry out these new responsibilities, policy makers have once again turned to paraeducators to support and expand the program management and administrative functions of teachers (Genzuk et al., 1994; Lyons, 1995; Miramontes, 1990; Mueller, 1997; Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & HongBo, 1994; Pickett, 1997; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995). As a result, teachers have also become leaders of program implementation teams with growing supervisory responsibility for paraeducators (French, 1997; French & Pickett, 1997; Pickett, 1994; Vasa & Steckelberg, 1987).

In today's schools, paraeducators still perform routine clerical and house-keeping tasks, prepare bulletin boards, duplicate instructional materials, and monitor playgrounds, study halls, and lunchrooms. There is, however, a greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles. As members of program implementation teams under the supervision of teachers, they: (a) assist with maintaining supportive, safe, and healthy learning environments that facilitate

inclusion for all children and youth; (b) observe, document, and report objective data about learners that enable teachers to plan, modify, and organize curriculum and learning activities for individuals and groups; (c) engage individuals and groups in learning experiences developed by teachers; and (d) assist with learner assessment activities (Giangreco et al., 1997; Lyons, 1995; Miramontes, 1990; Mueller, 1997; Passaro et al., 1994; Safarik, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995).

Increased reliance on paraeducators, with greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles, has not resulted in the development of policies and systems to improve their performance, supervision, and preparation. In many States where they do exist, policies and infrastructures have not been assessed and revised since they were established in the 1970s. Thus, these systems do not reflect the dramatic changes that have occurred in both teacher and paraeducator roles as the primary members of program implementation teams. The most critical needs that require the attention of policy makers, administrators, personnel developers, SEAs, LEAs, and IHEs are summarized as follows:

- The majority of paraeducators in our nation's schools spend all or part of their time engaged in providing instructional and / or other direct services to learners and / or their parents (Giangreco et al., 1997; Lyons, 1995; Mueller, 1997; Passaro et al., 1994; Rubin & Long, 1994; Safarik, 1997; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995). Over the past decade, however, scant attention has been paid to: (a) defining paraeducator roles in newly emerging staffing arrangements; (b) formulating supervisory responsibility; (c) identifying similarities and differences in roles and responsibilities of paraeducators assigned to different programs; (d) determining the skills and knowledge paraeducators require to carry out new, more complex tasks; (e) establishing experience and education qualifications for entry-level and more advanced paraeducator positions; and (f) setting standards for paraeducator performance (Pickett, 1996).
- Professional development / training for paraeducators, when it is available, is usually highly parochial and is rarely part of a statewide comprehensive system of professional / career development that includes: (a) competency-based, structured inservice programs and (b) access to flexible degree programs that enable paraeducators to achieve professional certification / licensure while they continue to work (Pickett, 1996).
- At the present time, fewer than half (24) of the State departments of education, including the District of Columbia and territories, have standards or guidelines for employment, roles and duties, placement, supervision, and preparation of paraeducators. Thirteen of these 24 States have credentialing mechanisms. These systems range from multilevel certification / permit systems that define roles, training, and career advancement criteria to one-dimensional systems that do not specify duties or training requirements. Despite the existence of standards and credentialing mechanisms in some states, it is likely that exceptions to standards occur frequently (Pickett, 1996).
- Contemporary education reform efforts increasingly stress the team and management responsibilities of teachers. These efforts have, however, overlooked the roles of teachers as leaders of instructional teams and supervisors of paraeducators. As a result, most teacher education programs have not developed curriculum content to prepare teachers to plan for, delegate or assign tasks, assess paraeducator skills and performance, and provide on-the-job training (French, 1997; French & Pickett, 1997).
- The need to recruit and train committed teachers is well documented. The need to attract more ethnic, cultural, and language-minority men and women into the field is particularly acute (American Association for Employment in Education, 1998; Genzuck et al., 1994; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Macias & Kelly, 1996; Recruiting New Teachers, 1997).

Although paraeducator personnel represent high percentages of the diverse ethnic, cultural, and language-minority populations in their communities, they are frequently overlooked as resources for recruitment into teacher education and other professional preparation programs (Genzuk et al., 1994; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

THE FUTURE: ADDRESSING THE ISSUES AND ESTABLISHING THE SYSTEM

For partnerships to work cooperatively and to find effective solutions to policy questions and systemic issues, States must have databases that identify who paraeducators are, where they work, and what they do in different program areas or educational settings. Once this has been accomplished, the stakeholders will have access to information that they can use to:

- Delineate appropriate duties and tasks for paraeducators and the non-delegatable responsibilities of school professionals;
- Determine similarities and distinctions in the roles and duties of paraeducators assigned to different programs;
- Identify a common core of skills for all paraeducators, a hierarchy of performance skills, and the knowledge base needed by paraeducators working in more advanced paraeducator positions;
- Set standards for paraeducator training, professional development, and education and/or experience qualifications for employment;
- Establish standards for paraeducator supervision and performance evaluation;
- Make recommendations for developing and implementing comprehensive systems of staff development and career advancement for paraeducators; and
- Identify the supervisory roles and responsibilities of teachers and other school professionals and establish standards for preparing them to assume their duties (Pickett, 1997, p. 15).

In addition to addressing these needs, there is a growing awareness among the various constituencies of the need for credentialing systems or other regulatory procedures to ensure that paraeducators have the skills necessary to meet the requirements of their roles. **As noted earlier, only 13 States have criteria for hiring, training, and career advancement for paraeducators that they regard as credentialing systems. Other States have** chosen to develop administrative guidelines, rather than more formal, mandatory procedures -- and the majority have not moved to adopt either system (Pickett, 1996).

Pickett (1996) has identified four reasons for developing new credentialing systems for paraeducators or strengthening current ones:

1. Setting standards and mandating specified levels of training and performance would guarantee that paraeducators have the skills and knowledge required to perform their assigned duties.
2. Effective credentialing procedures would be based on realistic and viable opportunities for upward mobility on various levels of a paraeducator career ladder and would, therefore, serve as an incentive for retaining skilled paraeducators.

3. Credentialing would establish clear distinctions in the tasks associated with different certification/licensure levels, matched responsibilities with training/education and competency.
4. Credentialing would serve as a method for providing formal recognition of the contributions paraeducators make to the delivery of instructional and related services.

HELP IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLICIES FOR THE FUTURE

Education policy makers at the Federal, State, and local levels do not need to start from scratch in addressing the concerns raised in this report. At the present time, a few States are in the process of developing and testing strategies and systems for effectively preparing, supervising, and integrating paraeducators into education teams. While each State uses a different approach that is designed to meet its identified needs, States can serve as resources for policy makers in SEAs and LEAs and personnel developers in IHEs. Minnesota, Utah, Rhode Island, and Washington are implementing new plans, and Colorado is in the formative stage of developing standards.

At the national level, the NRCP, through a Special Projects grant from the Office of Special Education Programs, is developing guidelines for paraeducator roles and responsibilities, as well as model standards for their training and supervision. Assisted by a broadly representative task force, the NRCP . . . (issued) its recommendations in the fall of 1999 to provide policy makers, educators, personnel developers, unions, parents, and other stakeholders with resources on which they can build to establish policies and strengthen partnerships among those concerned with improving the performance and status of a skilled paraeducator workforce.

The goals of this national project are to:

1. Develop parameters for scopes of teacher and paraeducator responsibilities in learning environments;
2. Identify a common core of skills required by all paraeducators and a hierarchy of performance skills and knowledge base for paraeducators working at more advanced levels with children and youth who have more severe and profound disabilities and other challenging needs;
3. Develop prototypes for articulated systems of training and professional development for paraeducators; and
4. Develop components of a model credentialing system that recognizes distinctions in roles, skills, and knowledge required for different paraeducator positions.

The recommendations of the task force are being reviewed and validated by a wide range of representatives of provider and administrative agencies, professional organizations, IHEs, and other constituencies. While the project is indicative of the growing awareness in the education community of the need to enhance the status and improve the performance of paraprofessionals, its work builds upon a wealth of existing resources, particularly at the State and local levels.

SUMMARY

Policy makers and administrators in SEAs, LEAs, and IHEs are confronted with many issues and concerns in their efforts to improve the quality of the education workforce. Because paraeducators are integral members of program implementation teams, it is of critical importance that the issues that have an impact on paraeducator performance and career development not be overlooked. Policies and systems must be put into place to ensure that paraeducators have the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the needs of the children and youth they serve.

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