Educators today are challenged to help every child succeed academically. How can we ensure that children read on or above grade level, especially those who need special assistance? In Florida, a group of paraprofessionals worked with students struggling to read at grade level, and the students’ gains show that the intensive attention of these professionals to small groups of students can make a significant difference.
RESEARCH STUDY

Florida State University researchers conducted a study about the effectiveness of paraprofessionals’ and teachers’ instruction for at-risk 1st graders (Grek, Mathes, & Torgesen, 2003). The study found that these 1st graders gained literacy skills when:

• Participating paraprofessionals were carefully selected.
  A group of four teachers and eight paraprofessionals were involved in teaching the Proactive Reading Program to 184 1st graders. Participating paraprofessionals were chosen based on the principal’s and teacher’s recommendations for their prior success working with students. Their understanding of reading concepts such as phonemic awareness, alphabetic decoding and spelling was assessed, as well as their abilities to demonstrate warmth and enthusiasm toward students.

• Paraprofessionals used an explicit research-based curriculum.

Sounding it out

An overarching routine used throughout the program is: The instructor models new content to students, guides student practice with the new content, and has students practice independently. For example,

I’m going to stretch the word pet: /P/-/E/-/T/
Listen: /P/-/E/-/T/
Now, let’s do it together: /P/-/E/-/T/
Listen: /P/-/E/-/T/
Now, let’s take turns.
The study used the Proactive Reading program, a curriculum specifically designed to promote academic gains even when the fidelity of program delivery was less than exemplary. For example, even if the instructor did not correct each error a student made, the item appeared several times across several days, increasing the chances that the student would master the item. Also, the program included skill practice before students moved on to more advanced skills. Students’ understanding of difficult concepts was facilitated through repetition, routines, and consistent language of the instructors.

The participants learned to deliver lessons at a fast pace with continuous interaction between the instructor and students. A typical lesson might consist of seven to 10 short activities covering multiple strands of content, including phonemic awareness, alphabetic decoding/encoding, and fluency. Each activity was brief to allow children with short attention spans to stay focused on the task.

The paraprofessionals and teachers followed highly detailed lesson plans focused on using a teaching routine. An overarching routine used throughout the program was having the instructor model new content to students, then guide student practice with the new content, and finally to have students practice independently. For example, when new content was introduced to students, the instructor used an instructional routine of model, guided practice, and independent practice:

Teacher or paraprofessional: “I’m going to stretch the word pet —

/ˈpɛt/. Listen. /ˈpɛt/.

Guided practice: The instructor continues, “Now, let’s do it together —/ˈpɛt/. Listen. /ˈpɛt/. Let’s try to stretch another word: hat. /ˈhæt/. Listen. /ˈhæt/. Now let’s do it together” (repeats with students).

Independent practice: The instructor has students take turns segmenting pet and hat, and adds new words according to the students’ abilities.

• The paraprofessionals took part in high-quality professional development.

The content of the professional development ensured that participants understood the reading program’s underlying concepts, such as struggling readers’ need to have additional instructional support. Paraprofessionals learned that early instructional intervention can prevent reading problems. Embedding modeling, feedback, and ongoing follow-up in the professional development ensured that the teachers and paraprofessionals adopted the new skills as part of their instructional routines.

These adult learning methods were the same as the reading program’s plan for student success — present content, practice, and receive feedback. Both teachers and paraprofessionals participated in professional development provided by program developers to learn the techniques of the reading program. In an initial two days of professional development, the teachers and paraprofessionals together learned the teaching strategies and tools of the reading program. They observed the program coordinators modeling lessons, saw videotaped examples of lesson demonstrations by program developers, and then participants practiced teaching lessons to each other and received feedback both from each other and from the program instructors. Teachers were given released time to attend the sessions, while the paraprofessionals were paid their regular rate of $10 per hour, funded by the study’s grant from the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development.

Paraprofessionals and teachers also were taught in the professional development sessions to monitor students’ responses consistently and to give students positive feedback for correct responses and corrective feedback if students erred. For example, if the student misread the word “that,” the teacher or paraprofessional was to correct the student or encourage the student to note certain features of the word that had already been taught, such as the ending sound, prompting the student to self-correct. Instructors were to offer four positive comments for every correction.

The second phase of professional development consisted of ongoing monthly meetings to continue instructional training and address issues and

A typical lesson might consist of seven to 10 short activities covering multiple strands of content, including phonemic awareness, alphabetic decoding/encoding, and fluency.

Lauderhill Paul Turner Elementary School
Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

Grades: K-5
Enrollment: 752
Staff: 50 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
- White: less than 1%
- Black: 95%
- Hispanic: 3%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 1%
- Native American: 1%
- Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 6.6%
Languages spoken: English, Spanish
Free/reduced lunch: 91%
Special education: 16%
Contact: Linda Sevier, principal
Lauderhill Paul Turner Elementary
600 SE 3rd Ave., 10th Floor
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301
Phone: (754) 322-6700
Fax: (754) 322-6740

/language of the instructors.

PARAPROFESSIONALS TOOK PART IN HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.
program coordinators observed the paraprofessionals and teachers as they taught the reading program over two years, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to determine the effectiveness of instruction.

Results indicated differences in the quality of lesson delivery between teachers and paraprofessionals, with teachers rated (see box at left for rating instrument) significantly higher than paraprofessionals. However, student test score results showed both the teachers and the paraprofessionals were equally effective in stimulating reading growth in the students. Paraprofessionals’ level of fidelity in delivering the program, though lower than teachers’, fostered students’ academic growth.

Paraprofessionals can make a significant difference with students struggling to read if the paraprofessionals use a focused curriculum, are carefully selected, and take part in a strong professional development program that includes theory, modeling and demonstrations, opportunities for practice, feedback, follow-up, and coaching.

A viable model for preparing paraprofessionals to assist struggling students in reading can be developed.
based on the important elements of this study. The model should include a focused curriculum, a careful selection process for participants, and a strong design for professional development that includes presentation of theory, modeling and demonstrations, opportunities for practice, feedback, follow-up, and coaching.

One school that used paraprofessionals to make a difference for students is Lauderhill Paul Turner Elementary School in Broward County. Site visit team members from the Florida Center for Reading Research found that paraprofessionals at the school were used to target literacy skills. The percentage of students scoring at grade level on Florida’s state standardized test in reading, math, and writing increased significantly in 2004 after well-prepared paraprofessionals worked with the students using a systematic and explicit reading program (see table above).

Schools struggle to find the needed resources to provide the intense instruction struggling readers require. Often paraprofessionals are assigned teaching responsibilities, working with students who most need a highly qualified teacher. Schools may benefit from an effective model for maximizing the time and talents of paraprofessionals to assist struggling readers. Such a model is especially important today as educators are challenged to ensure that all children read on grade level.

### Test scores at Lauderhill Paul Turner Elementary

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Scale shows % of students in kindergarten through 5th grade scoring at or above level 3 on a scale of 1-5 on the state standardized exam.

The state average for math was 65% in 2004. The state average for reading was 71% in 2004. The state average for writing was 84% in 2004.

### Reference