

June | 2012

# White Paper: Call for Standards of Practice for Education Assistants in B.C.

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Prepared by Nancy Hoyano, Education Assistant Program, Langara College with the assistance of Sylvia Woodyard, Kwantlen Polytechnic University and Diane Koch, Capilano University on behalf of the Community and School Support Sub-committee of the Post-Secondary Human Services Articulation Committee.

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## **White Paper: Call for Standards of Practice for Education Assistants in B.C.**

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Education Assistants (EAs) play a critical role in the education and support of a wide range of students presenting with various abilities in the school system. It is critical that this group of paraeducators\* be well prepared with thorough and high quality education and training.

A professional set of standards of practice for EAs must be established so that students who possess the most complex needs in our school system receive the best possible education by the EAs who support them. While EAs work under the general direction of teachers in schools, more and more EAs play a key role in the instructional aspects of the education of students with special needs. As Giangreco et al. (2002) point out, it seems questionable, if not a double standard, when general education students receive instruction from professionally certified teachers while, at the same time, many students presenting with a wide range of abilities also receive much of their instruction from paraprofessionals (Breton, 2010), over half with little or no related training or education (Malcolmson, 2009). Malcolmson (2009) points out that students served by EAs could benefit from staff empowered with appropriate knowledge, skills and credentials and that “the responsibilities we place on the shoulders of EAs working with the most vulnerable students in our school system suggest we should never be content to settle for less” (p. 17).

With this review of research literature, history and developments of the EA role in British Columbia, it is hoped that renewed discussion of the need for standards of practice for education assistants in B.C. will be seen as a priority.

### **What the research says**

In 2001, Giangreco, Edelman, Broer and Doyle conducted a comprehensive review of research pertaining to paraeducators and found that there was a substantial increase in the utilization of paraeducators to support students with and without disabilities in general education classes and that the role expectations had become increasingly instructional in nature. Breton echoes this increased demand more recently in a study of preservice and inservice training needs in 2010.

Increasingly, EAs are providing a range of supports to students including but not limited to instruction in academic, social, communication and life skills, behaviour support, and delivery of

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\* For the purpose of this paper, the main term, education assistant (EA), will be used to describe the job of a paraprofessional supporting students with special needs in the public school system. The secondary terms, paraprofessional or paraeducator, will be used in the context of discussing literature that has used paraprofessional or paraeducator as a definitive term. Typically, these secondary terms are used in the literature from the United States.

personal care (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, Doyle, 2001; Robertson, 2000). This is carried out in the context of school teams, which requires that they have strong communication skills (Pora, 2009) and are clear about their role and the roles of other team members (Giangreco, 2001; Hoyano, 2000).

In their review of a decade of literature about paraeducator support Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, Doyle (2001) suggest that students with the most complex challenges to learning “are in dire need of continuous exposure to the most ingenious, creative, powerful, competent, interpersonally effective, and informed professionals” (p. 252). At the time they also found that preservice training for paraeducators in the United States was virtually nonexistent and inservice training to be insufficient. Breton (2010) concluded “often the least qualified personnel are in a position of providing the majority of instruction and related services to students presenting the most complex learning challenges” (p. 35). He also points out that as a result of this situation many legal issues and ethical concerns have emerged concerning the adequacy of paraeducators’ supervision and training (in Etscheidt, 2005).

Teachers report that they “couldn’t do it on their own anymore” and have come to rely on EA support in order to accommodate the diverse abilities that exist in the classroom (Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman, 2002, p. 58). Overtime this support role has evolved to become more instructional in nature. Giangreco, Broer and Edelman (2002) found that there were concerns about training, and that EAs were being asked to take on this instructional role with virtually no preparation: “respondents often judged training of paraprofessionals to be insufficient to do the tasks they were assigned such as skills in teaching reading, language arts, math, communication, social behavior, and daily living”(p. 59). It was also identified as problematic when paraeducators’ command and modeling of written and oral language was deemed less than acceptable (e.g. errors in spelling and grammar), but it was particularly noted, “a paraprofessional’s level of academic skillfulness was of increasing concern at the middle and high school”. Similarly, problems were noted when paraeducators “were asked to support students in subject areas that were unfamiliar to them or where some of them struggled when they were students” (p. 61). French and Chopra (1999) found similar concerns by parents with regard to EAs supporting their children.

The issue of lack of educational preparation for the EA roles is reflected in Malcolmson’s BC research report published in 2009 by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE BC) following a provincial survey of 4,000 of its members, titled “Recognition and Respect: Education assistants in British Columbia: An Educational Profile and Agenda”. This study indicates that only 48% of those people employed have specific training and education for the role of EA and goes on to point out that there is variability in depth and breadth among these programs and credentials available in the province. With the responsibilities that are placed upon EAs and the work demanded of them in supporting the most vulnerable students in our school system, the author suggests further research be done and calls for an educational enhancement agenda. He states that there are EAs who believe that it is time to move towards a more uniform system of EA certification in core skill areas.

Malcolmson (2009) points out that many more EAs have training in the areas of first aid and non-violent crisis prevention (70 – 80%), and that both these skill sets relate primarily to anticipating and dealing with emergency or crisis situations involving students. “At the same time, however, survey findings show lesser success ensuring EAs have the skills to deal with students’ specific

educational needs. Dealing with the issue of violent behaviour from the vantage point of crisis management likely means less training or attention focused on skills related to Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), which is better suited to enhancing opportunities for student learning” (p. 17). Certainly current research supports PBS and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) as the primary tools for dealing with challenging behavior and therefore ensuring that there are uniform training requirements required for proactive behavior support. Teaching EAs to focus on crisis prevention approaches rather than adjusting the environment is now found to be largely counterproductive to longterm change (Carr, 2007). PBS “reflects a more general trend in the social sciences and education away from pathology-based models to a new positive model that stresses personal competence and environmental integrity” (Carr, et. al, n.d., p. 2).

Causton-Theoharis et al. (2007) point to a number of studies that have documented the unintended detrimental effects that untrained paraprofessionals can have on students' learning and on teachers' academic expectations of students that EAs support. At the same time there are a significant number of studies supporting the view that EAs have a positive effect on the learning and participation outcomes of students with special learning needs (Pora, 2007) and that when properly trained and supervised, EAs could provide an efficient and cost effective way for supporting students with disabilities (Breton, 2010).

There is documentation that shows very specifically that EAs impact student learning. Causton-Theoharis et al (2007) references a small, but growing body of literature that specifically addresses the use of paraprofessionals for literacy instruction. They found that when they are trained appropriately in research based approaches and used effectively in the classroom under the direction of a teacher, “paraprofessionals can not only expand a school’s literacy learning opportunities for struggling students, but can also make the ‘main course’ of literacy learning more appetizing and more nourishing” (p. 61). Martella (1993) demonstrated that systematic training of paraprofessionals in effective instructional procedures with a student with severe developmental disability and challenging behaviour resulted in improved skills and attitude and decreased behaviors and increased compliance by the student. Clancy and Walker (2011) found that the integration of the paraprofessional into the support team conducting positive behavioral approaches contributed to greater teacher retention, less expulsions, and stronger student academic and behavioral performance, and better classroom climates.

Paraprofessionals themselves show a keen interest in acquiring the knowledge and skills to do their jobs. Many of those who have completed a post-secondary program report having had transformational experiences that positively impacted their ability to process all the tasks and demands of their role. Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, Doyle (2001) reported satisfaction from learning and using new skills and that corresponding data indicated positive student outcomes (e.g., social skills, independent task engagement) when those skills were applied. Malcolmson’s (2009) data shows that “education assistants give the highest priority for additional training to a range of specific skills or areas of need” (p. 14). Anecdotal comments from recent graduates of the Langara Education Assistant Program state that their education was “transformational”, that the tools they have acquired have prepared them for the work and that they “couldn’t do it without this” (P. Logan, personal communication, April 2011) and another reported that while she had worked in the field of child and youth care and had some skills upon entering the program, she learned more specific skills related to behaviour, autism, medical and personal care procedures, learning styles, and visual supports, to name a few (A. Dragomir, personal communication, April

2011; P. DeLeon-McRae, personal communication, May 2011). In a recent survey, Kwantlen Special Education Assistant (SETA) Program graduates report being “provided with the skills and/or information that provided ...a strong foundation on which to build my career” (Woodyard, Cowell, Williams and Robertson, 2011, p. 10). Strong programs made consistent among each other by larger bodies such as the BC Human Service articulation committee correlate meta-cognitive skills necessary for the flexibility and reflective thinking critical to all the roles of the EA. SETA’s program review surveys further demonstrated that an average of 90% field respondents (*ie.* school district personnel), graduates, students and faculty alike place a high value on learning problem solving, interpersonal and critical thinking skills and are to the same degree satisfied with the training provided at Kwantlen (Woodyard et. al., 2011).

## **The landscape in British Columbia today**

In British Columbia the number of Resource Teachers and specialist teachers has diminished, while at the same time the number of EAs continues to rise; today there are over 10,000 Education Assistants (Fewster, 2008; Malcolmson, 2009). This trend is also observed in the United States (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, Doyle, 2001; Giangreco, Broer, Edelman, 2002; Breton, 2010).

The Ministry of Education in the School Act recognizes the role of Education Assistants. Section 18 states “A board may employ persons other than teachers to assist teachers in carrying out their responsibilities and duties under this Act and the regulations” and further that “Persons employed under subsection (1) shall work under the direction of a teacher and the general supervision of a teacher or school principal”. It continues to say that while Teachers are expected to design programs for students with special needs, Education Assistants play a key role in many programs for students with special needs, performing functions that range from personal care to assisting the teacher with instructional programs. Under the direction of a teacher EAs may play a key role in implementing the program. Clearly EAs have an important and direct role in educating children yet there is no provincial requirement they have any specific educational background.

In the spring of 1995, British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) and CUPE BC convened a small joint committee to address special education issues. Discussions were stalled and it wasn’t until April 2001 that BCTF and CUPE BC resumed meetings and the “Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers and Teacher Assistants” position paper was completed and endorsed by both union executives. More recently, in 2009, both union executives endorsed an up-dated document. This document also recognizes that both teachers and Education Assistants play a key role in the educational programs for students with special needs to ensure their success.

### *Evolution of the EA Role, and their Training and Education in BC*

In the BC education system, the EA role has existed in various forms for many years. For example, the Education Assistant program at Langara College is over 40 years old, one of the oldest in the province. In its early days the program had very different content, preparing students to do library cataloguing and to support students with learning disabilities. At that time students with more significant disabilities were not participants in general education but mostly in segregated schools. About 25 years ago, with the movement toward the inclusion of all children with special needs in the general education system, post secondary programs evolved to recognize the need for education and training to support these students in schools and classroom environments.

A study of Kwantlen's SETA program yielded interesting findings with regard to the current situation. To a large extent employers from across several Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley districts were highly satisfied that graduates were prepared to do the work of an EA upon graduating. However, comments were made about the increasing complexity of the role relevant to the need for greater skill level, given the needs of elementary and secondary students, in such areas as literacy, numeracy, classroom management and behavioural support (Woodyard et. al., 2011). This evolution of the role to that of a more sophisticated (para)-educator is significant to the current discussion, since commonality in skill level is critical.

Post secondary Education Assistant and related Classroom and Community Support programs prepare students broadly: to see children and youth as learners from a strength based perspective, to support them with their learning, to understand the purpose of their behaviour and support positive behaviour, to communicate as a team member and to see the benefits of the synergy of teamwork among many other skills. EA graduates report that they couldn't imagine entering the field without specific education, that it leaves them feeling so much more confident. They appreciate that their education has fostered their ability to be reflective practitioners, and to be aware of their values and related insights this brings to their practice (V. Reynolds, personal communication, April 2011; Woodyard et. al. 2011).

Recently, Malcolmson's (2008) survey findings pointed out that EAs in BC have a keen interest in pursuing courses, workshops and other upgrading opportunities to better address the issues and challenges they encounter on a daily basis with the students they serve. In the 2009/10 school year, the Support Staff Education and Adjustment Committee (SSEAC), a joint initiative of BC Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA) and unions such as CUPE, representing support staff in the K-12 public education sector decided to allocate \$3,000,000 of the Workforce Adjustment Fund to further support Skills Enhancement and Retraining initiatives, this was in addition to an earlier one-time payment of \$3,000,000 from an initial Framework Letter of Understanding which established SSEAC. These funds have been used to support training of CUPE members who are currently employees of a school district in a number of areas including education assistant upgrading. Nine learning options were developed from which school districts could select. These options covered a range of specific knowledge and skills from Foundations of Inclusion to FASD, ABA, and Sign Language and ranged in length from 9 to 30 hours.

While professional upgrading is important to any profession there is a universal requirement that professionals enter the field with a recognized minimum standard of knowledge and skill in the field.

### Provincial Post-Secondary Articulation

In the mid seventies the Ministry of Advanced Education instituted the process of articulation between post secondary institutions to facilitate student transfer between colleges and universities.

In 2006, fourteen public post-secondary programs that comprise both community and school support programs (CASS), a subcommittee of the provincial Human Service Articulation Committee, acknowledged the desire of students to have their education recognized provincially

so that they could continue their learning anywhere in the province. See appendix 1 for a list of the programs and educational services they provide. This required course transfer and laddering from one-year certificates to two-year diplomas and into degrees. The CASS subcommittee responded to this need with the development of the “Community & School Support (CASS) Articulation Guide for Instructors & Institutions” which set out the initial map for course transfer. It is updated annually and can be found on the BC Transfer Guide website at <http://bctransferguide.ca/program/cass/transfer/>.

In the late 1990’s the Ministry of Advanced Education established a multi-lateral task force, which oversaw the development of competencies for Community Living and at the same time a draft competency document was developed for education assistants. While the former was endorsed, the competencies for EA’s were never finalized and eventually shelved. As a result there are still no competencies or standards of practice to date for education assistants working in a paraprofessional capacity supporting children presenting with various abilities.

## **Finally**

There was a time when teachers had little more than a high school certificate to be certified to teach. Normal schools were established in BC in 1901. Initially, the Normal School offered a four-month program for students who had completed Grade 11 to train for teaching. Later the program was expanded to two years and was designed for students who had earned their Senior Matriculation (Grade 12). Beginning in September 1956, all teacher education (elementary and secondary) was transferred from Provincial Normal Schools to a new College of Education. It operated as a faculty within the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and as a department of Victoria College in Victoria, B.C. It soon became evident that teachers needed further education. Today in BC teachers require an undergraduate degree and a professional teaching year to meet minimum teacher qualifications.

Having EAs who are well educated will improve the likelihood that students with disabilities get the best educational support.

The time has come for establishing standards of practice for Education Assistants and minimum educational requirements that prepare them for their role in supporting students presenting with various abilities, including those with the highest needs in the school system.

### **A Plan of Action: Getting From Here to There, a first step**

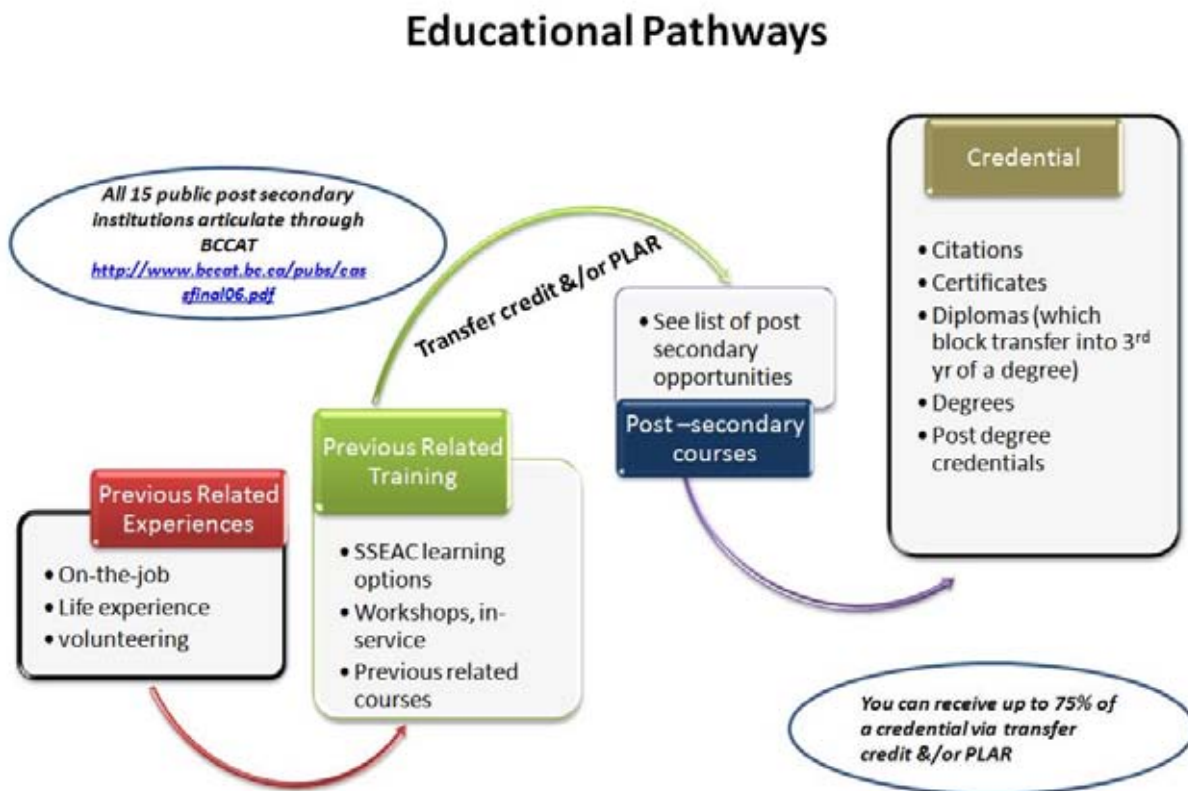
- Stakeholders need to come together to discuss standards for practice (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Advanced Education, Post Secondary Deans and Directors, Post Secondary EA programs, School District Superintendants, Principals, Directors of Special Education (BC CASE), School District Human Resource Managers, BCTF, CUPE, Families and most importantly EAs).
- Stakeholders need to develop a plan for developing and implementing minimum standards of practice for EAs.

## Appendix 1

### Pathways to Post Secondary Programs

Revised: May 2012

Welcome! The 15 public post secondary Community and School Support (CASS) programs across British Columbia and Yukon invite you to explore further learning opportunities. Education Assistant (EA) work is complex and requires specialized knowledge and skill in order to provide quality support to students. As the official EA-type programs, CASS programs across the province invite EAs to build upon what they already know to further personal and career opportunities. Education Assistants may qualify for transfer credit and prior learning assessment recognition. Flexible offerings may include part-time, full-time, evening, face-to-face, on-line, distance and self-directed learning. Curious? To find out more, individuals and school districts are encouraged to contact us (see the list of post-secondary institutions below).



*Education Assistants are encouraged to keep all their certificates, documents, course materials and assignments for future considerations and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) opportunities.*



## Public Post Secondary Institutions offering official Education Assistant curriculum

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Name of Program</b>	<b>Contact name</b>	<b>website</b>	<b>Additional info</b>
Camosun College	Community support and Educational Assistant Certificate	Anita Ferriss <a href="mailto:Ferriss@camosun.bc.ca">Ferriss@camosun.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.camosun.bc.ca">www.camosun.bc.ca</a>	FT, PT, face-to-face
Capilano University	Special Education Assistant Certificate	Diane Koch <a href="mailto:dkoch@capilano.ca">dkoch@capilano.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.capilano.ca">www.capilano.ca</a>	PT evening/weekend Face-to-face
College of New Caledonia	Community & School Support Program Certificate	Val Waughtal <a href="mailto:waughtal@cnc.bc.ca">waughtal@cnc.bc.ca</a>  Bev Currie <a href="mailto:currieb@cnc.bc.ca">currieb@cnc.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.cnc.bc.ca/">http://www.cnc.bc.ca/</a>	PT, distance, On-line
College of the Rockies	Education Assistant Certificate & Diploma	Ildi Walkley <a href="mailto:walkley@cotr.bc.ca">walkley@cotr.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.cotr.bc.ca">http://www.cotr.bc.ca</a>	Face to face and online
Douglas College	Behaviour, Intervention Certificate, Classroom & Community Support Cert & Dip, Disability & ABA Advanced Certificate Employment Support Specialist Advanced Certificate	Lori Woods <a href="mailto:woods1@douglascollege.ca">woods1@douglascollege.ca</a>  Wendy Parry <a href="mailto:parryw@douglascollege.ca">parryw@douglascollege.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.douglascollege.ca">www.douglascollege.ca</a>	FT, PT, Face-to-face, online, PLAR
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	Certificate in Special Education Teacher Assistant	Sylvia Woodyard <a href="mailto:Sylvia.Woodyard@kwantlen.ca">Sylvia.Woodyard@kwantlen.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.kwantlen.ca">www.kwantlen.ca</a>	FT, PT, face to face
Langara College	Education Assistant	Nancy Hoyano <a href="mailto:nhoyano@langara.bc.ca">nhoyano@langara.bc.ca</a>  Ken Pawlak <a href="mailto:kpawlak@langara.bc.ca">kpawlak@langara.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.langara.bc.ca">www.langara.bc.ca</a>	FT, PT, face to face, mixed mode
North Island College	Cert in Educational assistant/Community support worker	Mary Pat Thompson <a href="mailto:mthompson@nic.bc.ca">mthompson@nic.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.nic.bc.ca">www.nic.bc.ca</a>	FT, PT, PLAR, indigenous focus
Northern Lights College	Educational assistant program	Shari Harrison <a href="mailto:sharriso@nlc.bc.ca">sharriso@nlc.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://nlc.bc.ca/">http://nlc.bc.ca/</a>	On line FT, PT, PLAR
Okanagan College	Human Service Work Diploma Program	Michael Douglas <a href="mailto:mdouglas@okanagan.bc.ca">mdouglas@okanagan.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.okanagan.bc.ca">www.okanagan.bc.ca</a>	Face-to-face
Selkirk College	Classroom & Community Support Worker	Jane Green <a href="mailto:jgreen@selkirk.ca">jgreen@selkirk.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.selkirk.ca">www.selkirk.ca</a>	PT, face-to face, online, PLAR
Thompson Rivers University	Community & School Support Program	Sue McKay <a href="mailto:smckay@tru.ca">smckay@tru.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.tru.ca">www.tru.ca</a>	Face-to-face, FT
University of the Fraser Valley	Community Support Worker	Alyson Seale <a href="mailto:Alyson.Seale@ufv.ca">Alyson.Seale@ufv.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.ufv.ca">www.ufv.ca</a>	Face to face
Vancouver Island University	School & Community Support	Leif Rasmussen <a href="mailto:Leif.rasmussen@viu.ca">Leif.rasmussen@viu.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.viu.ca">www.viu.ca</a>	PT, face to face, online, PLAR
Yukon College	Education Assistant Certificate	Lori Eastmure <a href="mailto:leastmure@yukoncollege.yk.ca">leastmure@yukoncollege.yk.ca</a>	<a href="http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca">www.yukoncollege.yk.ca</a>	PT, distance, face-to-face

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