

# Paraeducators in Washington's teacher workforce

Recommendations to remove barriers faced by  
school districts and ESDs as they support  
paraeducators in teacher roles

A report to the Legislature,  
December 2019

Authorizing legislation:  
ESHB 1658, Sec. 2 (2019)

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR  
STANDARDS BOARD   
PARAEDUCATOR BOARD

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# Background

## Request by the Legislature

By December 10, 2019, the Paraeducator Board must submit a report to the Legislature on recommendations to reducing barriers faced by school districts and Educational Service Districts (ESD) who are using paraeducators on limited teaching certificates, or who are supporting paraeducators becoming certified teachers<sup>1</sup>.

## Introduction

This legislative reporting request addresses two challenges Washington State is currently experiencing in its teacher workforce. First, Washington is encountering a teacher shortage. Since 2013, limited certificates, which are requested by districts to fill emergency needs when they cannot find a fully qualified (or regularly certified) teacher, have increased 300%. Though individuals who receive a limited certificate may have experience with instruction, it is not a given. A lack of trained educators is thus a “problem that hurts our children’s ability to succeed in the classroom”<sup>2</sup>.

Second, Washington is experiencing a significant demographic gap between students and teachers. Nearly 50% of students in the state identify as students of color, while only 11% of teachers identify as educators of color<sup>3</sup>. Research shows that teachers of color have

positive outcomes in closing the opportunity gap for students of color and white students<sup>4</sup>.

As the state looks to minimize these two challenges, paraeducators are increasingly considered by school districts as individuals with the experience and skills to enter into the teacher role.

Paraeducators, also known as instructional aides or teacher assistants, are classified public school or school district employees who work under the supervision of a certificated or licensed staff member. They assist in K-12 classrooms to provide instructional support for teachers, as well as other services for students and their families<sup>5</sup>. Paraeducators are particularly needed in special education and bilingual classrooms. Their responsibilities often include providing one-on-one tutoring, assisting with classroom management, instructing small groups of students, and translation.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act established minimum employment requirements for paraeducators who are working in schools receiving Title I funds. These requirements include at least two years of college, an associate degree or higher, or a passing rate on a state or local assessment that demonstrates knowledge or skills in assisting math, reading, and writing instruction. Beginning in 2017, the Washington State established minimum employment requirements for all paraeducators regardless of their school’s funding source<sup>6</sup>. These minimum employment requirements assert that

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<sup>1</sup> 66th WA Legislature (2019). [SHB 1658](#). 2019 Reg. Sess.

<sup>2</sup> Inslee, Jay (2016). [Policy Brief](#).

<sup>3</sup> Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2019). [“Washington State Report Card”](#).

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<sup>4</sup> Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, Papageorge (2017). [“The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers”](#). IZA Institute of Labor Economics, IZA DP No. 10630.

<sup>5</sup> [WAC 179-01-020 \(1a\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> 65th WA Legislature (2017). [ESHB 1115](#). 2017 Reg. Sess.

a paraeducator must be at least 18 years of age and hold a high school diploma or its equivalent. In addition, a paraeducator must meet one of the following:

- Have received a qualifying score on the Education Testing Service paraeducator assessment;
- Hold an associate degree or higher from an accredited college or university;
- Have earned 72-quarter credits or 48-semester credits at the 100 level or higher at an accredited college or university; or
- Have completed an apprenticeship as a paraeducator in a program registered with the Washington State Apprenticeship and Training Council.

Paraeducators are increasingly under consideration as one solution to decreasing the teacher shortage and improving educator diversity. Due to their role in the classroom, paraeducators develop valuable instructional competencies by facilitating small group instruction and supporting student learning. Furthermore, paraeducators tend to be more racially representative of the local student population, and are twice as likely to speak a language other than English<sup>7</sup>. As dual language learners are a growing population, and represent ten percent of total public school enrollment, paraeducators are valuable assets in Washington’s increasingly diverse school system.

**Unfortunately, school districts supporting paraeducators, and paraeducators themselves, often face challenges on the pathway to teacher certification. These challenges include**

**low and stagnant wages, financing, testing barriers, and inconsistent communication on how to become a teacher.**

This report dives into the barriers faced by school districts and ESDs using paraeducators on limited teaching certificates, and the barriers they face while trying to support paraeducators on the pathway to becoming fully certificated teachers. This report also provides recommendations on how to reduce the barriers listed.

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<sup>7</sup> Connally, Garcia, Cook, and Williams (2017). [Teacher Talent Untapped: Multilingual Paraprofessionals Speak About the Barriers to Entering the Profession](#). *New America*.

## Limited certificates

Limited certificates provide flexibility in the Washington State educator certification system. With a limited certificate, educators who do not meet full certification requirements may practice in classrooms and schools if they meet certain conditions. Limited certificates can be an entry point into the teaching profession. Some individuals pursuing alternative routes to certification can teach with a limited certificate while they are completing their programs.

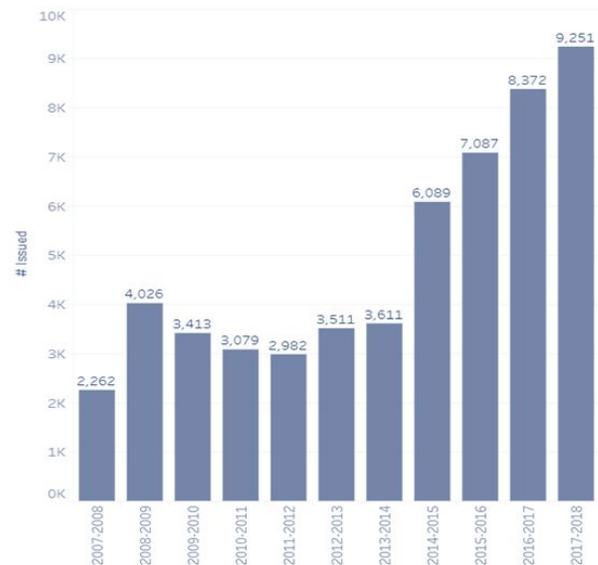
There are five limited certificates in Washington:

- The Conditional Certificate;
- The Emergency Substitute Certificate;
- The Transitional Certificate;
- The Intern Substitute Certificate; and
- The Conditional Educational Staff Associate (ESA) Certificates.

### Limited certificates issued per year across the state

Since 2013, the number of limited certificates issued has tripled, from 2,989 to 9,251. This growth not only exhibits an increased reliance on the use of limited certificates, but it is also a clear indication of a teacher shortage in Washington.

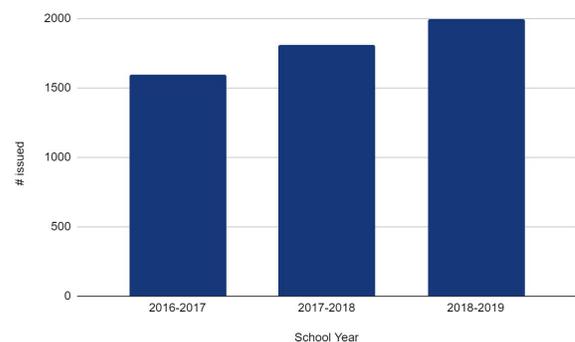
Figure 1: number of limited certificates issued per year, 2008-2018



### A look at paraeducators

If we filter the data to only display paraeducators, then the number of limited certificates issued to paraeducators follows the upward trend (earliest available data is from 2017).

Figure 2: number of limited certificates issued to paraeducators, 2017-2019



The most requested limited certificates are the "conditional" and "emergency substitute". This acknowledges that paraeducators are increasingly being asked to meet the role of a teacher, and yet, in general, receive minimal to no professional development training.

**Figure 3: limited certificates issued to paraeducators, 2017-2019**

Limited certificate	16-'17	17-'18	18-'19
Conditional certificate	54	67	72
CTE conditional certificate (renewal)	15	18	14
CTE conditional teacher	18	26	8
CTE probationary teacher	7	6	5
CTE probationary teacher (renewal)	2	1	1
Emergency substitute teacher	1121	1289	1503
Emergency teacher	0	12	7
Intern substitute teacher	22	25	26
Transitional teacher	1	2	3

\* Note: individuals may hold more than one limited certificate

**Figure 4: growth (%) of conditional and emergency substitute limited certificates to paraeducators, 2016-2019**

Limited certificate	Growth 16-'19
Conditional certificate	33.33%
Emergency substitute teacher	34.08%

### Conditional and emergency substitute limited certificates

Given the growth trends of the conditional and emergency substitute limited certificates, we must examine their current attainment requirements. This review is necessary to begin a discussion on recommendations to reducing barriers faced by school districts and ESDs who are using paraeducators on limited teaching certificates.

## Conditional certificate

### Requesting requirements for the district or ESD

Verify that **one or more** of the following criteria have been met:

- The individual has extensive experience, unusual distinction, or exceptional talent in the subject matter to be taught or in the certificate role; or
- No person with regular certification in the area is available; or
- The individual holds a bachelor's degree or higher from an accredited college or university; or
- The individual is enrolled in an educator preparation program specific to the certificate role for which they are applying; or
- The individual will serve as a nonimmigrant exchange teacher and meets the specific minimum requirements defined in this section; or
- The individual will serve as a traffic safety education teacher and meets the specific minimum requirements defined in this section; or
- Circumstances warrant.

Verify that **all** of the following criteria have been met:

- The district, ESD, or approved private school has determined that the individual is competent for the assignment; and
- After specific inclusion on the agenda and a formal vote, the school board or ESD board has authorized the conditional certificate; and
- The individual is being certificated for a specific assignment and responsibility in a specified activity/field; and
- The individual will be delegated primary responsibility for planning, conducting, and evaluating instructional activities; and
- The individual will not be serving in a paraeducator role; and
- The individual will be oriented and prepared for the assignment. In addition, prior to service, the individual will be apprised of any legal liability, the responsibilities of a professional educator, the lines of authority, and the duration of the assignment; and
- The individual will be assigned a mentor within twenty working days from the commencement of the assignment; and
- A written plan of support will be developed within twenty working days from the commencement of the assignment.

### Minimum requirements for teacher roles only

- Individuals must complete fifty continuing education credit hours after the issuance of the certificate, and prior to the reissuance of the certificate. Holders of conditional certificates in the role of nonimmigrant exchange teacher are not required to complete fifty continuing education credit hours.
- Special education teacher. The applicant for a conditional teaching certificate in special education shall hold a bachelor's degree or higher from an accredited college or university.
  - The issuance of a conditional certificate to a special education teacher is contingent upon the individual being enrolled in a state-approved teacher preparation program resulting in a teacher certificate endorsed in special education.
  - An individual with full certification and endorsed in special education shall be assigned as a mentor to the special education teacher serving on a conditional certificate for the duration of the conditional certificate.
- Traffic safety education teacher. The applicant qualifies to instruct in the traffic safety program under WAC 392-153-021. Written plans of support and mentors are not required for holders of conditional certificates in the role of traffic safety education teacher.
- Nonimmigrant exchange. A conditional certificate in the role of

teacher may be issued to an individual admitted to the United States for the purpose of serving as an exchange teacher.

- The individual must be eligible to serve as a teacher in elementary or secondary schools in their country of nationality or last residence.

### Validity period

- The conditional certificate is valid for two years or less, and is only valid for the activity or role specified on the certificate.
- The reissuance of the special education conditional certificate will have a validity period of three years or less.

## Emergency substitute certificate

### Requesting requirements for the district or ESD

- The emergency substitute certificate is issued upon request by a school district, approved private school, or ESD.
- If the local school district, approved private school, or ESD has exhausted or reasonably anticipates it will exhaust its list of qualified substitutes who are willing to serve as substitutes, emergency substitute certificates may be issued to persons not fully qualified as substitutes under WAC 181-79A-232.

### Minimum requirements

- There are no minimum requirements.

### Validity period

- Emergency substitute certificates shall be valid for two years or less.

## Barriers faced by school districts and ESDs requesting limited certificates for paraeducators

The barriers faced by school districts and ESDs using paraeducators on limited teaching certificates in teacher roles are minimal.

Both the conditional and emergency substitute certificates have requirements that allow flexibility to districts to find an individual to fill the required position. Specifically:

- A district may request a conditional certificate for a paraeducator if “circumstances warrant”; and
- A district may request an emergency substitute certificate if it has “exhausted its list of qualified substitutes who are willing to serve as substitutes”.

# Barriers to, and interest in, career growth

In 2016 and 2017, PESB administered two separate surveys to paraeducators requesting insight into their career aspirations, and the barriers they may face to meeting their goals. Nearly 6,000 paraeducators from across the state responded to the surveys.

## What are the top three barriers to becoming a certified teacher (2016):



**87%**  
said **yes**

If you had all the support you needed, would you be interested in receiving professional development? (2017)

If you had all the support you needed to become a certified teacher would you be interested in pursuing teaching as a career?

**43%**  
said **yes**



(weighted average of both surveys)



**71%**  
said **no**

Are you aware of any programs or support at the district level that are available for people who want to become a teacher or other school district certificated staff?

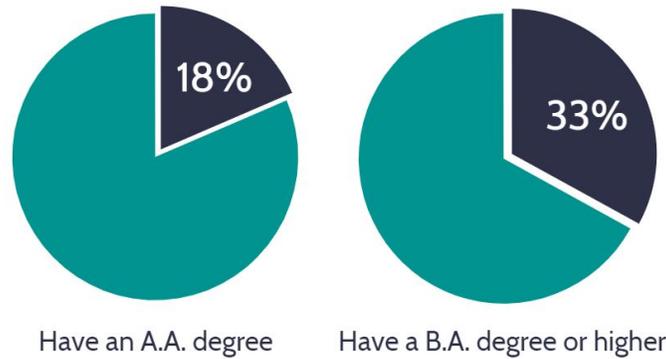
(weighted average of both surveys)

Are you aware of any programs or support at the state level that are available for people who want to become a teacher or other school district certificated staff?(2016)

**81%**  
said **no**



**What is the highest grade level or degree you have received?**



When asked, "on a scale of 1-5, with one being "not at all important" and five being "extremely important", how would you rate the importance of receiving the following financial support for you to complete the teaching program?"

**Figure 5: importance of receiving the following financial support to complete a teaching program?**

	1	2	3	4	5	No opinion
Continued salary and job security	0.31	0.31	4.39	11.91	81.19	1.88
Medical benefits	2.82	3.45	6.74	13.79	71.47	1.72
Scholarships for reduced tuition	0.47	0.94	5.02	14.58	77.59	1.41
Books and class materials	1.88	5.33	11.44	18.50	60.97	1.88
Testing fees	1.88	6.74	13.17	17.87	58.15	2.19

Survey data reveals two critical challenges to paraeducator advancement into the role of a certified teacher.

### **A lack of financial support**

A paraeducator's average annual wage is \$28,750, which is just above the federal poverty line of \$25,750.

To become a certified teacher, an individual must attain a bachelor's degree, meet assessment requirements, and complete a preparation program from an approved provider.

With 67% of paraeducators not holding a B.A. degree and 49% not holding an A.A. degree, completing the education requirements is both a priority and a financial hurdle.

Without the support to cover the cost of an education and a living wage (over 93% of survey respondents noted this as very to extremely important) paraeducators are financially burdened to earn a degree and enter into the teaching field.

### **Limited knowledge of professional development**

Nearly 90% of survey respondents want professional development if supported by the district and state, and over 40% of respondents want to become a teacher if also supported. However, there is a lack of understanding of how to become a teacher.

Paraeducators indicated that they are unfamiliar with any programs or supports provided by the district (over 70%) or state (over 80%) to become certified staff.

If 40% of survey respondents were to become teachers, Washington would have nearly 3,000 new teachers entering the profession. If we expand this percentage to the number of paraeducators in the state (27,001), then we could potentially welcome over 10,000 new teachers to the field.

# Supporting paraeducators to become teachers

## Alternative routes to teacher certification

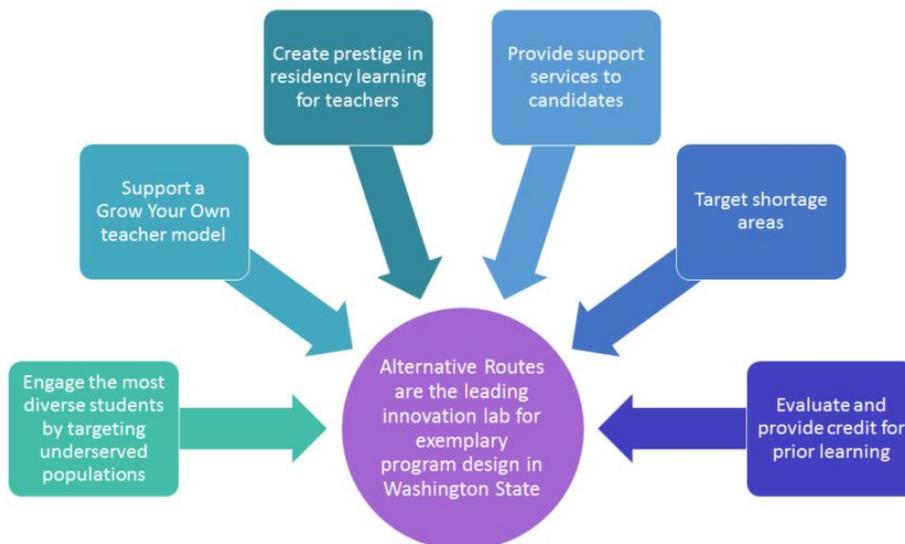
Alternative routes are designed for career changers, and for individuals already working in the school system who want to transition to full-time teaching. Compared to traditional educator preparation programs, Washington’s alternative routes tend to be shorter, more convenient, more affordable, and more practically oriented. Alternative routes prioritize a more diverse workforce, and create the opportunity to “grow your own” paraeducators and limited certificate holders into fully certified teachers. Alternative routes programs require a year-long teaching residency as well as academic coursework. Completers of these programs receive their residency certification and, depending on the route and program, possibly a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

Improving access to alternative routes programs will positively impact the future educator

workforce by increasing geographic access to teacher preparation, establishing stronger recruitment networks within communities, strengthening the paraeducator to teacher pathway for high demand areas, and growing pathways for community partnerships to develop their own teachers. Alternative routes offer several flexible options for full residency certification.

- Route 1: For district staff (e.g., paraeducators) with an associate degree
- Route 2: For district staff with a bachelor’s degree
- Route 3: For “career changers” with a bachelor’s degree
- Route 4: For district staff with a bachelor’s degree and a limited certificate

There has been a significant rise in applications to offer both new educator preparation programs, as well as adding alternative routes to existing programs. Washington State allows for community colleges and non-higher education organizations to be providers of educator preparation programs. Since January



2016, PESB has approved thirteen educator preparation programs, ten of which are new Alternative Routes programs.

## Paraeducator career ladder

### Paraeducator Certificate Program

The certificate program offers statewide, standards-based training for all paraeducators. It also supports a career growth ladder for those who wish to advance their career as a paraeducator, or pursue a teaching profession.



*“Paraeducators have been wanting training for a long time. This program will better equip us with the tools we need to serve students and support teachers.” – Tiffany and Raquel, Yakima Valley paraeducators*

The training begins with the four day Fundamental Course of Study (FCS), a course focused on the paraeducator standards of practice. Following the completion of the FCS, a paraeducator has three years to complete an additional ten days of training to earn the General Paraeducator Certificate. If funded by the Legislature, school districts are responsible for ensuring all employed paraeducators meet the requirements of the FCS and general certificate.

As of December 2019, nearly 27,000 paraeducators are receiving training on two days of the FCS during the 2019-20 school year.

In addition to the general certificate, a paraeducator may choose to earn a Subject Matter Certificate in English Language Learner and Special Education, and an Advanced Paraeducator Certificate.

### Pipeline for Paraeducators Conditional Loan Scholarship

The Pipeline for Paraeducators Conditional Loan Scholarship provides financial support for paraeducators interested in transitioning to teaching. The conditional loan awards eligible, classified instructional staff with financial assistance to earn their associate degree. Earning an associate degree enables candidates to enroll in a two-year alternative route one program to obtain a residency teaching certificate. The conditional loan is forgiven in exchange for two years of teaching service in a Washington public school.

Paraeducators are increasingly interested in becoming certified teachers. However, not all paraeducators have the required associate degree for a route one program, or a bachelor's degree for a route two program (the two alternative routes explicitly designed for paraeducators). This conditional loan ensures more of Washington's paraeducators can climb the educator career ladder, should they choose to do so. With the development of the Paraeducator Certificate Program, demand for this pathway will grow.

## **Paraeducator apprenticeship program**

Apprenticeship is a structured, paid program that combines on-the-job training with related supplemental instruction. This program allows the apprentice to earn a wage and complete professional development. In public education, the apprentice learns the day-to-day skills required by the school district during their regularly scheduled workday and then attends college classes on their own time.

All supplemental classes are clearly outlined for the apprentice, and can be accessed at participating local community colleges. Many of these college classes are available online and are designed to be a pathway to an associate degree. Once attained, this enables candidates to enroll in a two-year alternative route one program to earn a residency teaching certificate.

## Recommendations

There are several recommendations for minimizing barriers of entry for paraeducators to the teaching profession. What follows are meaningful recommendations with several objectives.

### Provide paraeducators with assistance navigating teacher pathways, and work to remove preparation program barriers

1. Provide online tools to assist individuals in mapping out their teacher pathway.
2. Identify district or regional coordinators to help and advise individuals both with district advancement policies and the options for pursuing teacher preparation programs.
3. During the district's onboarding of new staff, inform paraeducators who have indicated a goal of becoming a teacher of the teacher certification pathway process.

### Provide support to paraeducators in mentoring, academic advising, financial assistance, and testing

1. Provide resources to expand mentor programs. Provide opportunities for current paraeducators considering teaching, those enrolled in a teaching program, and those who have completed a teaching program the opportunity for peer-to-peer connection via facilitated cohort gatherings and networking with discussion topics and regularly scheduled meetings.
2. Provide financial assistance by identifying sustainable funding, and increasing knowledge about scholarships available.
3. Explore the current criteria exemptions, substitutions, and allowances for entry into an educator preparation program.
4. Provide better communication of test allowances.
5. Provide a streamlined pathway for paraeducators who have taken the required ETS ParaPro test to crosswalk with basic skills testing requirements to become a teacher.
6. Explore with the educator preparation programs the utilization of a combination of various program delivery methods, i.e., online, face-to-face meetings, small coaching sessions, observation time, and alternative support of different learning styles.

colleges or satellite university programs.

## **Provide paraeducators with equitable opportunity to be successful in an alternative route program**

1. Implement and adhere to safeguards to eliminate gatekeeping and unintentional or intentional biased decisions regarding an individual's potential and access at both the district and teacher preparation program level.
2. Provide cultural competency training for educator preparation programs and districts on various recruitment strategies and providing support services to diverse candidate groups.
3. Work with education preparation programs to review and provide guidance with the admissions processes to identify opportunities for increased diverse candidate access. Develop a collaborative selection process with members from a diverse review group of district staff, building administrators, preparation program staff, and community members.
4. Conduct an assessment to identify recommendations for state or regional standards regarding the acceptance of college credits, articulation, prior learning credit, transcript evaluation, and previous work experience.
5. Partner with the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges to identify a better process for evaluating foreign transcripts and accepting prior work experience.
6. Encourage the increase of teacher preparation programs in rural areas to increase access, be it community

## **Provide districts with program assistance in developing a robust teacher pathway**

Guide districts in each of the following areas:

1. Developing a strategic plan to develop our teachers;
2. Building a stronger partnership with a teacher preparation program to assist with developing our teachers;
3. Conducting careful recruitment and selection of program participants;
4. Implementing culturally responsive strategies for recruitment of teachers in need areas;
5. Collaborating with teacher preparation programs to ensure culturally sensitive teacher education curriculum;
6. Providing support services for candidates; and
7. Providing support services for completers.

## Identify funding, resources, and policies to support the districts and future teachers

1. Provide clear communication regarding the procedures and funding available to assist and track a teacher pathway at the federal, state, regional, and district levels.
2. Continue to support alternative routes programs.
3. Fully fund the Paraeducator Certificate Program.
4. Adopt school board policies and internal policy guidance that includes:
  - a. Placement policies for paraeducators in alignment with their education pathway goals;
  - b. Collective bargaining agreements for career ladder funding to support paraeducators; and
  - c. School board policies regarding equity and accountability of alternative route programs.
5. Propose state policy for residency that supports paraeducators development through allowing student teaching to take place while paraeducators act in their existing role. Currently, district practices vary across the state with some paraeducators having to resign their current role in order to do field placement to become a teacher.

## Conclusion

This report responds to a legislative request to provide recommendations on the following:

- Reducing barriers faced by school districts and ESDs who are using paraeducators on limited teaching certificates in teacher roles; and
- Supporting paraeducators to become fully certificated teachers.

The Paraeducator Board finds that the barriers of school districts and ESDs to use paraeducators in a teacher role via limited certificates to be quite minimal. Districts and ESDs have flexibility in their ability to request these types of certificates when necessary. The data shows that paraeducators are holding limited certificates at an increasing rate.

For the second prompt, the barriers to the teaching profession for paraeducators are much higher, and require more extended support from the district and state. The recommendations listed in the previous section provide many approaches to addressing these barriers. However, to focus on four, the Paraeducator Board recommends the following:

- 1. Increase financial support to paraeducators who seek to become teachers (both education and living wage while studying).**
- 2. Remove or ease testing barriers to paraeducators, which includes cost, language requirements, and access.**
- 3. Establish relevant and continued mentorship for paraeducators while employed as a paraeducator, during teacher preparation, and during the first three years of employment as a teacher.**
- 4. Communicate to paraeducators directly and consistently regarding the different methods to become a teacher, how to meet the requirements, and support their initiatives to become a teacher. The responsibility of communication falls on the building, the district, the region, the state, and state agencies.**

Paraeducators are a great asset to bridge the growing teacher shortage in Washington, but to do so will require continued and long-lasting support.

# Paraeducator Board

## Mission

Leveraging educator voice through policy innovation, removing barriers, creating equitable access to opportunities, and fostering professional standards that prioritize advancement for each and every student.

## Vision

Foster reflective educators who intentionally respond to the unique needs of each and every student and empower them to be engaged community members.

## Contact us

Please contact us at [paraboard@k12.wa.us](mailto:paraboard@k12.wa.us) for questions about this report.

## Appendix: data caveats and methodologies

### Figure 1

**Data ID:** 45

**Caveats:** Includes only certificated teachers hired in S-275 Personnel Report duty codes 31, 32, 33, 34.17 Data has been reviewed by internal PESB committee.

**Source:** S-275 Personnel Report

### Figures 2, 3, and 4

**Data ID:** 230

**Caveats:** Educators may hold multiple types of certificates concurrently, so counts are distinct only to the certificate type and should not be added together because this will produce a duplicate count. The total count of paraeducators with any valid limited certificate is provided for this purpose. That count is unduplicated. Limited certificates may have a variety of validity periods, and totals should not be added together across years as this will produce a duplicated headcount. 2018-2019 data is preliminary SAFS data. Data has been reviewed by internal PESB process. Data does not account for limited certificate use, and the paraeducator may be performing no duties requiring the limited certificate.

**Source:** eCert, SAFS