

Teacher Education and Special Education Policy Brief

Turnover Patterns in the Paraeducator Workforce in Washington State

Lindsey Kaler and Roddy Theobald

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS

Paraeducators are an essential and growing part of the special education workforce, but concerningly, research indicates that paraeducators leave the workforce at higher rates than special educators. Not much is known about the demographic and professional profiles of paraeducators who leave the workforce, nor patterns that make turnover more or less likely. Such patterns have key implications for attracting and retaining a stable and diverse workforce.

Using 10 years of administrative staffing data from Washington state, we find:

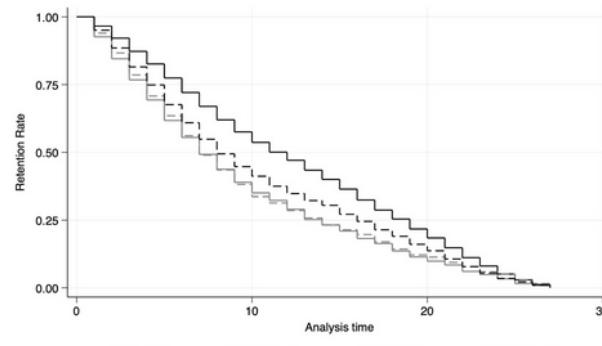
- Men who enter as paraeducators are more likely to exit the workforce than women
- BIPOC staff who enter as paraeducators are more likely to exit than White staff
- Salary can be a protective factor against paraeducator attrition

KEY ISSUE

The key issue in this study is to inform future policy efforts to improve the stability, diversity, and effectiveness of the paraeducator workforce. In particular, we explore:

- When are paraeducators most likely to leave their positions?
- What makes a paraeducator more or less likely to leave the workforce?

Figure 3. Kaplan-Meier Survival Estimates for Paraeducators by Race and Gender



Note. Kaplan-Meier curves are estimated for individuals who enter the workforce as paraeducators. "Survival" in this analysis is retention in the workforce (including in a different role or school than originally assigned), while "failure" is the first instance of an employee's exit from the workforce. While individuals may re-enter after their initial exit, this analysis focuses on an individual's first instance of attrition. Estimates are unweighted.

DATA & FINDINGS

We use longitudinal staffing data from Washington State, the S-275, to follow paraeducators from their initial placements through their tenure in the state's public school workforce. We find (see Figure 3 above):

- Entering paraeducators are most likely to leave within the first 5 years of entering
- By 10 years, over 50% of BIPOC paraeducators and White male paraeducators have exited the workforce, while less than 50% of White female paraeducators exited over the same time period

A subsequent regression analysis also shows that salary is a more salient factor in predicting paraeducator turnover than race or gender.



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POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis has key implications for policymakers seeking to improve the stability, diversity, and effectiveness of the paraeducator workforce. In particular, the findings from this paper suggest the following policy recommendations:

- Focus on paraeducator retention in early years and retention of BIPOC paraeducators, especially males. Teacher-student race match has positive impacts on student outcomes (e.g., Dee, 2004; Hart & Lindsay, 2004). It is important to consider the implications of high rates of male paraeducator turnover, particularly among BIPOC males, on male and BIPOC students.
- Implement policies to improve salary and benefits for paraeducators. For example, Connecticut has recently dedicated \$10 million to supplement healthcare costs for over 7,300 paraeducators across the state.

CITATION

Kaler, L. & Theobald, R. (2026). Turnover patterns in the paraeducator workforce in Washington. *Teacher Education and Special Education*.

REFERENCES

Dee T. (2004). Teachers, race, and student achievement in a randomized experiment. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86(1), 195–210.

Lindsay C. A., & Hart C. M. D. (2017). Exposure to same-race teachers and student disciplinary outcomes for Black students in North Carolina. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(3), 485–510.

ADDITIONAL READING

Bisht, B., LeClair, Z., Loeb, S., & Sun, M. (2021). Paraeducators: Growth, diversity and a dearth of professional supports (EdWorkingPaper No. 21-490). Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Laski, M. E. (2024). Teachers in Our Midst: Using Experienced School Staff to Solve Teacher Shortages. EdWorkingPaper No. 24-965. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Theobald, R., Kaler, L., Bettini, E., & Jones, N. (2025). A descriptive portrait of the paraeducator workforce in Washington state. *Exceptional Children*.

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