

CLASSROOM DILEMMA

New rules give most teaching aides a tough choice: Go back to school, pass an assessment test or quit

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By Matthew Brown

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For 16 years Terri Prough has worked as a teacher's aide. She is paid \$11,887 a year to help special education and regular students navigate their way through school.

If students at East St. John High School in St. John the Baptist Parish start to stumble in class, Prough, 54, will draw up flash cards to jog their memories. When first-year teachers are at their wits' end, they sometimes tap the classroom veteran for tips on the vagaries of instruction.

Yet with only one year of college under her belt, Prough's years of experience count for little under a new federal law.

Along with thousands of other aides in Louisiana and as many as a quarter million nationwide, her resume no longer measures up to new standards set by a sweeping federal education reform initiative known as No Child Left Behind.

Aides who fall short of the qualifications benchmark -- a minimum of two years of college -- face a pressing choice. They can go back to school for those two years, pass a lengthy assessment test, or get out of education altogether within the next three years.

Supporters of the higher standards say what will emerge in the future will be a crop of aides far better prepared to assist students, particularly in low-income communities such as St. John the Baptist Parish, where 75 percent of students qualify for subsidized meals and more than 20 percent of pupils are grouped into special education classes.

"The goal is to get more qualified people working with our kids," said state Assistant Superintendent Carol Whelan. "I'm not saying they're not doing a good job. But they could do a better job if they were more qualified."

Prough sees the new mandates differently.

"It's an insult, it really is," Prough said. "We have teachers that come to us for advice, and now they tell us we have to go to school. I don't care if I went to school for six years, I would not know any more than I know right now as far as handling the kids."

College training a must

A central tenet of No Child Left Behind, signed into law by President Bush in January, was to ensure that every school employee who interacts with students has college-level training.

Teacher's aides -- or "paraprofessionals," as they are referred to in the act -- are no exception if they work in schools receiving federal money directed toward low-income communities. More than half of Louisiana's schools receive such money.

Requests to soften or delay the new rules have been rejected by federal officials. The deadline for compliance is Jan. 8, 2006.

There is no grandfather clause for longtime aides, and state and federal education officials said they believe few already have the necessary college experience. Whelan said no precise figures have been gathered: "We would be making up numbers."

The law's aggressive implementation has led teachers unions, aides and the teachers they assist to worry that many aides may simply quit their jobs rather than meet the new standards.

Previous to the new federal rules, most districts required aides only to have a high school diploma and in some cases to pass a basic skills test -- covering reading, writing and math -- at a 10th-grade level or higher.

The assessment test could offer many aides a simpler way to meet the requirements than college credits, though Whelan said many aides still would likely need some sort of course work to prepare for the test.

First the test has to be finalized, which state officials do not expect to happen until sometime next year.

"They have options," Whelan said. "They're panicking because this is the first time any rules have come down from the federal level that impacts them."

Heavy reliance on aides

If such concerns cause an exodus of aides, it could prove disastrous for school systems that rely on them to keep standardized test scores high. Jefferson Parish schools, for instance, have more than 1,000 aides to back up about 4,000 faculty members. In St. John, Prough is one of 109 aides. Orleans Parish has more than 700 aides.

Their vast numbers aside, most of the time the aides stay in the background, plugging gaps in instruction not apparent from outside a school system.

"We're the silent people," said Iona Holloway, a 29-year veteran teacher's aide in St. John. "We have staying power. We live in this community, we work in this community and we vote in this community. We are this community."

Economic incentives to stay on the job are minimal.

Louisiana's 10,849 instructional aides make on average \$12,921 a year, according to state Department of Education statistics. In St. John the Baptist Parish, Prough would hit her salary ceiling after 35 years on the job making a little more than \$15,000 annually.

What keeps the aides going, according to Prough, Holloway and others, is their love for the work - the intangible rewards that come from seeing a struggling student grasp a complex concept. Many aides also perform specialized tasks for disabled students, down to hand-feeding and delivering medication.

Still, if they have to go back to school, several aides said, they expect a return on their investment: higher pay.

"I don't mind taking a test or going to school," Holloway said. "That's not our gripe. Our gripe is that we've been doing this for 30 years and you just now want to ask us if we're finally qualified and you're still not offering us more resources."

Holloway is backed by the National Education Association, the country's largest school union, which counts 158,000 teacher's aides among its members, said Reg Weaver, the organization's president.

"To force them to have to go back to school to get training on their own time and on their own dime is extremely challenging," Weaver said. "With a little tweaking of the law, these things can be corrected."

Changes unlikely

Any major changes would need to go through the legislative process, an unlikely prospect for now, said Jim Manley, press secretary for Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., one of the prime architects of the No Child Left Behind Act.

"I see no enthusiasm for that. There's not very many Democrats or Republicans who would be interested in reopening the bill," Manley said. "There's probably a time in the future . . . but now is not it."

And in the interim, the new qualification standards have to be met.

On Nov. 22, higher education officials from across Louisiana convened in Baton Rouge in hopes of crafting a new framework of courses and programs aimed at teacher's aides. One of the biggest hurdles the group faced, according to participants, was the amount of time aides would have to invest to get a degree. Holding down a full-time job while cramming in two years of college will doubtless prove difficult for many aides, they said.

Another option is to craft courses that cover topics that might appear on the assessment test that aides could take to opt out of the college requirement.

Until the test is finalized by state officials, however, preparing for it will remain an elusive task.

"The test is an unknown quantity right now," said Janet Williams, associate dean at the University of New Orleans College of Education and a participant in last week's conference.

Footing the bill

Left unaddressed at the Baton Rouge conference was who will pay for the course work.

Schools are allowed to dip into their federal grant money to cover tuition, up to a maximum of 10 percent of the amount they receive. Whelan, the assistant superintendent with the state

Department of Education, said that approach might end up "robbing Peter to pay Paul," since the grants otherwise go toward student programs.

Money also is an issue in Jefferson Parish, where Principal Gary Barras of John Ehret High School hopes to enroll many of his aides in a continuing education program run in cooperation with community colleges.

Setting up the program, Barras said, will be straightforward. Paying for the classes might not be.

"I don't think anybody's looked into how this is going to be paid for," he said. "These are certainly not high-paying jobs. If you want to keep on as a teacher's assistant and you can't pay out of your own pocket, you're going to have to find a loan or grant to cover the tuition."

Some aides, such as St. John's Holloway, say they do plan to attend college -- but not just to keep their current jobs.

Holloway is banking that she can get her associate's degree and parlay that toward a full-fledged teaching certificate -- worth almost \$20,000 more annually than she makes as an aide.

She also would qualify for a tuition reimbursement program under which the state pays tuition costs for recipients of teaching certificates.

Whelan said that could prove a silver lining, bolstering the ranks of the state's educators in the long term.

"We're going to have a shortage of teachers and maybe this will help that," she said. "It might mean relooking at the whole educational structure -- what works, what doesn't."

Prough, the East St. John aide, has decided that the new system will not work, at least for her.

"I'm not going to school for two years," she said. "When I have to resign, on Jan. 8, 2006, I will be 59 years old . . . They're going to lose a darned good employee."

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