

California's Approach to Training Early Intervention Assistants

Over the past decade, early intervention staffing strategies across the country began to change in response to the federal policy detailed in Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It emphasized serving infants and toddlers with special needs in more “natural environments” that incorporate the family’s usual routines and settings when possible. The shift has had a dramatic impact on the necessary skills and scope of duties of those who care for these young children with special needs. Providing services in home and community settings not only requires a highly skilled workforce but also necessitates that one work more independently. In response to staffing shortages and the expanded skills needed to work in natural environments, many states are developing job descriptions and training models that now incorporate early intervention assistants as part of the cadre of personnel that serve infants and toddlers with special needs.

While federal policy provides some guidance on the role of BA-prepared professionals or Early Interventionists who serve these children, the rules are less specific about paraprofessionals and Early Intervention (EI) assistants who work in the system.¹ Analysts anticipate greater demand for properly trained individuals who are fully prepared *before* entering the workforce to engage more independently with this special population. A new report² prepared by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd, reviewed websites detailing states’ early intervention personnel models and national centers charged with providing early intervention personnel preparation assistance. Interviews with Part C lead agencies in four western states were conducted to provide a detailed look at their use of EI assistants.

The new REL West report focuses on California’s approach to the training of early intervention assistants through a program launched in 1998 called the Community College Personnel Preparation Project (CCPPP). The study examines the program over an eight-year period. California is unique among western region states in developing a program that can prepare and certify EI assistants through existing Associate of Arts child development programs in the state’s community college system.

What is the CCPPP and how successfully did participating colleges implement it?

In 1998, California’s Part C lead agency, the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), launched CCPPP to help build an infrastructure for providing high-quality preservice education through the state’s community colleges and a curriculum that integrated the recommended competencies for EI assistants into the curriculum of the AA degree (or equivalent) in child development or related fields. Colleges were given mentorship and training to assist them in incorporating the EI assistant competencies into existing coursework at each college and to develop new coursework if necessary. Colleges that successfully completed the project were able to award the Chancellor’s Certificate for Early Intervention Assistants to their graduates. This certificate alerted employers that the graduate had preservice training in all recommended EI assistant competencies. Each college working towards the Chancellor’s certificate obtained multiple levels of administrative approval, including the college dean and a college-level certificate prior to applying for the Chancellor’s-level certificate. Only programs that offer the Chancellor’s certificate can be said to meet *all* the state-recommended competencies for EI assistants at the pre-service level.

Forty of California's 109 community colleges enrolled in the program between 1998 to 2006. The community college participants represent all of the state's geographic regions, including urban, rural, inner city, and suburban environments. Among the CCPPP participation requirements, enrolled colleges had to:

- » Select a faculty liaison responsible for coordinating the new certificate process;
- » Develop new EI electives and infuse existing curriculum with EI competencies;
- » Train faculty to prepare students to work with infants and toddlers with special needs;
- » Develop articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities;
- » Create an advisory board of community partners; and
- » Document project activities and submit project outcomes.

Participating colleges generally spent two to four years developing and implementing new coursework to meet CCPPP requirements, and they were paid a stipend of \$3,000–\$7,000 per academic year to support participation activities. Average total stipends for colleges that complete the program was \$20,000. Of the original 40 participating colleges, 15 completed all the CCPPP requirements for awarding the Chancellor's certificate to graduates. Eleven dropped out, seven are still working meeting all requirements, and seven others satisfied requirements for a college-level EI certificate, not the state-awarded Chancellor's certificate.

Strategies, Outcomes, and Challenges

Colleges' approach to implementation varied in ways that impacted the project outcomes. Most colleges had to find ways to seek faculty and training venues specifically for the CCPPP project. Those colleges that met all CCPPP requirements were more likely to have incorporated field experiences specifically with infants and toddlers with special needs, a faculty liaison with EI background, training venues specific to the needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities, services for infants and toddlers with disabilities in on-campus care, and program advisory committee members with an EI background. The study also examined

challenges and response strategies of all 40 participating colleges, during the study's eight-year time frame. All colleges mentioned these challenges: Inadequate institutional support and commitment; a need for faculty professional development and training in EI; and difficulty finding relevant fieldwork opportunities for students (noted by 24 participating colleges), with access to field sites that trained EI assistants in the home, a particular challenge.

Response strategies that colleges used included: Developing a streamlined administrative template for use by administrators, college liaisons, and mentors; utilizing liaison teams instead of an individual faculty liaison; collaborating to share problem-solving strategies (a dozen of the 40 colleges were paired at some stage of project implementation to do this); and sharing advisory committees and board members, as in the case of six San Francisco Bay Area colleges that formed a consortium of community partners to serve as a common advisory board.

All 40 colleges noted that faculty needed additional professional development that covered training in basic concepts of EI; methods to teach and infuse these concepts into existing course content; as well as how to supervise students at practice sites. Response strategies included: Partnering with EI experts; using media resources for faculty training and EI coursework; collaborating with other colleges; and hiring faculty with EI expertise.

Response strategies to increase the number of EI sites needed for fieldwork included: Partnering with state and community agencies; and offering on-campus EI service. Contracting to serve young children at childcare facilities or college-affiliated sites gave eight colleges the chance to offer EI fieldwork in locations convenient to both students and faculty. All of these eight colleges completed the CCPPP requirements.

1 Recently proposed changes to IDEA, Part C would require every state to devise "a comprehensive system of personnel development that addresses the training of paraprofessionals" or Early Intervention Assistants (EIAs) as they are called in some states.

2 Kellegrew, D., Pacifico-Banta, J., & Stewart, K. (2008). *Training Early Intervention Assistants in California's Community Colleges* (Issues and Answers Report, REL2008-No. 060). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

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