

Educational Assistants

[1973, revised 1985, 1993, 2003, 2013]

Growth of Noncertificated School Staff

By 1970 a number of circumstances had combined to put pressure on boards to increase the number of educational assistants and extend their functions in the schools.

Financial pressures encouraged boards to provide clerical and special services in a manner thought to reduce inefficiencies. Why pay higher-salaried teachers to take attendance, keep records of book rentals and issue audiovisual equipment? These duties could be assigned to other, less costly personnel.

The new financial avenue of federal Local Initiatives Program grants and the general public attitude toward education expenses also reflected a political force. Boards became concerned about threats to sources of funding such as the growing resistance of taxpayers to increases in property taxes. If parents could be encouraged to become more involved in the schools through voluntary and other money-saving programs, then the chances of boards for re-election and budget approval would improve. The hue and cry for accountability in education could be answered at least partially by a proliferation of volunteer projects, which would also give parents a task to do. This reinforces the view of the classroom as a worksite and helps the parent appreciate the overall complexity of the teaching process. Involved parents usually will be supportive of the school program.

There was also a social pressure for increased use of educational assistants. In a time of increasing leisure, volunteer tasks become significant as a means of releasing energy and achieving self-fulfillment. At precisely the time when the general population is becoming better educated, the number of satisfying jobs being developed is not keeping pace with the demand. Many citizens feel the need to give help in socially acceptable projects; volunteer social projects are a means for an individual's participation in society.

These economic, political and social forces combined to encourage boards to extend the possibilities for using noncertificated volunteer and paid personnel in the schools. Boards hired not only secretaries but media technicians, business managers, library technicians, coaches and tutors. Volunteer tutors and supervisors were also added to the list in increasing numbers. Although staffing the school with more adults was intended to alleviate problems, the resulting push in educational assistants staffing brought with it its own host of complex problems.

What Kind of Assistants Do Teachers Want?

We should not misinterpret the fact that teachers themselves have asked for the provision of special services (technical, clerical, supervisory) that teachers find themselves unable to perform in the available time without sacrificing the teaching role. Teachers did not seek to have their teaching duties taken over by "junior instructors." Teachers believe that every student is entitled to instruction from a highly qualified teacher.

While economic, political and social pressures and the desire of teachers to render better service in the teaching of students combined to produce an extensive and desirable use of educational assistants, some boards have used assistants in ways beyond those that teachers intended or can ethically accept. For instance, teachers did not expect assistants to interfere in teacher-student interchanges nor to act as another adult standing between the teacher and the student.

In at least two significant areas, assistants are undertaking work that should be performed by teachers: library and remedial services. When the situation called for teacher-librarians, some boards responded by supplying library technicians. In many cases, boards replaced teacher-librarians with library technicians. It was argued that, in the absence of financial provision for a teacher-librarian, a library technician was preferable to no library resource person at all. We must remember, though, that the library technician is not qualified to perform the same functions and cannot assume the responsibility of the teacher-librarian.

In the case of remedial services, when teachers requested the help of specialists to provide help for students who need highly skilled assistance with special learning difficulties, some boards responded by assigning educational assistants. This did not resolve the problem: the child did not receive the needed services and, because the teacher cannot allow an unqualified person to perform professional tasks, the teacher experienced no reduction in workload. In some circumstances, teachers have experienced an increase in work responsibilities because the teacher coordinates the work of assistants with students in the teacher's care.

Defining Teaching Tasks

Part of the complexity of the educational assistants issue involves the nature of the teaching task. Before the advent of so many noncertificated adults in the schools, it was fairly easy to define teaching tasks as ". . . All those professional tasks encountered by teachers in the course of their activities concerned with the instruction of pupils. Included would be the actual conducting of classes and presenting of lessons, the preparation of lessons, requisitioning of audiovisual and other materials and equipment, evaluation of student progress and maintenance of such classroom order as is necessary to promote a healthy learning climate. Implied, as well, is a teacher's duty to carry out such general pupil supervision as is required by law, by regulation or by agreement, to assist to a reasonable extent with the extracurricular or cocurricular program agreed to by the staff, to cooperate with other teachers in the best interests of students and, generally, to act as an enthusiastic member of the school's educational team." (Source: *Teachers' Rights, Responsibilities and Legal Liabilities*, ATA 1978, 11)

Educational assistants make it possible to transfer the execution of some of these duties from the teacher and, although the responsibility may be retained, the teacher does not in all cases perform the tasks; instead, an assistant responsible to the teacher performs them. The fact that some duties have been taken over by educational assistants has contributed to role confusion in the mind of the public and, even among assistants and some teachers, many wonder what the duties of the teacher are and how the teacher is really different from the volunteer or paid assistant.

What a teacher does

Teachers are hired to perform professional service in certain areas regarded as teaching areas, with teaching defined as in Association policy and by statute. Most teaching activities involve the pupil directly with the teacher whether through lecture, leadership of classroom activity, direction of small groups or one-to-one contact. In addition there is much pre- and postclass activity on curriculum development and adaptation, evaluation and teaching strategies.

Core of the professional task

Without denying such aspects as motivating students, supervision, curriculum development and management of classroom resources, four aspects of the teaching function should be stressed: diagnosis of students' learning needs, prescription for those needs, implementing educational program, and evaluation of student, program and self. These four areas are the core of the professional task. The teacher is not only totally responsible for these activities but also, in large measure, must execute them. These tasks are defined by statute.

In order to acquire the information for making decisions about a student's educational well-being, a teacher must interact extensively with the student so that in no case could a teacher allow extensive instruction to be done by others such as assistants or even other teachers and still retain an ethical authority for making decisions about the student's well-being. Counsellors do not recommend for clients whom they do not interview; doctors do not prescribe for patients whom they have not examined. Neither can a teacher passively accept responsibility for students the teacher has not taught.

The intent of any modification in staff utilization must be the ultimate improvement of the educational program to the benefit of the student. The focal value of formal education is based on the quality of the direct interaction of teacher and students. Any innovation that serves to remove the teacher further from this direct interaction with the students inevitably leads to the debasement of the quality of education.

Delegating Tasks to Assistants

At all times the teacher is responsible for the educational program and must perform the professional duties associated with that program. Nonprofessional tasks may be delegated to assistants and an assistant might at times perform a demonstration role, comment on slides or talk to students about some topic in which the assistant has special knowledge. That is, the assistant might at times take a role in the instructional component of education. But the assistant would do so under the direction of and in conjunction with the teacher in the same way as a teacher brings in a guest speaker from the community. The assistant would not diagnose, prescribe or evaluate with regard to the students, because these are teaching tasks defined by statute. And a teacher utilizing an assistant for the instructional component must be mindful of the teacher's need for a database for diagnosis, prescription and evaluation. The teacher must, in order to achieve the interaction with students necessary for getting the data for proper educational decisions, carry out the major share of instruction in person.

Assistants may play roles in other aspects of the teaching function. Both paid and volunteer assistants can assist in motivating students. Assistants employed as instructional assistants, although capable of performing occasional instruction as described above, could find their primary duty in assisting to develop curriculum materials, especially when making learning packages for individualized instruction. Such assistants will have a specific area of expertise. There is also a role for assistants in supervision, but this role seems limited by legal liability requirements to maintain the standard of care of a certificated teacher employed as a teacher. Assistants can assist in management of classroom and school resources of all types including texts, library materials and audiovisual equipment.

In all cases the role of assistants should be to assist the quality of teacher-student interaction by removing clerical, technical and supervisory barriers to this interaction. If assistants fulfill this role, the teacher is released for more contact with colleagues, parents and students (individually and in small groups), thereby improving the amount and quality of teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-parent and teacher-to-student interaction.