



Training early intervention assistants in California's community colleges



Institute of Education Sciences
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

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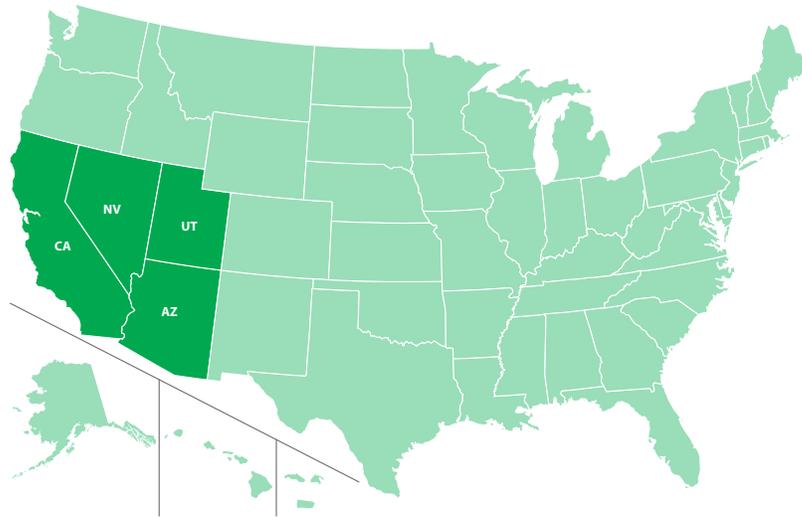
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Training early intervention assistants in California's community colleges

This study examines California's efforts to foster preservice preparation of early intervention assistants for infants and toddlers with special needs through the Community College Personnel Preparation Project, a certificate program offered by participating community colleges. The study finds that colleges could develop preservice training programs for early intervention assistants that meet requirements such as those for awarding a Chancellor's certificate, although not all participating colleges were successful, despite receiving state funding for startup expenses.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 requires that services for infants and toddlers with special needs take place primarily in natural environments, such as home or community settings. Partly as a result of the 1997 reauthorization of the act, the shift to early intervention in natural environments has had a dramatic impact on the necessary skills and scope of duties of early intervention assistants. Under the supervision of specialists with a bachelor's or a master's degree early intervention assistants must be available to independently visit the ever-changing dynamic family setting and carry out a prescribed intervention plan. These assistants are also required to work without the

line-of-sight supervision common in center-based programs.

One avenue to create and increase a qualified workforce is to focus on the preservice education of early intervention assistants. A review of state initiatives indicates that many states are actively developing more complete descriptions and training models for early intervention personnel, including early intervention assistants, but only about half have a credential specific to this work or are developing one. This study examined California's efforts to foster preservice preparation of early intervention assistants through a certificate program offered by community colleges, the Community College Personnel Preparation Project. The project is funded by the California IDEA Part C lead agency, the Department of Developmental Services. California's project is unique in the Regional Educational Laboratory West states and can provide information to other West Region states grappling with similar issues.

Community colleges enrolled in the project must meet a series of requirements, including infusing early intervention assistant competencies into coursework, adding early intervention field experiences, and drawing on the experience of community partners and advisory committee members. Graduates

of colleges that meet all requirements are awarded the Chancellor's Certificate for Early Intervention Assistants, a state-level certificate awarded by the Chancellor's Office for California Community Colleges. This study examined data from the inception of the project in 1998 through 2006. Forty community colleges participated during this time, representing 37 percent of the community colleges in the state. Data were gathered from the quarterly reports required of the participating colleges, faculty mentor monthly reports, and administrative annual reports. More than 2,000 documents were included in the qualitative and quantitative analysis. Four research questions were explored:

1. What is the California Community College Personnel Preparation Project, and how does it work?
2. How did community colleges seeking to award a Chancellor's Certificate for Early Intervention Assistants implement the Community College Personnel Preparation Project? In particular, how did the colleges develop faculty, coursework, field experiences, and an advisory board?
3. How did the Community College Personnel Preparation Project implementation differ for colleges that completed all requirements to award the Chancellor's certificate and for those that completed only the requirements for a college-level certificate or that dropped out of the project?
4. What challenges and response strategies did community colleges report in imple-

menting the Chancellor's Certificate for Early Intervention Assistants?

This study found that colleges could develop preservice training programs for early intervention assistants that meet requirements such as those for awarding a Chancellor's certificate, although not all colleges that participated in the project were successful despite receiving state funding for startup expenses. Of the 40 colleges that originally enrolled in the project, 15 completed all requirements for awarding the Chancellor's certificate, 7 completed only the first step (awarding a college-level certificate), and 11 dropped out. These 33 colleges were examined to compare colleges that completed the program with those that did not. In addition, 7 colleges are still working on meeting all requirements. A qualitative examination detailed the challenges and response strategies of all 40 colleges.

Participating colleges implemented many common features, though not all took the same approach. In most colleges the project liaison was a full-time faculty member with a background in general child development or education rather than a specialist in early intervention or special education. A majority of colleges offered faculty training in early intervention or in other special education topics, while the other colleges trained in general child development or education topics. Rather than develop new courses, three-quarters of the colleges modified existing courses to incorporate early intervention topics. A majority of colleges provided field experiences for their students, but only 30 percent of colleges held them in early intervention sites. Close to two-thirds of colleges had community partners and advisors who worked in the early intervention

field, and nearly three-quarters of colleges included employers of early intervention personnel on their advisory committees.

Some of the approaches colleges took to meet the project requirements differed by project outcome. Completion of the Chancellor's certificate requirements was associated with program implementation that focused specifically on early intervention services for infants and toddlers, even in program components where that focus was not required. Unlike colleges that dropped out or that met only the curriculum requirements to award a college certificate, colleges that met all of the requirements to award the Chancellor's certificate were more likely to have early intervention field experiences, a faculty liaison with an early intervention background, specific early intervention training for their faculty, services for infants and toddlers with disabilities as part of on-campus child care centers, and program advisory committees that included at least one member with an early intervention background.

More states are now defining the role of early intervention assistants (some states officially

refer to these aides as paraprofessionals) and identifying training for them. In addition, recently proposed changes to federal regulations for IDEA Part C would require every state to add paraprofessional training to their "comprehensive system of personnel development" for those serving the youngest children with disabilities: infants and toddlers from birth to age three.¹

The study provides an overview of data on the evolving national picture and the West Region states. Specific early intervention training is valuable preparation for a workforce that can serve infants and toddlers with special needs. Those seeking to promote a cadre of early intervention assistants and paraprofessionals prepared at the community college level may find value in examining California's efforts.

Note

1. "Early intervention program for infants and toddlers with disabilities," proposed rule change, U.S. Secretary of Education, 2007, *Federal Register*, 72(89), 26455–26531.

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