



# Support personnel in schools: characteristics and importance

Support  
personnel in  
schools

Sharon Conley

*University of California, Santa Barbara, California, USA*

Jewell Gould

*American Federation of Teachers, Washington, DC, USA, and*

Harriet Levine

*University of California, Santa Barbara, California, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite the critical role of support personnel in education, the literature about their supervision has been less than informative. In an effort to provide additional guidance to school leaders seeking to improve the supervision of such personnel, the purpose of this paper is to examine and compare three distinct groups of support personnel: school custodians/janitors, school secretaries, and paraprofessionals in special education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper begins with two analyses. One is that of the general importance of the role of support personnel in public schools in the USA. The other consists of a brief argument as to why the literature about the supervision of support personnel has not been overly informative. The paper proceeds with descriptions of three distinct support personnel groups.

**Findings** – The examination of three support personnel groups highlights the visibility of the school custodian/janitor, the multi-dimensional responsibilities of the school secretary, and the background of the paraprofessional in special education.

**Research limitations/implications** – A comparison of three distinct groups of support personnel has implications for their training, compensation and scheduling, and work design and supervision.

**Originality/value** – The paper content offers an information-rich and multi-faceted view of support personnel in schools, with implications for their overall supervision and the importance of their contribution to the organization.

**Keywords** Schools, Employees, Local management of schools, Work design, United States of America

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

Currently referred to as “support personnel” is the group of employees traditionally known as classified or non-certificated personnel. This group is composed of school secretaries, food service workers, custodial and maintenance workers, instructional aides, transportation workers, and central office administrative support staff, among others. The group comprises close to one third of the full-time staff of US public schools, commanding a significant proportion of school district expenses.

This article begins with two brief analyses. One is that of the general importance of the role of support personnel in education. The other consists of a brief argument as to why the literature about the supervision of support personnel has not been overly



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informative. One of the main reasons involves the need for different considerations for different groups of employees.

The article proceeds with descriptions and examinations of three distinct support personnel groups, each possessing unique characteristics of its own:

- (1) school custodians;
- (2) school secretaries; and
- (3) paraprofessionals in special education.

School custodians, also known as janitors and cleaners, are charged with maintaining school buildings and school grounds (> Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008/2009). Broadly defined, their responsibilities range from cleaning, to maintaining and repairing equipment, to preparing and securing school buildings. School secretaries perform and coordinate administrative activities for the school office, as well as store, retrieve, and integrate information for reporting and dissemination (> Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008/2009). Paraprofessionals generally include the many employees who provide a host of assistance to professional educators in schools. Paid instructional aides or paraeducators in classrooms represent a fairly recent phenomenon. This article focuses only on the largest category of US paraprofessionals, those whose primary area of instructional responsibility is in special education. Unlike janitors and secretaries, special education paraprofessionals' positions were created in the USA so schools could meet federal laws for educating children with special needs. Each of three separate sections of this article includes literature summaries of the history of each role, the specific tasks within each role, and relationships that each role has with other roles.

The third section of the article provides a comparison of the three support personnel groups. Particularly highlighted in this regard are the visibility of the school custodian, the multi-dimensional responsibilities of the school secretary, and the background of the paraprofessional in special education. The section also deals with implications of the above for those who serve as supervisors of each of the support personnel positions in regards to training, compensation review and work scheduling, and issues related to the supervisory work and responsibilities themselves.

### **Perceived value and role of support personnel**

In the context of the current accountability movement, with its emphasis on student instruction and high-stakes testing, a primary focus of school improvement has been placed on teachers and their professional development as a way to increase academic performance. Although the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (US Department of Education, 2002) mentions the training of classroom paraprofessionals, the roles of support personnel and their contributions with regards to school functioning and potential improvement opportunities appear to have been overlooked. Their omission from much policy legislation and education literature might contribute to contradictory views within school districts and from one district to another regarding the role expectations and perceived value of such personnel. For example, one district undergoing accountability-based reform allocated "almost unlimited resources" for professional development but "cut back on maintenance, food service, and secretarial staffing to fund" such development (Odden *et al.*, 2006, p. 12). The role of support personnel was enhanced, however, when the district utilized paraprofessionals by

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“treating and training them like teachers and giving them the same level of professional development” (Odden *et al.*, 2006, p. 12).

Indeed, according to Webb and Norton (1999), most discussions of the management of human resources in school systems have focused on certificated personnel who “teach, supervise, counsel, or administer” (p. 454). They noted that this attention appears justified, given that certificated personnel such as teachers constitute the “majority of people in a school system” and their salaries a large proportion of the school district budget (p. 454). Nevertheless:

... a very important group of employees cannot be overlooked in any consideration of the administration of human resources [...] that group of employees traditionally known as classified or noncertificated personnel, and more recently as *support personnel*. This group of employees makes up 31% of the full-time staff of the public schools and is composed of such employees as secretarial and clerical personnel, instructional and library aides, transportation staff, food services employees, plant operation and maintenance workers, and health and recreational staff (Webb and Norton, 1999, p. 454, emphasis added).

Such personnel are “vital to the successful operation of the school district and to promoting a healthy, safe, and productive school environment” (Webb and Norton, p. 454).

Despite their importance, limited attention has been provided to support personnel in the educational administration literature. In particular, there appears to be a lack of a written record regarding the complexities (e.g. tasks encountered beyond formal job descriptions) entailed in their work and how their jobs and responsibilities may be changing. Knowledge of these changes would be critical for others working in school systems and especially for administrators who supervise them. Although the work of support personnel appears critical to the day-to-day functioning of schools (Webb and Norton, 1999), their limited presence in this literature appears an oversight that may make their roles appear extraneous.

As Maxwell (2004) observed, this oversight is all the more compelling because of the critical role of these personnel in the school culture. Often, the longevity of support personnel represent the history and cultural experience of those involved with the school in the past and present, as well as those who will be a part of that school in the future. Maxwell (2004) noted:

School districts, whose leaders frequently move in and out in only a short period of time, manage to survive because the schools themselves retain some coherent culture and mission. Individuals who work in these schools and have longevity, even though they may be in support staff positions like custodians and secretaries, frequently are the “glue” that holds these school communities together. Colleges of education tell first-year teachers, “Get to know the school secretary and custodian – everybody knows they really run the school.” And although this phrase is bantered by educators in general, the research literature does not tell their story – does not recognize their contribution (p. 5).

Support personnel have usually been treated in educational literature and policy discussions as part of the “task environment” (Thompson, 1967, p. 27) of the school organization. They are part of one sector of Dill’s (1958) taxonomy of this “task environment”: the “suppliers of materials, labor, capital, equipment, and workspace” (Thompson, 1967, pp. 27-8). As such, support personnel might be considered in policy and administration literatures as part of the *physical plant* of the school as opposed to

persons within the *educational core* or “central instructional” delivery function (i.e. classroom teaching of students; Meyer and Rowan, 1978, p. 83). However, a question may emerge as to whether reform goals will be furthered by treating support personnel as part of a task environment; alternatively, future conceptions might consider these personnel closer to the educational core delivery function in overall school operation.

As noted, school and district administrators are responsible for the supervision of not only certificated personnel but also support personnel. In a call for the improved supervision of teachers, Zepeda (2006) argued that a form of “high stakes” (p. 67) supervision was needed in education. Focusing primarily on the supervision of teachers, Zepeda’s (2006) analysis appears relevant to the supervision of school personnel in general. In the context of reform agendas calling for increasingly highly qualified staff, a differentiated system of teacher supervision appears necessary to meet the needs of an increasingly complex and differentiated teaching force. For example, when districts hire high-risk teachers (e.g. first year and/or alternatively certified teachers) Zepeda (2006) suggested that an “emergency supervision” (p. 65) plan would help teachers gain requisite skills and knowledge. Supervision might be differentially applied for experienced teachers and/or those at more advanced career stages, thus creating a “differentiated” system of supervision (Zepeda, 2006, p. 66).

Similarly, Collinson (2008) argued for differentiated opportunities to learn and improve for all adult members in schools. Adult members include paraprofessional, custodial, and secretarial staff (Collinson and Cook, 2007). Schools require an “environment in which members, and thereby the organization, can continuously learn and improve” (Collinson, 2008, p. 444). These observations appear consistent with an overall emphasis in the general organizations literature stressing a fit between:

- the design of work including level of autonomy exercised, skills and training needed, and supervision carried out in the work context (Hackman and Oldham, 1980); and
- the needs of individuals and groups (Bolman and Deal, 2008).

Applied to consideration of the management of support personnel, custodians, secretaries, food service workers, transportation workers, and instructional aides might all require different considerations in supervision. Adding to the complexity, support personnel encompass numerous and highly varied job categories, sometimes more than 50 in a large school district (Gould and Johnson, 2008). In an effort to provide additional guidance to school leaders seeking to improve the supervision of such personnel, we examine in this article the roles of three specific categories of school support personnel:

- (1) school custodians (also known as janitors or cleaners);
- (2) school secretaries; and
- (3) paraprofessionals in special education.

We selected these personnel owing to their visibility in the daily routines of schools; our challenge is to surface issues related to their supervision, as well as to recognize their importance.

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### A snapshot view of three job categories

#### *Custodians: visibility in schools and in society*

In US society, where status and prestige are ascribed to various occupations, “the occupational role is usually accorded greater importance in defining social status than ethnicity, religion or political ideology alone” (Ghidina, 1992, p. 73). The job of custodian, also termed janitor or cleaner, is often considered a marginalized, low-status occupation. In many workplaces, this job is performed after business hours (Hood, 1988) and sometimes outsourced to a crew specializing in cleaning and maintenance. If the janitorial or custodial workers are present during the work day, they often do their jobs silently, only interacting with other employees, clients, and customers out of necessity. To do otherwise can mean crossing an invisible social and cultural line.

The film industry has been able to cross that line. Several examples have given custodial workers another, more personal, identity. In *Million Dollar Baby* (Eastwood, 2004), a former boxing coach turned gym custodian takes on a female wannabe fighter and makes her a champion. In *Maid in Manhattan* (Wang, 2002), a hotel maid who aspires to be in management crosses the line and becomes involved with a guest running for political office. And in *A Class of His Own* (Munic, 1999), a school custodian is aided by students and passes a high-school equivalency exam so he can keep his job. However, these characterizations remain mostly fictional in most work sites.

Although a job analysis is beyond the scope of this article (see Webb and Norton, 1999), it appears that the job of school custodian differs sharply from members of this occupational category who work in other sectors. Most custodial workers appear either hidden in the workplace as after-hours employees or silenced and instructed to have minimal interaction with others if they work during business hours. The school custodian, however, is a visible and relevant member of the school community, in part because he or she is present during the school day and at all events held at the school (Maxwell, 2004). Whereas a job description might emphasize tasks related to the maintenance and day-to-day operation of a school site, the unwritten role of the school custodian might include providing student behavioral support (Taylor-Greene *et al.*, 1997), assisting with projects (e.g. hanging student murals), assisting the health office (e.g. cleaning up when students become ill), and providing care and support for students (e.g. hanging soaked coats in the boiler room during cold spring days) (Maxwell, 2004). It is perhaps not surprising that teachers and students generally regard, support, and befriend the custodian as a key member of the school staff.

In performing a literature search, there appeared to be little educational research specifically on school custodians, although they were sometimes included in reports regarding school support staff (e.g. Griffith, 2001). There were a few articles regarding morale and identity in the school community (e.g. Ghidina, 1992). Other research has been aimed at health and safety issues, and there are dissertations that provide qualitative examinations of the work of school custodians (e.g. Maxwell, 2004).

However, the limited research literature in itself speaks to the attitudes about custodians and the beliefs regarding those who perform work that has been marginalized. Although it is generally agreed that their work is essential to the operation of the school and to students and school personnel, the nature of their work and its contributions to the overall functioning of the school remain largely unexplored. Yet, as employees who interact daily with students, teachers, administrators, and

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parents while performing their jobs, school custodians help ensure that the instructional program can take place. "School support services that are provided to students, their parents, and other school staff (e.g. teachers, school administrators) although not directly related to student learning and performance, are crucial to enabling student learning and performance" (Griffith, 2001, p. 1630).

One of the few studies specifically about the role of custodians at the school and university levels examined the personal and perceived identity of the custodian. "Social relations are often cited as a direct source of fulfillment and esteem in work [...] [as well as] the context within which work definitions are created and maintained" (Ghidina, 1992, p. 82). These social relations are often cited as a reason to stay on a job that otherwise might be mundane, demeaning, or lacking in economic incentives. "The staff, the faculty, the kids are why I decided to stay here". Another said, "The students are the only thing that keeps me going here. As far as the work itself, no" (Ghidina, 1992, p. 79).

Ghidina (1992) also addressed autonomy as an important element of job satisfaction among school custodians. The ability of custodians to affect their own schedules and direct their own work gives school custodians a feeling of freedom and of being trusted, benefits that appear less available to custodians in non-school settings. The multiple responsibilities at a school site foster a sense of ownership, including the special skills one might possess. The ability to respond to emergency situations, as well as being able to see the results of one's work enhance the feelings of value to the community (Ghidina, 1992). These observations are consistent with Hackman and Oldham's (1980) conceptions of critical job features such as knowledge of results and skill utilization that are likely to enhance work satisfaction and motivation.

Further, social relations (previously discussed, Ghidina, 1992) appear closely interwoven with the day-to-day work of the school custodian. Typically, we associate a custodian's job description with tasks related to the maintenance and upkeep of the school. However, those responsibilities often do not account for the multiple interactions a custodian might have and multiple tasks he/she might take on during the course of a work day. Among them may be dealing with unexpected safety issues resulting from broken equipment, functioning as an informal security officer, supervising children raise and lower the flag, locating lost keys, or doing numerous other jobs when someone says "Call the custodian for help!" (National Education Association, n.d.).

As members of the school community, school custodians are among the role models encountered by students on a daily basis. In some schools, their participation as staff is an integral part of the school program. In one study, school custodians were included in the implementation of a school-wide behavioral support plan in one middle school (Taylor-Greene *et al.*, 1997). Their participation involved being trained in the fundamentals of the plan, helping with orientation of students on the opening day of school, and ongoing participation in the implementation of the plan. In addition, a research brief (Walker, 2006) described a school-wide silent reading at a designated time each day involving all staff members, including the custodian.

Other research documented the impact of the day-to-day work of the school custodian, or the custodial staff of a school, on the student learning environment. A study conducted at the University of Houston Center for Public Policy (Branham, 2004) examined the effects of school infrastructure on student achievement. Using 1995-1996

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data from the Texas Performance Review and a Texas district describing 226 schools, Branham (2004) found that schools in need of roof repair, schools with a high percentage of temporary buildings, and schools with inadequate custodial staffs had lower attendance rates and/or higher dropout rates and were less able to meet high levels of student achievement.

Associated with the work of maintaining the school site are numerous health issues for school custodians. According to one estimate, six out of 100 school custodians experience an injury related to chemical exposure resulting in time lost each year from work. Of these injuries, 40 percent involve eyes and 36 percent involve skin irritation or burns. Despite many school districts employing green technologies for cleaning, a report on workplace injury documented a risk of exposure to toxic chemical fumes in the form of cleansers, disinfectant, pesticides, and other products (American Federation of Teachers, n.d.). Custodians also appear at increased risk of suffering injury as the result of heavy lifting, moving of furniture or school supplies, and/or repetitive movement.

*The school secretary: multidimensional responsibilities and computer technology*

School secretaries are perhaps the most visible support employees in an educational setting and the first employee a visitor to the school sees. Historically, the occupation's domination by females has contributed to its characterization as marginalized "women's work" (Casanova, 1991, p. 15). The imbalanced nature of women's participation in secretarial positions generally has been attributed to a failure of the labor force system "to make adjustments in the rhythm of work to accommodate those (primarily female) who face role conflict due to family responsibilities" (Casanova, 1991, p. 20). Wolcott's (1973) ethnographic study, *The Man in the Principal's Office*, observed that school secretaries' attraction to the career may not be primarily monetary but instead is often related to "attractive working hours, varied duties, and vacation periods which allow them to be home when their own school-age children are home" (p. 156).

Despite the potential for marginalization of general secretarial work (Glenn and Feldberg, 1977), the school secretary is heralded as critical to the day-to-day functioning of the school, keeping the office going, minimizing the disruptions of students who have been called to the office, and protecting the principal's time. Just as the custodian's centrality to the school makes him/her someone who others value, people (teachers, parents, and other support personnel) recognize that secretaries influence the tone and function of the school in a major way (Casanova, 1991; Wolcott, 1973).

Wolcott's (1973) study of an elementary school principal noted the school secretary was high on the list of contacts with the principal, accounting for about 4 percent of his daily interactions compared with 4 percent for *all* other "nonprofessional" staff combined (p. 92). (Teachers, individually, for example, accounted for an additional 16 percent of the interactions.) Wolcott (1973) commented on the secretary's key role in the school administration, while acknowledging its subsidiary status: "From a principal's point of view, the presence of a secretary [. . .] is vital, although the position is certainly unheralded beyond the confines of each individual building" (pp. 155-6). However, within the individual building or "official territory" of the front office (Wolcott, 1973, p. 131), the school secretary's role can have a powerful influence on the work of the

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principal. For example, Wolcott's (1973) account supported the core importance of the secretary's role: Principal Ed Bell had difficulty replacing his secretary of four years and then showing her successor things "that had just been done routinely [. . .] I knew they were being done, but I didn't realize how much time it took" (p. 157).

In an early account of school administration generally, Lawson (1953) described the office work involved in the school secretary's role as key to healthy administrative practice. The "competent office secretary" was seen as "essential" in handling the "innumerable duties" associated with the running of the school, such as entering proper memoranda in the office date book or on the daily calendar; handling appointments; systematic checking of office equipment and supplies; preparation of all routine announcements and forms; checking and distributing supplies; filing and monitoring student records; receiving visitors and answering phone calls; answering much of the office's routine correspondence; and, importantly, making minor decisions of a "more or less routine nature" in accordance with the established policy of the administration (pp. 268-9).

Currently in education, policy discussions and some educational literature suggest that the primary responsibilities of the secretary are not much altered. Meyer and Rowan (1978) did not include clerical support in the context of educational organizations, focusing primarily on the "ritual classifications" of "curriculum, students, and teachers" (p. 79). The school secretary, nonetheless, carries out additional tasks that may include the school budget, accounting, preparation of financial reports, school inventories, checking invoices, and signing vouchers (e.g. Casanova, 1991; Lawson, 1953). These functions may be subsumed into "routine" matters of school organization; however, the key responsibility Lawson (1953) historically ascribed to secretaries, making minor decisions of a more or less routine nature, appears to diminish the complexity of the secretary's place in school operation.

At each school site, the nature of what might be considered to be more or less routine in terms of the secretary's discretion will not be uniform. Decisions made under the assumption that "standard operating procedures" are in place may in fact have hidden political or resource-driven dimensions (Allison, 1971, p. 7). For example, a concealed dimension of a new computerized system for monitoring student attendance records might mean that increased pressure is being placed on clerical staff to follow up with teachers to submit attendance in a timely manner. Thus, even decisions that can appear routine may have *intentional* reflective input from staff making those decisions (Enomoto and Conley, 2007; Johnson and Fauske, 2000; Feldman, 2000).

Indeed, Wolcott's (1973) analysis suggested that the enactment of routine tasks and the application of standard procedures in the school setting are not as simple as they might appear. In Wolcott's (1973) account, for example, when the new secretary was out sick and there was no "substitute" to cover the office during the secretary's absence, Ed, the principal, "had to spend more time near the office either explaining procedures or handling them himself" (p. 158). Underscoring this observation, Casanova (1991) examined research (although scarce) that had been conducted on the school secretary[1]. Casanova's (1991) survey-based study of 297 elementary secretaries and qualitative analysis of six secretaries and their principals also illustrated the added complexity of work by pointing to the numerous interactions the secretary had with other personnel (e.g. part-time office assistants, nurses, counselors, and personnel in special programs such as bilingual and special education) and the

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multiple clientele served (e.g. students, parents, teachers, support staff, principals, district officials, and the community). Because of the special relationships secretaries may have with families, they can be expected to have knowledge about family issues and relationships (such as divided families, parent volunteers). Among clerical workers generally, Glenn and Feldberg's (1977) critique warning against the potential deskilling of clerical work also pointed to its contributions:

When clerical work cannot be performed efficiently, the [administrative] control structure it services is similarly hampered. [...] Clerical units have been described as the "arteries through which the life blood flows." Activities such as record-keeping, scheduling, and copying link the various internal departments of an organization and connect it to "other businesses and to the rest of the people". [...] These connections are essential for maintaining control of the various departments in an organization and for coordinating their activities (p. 62)[2].

Federal and state policies of the NCLB Act of 2001 (US Department of Education, 2002) have held schools responsible for meeting performance standards and eliminating achievement gaps. This development has resulted in school districts publishing annual school report cards based upon student standardized test scores. The school and its personnel are at the most immediate level of accountability. The school secretary and other clerical staff would be the designated individuals who would provide data entry, update, and monitoring. Demands for increased record keeping have been facilitated, yet also intensified, by computer technology (Enomoto and Conley, 2007). Although computers assist in meeting the growing burden of documentation, using computers and new software requires new skill sets, and the computers themselves must be networked and maintained if they are to provide proper assistance. The use of this technology is a central US reform recommendation (see, for example, Odden *et al.*, 2006), having broad implications for secretarial work that might have been accomplished in previous generations on a typewriter. Although secretaries are acknowledged as crucial to ensuring the smooth functioning of a school, their critical role and the need for increased skill sets are often overlooked in the literature, and there seems to be little research on their work, responsibilities, and importance.

#### *Special education paraprofessionals: requirements and certifications*

Instructional paraprofessionals, also referred to as paraeducators and instructional aides, are the third category of support personnel we discuss. Estimates indicate that about 312,000 paraprofessionals whose major area of instructional responsibility was in special education were working in public elementary and secondary schools in 2003-2004 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). This category constitutes the largest category of paraprofessionals. Further, "the utilization of paraprofessionals to support the education of students with disabilities" appears to have increased dramatically in the 1990s (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001, p. 45). In the research literature, there is a relative abundance of information on the role of these paraprofessionals as compared to school custodians and school secretaries.

Whereas school custodians and secretaries are typically funded through a district general fund as part of its operating costs, this is not the case with instructional aides in special education. Most references to the employment of paraprofessionals or instructional aides in the USA appeared after the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 and following the 1975 Education for All

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Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA).

In historical perspective about paraprofessionals, an important component of the War on Poverty, which followed the 1964 Civil Rights Act during the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, ESEA was to make federal funding available to improve the quality of education in school districts serving populations with a low socio-economic base. This funding was often used to hire instructional aides to assist teachers in the classroom. Schools often recruited neighborhood parents with a variety of backgrounds and experiences to fill these positions. Teachers not accustomed to having this level of assistance often utilized instructional aides as classroom clerical workers, assigning them jobs such as grading papers, making copies, and posting work on bulletin boards. A school might hire one aide to do all of the copier work, and others might be assigned to playground or lunchroom supervision. Gradually, responsibilities increased, and instructional aides became an integral part of the classroom instructional program, providing direct service to students as opposed to “clerical support and other routine duties” (Ghere and York-Barr, 2003, p. 3).

Specific to special education, with the enactment of Public Law (PL) 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, the primary use of paraprofessionals was to provide for the basic needs of their students. Some questioned the educability of children with more severe disabilities and reasoned that such work did not require skilled staff, so paraprofessionals “would suffice and be less expensive” (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001, p. 46). As special education has evolved with each reauthorization of this law, the role of instructional aides has been expanded. The Regular Education Initiative of 1986, written by Madeline Will, called for an end to the segregation of special education students in isolated classrooms and their inclusion in general education settings. As inclusion has grown to become the standard for special education, instructional aides have been utilized to provide increasing amounts of support. Although some work is directly under the supervision of a special education teacher, others are responsible for creating modifications and accommodations to implement goals stated in a student’s individual education plan (Ghere and York-Barr, 2003).

Persons employed as paraprofessionals represent a wide range of backgrounds and experience. Typically, a paraprofessional must have a high-school diploma and pass a standardized test to demonstrate competency in the basic subject areas of reading and math. He or she might be a neighborhood parent or community member recruited by the school[3]. Some of these paraprofessionals may have received teaching credentials but not yet secured a teaching job. There are reasons some with teaching credentials might not seek a full-time teaching position, such as having small children in the home or being a recent college graduate still making decisions about the future.

Like custodians and school secretaries, paraprofessionals are visible and highly involved members of the school. The focus of their work is usually students: in classrooms, on playgrounds, in the lunch room, and sometimes as a supervisor before and after school. Because many are involved in instruction, such employees might be informally considered by teachers as the person with whom they are team teaching (Valli *et al.*, 2007). In special education, the paraprofessional may be the person with

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whom a parent has the most communication. The multitude of roles of such paraprofessionals may include:

- (a) providing instruction in academic subjects, (b) teaching functional life skills, (c) teaching vocational skills at community-based work sites, (d) collecting and managing data; (e) supporting students who exhibit challenging behaviors, (f) facilitating interactions with peers who do not have disabilities, (g) providing personal care (e.g., feeding, bathroom assistance), and (h) engaging in clerical tasks (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001, p. 53).

In addition, paraprofessionals may play roles in assisting students to “avoid, or return from, more restrictive educational settings” (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001, p. 53).

Research on paraprofessionals that is specific to special education raises questions about the nature of these paraprofessionals’ work, skills, and supervision. Giangreco *et al.* (2001) asked, for example, “Are the roles and duties [paraprofessionals] are asked to perform appropriate? Are they adequately trained for their roles? Are they appropriately supervised?” (p. 47). It is at times unclear whether paraprofessionals are assisting qualified certificated personnel or, even as they work under the supervision of certificated personnel (teachers), are functioning as “primary instructors and decision makers” (p. 47). Supervision by the classroom teacher (who may regard the supervision of the paraprofessional as an added but unrecognized role[4]) might vary according to the assignment of the paraprofessional.

For example, a paraprofessional working in a resource class might work “under the close supervision and direction” of the special educator “who is present in the classroom” (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001, p. 47). By contrast, an inclusion aide working in a general education setting might experience less supervision (although a reduced level of supervision may sometimes be viewed positively by the aide). The paraprofessional might feel left to work from an intuitive level to devise ways to accommodate the special needs of the student, make in-the-moment modifications to assignments, or facilitate social interactions. In other situations, students might have an alternative curriculum that the paraprofessional is responsible for teaching, although still under the supervision of a special education teacher. These observations emphasize the complexity of aides’ roles and the need to consider them in research on school management and reform.

### **Comparison of categories and implications for supervision**

Webb and Norton (1999) noted that “only in recent years have school districts come to recognize that the term staff should include all employees – that no section of their human resources can be overlooked” (p. 475). In this article, we have presented a cross-section portrait of three groups of support personnel all identified as vital to school operation. Some of the aspects of this portrayal include:

- the visibility and special nature of custodians in schools versus custodians in general society;
- the multidimensional responsibilities of the school secretary whose roles have been reshaped by computer technology over time; and
- the special education paraprofessional who may originally have been someone who lived near the school hired to provide custodial (basic) student care and has transformed to become required to perform teacher tasks and have particular educational requirements and certifications.

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It has been suggested from our analysis that there is a tendency in the literature to describe educational organizations in a particular way, focusing on the core technology of education or classroom instruction. As referenced here, the jobs of the school custodian and secretary have been considered part of the physical plant of the school, and the aide is categorized as being closer to the educational core delivery function. However, all of these groups are frequently asked to work in capacities outside the formal set of requirements in their job descriptions. Consequently, it would appear that questions we have raised about paraprofessionals – i.e. will school districts be required to build additional capacity to provide needed training? – might apply to school custodians and secretaries as well.

According to Webb and Norton (1999), “training”, “experience”, and “skills” requirements are among those factors to be considered when determining equity, contributory worth, and compensation in the supervision of support positions (p. 466; also see Conley and Gould, 1997). Other factors include license requirements, number of employees supervised, and number and range of responsibilities assigned.

Further, school districts appear to be increasing the investment they are making in the training and development of support personnel:

More and more districts have found that the time and expense invested in development programs for support personnel are small compared to the inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and staff turnover resulting from the lack of such programs. Research has shown that staff development can result in improved morale, an increased sense of professionalism, and higher levels of job satisfaction (Webb and Norton, 1999, p. 475).

In this light, perhaps the supervision of school custodians should include special training and development programs if they work around laboratories in high schools, e.g. specialized knowledge of directives relating to the care and disposal of hazardous materials, the prevention of chemical spills, and mold abatement. Secretaries, on the other hand, might require specialized training in computer technology and large database management in order to handle employee payroll and attendance records; conduct purchasing and fiscal/budget recordkeeping; and maintain and protect student records, including student test scores, health records, and confidential student information. Secretaries might also require training in disaster plans so that they may be prepared for extraordinary situations. Further, among paraprofessionals, a formal process of orientation might include, at minimum, “roles and responsibilities” as instructional team members and “information about student goals and objectives, behavior plans, management and health concerns, and safety” (Ghere and York-Barr, 2003, p. 2; see also Giangreco *et al.*, 2001, p. 60).

The above factors are among those serving as inputs to determining equity, worth, and compensation (Webb and Norton, 1999). These factors are subject to “periodic review” of pay-grade plans, a process whereby “each position is assigned to a specific pay grade with a predetermined number of steps within the grade” (Webb and Norton, 1999, p. 467). Careful compensation review, with attention to data obtained from salary studies as well as cost of living estimates, ensures that school district employees do not “fall behind their counterparts in other agencies and business” (p. 467).

In this context, a key issue for the supervision of site-based support staff is the often part-time nature of their work and commensurate total salary and benefits. According to a report issued by a major union of US employees working in education, many on-site school personnel do not work a 52-week year (American Federation of Teachers,

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2006; Caravatti, 2008). The employment of many support personnel (including food service workers, transportation workers, and clerical staff) might be only during the school year, which often lasts approximately 38 weeks. Corresponding implications exist for the three groups examined here. Interestingly, the school custodian might be of high value throughout the year because of issues like deep cleaning and heavy maintenance, which cannot be accomplished during the school year without disrupting instruction. The work of the school secretary and special education paraprofessional, however, may be more closely aligned to the school-year calendar. The salaries of other support personnel appear to conform to the school-year calendar as well (bus drivers, food service workers, etc.)

Because compensation for support personnel may be based on a less than 52-week work year, the financial compensation of many support personnel might also need to be considered in relation to the needs of a basic family budget (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001; Webb and Norton, 1999). A case cited by an American Federation of Teachers (2006) report was school instructional aides (in general and special education). A single parent working 38 weeks a year as an instructional aide generally did not earn enough to cover the totality of a basic family budget. For example, in Visalia Tulare-Porterville in the state of California, the annual salary was \$17,918, which would be only 83 percent of a basic family budget for two people, which is estimated at \$21,590.

Such financial considerations raise questions about whether assumptions might exist about the demographics of people working as instructional aides or school secretaries (e.g. women, perhaps second income) (Giangreco *et al.*, 2001; Glenn and Feldberg, 1977). Although some employees may be attracted to work as school support personnel (e.g. instructional aide, secretarial, food service) because their schedules correspond to the school calendar of their children, they might also have to seek additional employment in the summer and evenings to make ends meet unless there is a partner or spouse able to work as well.

Another factor related to both monetary and non-monetary issues is that school organizations characteristically desiring to economize might first focus on the elimination or downsizing of support personnel. For example, school districts may consider subcontracting custodial or janitorial work. Although subcontracting might circumvent having to pay the wages and benefits of a full-time employee, it could also negate the school "involvement" effects (Collinson and Cook, 2007; Conley, 2006; Ghidina, 1992) and long-term expertise (participating in behavioral support, previously discussed) present in an in-house, dedicated custodial staff. That is, such a practice might raise issues about school safety, accountability, and motivation that are rooted in site-specific contexts.

In addition, under a conception of differentiated supervision (Zepeda, 2006), the needs of beginning staff might be considered separately from those at middle and advanced career stages. People in mid- and late career might seek opportunities to revive a sense of personal identity and develop skills in mentoring others (Hall, 2002). The custodial staff members who participated in the behavioral support plan that assisted teachers and students provide a good example of this (Taylor-Greene *et al.*, 1997). A secretary who learns new computer and data management skills provides another. Seeking a correspondence between supervision and career stage (Zepeda, 2006) or between staff development and skill/knowledge levels (Collinson, 2008)

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appears a promising way of attending to the variety of issues existing not only in the retention of support staff but also their recruitment.

Further, although new employees working as instructional aides might find that monetary and non-monetary factors meet their needs, as they approach mid-career they might look for more stable sources of income and/or an increased sense of career advancement (Hall, 2002). For example, a special education paraprofessional who is a single parent might work six hours per day, 38 weeks per year. Reflecting that this role is dominated by females, she might begin working at a retail store after school hours to supplement her income. Should years of this retail employment result in higher pay or promotion at the retail store, she may consider resigning from her job as an aide to work full-time elsewhere. Similarly, someone working as a school secretary might realize that the skills she has can allow her to earn more and advance more quickly in a law firm. In this context, schools might also add weeks of employment for such personnel that correspond to new development opportunities. With the expanded definition of the secretary (previously described), the summer months might be used for additional training and/or to “catch up” given the increased job demands.

In addition to designing or modifying the work of support staff, supervisors might take into account the special contributions highlighted in this article. In their supervisory responsibilities, such supervisors might utilize work design or job enhancement strategies (Ghidina, 1992; Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Smylie and Smart, 1990). Should a school district, for example, begin a new breakfast program for students, there will be implications for custodians at school sites who must clean meal rooms. In supervising such personnel, considerations might include “enhancement” of the work to increase a sense of control over work scheduling such as increased autonomy (Smylie and Smart, 1990, p. 139) (do I set up the chairs for assembly or clean the cafeteria at a given time?).

Further, custodians might have school policy-making opportunities, including the development of protocol for cafeteria usage, deadlines, and clean-up, and receive formal recognition and support (Taylor-Greene *et al.*, 1997). Paraprofessionals, too, might be recognized for their critical role in supporting teacher instructional capacity by receiving enhanced feedback and supervisor recognition (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). They might have expanded opportunities to participate in faculty meetings, provide input on instruction, and lead small group instruction. Finally, in consideration of school secretaries’ support for critical administrative functions (Casanova, 1991; Enomoto and Conley, 2007), such personnel might receive enhanced support from supervisors in times of heightened need. For example, during grading periods, student enrollment, and student graduation, secretaries might be granted scheduling autonomy and resources to provide “work context” satisfaction (Hackman and Oldham, 1980, p. 86). Extended work hours might be provided as well, in addition to soliciting feedback concerning the challenges of data collection, record keeping, and reporting.

Although this article has tended to highlight differences among the three groups of support personnel, an important point might be made about their commonality. As suggested, school organizations would likely benefit from the custodian who identifies with the school, its teachers, administrators, and students. Similarly, the involvement and enfranchisement of the paraprofessional by supervisors might make him or her feel part of a community and, therefore, view the job as a career instead of a

stepping-stone. And, for the secretary or clerical worker looking to advance in an increasingly evolving role as well as gain a sense of career progress, additional opportunities for skill development cited may not only fulfill advancement goals but add to their inherent value already possessed in the school community.

A concerted approach involving different considerations in work design and supervision might further understanding of how this significant group of personnel, integral to effective school and district operation, complements and continues to add to the success of our schools. From an organizational standpoint, all school personnel can be conceptualized as working toward goals of organizational development and improvement (Collinson, 2008). To the degree that custodians, secretaries, and paraprofessionals are not included in formal reform efforts and school enhancement, this development seems contrary to the literature suggesting that school capacity (“the core attributes and practices that define an organization’s identity”) is built across the entire organization (Collinson, 2008, p. 447). In addition, qualitative research projects examining the career lives of support personnel, their career decisions, as well as providing detail about these positions appear worthy of further study. This article has taken a step toward raising these issues and highlighting some gaps in the literature.

### Notes

1. In making this point, Casanova (1991) cited Rimer (1984) and Hart (1985).
2. Glenn and Feldberg (1977) also noted that “changes that rigidify or interfere with these connections can result in a form of organizational paralysis” that ironically makes managers introducing such changes may be less able to manage their organizations (pp. 62-63). (In making these points, the authors cited Giddens, 1975, and Mills, 1956.)
3. See National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, “Paraeducator state of the art: historical perspective (1950s-1980s)”, available at: [www.nrpara.org/report/historical](http://www.nrpara.org/report/historical) (accessed April 6, 2009).
4. The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, “State policies, standards, and systems”, available at [www.nrpara.org/report/policies](http://www.nrpara.org/report/policies) (accessed April 6, 2009) discusses amendments to IDEA 1997 and the NCLB Act of 2001 by the US Congress including provisions acknowledging the evolving roles of teachers and paraprofessionals as members of instructional teams, as well as increased standards/opportunities for paraeducator preparation, supervision, and development.

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**Corresponding author**

Sharon Conley can be contacted at: [sconley@education.ucsb.edu](mailto:sconley@education.ucsb.edu)

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