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COMMUNITY HELPERS WITHIN THE SCHOOL

by Mary Ellen Bentley and
Gladys Martineau

Instead of WPA and the alphabetical agencies of the 1930's, Redford Union School system has a whole new group of letters centering around the various services performed by paraprofessionals.

PAL is the abbreviated title of Parents Assist in Learning. Currently, PAL operates at five of the seven elementary schools and one junior high school. The Pals are mothers who donate from one hour to a whole day a week to tutoring an individual child. Their help is principally academic, although the friendship and regular support they give children have great social value. The reading specialists meet with the PAL mothers and discuss ways in which they can work with pupils in reading. They also assist in selecting the right materials for specific children.

The VTC was formed during the winter of 1971-72 to give help to severely-handicapped readers in junior high school. VTC stands for Volunteer Teachers Corps and is composed of elementary teachers who donate time either before or after school to work with boys or girls who need extra help in reading. Students were selected for this tutoring after reading, speech, hearing, and vision tests indicated that they needed this help.

The Lend-A-Hand, which is in operation at five of the elementary schools, is composed of high school juniors and seniors who come to an elementary school one afternoon a week to work with a particular child. Because many of the elementary pupils in this program are weak in the area of reading, the elementary reading specialist conducts mini-workshops

with the high school volunteers at the various schools. The sessions are spent in teaching the high school students how to use the material supplied by the classroom teacher, instructing the volunteers in skill games which they can use with the students, and helping them plan their teaching sessions. Most of the elementary children have already been given diagnostic reading tests by the reading specialist so she is able to give specific recommendations for each child. High school students seem to be very enthusiastic about participating in this program. In the fall of 1972, there were over 100 volunteers for Lend-A-Hand.

An innovative Title III project operating at Redford Union is called PREP, which is an abbreviation for Parent Readiness Education Project. This project has three major goals: (1) The diagnosis and amelioration of deficiencies in pre-school children through individualized programming; (2) The preparation of high school students for future roles as parents, and (3) The training of parents in child management and enrichment of the home environment. In this program, which centers around forty pre-school children, high school students work with pre-schoolers and assignments are performed by the parents with their children in the home and community.

The paraprofessional program which has been nearest and dearest, perhaps, to the two reading specialists is the High School Intern Program. This is a course offered for high school credit to seniors who plan to attend college and are interested in a career in education. In this course, each senior works in an elementary classroom with a child or a small group of children

who need help in reading. Each student spends an hour and a half four days a week in the classroom working under the classroom teacher's direction. On the fifth day, the high school students meet with the two reading specialists. The seminar starts with a "show and tell" period where each student recounts his experiences of the week, referring often to his daily log which he is expected to keep. The remainder of the time is spent on a discussion of a specific topic, relative to the beginning reading process.

The elementary reading specialist meets with the classroom teachers to help them plan how to use the high school interns. The teachers who are involved in the program agree that many of their children have made real gains as a result of this help. One first grade teacher commented that the high school boy assigned to her room often was able to reach a child much better than she could.

The high school students are developing increasingly sensitive attitudes in meeting the needs of individual children. They find that in school, skills are learned sequentially and that children learn in many different ways.

Besides the programs mentioned, parents are used as helpers in various buildings, especially in two elementary schools where team teaching with an emphasis on individualized instruction is carried on. Parents are used to help check papers, keep records, and prepare materials; thus freeing the teachers to spend more time with individual children.

Redford Union has found that by tapping this community resource of paraprofessionals, it has been able to give more individual attention to its students and also increase the interest of many parents and potential parents in its schools.

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