



An Educational Gift: Teacher Aides in New York State **Alexa Rissoff**

Nature of the work

Teacher Aides, also referred to as teacher assistants, instructional aides, paraprofessionals or paraeducators, generally provide non-instructional and clerical support for classroom teachers.

While this fact sheet focuses on teacher aides, it is important to briefly note the major differences between teacher aides and teaching assistants in New York.

Q. How do the tasks of a teacher aide differ from a teaching assistant in New York?

A: Teacher aides generally perform non-instructional services under supervision determined by the local school district, consistent with Civil Service Law. Teaching assistants perform instructional services under the direction of a licensed or certified teacher.

Q: What are the licensing requirements for a teacher aide and a teaching assistant?

A: Unlike teaching assistants, teacher aides do not require teaching assistant certificates. Teacher aides only need a high school diploma.

Q: How do the pay and benefits differ for teacher aides and teaching assistants?

A: Teaching assistants generally receive greater pay than teacher aides, and they are members of the teacher's union. Teacher aides typically are members of a separate union.¹

Teacher aides use the teacher's lesson plans to support and assist children in learning the class materials.² They provide the teacher with information

about the students to help the teacher appropriately address the students' needs. Teacher aides help students in the use and development of instructional resources.³ Many assist students one-on-one, helping those that require additional care. They supervise students at the bus stop, during field trips and in the cafeteria, hallways and schoolyard. Teacher aides also record students' grades, check homework assignments, photocopy classroom materials, set up classroom equipment and help the teacher prepare lessons.⁴

Some teacher aides will conduct music and creative movement instruction in the kindergarten classroom since some schools do not provide specials such as physical education or art to the kindergarten students. Many work with students in small reading groups. They listen to them read and help them with word annunciation and articulation.⁶ Some work in the computer laboratories, monitoring the students' grasp of software programs. Aides at the high school level usually focus on a certain subject like math, science or foreign language.⁷



Many teacher aides work specifically with special education students, especially in inclusion type settings. They address:

- the physical needs of students with disabilities, including feeding, teaching grooming habits and assisting students riding the school bus.
- Teacher aides may simplify a reading or math lesson.⁸ Other aides help students who speak English as a second language and those who need remedial education⁹
- Teacher aides continuously observe students' performance and record relevant information to track their progress for the teacher's use. Some teacher aides help young adults obtain a job or help them apply for community services that will support them after their schooling ends.

Besides elementary and secondary schools, teacher aides also work in preschools and child care centers. In these settings, one or two teacher aides and the primary teacher assist and supervise the children with basic skills and feeding. Teacher aides who work with developmentally delayed or disabled infants and toddlers play games and assist them with exercises developed by the teacher or therapists to address their individual needs.¹⁰

The Workplace

Although most teacher aides work in school classrooms, some work in preschools, child care centers, religious centers and community centers.

Some perform more physical work (on the playground, walking or kneeling) while others spend more time sitting with the students.

The four teacher aides I interviewed work full time. However, approximately 40 percent of teacher aides work part time. Most aides who work in the school setting work a traditional 9 to 10 month school year.¹¹

Like many low wage workers, teacher aides face challenges and difficult working conditions. The teacher aides that I interviewed all agree that the job is physically taxing. The students, especially the younger ones, require a lot of physical assistance. Some special needs children are physically abusive, even biting teacher aides on occasion. As one teacher aide said: “This job is not cut out for everyone.”¹² Sometimes the intensity of the job causes teacher aides to burn out and turn to a different occupation.

What are some of the struggles teacher aides face?

They need a lot of patience since many of their students have disabilities and need extra time completing assignments. Students with learning disabilities, reading issues and processing delays are a challenge, especially if they delay the classroom learning process.



In addition, restrictive state laws put further restraints on what the teacher aides and the teachers can accomplish in the classroom. Parents can also be hard to please and interfere with a student’s development if they are in denial about their child’s problem or if they are not willing to cooperate.¹³ Other teacher aides complain that they are responsible for teaching poor, troubled and disabled kids, and they and often have to communicate with parents who speak little English.¹⁴

The relationship with the teacher is sometimes a challenge. Most of the teacher aides I spoke to have a great rapport with their colleagues. Some have a lot of autonomy in the classroom. They are allowed to instruct the children and have flexibility in conducting their lessons. They have a great camaraderie with the other teachers and love what they do. One teacher aide said her teacher sometimes lets her teach the entire math lesson.¹⁵ On the other hand, another teacher aide I interviewed struggles with having independence from the teacher to reinstruct the students. The class setting is always teacher motivated. The teacher aide follows the teacher’s lead, but it can be very difficult to follow what the teacher does and determine what she will do.¹⁶

Teacher aides also struggle with low wages. One teacher aide told me she has to work a second job for an early childhood agency to supplement her

income. Her wages are more than double at the agency than at school. In her district, where there is no pay scale, there is no incentive for teacher aides to do better. If her salary was increased, her morale would improve, there would be an incentive to try harder and there would be less disgruntled employees.¹⁷ The teacher aides are pushing the union for a raise and health benefits. Another teacher aide addressed the challenges of working such an intense job for little pay. She usually does not receive any breaks and is on her feet all day. She wished she returned to college to become a teacher and receive more pay.¹⁸

Despite the struggles of the work environment, seeing students learn is very rewarding. The teacher aides I spoke to love the children. They enjoy working with them and improving their lives. One teacher aide enjoys helping a student whose mom is addicted to painkillers. She provides him with attention and love he does not receive at home. She also loves the staff and the principal. She said, “My school is like a family.”¹⁹



Knowledge, Skills and Work Abilities

Teacher aides must have a breadth of knowledge in different areas. They should be familiar with the structure and content of the English language, including the meaning and spelling of words, grammar and rules of composition. Knowledge of human behavior and performance, including individual differences in ability, personality and interests is important when working with students. Teacher aides should be familiar with the principles and methods of the curriculum and instruction for individuals and groups, so they are on the same page as the teachers. An understanding of arithmetic, algebra and geometry is also essential.²⁰

The job requires many skills. Active listening and instructing students is key to a positive work experience. Teacher aides must also be able to talk to others to convey information effectively and think critically. Other skills include time management, being aware of others’ reactions, active learning, self-monitoring and monitoring students’ performance. Reading comprehension and using training methods when learning or teaching new things are important additional skills.²¹

Teacher aides must clearly express their thoughts and ideas, understand and identify the speech of another person and orally comprehend ideas and information. Problem sensitivity (recognizing there is a problem), deductive reasoning (applying general rules to specific problems) and inductive reasoning (combining pieces of information to

form general rules or conclusions) are all necessary abilities. Fluency of ideas is also important since teachers look to teacher aides for new project ideas.²²

Job Training, Qualifications and Advancement

Q: What qualifications are needed for a teacher aide?

A: Teacher aides only need a high school diploma and on-the-job training. Increased education including a college degree or related coursework may improve job opportunities and lead to higher pay. Many schools require prior work experience with children and a valid driver's license. Most also require the applicant to pass a background check.²³

Q: What types of personality traits and characteristics must teacher aides possess?

A: Schools look for individuals who enjoy working with children and come from diverse cultural backgrounds – people with patience, enthusiasm and fairness in the classroom. Teacher aides must be willing to listen and follow the teacher's lead. They must be good writers and be able to communicate effectively with students, teachers and parents. Due to the growing number of foreign students, teacher aides who speak more than one language, especially Spanish, are in high demand.²⁴

Teacher aides seeking increased pay or additional responsibilities often become teaching assistants. After President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act became law in 2002 the standards for teaching assistants rose. By 2006, the federal law required most teaching assistants to have some college credits and take the Assessment of Teaching Assistant Skills exam.²⁶

Q: What are the different levels of teaching assistants?

A: There are three levels of teaching assistants in New York.

- Level I teaching assistant requires a high school diploma or a GED, completing two one-day workshops on school violence and child abuse, being fingerprinted and passing the Assessment of Teacher Assistant Skills exam. The exam is like a mini-SAT, incorporating science, math and reading comprehension skills. Level I teaching assistants receive a temporary certificate that is good for three years. An individual cannot go to the next level until he or she has completed one year as a teaching assistant.
- Level II requires nine hours of post-secondary education.
- Level III requires eighteen hours of post-secondary education.



Many individuals who want to be teachers start off as level III teaching assistants. In addition to college credit requirements, teaching assistants also have to complete professional responsibility hours. Level I and II teaching assistants must complete ten hours of professional responsibility each year, and level III teaching assistants must complete eight workshops of 175 hours of professional responsibility every five years.²⁷

In addition to becoming a higher level teaching assistant to increase earnings, some school districts provide time away from the job or tuition reimbursement so that teaching assistants can earn their bachelor's degree and pursue licensed teaching positions. Teaching assistants are usually required to teach for a certain length of time in the school district to receive tuition reimbursement.²⁸

Earnings and Union membership

Earnings for teacher aides differ depending on the school district and the state. The four teacher aides that I spoke to all worked full time at different school districts in Long Island, New York. Their salaries ranged from \$20,000 to \$30,000. One teacher aide working in the Rockville Centre School District told me that if she were to become a teaching assistant there would be an eight year waiting period for health benefits. She gets health coverage through her husband. She receives five sick days and two personal days, which can be carried over to the following school year. Teachers in her school district receive ten sick days. Teaching assistants can receive tenure after three years in the district.²⁹

Another aide is sixty years old and has been working for seventeen years in the Levittown Public School District; she told me that when the laws changed in 2006, she could have become a teaching assistant. However, she would have lost her seniority, had to resign from her job and be re-hired as a teaching assistant, and she would have received a \$10,000 paycut. She only needed six college credits, but she did not want to give up her seniority or pay. She would have been on the same level as someone starting out. She makes \$30,000 because of her seniority, and she receives health, dental and vision coverage.³⁰ Another aide I spoke to who works at the same school makes \$23,000.³¹



A teacher aide at another school told me that she makes \$30,000, and there is no pay scale or raises. Therefore, there is no incentive to stay longer or work harder. She is a young, recently divorced mother of three who has to pay 65% of her health insurance (about \$860 a month). The school district

picks up the remaining 35%. The teacher aides have been continuously fighting for a pay raise.³²

The median annual wage of U.S. teacher aides in May 2008 was \$22,200.³³ Below is a chart that indicates wages for teacher aides in different sectors.³⁴

Sector	Employment	Annual mean wage
Elementary and Secondary Schools	1,013,450	\$23,680
Child Day Care Services	109,000	\$20,110
Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools	29,140	\$28,880
Individual and Family Services	18,900	\$21,830
Junior Colleges	18,220	\$28,170

In 2008, the states with the greatest number of teacher aides were New York (123,440), Connecticut (27,800) and Kansas (19,950). The top paying states were Alaska (\$33,370), Connecticut (\$29,090) and Delaware (\$28,600).³⁵

Unlike part time workers, full time workers generally receive health coverage. This varies from state to state. In 2008, about 37% of teacher assistants belonged to unions or were covered by a union contract.³⁶ The teachers and the teacher aides usually belong to separate unions. The teaching assistants often fall under the teacher's union. The Paraprofessional and School-Related Personnel (PSRP) division of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) represents teacher aides in different school districts, colleges and universities throughout the United States. The AFT has organized school and college support staff since the early 1930s.³⁷ In addition, many school districts belong to the National Education Association (NEA), which bargains with school systems for wages, hours and various terms of employment.³⁸



Employment in the field

Employment of teacher aides is expected to grow by 10% between 2008 and 2018, which is about as fast as the average for all occupations.³⁹ In the Western New York region, teacher assistant is one of the occupations with the most openings.⁴⁰ The mean wage for Western New York is \$24,010.⁴¹ Due to the projected increase in school enrollment for students whose native language is not English and special education students, there

will likely be a great demand for teacher aides. Additional afterschool programs and summer programs will also create jobs for teacher aides.

The increased focus on school quality and accountability in recent years will also lead to an increased demand for teacher aides. Teacher aides may be needed to help teachers prepare students for standardized testing and to provide extra assistance to students who perform poorly on the tests. However, if school districts decide to hire more teaching assistants, fewer teacher aides will be hired.⁴²



Demand for teacher aides varies throughout the United States. Regions in the South and the West with increased school enrollment will probably have a greater demand for teacher aides. Depending on individual school budgets, available jobs may be limited to part time work.⁴³

Endnotes

¹ Univ. of the State of New York-New York State Educ. Dept. Office of Teaching Initiatives. *Teaching Assistants Pursuing Certification Teaching Assistants and Teacher Aides Compared*.

<<http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/career/tavsta.html>>.

² Personal communication, March 16, 2010. These are all based on four interviews with Long Island teacher aides.

³ Univ. of the State of New York-New York State Educ. Dept. Office of Teaching Initiatives. *Teaching Assistants Pursuing Certification Teaching Assistants and Teacher Aides Compared*.

<<http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/career/tavsta.html>>.

⁴ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Personal communication, March 16, 2010.

⁷ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.

⁸ Personal Communication, March 16, 2010.

⁹ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Id.

¹² Personal Communication, March 22, 2010.

¹³ Personal Communication, March 16, 2010.

¹⁴ Toppo, Greg, *Teacher's aides filling growing gap*, U.S.A. Today (July 13, 2004).

¹⁵ Personal Communication, March 16, 2010.

- ¹⁶ Personal Communication, March 20, 2010.
- ¹⁷ Personal Communication, March 22, 2010.
- ¹⁸ Personal Communication, March 16, 2010.
- ¹⁹ Id.
- ²⁰ O*Net-The Occupational Information Network, Summary Report for 25-9041 .00-Teacher Assistants. <<http://online.onetcenter.org/link/summary/25-9041.00>>.
- ²¹ Id.
- ²² Id.
- ²³ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.
- ²⁴ Id.
- ²⁵ Id.
- ²⁶ Toppo, Greg, *Teacher's aides filling growing gap*, U.S.A. Today (July 13, 2004).
- ²⁷ Dr. John Brennan, Department Head for Teacher Preparation Materials Erie Community College, March 22, 2010.
- ²⁸ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.
- ²⁹ Personal Communication, March 16, 2010.
- ³⁰ Personal Communication, March 20, 2010
- ³¹ Personal Communication, March 21, 2010
- ³² Personal Communication, March 22, 2010
- ³³ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2008<<http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes259041.htm>
- ³⁴ Id.
- ³⁵ Id.
- ³⁶ U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.
- ³⁷ American Federation of Teachers (AFT) <http://www.aft.org/>
- ³⁸ National Education Association (NEA) <http://www.nea.org/>
- ³⁹ Id.
- ⁴⁰ John Slenker, Labor Market Analyst, New York State Department of Labor, Erie County Labor Trends, <http://low-wage.wikispaces.com/WNY+Employment+Data>
- ⁴¹ John Slenker, Labor Market Analyst, Occupational Projections 2006-2016 Western New York Region, <http://low-wage.wikispaces.com/WNY+Employment+Data>
- ⁴² U.S. Dept. of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011 ed. <<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos153.htm#nature>>.
- ⁴³ Id.

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