
Teacher Assistants

(0*NET 25-9041.00)

Significant Points

- About 4 in 10 teacher assistants work part time.
- Educational requirements range from a high school diploma to some college training.
- Workers with experience in special education, or who can speak a foreign language, will be especially in demand.

Nature of the Work

Teacher assistants provide instructional and clerical support for classroom teachers, allowing teachers more time for lesson planning and teaching. Teacher assistants tutor and assist children in learning class material using the teacher's lesson plans, providing students with individualized attention. Teacher assistants also supervise students in the cafeteria, schoolyard, and hallways, or on field trips. They record grades, set up equipment, and help prepare materials for instruction. Teacher assistants also are called teacher aides or instructional aides. Some assistants refer to themselves as paraeducators or paraprofessionals.

Some teacher assistants perform exclusively noninstructional or clerical tasks, such as monitoring nonacademic settings. Playground and lunchroom attendants are examples of such assistants. Most teacher assistants, however, perform a combination of instructional and clerical duties. They generally provide instructional reinforcement to children, under the direction and guidance of teachers. They work with students individually or in small groups—listening while students read, reviewing or reinforcing class lessons, or helping them find information for reports. At the secondary school level, teacher assistants often specialize in a certain subject, such as math or science. Teacher assistants often take charge of special projects and prepare equipment or exhibits, such as for a science demonstration. Some assistants work in computer laboratories, helping students using computers and educational software programs.

In addition to instructing, assisting, and supervising students, teacher assistants grade tests and papers, check homework, keep health and attendance records, do typing and filing, and duplicate materials. They also stock supplies, operate audiovisual equipment, and keep classroom equipment in order.

Many teacher assistants work extensively with special education students. As schools become more inclusive, integrating special education students into general education classrooms, teacher assistants in general education and special education classrooms increasingly assist students with disabilities. Teacher assistants attend to a disabled student's physical needs, including feeding, teaching good grooming habits, or assisting students riding the schoolbus. They also provide personal attention to students with other special needs, such as those from disadvantaged families, those who speak English as a second language, or those who need remedial education. Teacher assistants help assess a student's progress by observing performance and recording relevant data.

Teacher assistants also work with infants and toddlers who have developmental delays or other disabilities. Under the guidance of a teacher or therapist, teacher assistants perform exercises or play games to help the child develop physically and

behaviorally. Some teacher assistants work with young adults to help them obtain a job or to apply for community services for the disabled.

Working Conditions

Approximately 4 in 10 teacher assistants work part time. However, even among full-time workers, nearly 40 percent work less than 8 hours per day. Most assistants who provide educational instruction work the traditional 9- to 10-month school year. Teacher assistants work in a variety of settings—including private homes and preschools, and local government offices, where they would deal with young adults—but most work in classrooms in elementary, middle, and secondary schools. They also work outdoors supervising recess when weather allows, and they spend much of their time standing, walking, or kneeling.

Seeing students develop and gain appreciation of the joy of learning can be very rewarding. However, working closely with students can be both physically and emotionally tiring. Teacher assistants who work with special education students often perform more strenuous tasks, including lifting, as they help students with their daily routine. Those who perform clerical work may tire of administrative duties, such as copying materials or typing.

Employment

Teacher assistants held almost 1.3 million jobs in 2002. Nearly 3 in 4 work for State and local government education institutions; mostly at the preschool and elementary school level. Private schools, daycare centers, and religious organizations hire most of the rest.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Educational requirements for teacher assistants vary by State or school district and range from a high school diploma to some college training, although employers increasingly prefer applicants with some college training. Teacher assistants with instructional responsibilities usually require more training than do those who do not perform teaching tasks. In addition, as a



Teacher assistants provide students with individual attention.

result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, teacher assistants in Title 1 schools—those with a large proportion of students from low-income households—will be required to meet one of three requirements: have a minimum of 2 years of college, hold a 2-year or higher degree, or pass a rigorous state and local assessment. Many schools also require previous experience in working with children and a valid driver's license. Some schools may require the applicant to pass a background check.

A number of 2-year and community colleges offer associate degree programs that prepare graduates to work as teacher assistants. However, most teacher assistants receive on-the-job training. Those who tutor and review lessons with students must have a thorough understanding of class materials and instructional methods, and should be familiar with the organization and operation of a school. Teacher assistants also must know how to operate audiovisual equipment, keep records, and prepare instructional materials, as well as have adequate computer skills.

Teacher assistants should enjoy working with children from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, and be able to handle classroom situations with fairness and patience. Teacher assistants also must demonstrate initiative and a willingness to follow a teacher's directions. They must have good writing skills and be able to communicate effectively with students and teachers. Teacher assistants who speak a second language, especially Spanish, are in great demand for communicating with growing numbers of students and parents whose primary language is not English.

Advancement for teacher assistants—usually in the form of higher earnings or increased responsibility—comes primarily with experience or additional education. Some school districts provide time away from the job or tuition reimbursement so that teacher assistants can earn their bachelor's degrees and pursue licensed teaching positions. In return for tuition reimbursement, assistants are often required to teach a certain length of time for the school district.

Job Outlook

Employment of teacher assistants is expected to grow somewhat faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. Although school enrollments are projected to increase only slowly over the next decade, the student population for which teacher assistants are most needed—special education students and students for whom English is not their first language—is expected to increase more rapidly than the general school-age population. Legislation that requires students with disabilities and non-native English speakers to receive an education “equal” to that of other students, will generate jobs for teacher assistants to accommodate these students' special needs. Children with special needs require much personal attention, and special education teachers, as well as general education teachers with special education students, rely heavily on teacher assistants.

Additionally, a greater focus on educational quality and accountability, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act, is likely to lead to an increased demand for teacher assistants. Growing numbers of teacher assistants will be needed to help teachers prepare students for standardized testing and to pro-

vide extra assistance to students who perform poorly on standardized tests. An increasing number of afterschool programs and summer programs also will create new opportunities for teacher assistants. In addition to those stemming from employment growth, numerous job openings will arise as assistants transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force to assume family responsibilities, to return to school, or for other reasons characteristic of occupations that require limited formal education and offer relatively low pay.

Opportunities for teacher assistant jobs are expected to be best for persons with at least 2 years of formal education after high school. Persons who can speak a foreign language should be in particular demand in school systems with large numbers of students whose families do not speak English at home. Demand is expected to vary by region of the country. Areas in which the population and school enrollments are expanding rapidly, such as many communities in the South and West, should have rapid growth in the demand for teacher assistants.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of teacher assistants in 2002 were \$18,660. The middle 50 percent earned between \$14,880 and \$23,600. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$12,900, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$29,050.

Teacher assistants who work part time ordinarily do not receive benefits. Full-time workers usually receive health coverage and other benefits.

In 2002, about 3 out of 10 teacher assistants belonged to unions—mainly the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—which bargain with school systems over wages, hours, and the terms and conditions of employment.

Related Occupations

Teacher assistants who instruct children have duties similar to those of preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers, special education teachers, and school librarians. However, teacher assistants do not have the same level of responsibility or training. The support activities of teacher assistants and their educational backgrounds are similar to those of childcare workers, library technicians, and library assistants. Teacher assistants who work with children with disabilities perform many of the same functions as occupational therapy assistants and aides.

Sources of Additional Information

For information on teacher assistants, including training and certification, contact:

- ▶ American Federation of Teachers, Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel Division, 555 New Jersey Ave. NW., Washington, DC 20001.
- ▶ National Education Association, Educational Support Personnel division, 1201 16th Street, NW | Washington, DC 20036.

For information on a career as a teacher assistant, contact:

- ▶ National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals, 6526 Old Main Hill, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322. Internet: <http://www.nrcpara.org>

Human resource departments of school systems, school administrators, and State departments of education also can provide details about employment opportunities and required qualifications for teacher assistant jobs.