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Request for Waiver of Title I Paraprofessional Qualifications and Added Flexibility

The South Dakota Department of Education (SD DOE) is formally seeking a waiver from the United States Department of Education pursuant to Section 8401 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Specifically, South Dakota requests a waiver of the strict paraprofessional qualification requirements under ESEA Section 1111(g)(2)(J) (and by extension Section 1111(g)(2)(M)) to allow our Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) additional flexibility in certifying qualified instructional support professionals in Title I Schoolwide programs and those supported with Title I, Part A funds.

Our state, like many across the nation, faces unique and persistent staffing challenges, particularly in rural and geographically isolated school districts. These staffing shortages directly impact the capacity of our LEAs to deploy critical instructional support staff. By expanding the pathways through which a paraprofessional can demonstrate qualification, South Dakota aims to remove unnecessary systemic barriers, honor valuable hands-on experience, and ultimately ensure that every child in a Title I setting is served by a highly capable professional.

Currently, South Dakota's policy requires all paraprofessionals in Title I settings to hold a high school diploma (or equivalent) and meet at least one of the following requirements:

1. Hold an Associate's degree or higher; OR
2. Earn at least 48 semester hours of college credit; OR
3. Pass the ParaPro Assessment (or a state-approved equivalent).

[\(More information can be found on the paraprofessional requirements document\).](#)

To broaden recruitment pools without sacrificing academic quality or instructional rigor, South Dakota proposes to establish four additional, alternative qualification pathways that candidates may satisfy alongside the high school diploma requirement:

- Professional Classroom Experience: Accumulation of one year or at least 1,000 hours of previous, successful employment experience in a school, preschool, or licensed childcare facility working directly with children.
- Demonstrated Local Competency: Satisfactory completion of three consecutive years of school-level performance evaluations supervised and signed off by a certified building principal or administrator.
- Early Childhood Expertise: Holding valid and active Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential.
- Targeted State-Approved Professional Development: Successful completion of a comprehensive state-approved training curriculum covering foundational instructional skills, specifically:
 - *Literacy*: Science of Reading training.
 - *Math*: Explicit Instruction training.
 - *Social Studies*: South Dakota Studies Weekly (A-Z) curriculum.
 - *Title I Operations*: Title 101 Course.

Scope of Requirements and SPED Exemption

As part of this waiver and updated policy, SD DOE also seeks to clarify and formalize the scope of these requirements. Special Education (SPED) paraprofessionals will not be required to meet these Title I qualification requirements, regardless of whether they are employed in a Title I Schoolwide school. This exemption ensures that LEAs are not unduly burdened when hiring dedicated SPED staff whose primary roles, funding structures, and required skill sets are governed distinctly from general Title I instructional support.

State Accountability and Educational Safeguards

South Dakota is committed to ensuring these alternative pathways maintain a high bar of educational quality. Paraprofessionals qualifying under these new pathways will continue to work under the direct supervision of appropriately certified classroom teachers.

Furthermore, this flexibility integrates seamlessly with our innovative South Dakota Teacher Apprenticeship Pathway (SD-TAP). By recognizing and standardizing alternative qualification routes, we create an accessible, structured "grow-your-own" pipeline that transitions experienced local paraprofessionals into fully certified, baccalaureate-holding classroom teachers.