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New Online Autism Training for School Paraprofessionals *Announcement Corresponds with Autism Awareness Month*

Teachers' aides and other paraprofessionals and support staff serving students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can now enhance their knowledge and skills through an online training program developed by the Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center of Excellence (VCU ACE) and Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

The course, Autism Spectrum Disorders for Paraprofessionals: Providing Effective Instruction and Supports, includes five learning modules:

- Characteristics of ASD;
- Roles and Responsibilities of the Paraprofessional;
- Foundational Instructional Practices;
- Supporting Communication and Social Skills; and
- Providing Positive Behavior Supports.

"Paraprofessionals are on the front lines every day with students with autism spectrum disorder," VCU ACE Director of Training Dawn Hendricks said. "Training is essential to improving educational experiences and outcomes for these students."

In December 2011, the commonwealth's 132 school divisions reported 13,137 students with autism as their primary disability, a 490 percent increase since 2000, when 2,226 children were identified as having a form of ASD. This increase mirrors national statistics and is the subject of research to better understand the causes of autism and factors contributing to the rise in the number of children diagnosed.

"These statistics underscore the importance of VDOE's partnership with VCU to assist school divisions in educating and supporting children with autism spectrum disorder and preparing these students for productive and independent lives," Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright said. "This new training course will equip teaching assistants, bus aides and other support staff with the knowledge and skills they need to help students with autism experience success."

Autism Spectrum Disorders for Paraprofessionals is a self-paced course that provides flexibility for both paraprofessionals and their employing school divisions to meet their training needs. Participants earn a certificate of completion if they have reviewed all content and score a minimum of 80 percent on each of the five quizzes to receive a passing grade for each lesson. Registration for the May session is now open through the [VCU ACE website](#). The course is free to Virginia residents through a grant from VDOE.

House Bill 325, which was approved by the 2012 General Assembly, requires school divisions to ensure that aides assigned to work with teachers who have primary oversight of students with ASD receive training in student behavior management. The legislation also directs the state Board of Education, in consultation with VCU, to develop an online training program divisions may use to comply with the new requirement.

"VDOE will work in partnership with VCU's Autism Center for Excellence to ensure that the course addresses all standards and competencies identified by the Board of Education," Wright said.

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