

March 12, 2014

General Assembly
Education Committee
Room 3100, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

RE: H.B. No. 5523 (RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE TO STUDY PARAPROFESSIONAL STAFFING LEVELS.

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is George Gould. I am a resident of West Hartford and Union Representative for Connecticut Paraprofessional Educators with CSEA SEIU Local 2001. I am submitting this testimony in support of House Bill 5523: An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study Paraprofessional Staffing Levels.

This Bill long overdue. I have been negotiating municipal contracts for paraprofessionals for many years and even the title “paraprofessional” is insufficient for today. Today’s paras have evolved into Education Specialists. Paraprofessionals have evolved from being moms in the classroom, to working with the most challenging and difficult children in the school system. Today’s paraprofessionals provide job training for students transitioning into the community, and even bathroom assistance. They work with children in early childhood programs, students on the Autism Spectrum, the hearing and sight impaired, children with developmental disabilities, and even the medically fragile. Today’s paraprofessionals work with such a diverse group of students and perform such a wide range of work that it’s difficult to pigeonhole them into a single job title.

We need to study and develop a best practices approach to para-educators in the classroom so that we can have the appropriate staffing levels and trainings to meet the needs of the students they serve. Some may say that these needs have already been addressed—they have not talked to the paraprofessionals. Anecdotally, paras are more than occasionally assigned to students without specific information concerning the child’s needs or knowing issues developed in IEPs or 504s, for which they are responsible but without the training necessary to meet those needs.

As has been done in many States across the country, Paraprofessionals have been left out of the discussion in determining the solutions to issues that our paraprofessionals experience in the classroom on an almost daily basis. There needs to be at least a good cross-section of paraprofessionals and representation from the areas they teach that are on this committee.

Because of the diversity of assignments and the gradations of those work assignments and work experience, it would be important for this committee to look at the development of a career ladder—so that paraprofessionals with the desire can move with greater ease into the teaching field, particularly in the teaching area of special education. Years of working with children as a para provides extensive experience that is valuable in the special education field. Paraprofessionals that are provided with the opportunity to achieve teaching certification would become a hiring source for replacing teachers who leave the school
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system. The advantages to that are certainly self-explanatory. In fact, many certified teachers take paraprofessional jobs when there are no vacancies using that experience to land a job when a vacancy does occur in the school system.

Paraprofessionals work better as substitutes than substitute teachers. If a paraprofessional takes over a classroom it is often as an Education Specialist that has firsthand experience with the children. Substitutes on the other hand do not see the children every day and are often dependent on the paras to provide the substitute with guidance concerning routine and teaching.

We believe that Connecticut should set the bar for paraprofessionals and be willing to go beyond what other States have done in developing staffing standards. The correct usage of paraprofessionals in the classroom would turn the greatest educational bargain in Connecticut into the best educational system ever.

I also ask that you oppose SB 425: An Act that threatens to turn the State Education Resource Center into a "quasi-public agency" not subject to the same level of oversight, transparency and accountability as other state agencies

Thank you

Submission by: George Gould
Staff Representative
CSEA SEIU Local 2001