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**Program Review and Investigations Committee  
September 24, 2014**

**SCHOOL PARAPROFESSIONALS STAFFING STUDY**

Good Day, Senator Kissel, Representative Mushinsky and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee. I am Shellye Davis. I have been a paraprofessional in the Hartford Public Schools for twenty-three years and am co-President of the Hartford Federation of Paraprofessionals, a union representing 460 paraprofessionals throughout the district. I also hold a number of positions at the local, state and national levels of the American Federation of Teachers, as well as a vice-presidency of the Greater Hartford Labor Council and membership on the MORE Special Education Working Group of this legislature. Thank you for taking a closer look at paraprofessional staffing levels in our public schools and thank you for the opportunity today to address some critical issues related to understaffing, in particular. I would also like to propose a couple of ways in which these issues can be effectively addressed.

My primary concern is with understaffing of Adult Support Special Education Paraprofessionals. These are paraprofessionals who work with students who have been determined to need an IEP, or Independent Educational Program. These programs are indeed individualized and rarely do two programs coincide. For that reason, and for safety reasons, many special needs students are individually assigned their own Adult Support Special Education Paraprofessional. Perhaps, that one-to-one standard is being met in the wealthy suburbs of Connecticut. It is not however, being met in the large cities, and definitely not in Hartford. I personally have witnessed situations where paraprofessionals have been simultaneously assigned responsibility for two or three students (usually they are assigned three students when another paraprofessional is absent). There is no reserve of substitute Adult Support Paraprofessionals, as there is for teachers. The burden is simply loaded onto those who are present.

As I stated above, special needs differ from student to student. No paraprofessional can meet the divergent needs of two students, let alone three. The student cannot learn when the paraprofessional has to divide his or her time in such a manner. Worse, still, is the safety aspect. If one student is a runner (that is a student whose concentration is so limited that the student may wander off or run away from the paraprofessional), how can the paraprofessional tend to the stationary student while attempting to retrieve the student who leaves? It cannot be done. Someday, under these conditions, a serious student injury will inevitably occur. And the cost of the lawsuit for neglect will dwarf the cost

savings of not hiring a second paraprofessional. I have attached a recent article from the *New Britain City Journal* to my testimony. It illustrates how a child's safety can be compromised when there aren't enough paraprofessionals to care for students.

But the safety concerns do not end there. The number of reported workers' compensation claims rise when paraprofessionals are forced to care for multiple students. These costs can be significantly reduced with proper staffing levels.

Of all the employees in a school district, Adult Support Paraprofessionals provide the greatest amount of direct service to children with disabilities. Yet they are given the least amount of formal preparation. Even worse, there are no current standards for any appropriate training of paraprofessionals assigned to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) programs. Adequate training must be provided to Adult Support Paraprofessionals, both before exposing them to students and on an on-going basis. It is critical to ensuring a proper education for children with special needs.

So, how can these problems be successfully addressed? First, there is currently no effective monitoring done by the State Department of Education to ensure districts are in fact following the staffing requirements mandated in student IEPs. For years I have raised this issue to the Hartford Board of Education, and no action has ever been taken. Compliance monitoring by the State Board of Education would certainly improve the

situation, especially if districts who fail to comply with IEP requirements were mandated to report such shortcomings to parents or were sanctioned in some way by the state.

Second, there appears to be plenty of money to hire administrators who never lay eyes on a child, but no money for those who provide direct services. I infer from this that the ratio of expenditures on administrative staffing and top administrators to that of front line employees is drastically out of whack, to put it bluntly. The General Assembly should determine a maximum ratio of administrative to front line payrolls and related expenses. This sort of standard has been used in healthcare and charitable service areas to ensure that more money goes to actual care for the needy. It will work here as well.

Moreover, as an added bonus, adequate staffing levels that meet IEP requirements will reduce workers' compensation claims and reduce, if not eliminate, the risk of lawsuits, thus saving further dollars.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

New Britain

# City Journal

## **Special Needs Child Goes Missing**

By Robin Vinci at September 11, 2014 | 6:15 pm |



Tay Pérez Sierra wants the public to be aware of the disasters that could happen because the New Britain schools do not have enough para-educators.

On Tuesday, Sept. 9 her special needs daughter, Yuansueé Burgos-Perez, a 17-year-old senior at New Britain High School, did not come home from school on the bus as she does every day. Perez has mental retardation, speech problems and is a selected mute so she will not talk to everybody.

“She gets door to door transportation. At 3 p.m. her bus never showed up and alarms started going off,” said Sierra. “I called Dattco to make sure she was picked up and the dispatcher said she was not on the bus.”

So Sierra called New Britain High School frantic. No one answered because school was over. So she called Rebecca Dadonna, director of special needs.

“She said ‘please tell me she is there’ and I said no,” said Sierra. “It was 45 minutes after dismissal.”

Sierra’s husband Eduardo Varga went to the school and said no one was doing anything except walking around the school looking for her.

“I called the cops and they went to the school to start taking information,” said Sierra. “They needed more back-up, but did not have it because there was someone with a gun on Tremont St.” Sierra, who has a home licensed daycare center, was unable to leave to look for her daughter.

“I started calling family members,” said Sierra. “I was trying to keep calm, because I have other priorities to take care of the daycare children.”

Sierra said her sister went looking for Yuansueé and found her walking on Osgood Street near the cemetery. The family lives on Slater Road.

“That was at 4:19 p.m.,” Sierra recalls. “She was extremely hungry, thirsty and tired. That was three and one-half miles from the school.”

Yuansuee told Sierra she walked home.

“I’m so proud of her. She must have taken the bus route. She knew she was heading home,” said Sierra. “But she must have crossed a lot of streets and intersections. This child is always home or at school. She is a flight risk and the school knows this.”

Yuansueé has had a one on one para with her from 3rd grade to the beginning of 11th grade.

“I was hesitant about her not having a para. Last year they assured me that she was safe and was doing much better and needed her independence,” said Sierra. “I said okay, fine let’s see where this takes us. They let go too much.”

Yuansueé may return to school on Thursday, but Sierra isn’t sure.

“After all this, I would like more para’s reinstated in special needs classroom to alleviate some of the staff burden and better safety protocols and procedures in place,” she said. “I had a happy ending, but what about that parent in Hartford who is still looking for their child? I want to bring a positive change out of this.”

Sierra wants special need parents to learn about their children’s rights on websites and speak up for their child because no one else will.

“This could have been prevented. It all comes down to money,” said Sierra. “This is the result of the elimination of para’s and I am angry.”

Dr. Ann Carabillo, Director of Pupil Services, did not return phone calls as of press time.