

Program Review and Investigations Committee
September 24, 2014
SCHOOL PARAPROFESSIONALS STAFFING STUDY

Senator Kissel, Representative Mushinsky and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee:

This study is long time overdue. I have been negotiating municipal contracts for ParaProfessionals for many years. Even the title ParaProfessional was insufficient, which is why we have begun referring to them as ParaEducators. Today's paras have evolved into education specialists. ParaEducators have evolved from being moms in the classroom, where many took the jobs to follow their children through school, to working with the most challenging and the most difficult children in the school system; from children within the Autism Spectrum, to the hearing and sight impaired, to children with developmental disabilities, to the medically fragile, to providing job training for students transitioning into the community, as well as working with children in the early childhood programs.

There needs to be consistent levels of educational standards for people who are Education Specialists: standardize the delivery system by which our ParaEducators provide education to their children; training that teaches the best practices for child development. There needs to be a best practices approach to teachers working with the education specialists in the classroom. Some may say that these needs have already been addressed—they have not talked to the ParaEducators.

Anecdotally, paras are more than sometimes assigned to students without specific information concerning the child's needs or knowing issues developed in IEPs or 504s for which they are responsible or without the training necessary to meet those needs when they are made aware.

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

Because of the diversity and the gradations of work assignments and work experience, it would be important for this committee to look at the development of a career ladder—so that ParaEducators with the desire to teach can more easily move into the teaching field, particularly in the teaching area of special education. Years of working with children as a para provide extensive experience for working with children. ParaEducators that are provided with the opportunity to achieve teaching certification would become a source for hiring and replacing teachers as they leave the school system. The advantages to that are certainly self-explanatory. In fact, many certified teachers take ParaEducator jobs when there are no vacancies, and using that experience to land a job when a vacancy occurs in the school system.

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

Thank you.

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