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Governance
Sheila Cohen, President
Jeff Leake, Vice President
Pat Jordan, Secretary
Thomas Nicholas, Treasurer
John Horrigan, NEA Director
Gary Peluchette, NEA Director

Executive Office
Mark Waxenberg
Executive Director
Capitol Place, Suite 500
21 Oak Street
Hartford, CT 06106
860-525-5641 800-842-4316
Fax 860-725-6388

An affiliate of the
National Education Association

Written Testimony of

Sheila Cohen,

President of the

Connecticut Education Association

Before the Education Committee

Re: HB 6968 An Act Authorizing the Use of School Paraprofessionals to Serve as Short-Term Substitute Teachers

March 11, 2015

Good morning, Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Sheila Cohen. I am the President of the Connecticut Education Association, representing over 43,000 active and retired teachers across the state. I am testifying today regarding HB 6968, An Act Authorizing the Use of School Paraprofessionals to Serve as Short-Term Substitute Teachers.

HB6968 would enable districts to utilize paraprofessionals who possess their bachelor's degrees as school substitutes for periods of ten days or fewer. CEA cannot support this bill as written.

As a teacher, I have witnessed firsthand how important paraprofessionals are in helping classrooms function effectively and in meeting the needs of children to which they are assigned. Although CEA recognizes the need for districts to access qualified substitute teachers, we do not support pulling paraprofessional staff away from critical classroom duties and the needs of their assigned students in order to serve as substitutes, even on a short-term basis.

Utilizing staff who are hired to perform duties in classrooms and/or work with some of our neediest students from their respective positions to fill in, even short-term, for absent teachers is simply unacceptable. And it could create legal concerns. In some cases, paraprofessionals are mandated via the PPT and IEP processes to perform their work with specific children. Deviations from a special education plan, including changes in staff assigned to a student, could be a violation of a legal agreement between parents and the school district.

In addition, with all the emphasis on high quality professionals and high quality instruction, as capable as a paraprofessional may be, there is no substitute for a person with a degree in education leading a classroom of children. Paraprofessionals do not develop instructional materials, nor can they serve as teachers as defined by law. Unlike substitute teachers, paraprofessionals are not required to hold a bachelor's degree. The assurances that classrooms are staffed with qualified individuals would be significantly diminished, and for possibly up to ten days at a time. For districts having trouble attracting qualified substitutes, lowering standards is not a very wise solution.

Districts that have difficulty finding substitute teachers do so not because there is a lack of qualified people to fill these positions, but because in many districts the positions are woefully underpaid. The solution to the problem of substitute teacher availability is not to remove paraprofessionals from the students who most need them, but for districts to make their substitute compensation competitive enough to attract qualified candidates.

This bill does not create a resolution to the real problem of obtaining short-term, highly qualified substitutes. Rather it exacerbates an already existing challenge for many school districts in Connecticut – how to attract and maintain a dependable and qualified pool of substitute teachers.