

February 24, 2016

Education Committee Raised H.B. No. 5305 - Support

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Cynthia Ross-Zweig and I am a paraeducator in the New Fairfield school district and submit my testimony in support of H.B.5305, an act concerning school paraprofessional training.

Paras come from all economic backgrounds, and often have a degree. They may have had a second profession, but have decided that this profession meets their desire to give back to their community; providing support, guidance, and advocacy to students. We are dedicated professionals and we care about our students, but we need training and resources to do our jobs, just like others who work in the education system.

Paraeducators in Connecticut's school districts take on many roles based upon the needs of an individual student, the students in a classroom, and the demands of the teacher in that classroom. Paraeducators working with young or physical disabled students must often provide hygiene care and support, inclusive of diapering and toileting for which the paras frequently receive no training or guidance. Paras regularly do not receive training in bio-pathogens and no masks, or gloves are provided to them. If a student becomes physically ill, a para is not even provided with time to change their own cloths, subjecting themselves to the potential for illness. Paras who provide behavioral support receive little or no training in de-escalation techniques, and therefore can be subjected to physical harm. Clearly paras should be provided the same protection under law as any other person who works in the education system.

In today's technology driven classroom, paraeducators are not given equipment to utilize for communication with case managers, therapists and other personnel who can be important to their assignments. Today's teachers and students utilize electronic data driven classrooms with multiple software applications that the para must learn in real time with the students, in the classroom. Teachers meanwhile receive data training in staff meetings on a regular basis, as well as prior to the school term. Paras are not included during these training times.

The goal of providing training and planning for paraeducators often takes a backseat when school budgets are factored in. While most towns receive money earmarked for special-education, school budgetary guidelines drive the para's wages. The paras make barely above minimum-wage and easily fall below the federal property line in most school districts, which is currently \$23,850 for a four person household, qualifying the para for public assistance. On average, the salary of a para is \$14,800 compared to a teacher's average salary of \$50,000 or an administrator's average salary of \$100,000.

Despite all this, we do have successes with our students. Paraeducators are dedicated to the education of our nation's youth even without any training and limited professional development. Paras work each day to support the needs of the individual students; however without state directives on wages, training and work conditions, we are limited in our true potential as a highly valued participant in the educational process.

While H.B. 5305 goes a long way and is an excellent first step towards addressing some of our training issues, it cannot be the end of the story. We will need to continue to fix the issues around how paraeducators are handled in Connecticut.

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