



Testimony of  
**Shellye Davis**

**President, Hartford Federation of Paraeducators, AFT Local 2221  
Executive Vice President, Connecticut AFL-CIO**

Education Committee  
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***HB 5384 An Act Concerning Paraeducators***

Good afternoon, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. My name is Shellye Davis and I have been a paraeducator in the Hartford Public Schools for 33 years. In addition to being Secretary-Treasurer of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, I am proud to serve as the President of the Hartford Federation of Paraeducators, AFT Local 2221 and as AFT Connecticut Jurisdictional Vice President for Paraeducators and School Related Personnel. I am also honored to represent my colleagues as Co-Chair of Connecticut's Paraeducator Advisory Council.

I won't sugarcoat what we already know is true. There is a crisis in our classrooms across the state. Paraeducators have reached the end of their ropes, struggling with embarrassingly low pay, unaffordable health insurance, no meaningful professional development, little hope of retirement, and violence in the classroom. They are tired of being ignored and dismissed, stressed out from not being supported and exhausted from working two or three jobs. They love being paraeducators, but they cannot afford to be the sacrificial lambs any longer.

School districts have repeatedly ignored and disregarded our roles, refusing to invest in us so we can afford to keep working with the students who need us. Over and over, our pleas have fallen on deaf ears. The only progress we have made in recent years has been at the General Assembly. I want to thank the Committee for really hearing and seeing us – paraeducators, most of whom are women and women of color – by raising HB 5384. If enacted, it will begin to invest in paraeducators in ways that ultimately help our students succeed.

HB 5384 will help districts retain and recruit paraeducators by establishing a minimum annual salary of \$45,000. It doesn't sound like much, but it is substantially more than most paraeducators presently earn. Nor is it too generous a sum. According to the MIT living wage calculator, a single person with no children working full-time must earn at least \$24.13 per hour (\$50,190.40 annually) to support themselves in Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> Setting this wage floor is an historic recognition of the value of our work. Paraeducators and their unions will be able to negotiate salaries that ensure they can afford to remain on the job.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/09>

As important as a living wage is affordable healthcare. HB 5384 does many things in this regard:

1. Extends the health savings account subsidy program administered by the Comptroller for the next fiscal year;
2. Requires the Comptroller to establish a health insurance premium subsidy program in the next fiscal year for paraeducators who are covered by a health benefit plan that is not a high deductible health plan;
3. Required boards of education to report information to the Comptroller concerning the health benefit plans they provide to employees, including premium costs, levels of coverage and the number of covered employees; and
4. Requires the Comptroller to use the data collected by boards of education to conduct individual costs-benefit analyses about continuing to provide health benefits individually or through the Partnership Plan and report that information to this Committee.

These are levels of effort and transparency that paraeducators have not seen previously on their behalf. We are grateful for their inclusion in HB 5384.

HB 5384 also requires the State Department of Education to proportionally distribute \$1.8 million in ARPA funds allocated for paraeducator professional development to school districts. This is long overdue and much needed so paraeducators can learn new skills and enhance existing ones to better serve our students.

HB 5384 changes the term “paraprofessional” to “paraeducator” throughout the statute. It’s a small change that means a significant difference.

We appreciate the need to define “paraeducator” in statute. The fact that our roles have not been previously defined speaks to the historical lack of awareness or regard for the work we do. However, we are concerned that the phrase “direct supervision” on line 8 may be problematic. Despite the federal definition, not all paraeducators are under the direct supervision of a teacher or another certified staff person. Many regularly work independently or in collaboration with certified staff. Others may hold a different title, but perform the functions of a paraeducator. We fear that the way this definition is currently written may exclude many who perform the role of paraeducator from the benefits provided in the rest of the bill. We respectfully ask the Committee to work with us to amend the definition to ensure it captures all who perform this work and are deserving of the benefits contained in this bill.

As comprehensive as this bill is, it does not address the issue of paraeducator retirement. Districts vary in the retirement benefits they offer paraeducators. Some offer none at all. We urge the Committee to include language that allows paraeducator bargaining units to choose to join the Connecticut Municipal Retirement System (CMERS). CMERS is a stable and well-funded retirement plan that will provide paraeducators with the economic stability we have earned at the end of our careers.

Section 30. (NEW) (*Effective from passage*) (a) Notwithstanding any provision of the general statutes, each local and regional board of education shall pay for each paraeducator, as defined in section 1 of this act, employed by such board the full employee contribution

required pursuant to the Municipal Employees Retirement System or any other retirement system in which such board participates, provided such payment shall not exceed the amount of the full employee contribution required pursuant to the Municipal Employees Retirement System. (b) The Comptroller shall annually pay to each local or regional board of education not less than fifty per cent of the cost to such board for the payment of the employee contribution for retirement benefits pursuant to subsection (a) of this section.

We also urge the Committee to also include two sections that will ensure that the State Department of Education collects the data it needs makes informed policy decisions about paraeducators and shares that data statewide:

Section 31. Subsection (c) of section 10-10a of the general statutes is repealed and the following is substituted in lieu thereof (*Effective July 1, 2024*):

(c) The state-wide public school information system shall:

(1) Track and report data relating to student, teacher and school and district performance growth and make such information available to local and regional boards of education for use in evaluating educational performance and growth of teachers and students enrolled in public schools in the state. Such information shall be collected or calculated based on information received from local and regional boards of education and other relevant sources. Such information shall include, but not be limited to:

(A) In addition to performance on state-wide mastery examinations pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, data relating to students shall include, but not be limited to, (i) the primary language spoken at the home of a student, (ii) student transcripts, (iii) student attendance and student mobility, (iv) reliable, valid assessments of a student's readiness to enter public school at the kindergarten level, and (v) data collected, if any, from the preschool experience survey, described in section 10-515;

(B) Data relating to teachers shall include, but not be limited to, (i) teacher credentials, such as master's degrees, teacher preparation programs completed and certification levels and endorsement areas, (ii) teacher assessments, such as whether a teacher is deemed highly qualified pursuant to the No Child Left Behind Act, P.L. 107-110, or deemed to meet such other designations as may be established by federal law or regulations for the purposes of tracking the equitable distribution of instructional staff, (iii) the presence of substitute teachers in a teacher's classroom, (iv) class size, (v) numbers relating to absenteeism in a teacher's classroom, and (vi) the presence of a teacher's aide. The department shall assign a unique teacher identifier to each teacher prior to collecting such data in the public school information system;

(C) Data relating to schools and districts shall include, but not be limited to, (i) school population, (ii) annual student graduation rates, (iii) annual teacher retention rates, (iv) school disciplinary records, such as data relating to suspensions, expulsions and other

disciplinary actions, (v) the percentage of students whose primary language is not English, (vi) the number of and professional credentials of support personnel, (vii) information relating to instructional technology, such as access to computers, and (viii) disaggregated measures of school-based arrests pursuant to section 10-233n; and

(D) Data related to paraeducators shall include, but not be limited to, (i) total number of paraeducators employed in each school district, (ii) assigned job title, (iii) hourly rate of pay, (iv) number of working days and hours, (v) health care contributions as a percentage of salary, and (vi) annual salary calculated by multiplying working hours and hourly rate of pay. The department shall assign a unique paraeducator identifier to each paraeducator prior to collecting such data in the public school information system.

(2) Collect data relating to student enrollment in and graduation from institutions of higher education for any student who had been assigned a unique student identifier pursuant to subsection (b) of this section, provided such data is available.

(3) Develop means for access to and data sharing with the data systems of public institutions of higher education in the state.

Section 32. (NEW) (*Effective July 1, 2024*) Not later than December 1, 2024, and annually thereafter, the Department of Education shall post on the department's Internet web site and submit, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to education a report concerning the staffing level of paraeducators in schools. Such report shall include, but need not be limited to, for each school district in the state (1) the number of vacancies for paraeducator positions, (2) paraeducator to student staffing ratios, (3) the number of student individualized education plans that are not being met; and (4) the impact of such vacancies on students and student learning.

Lastly, we urge the Committee to include language that will prohibit boards of education from outsourcing the recruitment of paraeducators. Rather than spend the money to raise paraeducator wages or improve benefits, several districts have spent millions to contract with corporate agencies to recruit new paraeducators. Hartford Public Schools has spent \$2.5 million on a contract with Tennessee-based Education Staffing Solutions. Districts in Bristol, Norwalk and Waterbury have acted similarly. Privatizing paraeducator recruitment only dilutes hiring standards and generates turnover, further exacerbating the disparities between Connecticut's school districts. It is also a demonstration of bad faith for districts to use expanded Education Cost Sharing (ECS) dollars from the accelerated phase-in of the ECS formula passed by the Connecticut General Assembly in Public Act 23-204. The Committee can ensure this does not continue to happen by including the following language in HB 5348:

Section 33. (NEW) (*Effective from passage*) (a) No local and regional board of education shall utilize any portion of their education cost sharing grant to outsource the recruitment or hiring of paraeducators.

We understand that many will balk at the cost of this bill. Yes, it is expensive. But the cost of doing nothing is far greater. Connecticut has saved a tremendous amount by waiting decades to address these issues. Failing to act now will only exacerbate the crisis and drive more paraeducators out of our schools. IEPs will continue to go unmet; students won't reach learning benchmarks; teachers will be stretched thinner and thinner and classroom safety will become even more challenging. It's only a matter of time before something happens that can't be undone. We hope you won't let that happen. Please support HB 5384 with the additions we have suggested.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.