

Speaker: Sally Murek, Montgomery County Public Schools, Coordinator, Paraeducator Program

Occasion: Testimony for Workgroup to Study the Wages of Education Support Professionals – HB1234

Location: House Ways and Means, Appropriations

Date: Tuesday, March 14, 2023

Who: SEIU Local 500, VP Paraeducator chapter

Good afternoon, committee members, and thank you for this opportunity to be with you today to share my strong support for House Bill 1234. My name is Sally Murek. I am a paraeducator and the Coordinator of the Paraeducator Program with Montgomery County Public Schools where I have worked to support staff, and the instruction of students for 32 years. I want to say a special thank you to Delegate Wells for her leadership on this important issue.

Much has been shared with you in previous testimonies of how the heroes of the school system stepped up during the pandemic to ensure instruction continued for our students, our children. I wish to expand on the courage, flexibility, and stamina of the paraeducators. They were called upon to pivot instantly into a digital instructional world. Alongside of teachers, they took multiple and daily just-in-time trainings to learn all the virtual platforms and tools that would be available and needed to deliver virtual instruction which was effective and engaging. On top of the hours of technological trainings, they had to establish their “home classrooms” and set up technology for virtual delivery while spending hours collaborating with their peers and teachers. And they had to form their own small groups of students with teacher guidance while figuring out how to continue to support the students they were already supporting. Many also had to supervise their own children through their digital learning classes and being at home rather than in school or child care. Paraeducators had to handle the trauma and anxiety of the pandemic for themselves, their families, and their loved ones while carrying on with their prescribed task of engaging our students in effective differentiated instruction.

Educational support professionals, specifically paraeducators, were left out of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future for them to be recognized and respected as the integral partners in student instruction and learning that they are. They were removed in the eleventh hour before passage of the bill, and I hope the workgroup being formed by this legislation will rectify that mistake. They serve as co-educators and are due the same respect and recognition.

Montgomery County Public Schools has approximately 2700 paraeducators. 60% have a four-year degree, another 20% have master’s degrees and we have a number that hold Ph.Ds. Our paras have CHOSEN this as their career, not because it is “all they can do.” They love supporting the academics and growth of our students. They are flexible and willing to use their instructional knowledge and skills to quickly support school operations and instructional needs in real time as situations arise. During COVID, and continuing through our current school year, many, many paras have stepped in to be teachers covering classes for a day, a week, and even as long-term subs because of high staff absenteeism and unfilled teacher positions.

Paras build relationships to develop and promote the whole-child. It is not uncommon for students to have deeper relationships with paras, or other educational support professionals, rather than with their teacher. Paras are quick to pick up on subtle changes in a child's behavior in unstructured settings such as specials, and lunch and recess. They may see a gregarious child become quiet and withdrawn at recess, or a child who usually brings lunch to school to suddenly not bringing lunch and not wanting the "free" lunch that is offered. These social-emotional observations are then shared with teachers and counselors as possible "red flags." They also provide continuity to families by being there for siblings and cousins as they progress through a school.

Paraeducators love working in schools and supporting the academic and well-being development of our students, but they have financial needs and families, too. Low wages are affecting our recruitment and retention of these valuable and educated employees. Many must work second jobs and struggle to provide for their families, buy homes, and provide for their futures. We have heard terrible stories of paras being homeless and living out of their cars even though they are fully employed by our schools. Many cannot afford to live in the county where they work. More than half of all support staff working full time in 2021-2022 earned less than \$35,000. 70% were paid less than \$45,000. They are "essential" but are not paid as if they are. Paras, and educational support professionals, are the backbone of our schools. They deserve a fair wage and recognition for the value they bring to education.

In closing, I ask for your support to pass House Bill 1234. Our schools are worth it – our educational support staff are worth it – our children are worth it.