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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

**VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION:  
The Integral Role of Paraprofessionals**

*Hosted by Caucus Administrator Mike Schlossberg*

**Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021 | 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.**

*A virtual discussion on what role the legislature could play in assisting, recruiting, and retaining these essential employees.*

**Dr. Lucretia Brown**, Deputy Superintendent  
Allentown School District

**Elizabeth Moyer**, President of Support Staff  
Parkland School District

**Sonia Pitzi**, Region 3 Coordinator for the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program (ECYEH)

**Katherine Diorio**, Director of Pupil Services  
Red Lion School District





**WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

**of the Allentown School District**

**Delivered by**

**Dr. Lucretia Brown**

**Deputy Superintendent**

**For a Public Hearing on Paraprofessionals**

**Before the Democratic House Policy Committee**

**Thursday, February 18, 2021**

Thank you, Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Schlossberg, and distinguished members of the Committee, for the opportunity to speak with you today.

As we all know, of all school-based factors, educator quality has the largest influence on students' academic learning and social and emotional wellbeing.

The need for quality educators is especially critical in school districts like Allentown, that serve students with the greatest needs. The Allentown School District - the third largest school system in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania - operates 21 schools and educates more than 16,400 students. Almost seventy percent of our student population is identified as economically disadvantaged, 17 percent of our students require English as a Second language instruction, 17 percent of our students receive special education services, and 3.4 percent of ASD students are currently experiencing homelessness.

Paraprofessionals play critical roles in the ecosystem of a school, making classrooms more inclusive for all students, assisting classroom teachers, building relationships with students, and providing support to students with specialized learning needs - including English Language learners, students who receive special education services, and students with 504 plans.

On a personal note, I previously worked as a one-on-one paraprofessional for a non-verbal, male student on the autism spectrum. Prior to my assuming the position, he had been without support for quite some time despite the district's best efforts. I took the position as an opportunity to align my graduate school schedule with my own children's elementary school schedule. However, with no pathway toward more gainful employment, I resigned the position within six months. On a more macro-level, the Allentown School District maintains approximately 385 paraprofessional positions with a little more than 100 openings that remain vacant each year. This means many of our classrooms and neediest students do not receive the resources and supports they need annually.

This is why the Pennsylvania Grow Our Own Educators Act -- proposed by Representative Schlossberg as House Bill 2713 last session -- resonates so deeply personally, and with the community of Allentown. This bill would allow schools to provide a viable pathway into teaching and paraprofessional positions, and thereby support the broader community with an opportunity toward gainful employment options. City residents who are parents would have a pathway toward becoming an educator in the very schools their children attend. Anytime we can provide both economic and educational opportunities within the community we serve, it is a win for all.

Additionally, the PA Grow Our Own Educators Act highlights the Allentown School District's commitment to equity and leveling the playing field within its workforce as outlined in the Strategic Framework. Strategic priority areas such as the meaningful collaboration with families and community organizations, and the calibration of leadership at all levels of the district were identified by the school board of directors as essential to our district's success. Therefore, this bill is seemingly vital to the efficacy of our district and our community.

Mirroring national trends, Pennsylvania faces growing recruitment and retention challenges that disproportionately impact school districts like Allentown. This was true even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The Commonwealth faces a steep decline in the number of individuals entering teacher preparation -- a decrease of more than 65 percent over the last 10 years.

[Source: Learning Policy Institute/PA State Board of Education,

<https://www.stateboard.education.pa.gov/Documents/About%20the%20Board/Hearings%20and%20Roundtables/LPI%20Report%20Examining%20Educator%20Cert%20in%20PA.pdf>]

Another concern is the fact that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania suffers from a notable lack of diversity in its teaching force. The percentage of teachers of color in Pennsylvania, less than 6% of the teacher workforce, lags behind the national average of 20% and falls well below the percentage of students of color (33%) enrolled in the state's public schools. [Source: Research for Action, <https://www.researchforaction.org/publications/new-data-on-teacher-diversity-in-pennsylvania/>]

The identification of diverse teacher and paraprofessional candidates with the necessary credentials and educational attainment often is problematic.

- Within Allentown, only 15.3% of adults have obtained a Bachelor's degree, compared with 31% statewide.

[Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/PA,allentowncitypennsylvania,US/PST045219>]

- Further, in Pennsylvania, only 14% of Bachelor's degrees earned are in the education field.
- Only 19% of African Americans in Pennsylvania, and only 16% of the Commonwealth's Latinx citizens, have earned a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Only 30% of African Americans in Pennsylvania, and only 23% of Latinx Pennsylvanians have obtained an associates degree, the minimum educational requirement for a paraprofessional.

[Source: Town Charts, <https://www.towncharts.com/Pennsylvania/Pennsylvania-state-Demographics-data.html>]

Just as the prioritization of the development of career ladders and creation of meaningful partnership opportunities within the community are core tenets of the district strategic framework, so too is the prioritization of workforce diversity. ASD has made strides in the areas of recruitment and retention of diverse candidates and staff at all levels.

Let me say that great teachers and paraprofessionals come in all races, ethnicities, and genders. However, there are historical impediments that prevented some members of our communities from equitable access to professions in education. The challenge is more acute within certain regions of the Commonwealth. The PA Grow Our Program has the potential to increase diversity and equity within the ranks of the teaching profession in both rural, urban and suburban school districts. What is more, this initiative will advance the ASD equity initiative just a bit further for our paraprofessionals, and parents as educators.

The research is clear, “grow your own programs” benefit student outcomes in the areas achievement, and attendance. Educators from the community have the profound ability to impact student engagement, build relationships and demonstrate high levels of cultural responsiveness in support of teaching and learning.

In summary, legislation such as the Pennsylvania Grow Our Own Educators Act would tackle challenges of a lack of sufficient teacher and paraprofessional candidates, and a lack of diversity in the teaching force. By creating a paraprofessional-to-educator pathway and a parent-to-paraprofessional pathway, it would increase the pipeline of high-quality and diverse future teachers and paraprofessionals across Pennsylvania.

Worth noting, is the ASD experience with another grow your own program. the Residential Experience for Aspiring Leaders (REAL) program. This state-funded, grow-your-own program has provided a pathway for more women of color into the ranks of principalship within ASD. To date, more than half of the participants identify as female, and minority educators.

We believe that the replication of this type of approach to address the teacher and paraprofessional workforce would benefit our district and the students we serve greatly.

In closing, the Allentown School District through its school board of directors, administration, staff, students, and families looks forward to supporting and working with you on this important educational topic.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify today.

# Challenges of the Paraprofessional

Over time, the role of the paraprofessional has evolved into a multifaceted role with increased responsibilities and complex tasks. Federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB/2001), amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA/1997 and 2004), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA/2015) have had an impact on paraprofessionals employment, training, and supervision. In addition, as the traditional roles of the teacher changed, so has the role of the paraprofessional. Along with the changing role have come many challenges for paraprofessionals.

When the position of "teacher aides" was established, the primary responsibilities included clerical tasks, monitoring students during non-instruction times, maintaining the classroom environment, duplicating materials for instruction, and every now and then reinforcing lessons taught by the teacher. Fast forward to today ... the paraprofessional role has evolved into something carrying much greater responsibility and requiring more technically multifaceted tasks. Because of the complexity of today's paraprofessional position, the title of paraeducator is perhaps more of an accurate title that distinguishes an educator from other paraprofessionals who work in other fields. The title of paraeducator is also more in line with other professional titles such as paramedic and paralegal.

Adequate training that enables paraprofessionals to handle the worsening student behavioral aspect of the job is needed. On the job training with a behavior specialist would allow paraprofessionals to feel confident and more prepared to manage student behavior. Computer modules and professional development programs offer information, but not the real time guidance that is needed in the midst a difficult behavioral situation.

Even with improved training, paraprofessionals should not be required to participate in certain tasks that leave them very vulnerable. One paraprofessional described a situation where she cared for a student who needed to lay on a mat in the classroom due to a spinal cord surgery incision that didn't heal. The paraprofessional was required to turn the student every twenty minutes. "I had a 3 minute lesson on how to complete this turn which occurred while the whole class watched. Another 3 minutes on how to transfer from the bed to her wheelchair using a lift, transporting her through 2 classrooms to the lavatory while she was in the lift." The paraprofessional went on to explain that these procedures "should be done by a trained physical therapist ... What if I did something wrong?" Although every student is entitled to their education, the paraprofessional felt that her rights were being compromised and that it was an

unacceptable situation that left her vulnerable. Other vulnerable situations that paraprofessionals are subjected to include toileting and female hygiene. These tasks leave paraprofessionals vulnerable because they take place behind closed doors with only the paraprofessional and the student. While we respect every student's privacy, protection for paraprofessionals is an important aspect that needs to be considered.

Another challenge facing paraprofessionals is physical abuse by students and the impression by other staff members that it is the paraprofessionals job to solely handle physically aggressive situations. One paraprofessional recounted an experience by stating, "I am challenged by a situation where an aggressive student in a wheelchair was placed into a life skills classroom. This was a difficult student who bit, scratched, and used his wheelchair with aggression." She went on to reveal her concern with the ability of life skills students to defend themselves, "Those students cannot protect themselves and have a right to a safe learning environment." Physical abuse from a student having an emotional and/or behavioral crisis is more common than one might think. We have had paraprofessionals experience wedding rings damaged, clothing destroyed, black and blue marks from things being thrown at them, students spitting on them, and the list goes on. To compound the issue of physical abuse, paraprofessionals are required to use their own sick time when recovering from an injury caused by a student.

Paraprofessionals often have a fear of administration retribution if they speak up about any concerns regarding tasks they are required to complete. A paraprofessional characterized her perception as, "A vindictive atmosphere of administration." Other paraprofessionals have stated, "I don't want to say anything, I don't want to get a black eye." Administrations that are open to working with paraprofessional concerns could help eliminate this challenge.

Lack of communication from and with administration can create challenges for paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are often placed in compromising positions without having preparation or knowledge about the student(s) circumstances. By having more inclusive communication, paraprofessionals would be more equipped to handle student situations. In addition, by administration communicating with and getting to know staff strengths, paraprofessionals could be more appropriately matched in a role that best utilizes their talents.

A lack of paraprofessional academic resources is another challenge that puts paraprofessionals at a disadvantage. Often the only way to access the curriculum resources paraprofessionals need to support students is by utilizing a professional staff members technology access. This situation exposes the paraprofessional and the professional faculty member to a technology security issue.



R-E-S-P-E-C-T ... that song title by Aretha Franklin sums up one of the most important principles for paraprofessionals. It is disheartening when paraprofessionals feel a lack of respect or even sometimes disrespect from administration, professional staff, and/or students. It is not unheard of that a teacher uses the phrase, "just a para". Paraprofessionals feel it is a challenge to gain the respect of those around them. It is a feeling of worthiness to paraprofessionals when they are viewed as a team in the classroom. Overcoming the "just a para" viewpoint is an incredible challenge that every paraprofessional yearns to achieve.

I want to thank you for taking the time to listen to the concerns and challenges we face as paraprofessionals in public schools. We are proud of the work that we do and we will continue to be a team player in the learning experience.

Hello,

I work for Lincoln Intermediate Unit as the Region 3 Coordinator for the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness (ECYEH) As such, I can not speak to paraprofessionals as a whole. Intermediate Units have multiple school districts within the IU. I can speak to the specific professional instances I have spoken with or worked with paraprofessionals when working with a student experiencing homelessness.

The times I have worked or communicated with a paraprofessional, it has been a good collaboration with and for district teachers. When working with the students experiencing homelessness, paraprofessionals have been utilized to assist with one-on-one time with students, have developed a trust and rapport with the student, allowing for greater success to succeed in school. Being homeless comes with a lot of issues a student must deal with daily. School can be overwhelming and, if not given a positive experience, these students can fall behind, have behavioral issues and not trust adults in their school to provide support and care.

Again, I can't speak to paraprofessionals as a whole, but I can say, without the paraprofessionals I spoke and collaborated with, who worked and cared for the students I knew experiencing homelessness, the students would not have benefited from their learning experience. This is both Pre Covid and current climate.

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**Bio:**

Kate Diorio is the Director of Pupil Services in the Red Lion Area School District located in southern York County. In this role, she supervises school social workers, school nurses, school counselors, and the English Language Learner Program. Additionally, Kate is the foster care and homeless student liaison. Kate is most proud of being recognized as the Homeless Liaison of the Year for Region 3 in 2018. Kate views her role as the Director of Pupil Services as one who removes barriers for learning to provide equitable educational experiences for students

**Paraprofessional**

**Role:** School employee who works under the direction of a teacher to support and assist students with instructional delivery or related services to students with disabilities. Support can be delivered one-to-one or in group settings. Services can be provided on in any instructional settings as outlined in a student's IEP.

**Instructional Paras:** must have 2 years postsecondary study, an associates degrees, or pass a state or local assessment. Must complete 20 hours of PD activities related to their assignments.

**Personal Care Assistant (PCA):** provides one-to-one support and assistance to a student. PCA may be assigned more than one student; however, can not provide care to more than once student at a time. Examples of PCA responsibilities are assistance in the use of medical equipment, toileting, feeding, mobility, etc. Personal care assistants shall provide evidence of 20 hours of staff development activities related to their assignment each school year.

**Educational interpreters:** provides students who are deaf or hard of hearing with interpreting or transliterating services in an educational setting. Interpreter must provide evidence of score of 3.5 on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA) for the appropriate grade Level or be a qualified sign language interpreter or qualified transliterator under the Sign Language Interpreter and Transliterator Registration Act (63 P.S. § § 1725.1—1725.12) and its implementing regulations.

**Issues:**

- Para roles are not clearly defined.
  - What can paras do and what should they be doing under the direction of a teacher?
    - Paras should not be teaching new content, conducting progress monitoring, or interpreting data.

- Experience and driven para often observe teachers and take on quasi teaching roles.
- PCAs may not have the appropriate training to care for students with complex medical needs.
  - Proper toileting protocol
  - Proper feeding protocol
  - Equipment training – communication devices, mobility devices