Hearing Testimony March 8, 2023
Senate Budget and Tax Committee
Service Employees International Union, Local 500, CTW, CLC

Senate Bill 735: Workgroup to Study the Wages of Education Support Professionals

SUPPORT

Chairman Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and members of the Senate Budget and Tax Committee,

Thank you, everyone. It's great to be with you today. My name is Pia Morrison, President of SEIU Local 500. SEIU Local 500 represents approximately 20,000 working people in Montgomery County and across our region. Our membership includes the thousands of support staff at Montgomery County Public Schools, part-time faculty at Montgomery College, childcare providers, and more. We are the largest and fastest growing public sector union in the county and state.

I am proud to stand here alongside Senator Zucker, MSEA, and other organizations in support of Senate Bill 735 – SEIU Local 500 represents over 9,000 support staff at MCPS which is the largest school district in Maryland. We represent para-educators, bus operators, office staff, building service workers, food service workers, and many more. On behalf of the thousands of support staff members we want to thank Senator Zucker for being a champion of K12 education and our members.

Senate Bill 735 forms a workgroup to study wages for support staff across our state and make recommendations on how to attract and retain staff.

Support staff are essential to the school day. But for far too long they have not gotten the respect nor the recognition that they deserve. School support staff are the backbone of the safe, healthy, and supportive learning and working environment that must exist if educators and students are to succeed. Many are second or third generation school employees who contribute to the communities they live in. For their extraordinary and essential commitment, support staff deserve a fair wage and recognition for the value they bring to education.

During the pandemic our food and nutrition staff continued preparing and distributing thousands of meals for students each day; security staff that helped at schools with the distribution of the meals, and bus drivers delivered meals to those schools and helped to distribute them to families.

Our instructional technology staff, including media assistants, worked to support the delivery, repair, and operations of thousands of Chromebooks and internet hot-spots for all students and teachers.

Building service workers performed additional sanitizing procedures in buildings. It was the maintenance workers that worked diligently to test air quality, change filters, and set-up air purifiers where needed.

Warehouse workers received, sorted, and distributed masks, sanitizing wipes, hand sanitizers, and later distributing KN95 masks and home testing kits.

Secretaries immediately pivoted to perform their duties digitally while remaining responsive to their administrators, staff, and parents.

And it was para-educators that dove into learning all the new instructional technologies so they could continue to support their teachers and students with online learning.

It was the effort that all these individuals did while continuing to support student and family wellbeing, while also tending to their own family and personal wellbeing.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, low pay is a long-standing issue for support staff, the median weekly wage for food services workers was $331, was $493 for school bus drivers and $507 for paraeducators. Also, nearly every state has experienced significant losses in local public education employment because of the pandemic. Education support staff are vital to school operations. As we look forward to the implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, my hope is that lawmakers use that opportunity to raise the wages of education support staff professionals so that they can live in the counties where they provide such critical services to the community.

For these reasons, SEIU Local 500 supports SB 735 and we ask that you vote yes and urge a favorable committee report.