

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1234

Workgroup to Study the Wages of Education Support Professionals

Ways and Means Committee

March 14, 2023

1:00pm

My name is Shari Brown and I am on an external assignment with the Baltimore Teachers Union as a PSRP (Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel) Member Engagement Team Associate. My prior assignment was that of a school secretary in many schools throughout the district to include elementary, middle and high schools.

House Bill 1234 is very important to Paraprofessionals (ESPs) in Education. Currently the study of earning wages that currently exist for paraprofessionals are that of a subsistence wage and the living wage. A subsistence wage allows employees to pay for basic needs but leaves no extra income. An employee earning a subsistence wage is usually living paycheck to paycheck. A living wage allows an employee to earn enough income for a satisfactory standard of living and to provide expendable income which prevents an employee from falling into poverty.

Members of the Baltimore Teachers Union have shared with the union that they are not making enough money to pay their monthly expenses and are forced to seek extra incomes by working a second and sometimes third job to afford emergency expenses like a surprise medical bill or a car repair. Many of these members are our Paraprofessionals, known also as PSRPs or ESPs. PSRPs are not only the most underpaid of all job classifications in the district but are the most overworked. PSRPs are expected to be flexible and fill in the many gaps that exist at a school. We take on the jobs that no one else is willing or able to do and still support teachers, students, families, communities, stakeholders and the district. When all personnel were allowed to stay virtual during the pandemic, it was school secretaries and custodial staff not allowed that option. We were on the front lines transitioning schools from virtual to hybrid after the pandemic.

The work of PSRPs is essential to ensuring that school districts across the state meet the requirements to qualify for federal and state funded dollars, yet many PSRPs are dependent on federal and state assistance just to survive. No one should have to work multiple jobs to support themselves and their families. Regardless of education, experience and years of service, no job, especially in a school district, should value our time and our labor so low - that there are not enough hours in a week to earn a basic living. No one should have to work multiple jobs to support themselves and their families. PSRPs are held to high expectations just like all job classifications in school districts.

As a secretary, school safety was always a priority of staff, students and visitors. I was the first person they interacted with and the last person they saw when leaving. Yet I was the lowest

paid staff member at my school. They say secretaries are the ***Heart of the School***, yet we are the last heartbeat of concern when it comes to safety and compensation. We deserve so much more. By passing House Bill 1234, legislators can make a powerful statement that we are not just the “heart of the schools” but that our hearts truly matter.

HB 1234 provides a much needed study to ensure that Educational Support Professionals across Maryland are paid adequately for the work we do and that we can stay in our professions and continue to serve our students, our communities and our school staff. It sheds light on how our low wages can't keep up with inflation and how this affects education support professionals in Baltimore and throughout the state. This is why the study called for in HB1234 is so important.

I strongly urge a favorable report on House Bill 1234.