

Take a good look at paraprofessionals



In October, this magazine printed a commentary by the superintendent of New York's Lakeland Central School District, Barnett Sturm, which proposed eliminating paraprofessionals from our schools and reinvesting the savings in other areas. Mr. Sturm may live in the same state as I do, but his views on paraprofessionals could not be more distant.

As the executive vice president of the 1.3 million-member American Federation of Teachers, I'm struck by how frequently teachers from across the country say they could not do their jobs without the assistance of paraprofessionals.

In California, for example, the San Francisco Unified School District employs paraprofessionals to help support instruction in more than 50 languages.

Sue Solomon, who teaches kindergarten at John Swett Alternative Elementary School in San Francisco's Mission District, told me that having an aide is essential to her classroom. Solomon is able to tailor reading lessons to groups of five students while the para-educator monitors the rest of the class. Her bilingual assistant is the link between the classroom and the six students who speak primarily Spanish.

The need to reach children from homes where the first language is Spanish is no longer confined to California, Florida, and the Southwest; it's a national issue. We are far more likely to find certified kindergarten teachers and articulate bilingual paraprofessionals than we are to find a large new supply of highly qualified teachers who happen to be fluent in Spanish and other languages.

Language assistance is only one area where paraprofessionals are supporting instruction. Wherever you travel in this

country, you see school districts dealing with teacher shortages and the needs of disabled and special education students who, through inclusion, are now learning in regular classrooms. Without the assistance of paraprofessionals, teachers would spend more time caring for basic needs and less time on instruction.

Unfortunately, in his commentary, Mr. Sturm reduced paraprofessionals to "local taxpayers who need their jobs not only for salary, but also for benefits." He implies that paraprofessionals take up space and that only people with four-year degrees have a place in our classrooms. This view is not supported by the facts.

A few years ago, Educational Alternatives, Inc. (EAI), the failed school management firm, took over the Baltimore city schools. The first thing EAI promised was to get rid of paraprofessionals and replace them with "interns" who had undergraduate degrees and were usually working toward an advanced degree. It was a total disaster. Interns lacked the commitment and dedication that the city's longtime paraprofessionals had provided. They couldn't maintain discipline, they didn't understand the community the students came from, and they considered some aspects of the job beneath them. Within one year, the paraprofessionals were back.

Mr. Sturm tried to defend his view by citing Tennessee's Project STAR (Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio) to show that increasing the ratio of teachers to students raised academic performance while increasing the number of paraprofessionals did not. Only one problem: The STAR study wasn't designed to gauge the work of paraprofessionals. It was solely a study of class size. A later study by STAR authors Barbara Nye and Larry

Hedges, published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, showed that "full-time instructional aides have a significant effect on both mathematics and reading in inner-city schools in kindergarten."

There is no question that we need to raise standards for paraprofessionals. The AFT has taken a big step in that direction by developing a training program to teach paraprofessionals strategies for reading and mathematics instruction, as well as classroom management and other topics. Teaching assistants from Anchorage, Alaska, to Scranton, Pa., have begun to take courses to qualify under the new requirements for paraprofessionals in the No Child Left Behind Act.

In my home state, we also have a rigorous state certification process for teaching assistants that includes a requirement for undergraduate credits and a tough test that paraprofessionals must pass. AFT's state affiliate, the New York State United Teachers, offers undergraduate courses in conjunction with two- and four-year colleges to para-educators, as well as intensive professional development workshops for teaching assistants.

The one place in which Superintendent Sturm and I see eye to eye is the need for an empirical study, along the lines of STAR, on the work of paraprofessionals. I'm confident such a study would show that the nation's one million paraprofessionals are making a big difference for students. Until we get that study, I recommend that Mr. Sturm and others look closely at the work of this nation's paraprofessionals. There's a lot to see.

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