



January 27, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health,
Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of the 1.6 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, the majority of whom work as paraprofessionals and teachers in America's classrooms, we write to encourage you to maintain the current law's qualification requirements for paraprofessionals as you reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Thirteen years ago, No Child Left Behind put in place qualification requirements for paraprofessionals working in Title I schools that ensured paraprofessionals had the knowledge and skills needed to fully assist in teaching and learning in classrooms across America. For many school systems at the time, there were few or no qualification requirements, so these systems hired individuals with little or no experience or education background, and provided no professional training. They were often assigned classroom tasks for which, through no fault of their own, they were neither prepared nor equipped.

Today, because of the requirements put in place by NCLB, paraprofessionals are qualified and prepared to provide needed instructional support. For example, in the Baltimore City Public Schools, implementation of the federal standards led to higher-quality, systemic and on-going professional development for paraprofessionals. Initially, this was done to help paraprofessionals meet the NCLB qualification requirements, but it has since been sustained. Baltimore City schools have gone on to develop a sophisticated and comprehensive professional development program that provides paraprofessionals with high-quality training on a variety of topics, allowing paraprofessionals opportunities to improve their ability to support their students' learning. In addition, following the implementation of the standards, the Baltimore City Public Schools reorganized its paraprofessional workforce to ensure that only those paraprofessionals who met the NCLB standards were placed in classrooms. Paraprofessionals who did not meet the standards and had previously been working in classrooms with students were given non-classroom-based assignments. This significantly raised the level of academic support provided to Baltimore students.

American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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Other examples abound. In Pittsburgh, the paraprofessional qualification requirements have ensured that paraprofessionals receive the training and professional development they need to keep abreast of frequently changing curricula so they can ably assist students. And in Albuquerque, N.M., the NCLB qualification requirements helped the district better serve its English language learners. Because of the requirements, the district created higher-quality professional development for all paraprofessionals that focused on providing support in the core subjects of English, math and science. Bilingual paraprofessionals now provide academic as well as language support. This has led to better academic outcomes for students who do not speak English as their native language. Because of the NCLB standards, in classrooms with diverse groups of students at diverse reading levels, paraprofessionals, under the supervision of a teacher, can work with small groups of students mastering one set of skills while the teacher works with another group on another set of skills. In this case, school systems need paraprofessionals who have developed the academic and pedagogical skills to assist students.

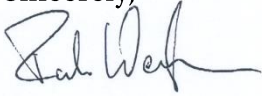
The ESEA discussion draft currently being considered by your committee would roll back the qualification requirements for paraprofessionals working in Title I schools, and simply require that such paraprofessionals meet whatever certification and licensure requirements states have for them. This is a problem: Many states never implemented their own standards because the federal standards for NCLB-funded positions were in place. Unlike the highly qualified requirements for teachers, which are generally regarded as a low bar 13 years after their introduction in NCLB, the qualifications requirements for paraprofessionals still stand as a high bar.

Because of the inconsistent nature of assignment and preparation, the AFT has a very long history of support for standards for employment and training of paraprofessionals. We initially did not support the NCLB-established standards, since experience told us that state-level standards would have more permanency. Thus, during the last reauthorization, the AFT worked to ensure that the standards for paraprofessionals were fair and achieved the goal of improving outcomes for children. Since then, we have worked to codify these standards in state law so paraprofessionals and the students they serve would be protected from any federal rollback of standards.

Having ESEA-established standards for employment, training and responsibilities ensures consistency in the qualifications and deployment of paraprofessionals across states and grade levels, and ensures that districts hire qualified individuals to work as paraprofessionals and provide the necessary support they need to guarantee students success.

As you reauthorize ESEA, we urge you to maintain the strong standards for paraprofessionals set by NCLB so they can fully support America's students as they prepare to succeed in the 21st century.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten
President



Lorretta Johnson
Secretary-Treasurer

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