"I JUST WANT THE DIGNITY OF MY WORK RECOGNIZED."

ESEA retains high standards for paraprofessionals

PSRPs add to the mix on Schoolhouse Voices

Affirming our stand for racial equity
President Obama signs new ESEA legislation
Paraprofessional standards will stay in place

THE WAIT IS OVER for a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which ushered in the era of paraprofessionals after its original passage in 1965.

The Every Student Succeeds Act retains formulas to help schools mitigate the effects of concentrated poverty and preserves vital language that will maintain high standards for paraprofessionals. Signed into law Dec. 10, the federal law will be a sea change for public education. Although not perfect, it goes a long way toward fixing its flawed predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act.

The new legislation keeps certification for paraprofessionals and strengthens provisions requiring collaboration between paraprofessionals and teachers on school improvement and professional development.

The law also maintains the federal funding commitment to children living in poverty, and re-envision accountability that, until now, has been only about test scores. And it expands collective bargaining protections.

AFT President Randi Weingarten points to the bill’s passage as an example of how PSRPs make a difference in education. Congress received repeated waves of calls, letters and visits from paraprofessionals and school-related personnel in the year leading up to the vote.

“We wouldn’t be here without you,” Weingarten says. “Our members worked hard to make sure that we, as people who want to make a difference in students’ lives, were heard. More than 130,000 of you took action online, made phone calls, submitted comments on the bill and met with your members of Congress, and it made a difference.”

Most important, PSRPs look forward to educators having the latitude to teach to the needs and aspirations of all our children.
PSRPs, rising together to the challenge
LORRETTA JOHNSON, AFT Secretary-Treasurer

IT’S BEEN A LONG JOURNEY since the day we had a massive snowstorm in Baltimore, soon after I started my career in the classroom as a paraprofessional. Teachers were sent home, and my co-workers and I were left alone to keep the students safe. At the time, we earned $2.25 per hour and received no benefits. And that day, we weren’t paid for our extra time or our important work. That day, that snowstorm, that disrespect—they inspired me to launch my first organizing drive. Now, 50 years later, I look back with pride at the union we have built together.

For me, my union has enabled me to build a career. It has given me a voice. It has helped me to be in control of my own destiny. But none of this would have happened if I hadn’t been engaged in my union.

As we embark on our 100th year as the American Federation of Teachers, and look back on a proud past that has included so many great steps forward for us as workers and for our students and our communities, we must also look forward to the challenges that are real, stark and just ahead.

Challenges like the U.S. Supreme Court case Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association that, if the court rules against us, could make our efforts to support working families more difficult. But we know that if we are prepared, our call to reclaim the promise of public education will be stronger.

Challenges like the threat to our job security that we face when national, state and local entities engage in unnecessary funding cuts. But we know that if we are united and speak with one voice, we can ensure that school support staff—from paraprofessionals in the classroom to school secretaries, security officers and all classified employees—are recognized for their contributions to our children’s education and are an important part of the school team.

Challenges like no access to the high-quality professional development we need to serve our students. But we know that if we demand to be treated like the professionals we are, we will be better prepared, have access to high-quality job-related training and be equipped to meet the individual needs of our students.

Just look at what we accomplished with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act. Because our members spoke up and spoke out—walking the halls of Congress, sending letters and emails, making phone calls—the standards created 13 years ago to help professionalize our profession will be maintained.

Back when I started my career in the classroom, training was largely by trial and error. I was one of the lucky ones—I worked with great teachers who helped me be my best for my kids. Now, because of the requirements that we fought for, my sisters and brothers in the Baltimore City schools have a sophisticated and comprehensive professional development program that provides them with high-quality training to support their students’ learning.

None of this happened by accident. None of this happened because we sat back and stayed silent. And now as we face the challenges that lie ahead, we must raise our voices to flex our collective power. Our union, our contract, give us that voice. But it’s up to us to use it.

In Jefferson County, Ala., our members used that voice to stave off the district’s plan to lay off 227 paraprofessionals and school-related personnel. They did this by putting together a plan that forced the district to revamp its finances and make cuts that didn’t result in layoffs. In the end, the school board voted to adopt a revised budget that not only included no layoffs, but also provided raises for every classified employee.

In Peoria, Ill., our members used that voice to tell agency fee payers—workers in a unionized workplace who aren’t members of the union—that “we need you.” Within two months, the number of agency fee payers had dropped by 60 percent because our fellow employees understood the importance of having a voice through their union.

Now as we face the challenges that lie ahead, we must raise our voices to flex our collective power. Our union, our contract, give us that voice. But it’s up to us to use it.

And in the halls of Congress in Washington, D.C., our members used that voice to demand a reset on federal education policy, with PSRPs at the table. “Do not leave us out of the equation,” wrote Janet Eberhardt, a member of the United Educators of San Francisco. “We need the skills to fully assist in teaching and learning. We do the work and we must be supported in the reauthorization.”

I’ll never forget the day that my union gave me a voice. That feeling has driven me, all these years, to make sure that working families across the country have that voice and the power it creates. As we face the challenges ahead, we need our collective power more than ever—for ourselves, for our students, for our families and for our communities. Together, we will reclaim the promise of America.
THE AFT TASK FORCE on Professionalism continues refining what it means to be a professional, identifying our members’ professional needs and considering what we must do to eliminate barriers to being a professional. The task force met in October after a series of listening sessions in which it gathered members’ ideas, all toward the goal of drafting a resolution to put before our union. Activists from every sector of the AFT, including AFT PSRP, are represented on the task force.

During its first meeting earlier this year, custodian Sonia Chavez spoke to the need for a living wage. The second meeting in New Orleans this fall immediately preceded the AFT’s annual Civil, Human and Women’s Rights Conference, emphasizing how tightly linked our basic rights are to being treated with dignity and respect at work.

As task force chair, AFT Executive Vice President Mary Cathryn Ricker welcomed members, who then examined aspects of professionalism such as a commitment to excellence and continuous improvement in knowledge and skills, as well as autonomy, authority and respect.

Ricker summed up the feelings of many school and college support staff this way: “I just want the dignity of my work recognized.” Yet, that basic recognition—respectful listening—is often withheld.

“Lately, our district has decided that anyone and everyone can do my job, with a little training,” said Sandra Davis, a special education paraprofessional and PSRP chair of the Baltimore Teachers Union. “We have to be the biggest advocates for our jobs.”

Later in the fall, Davis shared with other PSRP leaders her ideas on how support staff should be treated more professionally:

- First, stop lumping together all PSRPs, no matter how vastly different their jobs, by giving them the same one-size-fits-all job evaluation, whether they work as food service workers, building engineers, school bus drivers, clerical workers, paraprofessionals or groundskeepers.
- Second, make sure those evaluations are part of a fair and objective appraisal system.
- Third, provide coaching throughout the ranks of employees, not just at the top.
- Fourth, hire qualified, competent and trained managers who will be held accountable.
- And fifth, set and enforce a mechanism for due process, so that all employees are treated fairly.

Growing professionally

Supervisors need to know how to do everything workers do, and they need to advocate for employees’ professional development, said Januye Smith, a paraprofessional and member of the Buffalo (N.Y.) Educational Support Team.

Robert Chacanaca, a school security officer and president of the Santa Cruz (Calif.) Council of Classified Employees, said his school district
has lost one avenue for professional growth—peer review and assistance—to budget cuts brought on by people who constantly attack funding for public education. Indeed, the task force is committed to lifelong learning and advancement. Besides professional development, other visible proof of professionalism, task force members said, would include paid sick days, smaller student-staff ratios and greater community engagement.

One member noted that it’s important for the task force to meet nationally because too many people see the problem of not being treated like a professional as unique to their school or college; but in reality, the fight for professionalism is national—even global. PSRPs aim to turn that around.

“Our voices will be heard,” Chacanaca said. “People don’t see PSRPs as professionals, but we are every bit as professional as a teacher. We’re overlooked, we’re often in the background, but we’re right in front when it comes to a union of professionals.”

Valuing social capital

Researcher Carrie Leana, a professor of organizations and management at the University of Pittsburgh, shared her studies on what makes organizations work better. Leana measured both human and social capital, where human capital reflects individual knowledge and skills, while social capital is new knowledge generated when peers interact and share.

One thing that makes workplaces better is social capital, which unlike human capital has received little attention, whether in public schools and colleges or child care settings. For example, in fields such as nursing, empathetic care is a combination of behaviors, Leana said, including going the extra mile, cultivating relationships with patients and colleagues, and engaging emotionally.

However, even empathy, shown to improve patient outcomes, can be lost under unfavorable working conditions like high patient load. What’s more, she added, heavy workloads combined with financial hardship have a taxing effect on the brain, taking a cognitive and emotional toll on workers. Research shows a relationship between burnout and turnover. If workers feel high empathy but low efficacy, they’re likely to leave.

In education, strong connections among colleagues help students. An increase in a team’s social capital produced almost three times the effect on student growth as an increase in teacher ability. That is, social capital benefited students by a 5.7 percent gain, while individual human capital benefited students with a 2.2 percent gain.

This suggests that schools and districts ought to change their “Teacher of the Year” model—with its focus on standout teachers—to more collaborative communities of practice among teachers and support personnel.

A combination of student characteristics, human capital and social capital is the best predictor of student growth, Leana said. Yet right now, education policy focuses almost exclusively on the first two factors, ignoring social capital. School and college staff, as well as healthcare professionals, already know that collaboration is key, Ricker pointed out. “Human capital versus social capital describes virtually every negotiating table I’ve sat at.”

Being heard

Over a working dinner, members heard from a panel of local professionals in education and healthcare. When Ricker asked the panelists if they had advice for AFT members in Chicago, Detroit or Philadelphia, which are being buffeted by attacks on the professionalism of their entire public sector, they had a single answer: “Organize.”

Despite powerful opponents and heartbreaking setbacks, task force members and panelists both urged their fellow members not to lose heart.

The task force will recommend actions the AFT can take that will enable our union to be considered a champion of respect in the workplace and a gatekeeper of professionalism. It will keep gathering ideas from AFT members through their program and policy councils. Ricker says she would like to see the fruits of our work on professionalism make their way into local unions’ contract language, and is looking forward to following up “in a starburst sort of way,” expanding the conversation in as many directions as possible.

This work is leading to a resolution that will be presented to the union’s executive council in May, in advance of the AFT national convention this July.
Growing together in our union
How engaging a fellow member produced a new leader

BY KAREN KRUSSOW

HERE AT THE Robbinsdale Federation of Teachers in Minnesota, I was president of the educational assistants for about seven years, and with my retirement on the horizon, I found myself giving more and more thought to who would or should come after me. When our union vice president, Victoria Arabanos, attended our Education Minnesota Representative Convention about three years ago and we were rooming together, I had a chance to ask her about what she thought her future union involvement might be. Of course, she asked why I was asking, which led to the first of many conversations.

Like a lot of members, Victoria had felt the importance of our union but was only able to make it to occasional membership meetings. When we needed a new building representative at her middle school, I asked Victoria if she’d be willing to take it on, and she accepted! She quickly grew into her role of representing members in her building, especially in dealing with a principal who thought little of the hard work done by educational assistants.

Victoria pulled together engaging monthly union meetings that kept our members well-informed. Her enthusiasm makes her great at recruiting new members and getting them involved. And as vice president, she obtained a grant through Education Minnesota for PSRP professional development.

She has been our chief negotiator for the past four years and excels at that as well. For example, she bargained for educational assistants to be provided the opportunity to take, at no charge, the state test required for paraprofessional credentialing. Last but not least, Victoria takes part in lobby days at our state Capitol and recruits other members to attend. So as you see, my confidence in Victoria to lead our local union is without question.

PASSING THE TORCH

My plan was to retire sometime in 2016 or 2017, but I decided to step aside as president earlier and make myself available to mentor a newly elected president. I was more than pleased when, after a few conversations, Victoria expressed strong interest in running for the office. Her daughter had one more year of high school and a very busy schedule, so Victoria wanted to wait a couple years until she could devote the time and energy it would take.

As it turned out, that worked perfectly. Victoria put her name on the ballot for president last spring, and she was elected. We met several times last summer, not only for me to hand over material and talk about the duties of her new job but also to discuss what involvement she would want me to have in the transition.

On the day of our union’s leadership workshop to plan for the coming school year, it sure felt funny not to be going. Prior to my presidency, I had been vice president for 10 years, which added up to 18 years of camaraderie, joy and a feeling of accomplishment. All of this left me feeling a bit sad not to be there with my union brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, I feel confident about leaving our work in good hands, and I know I’ll be back in other ways. We held a small book giveaway in Robbinsdale, which provided free books to hundreds of elementary students through the AFT’s partnership with the nonprofit group First Book. Our next First Book event has not been set up yet, but we’re hoping for this spring. And we want it to grow.

How to join in

How reaching out to your fellow union members gets everybody involved. Contact your building representative, or ask to become your building rep! There’s a way for everybody in the AFT to contribute.

HERE ARE SOME OTHER WAYS TO ENGAGE:

Reclaim the promise of public education
www.aft.org/promise

Be part of the network
www.aft.org/action

Show your support for Hillary Clinton
go.aft.org/hillarysupport

Shape the future of our nation
www.aft.org/election2016

Join the conversation on Twitter
#aftALLIn

PARAPROFESSIONALS AND SCHOOL-RELATED PERSONNEL gather at our professional issues conference each year to gain knowledge and skills. Besides learning from specialists in our areas of expertise, PSRPs swap tips, tools and practical wisdom. We’re proud to announce that in 2016, we’re joining AFT Higher Education for a combined conference.
AFT issues groundbreaking report on racial equity

AFT ACTIVISTS spent the past year having blunt, tough, uncomfortable, courageous conversations about how to address the lingering effects of racism and inequity in our nation—especially related to black males. As a result, the AFT this fall became the first public sector union in modern history to issue an action-oriented report on achieving racial equity in America.

The report, “Reclaiming the Promise of Racial Equity: In Education, Economics and Our Criminal Justice System,” provides a framework for policy in national and state legislation, at the school board level and inside the AFT itself. As the AFT approaches its 100th year, this report serves as a capstone to a legacy of fighting for democracy and championing fairness and opportunity for all.

“I have been humbled and heartened by the overwhelming response from leaders and members around the country who participated in these courageous conversations,” says AFT Secretary-Treasurer Lorretta Johnson, who chaired the AFT’s Racial Equity Task Force. “I am proud that the AFT is the first union in the labor movement to address the crisis facing black males in a significant way. And for this work to continue, it will take the effort of all our members, including our white brothers and sisters, and the entire labor movement coming together.”

Members of the task force shared their experience in hammering out the report with the AFT executive council just before the council unanimously approved it—with a standing ovation. They described the emotion they felt as disheartening statistics about discrimination became deeply personal, and member after member described instances of indignity and discrimination—being followed in a store simply because they were black, or watching as worried white women crossed the street to avoid them.

Many white task force members had never imagined the reality of discrimination in quite so much detail, or heard about it in such a personal way. Many were uncomfortable confronting the truth.

“It is not easy. I’m sure, for a white person to sit among black folks and hear about the indignities to which we have been subjected,” said Keith Johnson, an executive board member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, an AFT vice president and a member of the task force. “It is not easy to hear that people who look like you were the ones responsible for perpetrating some of those injustices.”

Jeff Grider, executive vice president of the Portland (Ore.) Community College Federation of Classified Employees, a campus security officer and a white man, embraced that struggle. Just as the sexual assault prevention movement focuses not just on women taking action to stay safe but on men taking action to stop assaulting them in the first place, the racial equity movement must both help victims and stop perpetrators, he said. “My challenge as a white person is to teach other white people how not to be racist,” Grider said.

Shelvy Abrams, also an AFT vice president, a PSRP leader in the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and a task force member, described seeing members of the Ku Klux Klan parade through her town when she was four or five years old. Her mother told her “never to hate,” so she suppressed her anger, pushing aside the everyday slights she would experience as a black woman. The AFT changed that. “When we had that task force, I was able to say, ‘OK, let it go,’” she said. “Now is the time to speak up for my rights.”

AFT President Randi Weingarten said, “We must do everything in our power to make sure that black lives matter in every classroom, on every street and in every court in America.”

The report highlights recommendations the AFT plans to implement in partnership with its state and local affiliates, including:

• Fund programs that provide alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and offer meaningful opportunities for black male students.
• Ensure that all schools are safe and welcoming spaces for students and educators by replacing zero-tolerance policies with restorative justice and fairer enforcement.
• Develop and implement programs to intentionally help identify, recruit, support and retain black male educators and staff.
• Provide professional development and cultural competency training that helps teachers and other school staff understand their own personal biases.
• Create review processes in schools to ensure that black male students are treated fairly.
• Develop strategies, mentoring and counseling to create greater opportunity for black males to attend college.
• Establish partnerships with trade unions to develop apprenticeship programs that provide job training and placement in trade careers that can open the door to economic opportunity for black men.
• Expand our work with the Conferences of Chief Justices to help bridge the gap between minority and low-income communities and court leadership through collaborations to increase public trust and confidence in the states’ courts.

Other PSRPs on the task force are encouraging fellow members to pick up this work at the local level. PSRP Chair Ruby Newbold of Detroit, an AFT vice president, urges members to read the summary report on AFT.org.

PSRP leader Kathy Chavez of New Mexico, also an AFT vice president, notes the AFT’s history of promoting social justice and urges members to start teaching tolerance to their youngest students.

And PSRP leader Shellye Davis of Connecticut points out how universal the message is.

“This work affects every single one of us—it doesn’t matter our skin color,” she says. “We can’t turn back on what we started, so I hope we’ll all be part of it.”
OUR WORK LIVES often come down to a balance between challenges and aspirations. Challenges when we’re not given the dignity and respect we deserves, and aspirations when we reach for higher goals, like the best education for our students. That’s the case for two members who found that their jobs as paraprofessionals didn’t always tap their talent and experience. Through their union, they both found a way.

Karen Riggleman is a special education para working with students in inclusion classrooms in Kenner, La., and is a member of the Jefferson Federation of Teachers. When her students don’t understand the material, she re-teaches it in a different way. She enjoys mathematics the most by far, but also helps children master English, social studies and science.

Although the paras in Jefferson Parish would love to have district-sponsored professional development, they haven’t had any in more than a decade. That’s because Louisiana’s elected officials haven’t always seen the light on the value of public education. Not one state bill for support staff training has passed in more than a decade.

In the meantime, paras’ continuing lack of professional stature is evident. For example, on teacher conference days, the special ed paras are not allowed to participate in discussions—even though they spend more time with their students and know more about them than anyone. They may be asked to shelve books and do filing when they need to be coaching students in multiplication and division.

But about four years ago, Riggleman found a way to fulfill her aspirations for a bigger role. She attended a 10-day, AFT-sponsored training in Common Core math, and a separate five-day course. Afterward, she was asked if she wanted to become a national trainer. She did.

Now Riggleman travels the country training educators. “We go around now, and we train our paraprofessionals,” she says. “We all would love to have more professional development.”

She wants to impress on fellow PSRPs the importance of engaging with their local union. To make sure she doesn’t miss a beat, Riggleman also serves on the Louisiana Federation of Teachers paraeducator committee. “If you don’t socialize with paras at other schools,” she says, “you tend to lose sight of things.”

Why Common Core

One thing Riggleman’s partner on the math team, Jamye Smith, doesn’t want trainers to lose sight of is the purpose behind what they teach—that the Common Core is a set of academic standards, not a test. “There are a lot of misconceptions about Common Core still today,” says Smith, a special education teaching assistant in Buffalo, N.Y. Common Core was created in part so that students would be taught to the same standards from state to state, creating a level playing field for all.

Smith, a member of the Buffalo Educational Support Team, started training several years ago with five paras and the AFT’s educational issues department.

Since the cadre got started, it has trained hundreds of paras from Massachusetts to New Mexico. By taking students aside to reinforce material and catch them up to grade level, “we can actually dispel the myth that the Common Core is a test,” Smith says. “Common Core will allow our students to become college- and career-ready.”

And that, she adds, is the essence of professional development.