

Ken Page's Testimony regarding the Use of Paraprofessionals in Schools to the Vermont Senate Education Committee on April 29, 2015

Thank you for the giving me the opportunity to testify on this important topic. For the record, I am Ken Page, Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. I have spent my entire career now, almost 42 years, as an educator. As a principal, I was the LEA representative at special education meetings at my school and was responsible for hiring all staff and with the special educator's help supervising 10-15 para-educators at my school.

My initial observation regarding the paraeducator study was that the researchers did a very creditable job with this involved topic. At times over the years, you have heard me say "*but let me tell you how it really is in schools.*" But not this time. The people from the Donahue Institute got it right. Given that these researchers surveyed almost 4000 stakeholders for their work, I must say I was impressed with how thoroughly they articulated the problem, how they listened to the responses they received, and how they exposed the reasons for the problems. My comments however will go a bit deeper into the problem and the huge paradox that exists throughout Vermont concerning the delivery of special education services in Vermont.

Although I have over 20 years as an administrator, I wanted to get some current information about paraeducator use, so I called some long-time special education Instructional Assistants at my former school, Crossett Brook Middle School in Waterbury and Duxbury. These two people have over 30 years combined experience and have seen many changes in their roles over the years. I have included some of their thoughts in my testimony today.

Here are a few points I wish to make concerning paraeducator use in schools today:

- Over the years, I have seen the use of paraeducators expand as we have become more sophisticated about identifying student needs and have, accordingly, developed individual education plans (referred to as IEPs) to meet these needs. Each of these special education students have service minutes per week written in their IEPs, which become a contractual obligation of the school with the parents and the IEP team. *The obligation to remediate students as individuals who have identified needs and these students' desires be considered normal or regular and to fit in with their peers is the first contradiction I wish to point out.*
- Vermont is truly a leader in the field of inclusion. Our educators know from research and experience that there is value to "pull-out" education in younger grades. However, they also know that the true measure of success is being able to successfully do work that their classmates do. So, special educators and paraeducators provide "push-in" education, or better understood as being "*embedded*" in the regular classrooms. *Here is contradiction #2: The Vermont special education funding formula restricts funding for embedded work in regular classrooms by limiting funding for the special educator or the paraeducator to work with general education*

students who are mixed in with special education students. Regularly, paraeducators and special educators are required to participate in time studies which are intended to determine if any work they are doing is with general education students, and therefore not reimbursable with special education funds.

- **There are now models of successful practice that have shown tremendous promise, such as the SWIFT Model (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Intervention) and the co-teaching model where a special educator teaches in a classroom along with the regular classroom teacher. The problem with this is this: the way services are now organized, our special educators simply don't have sufficient time in their days to do all of their responsibilities well. You may be surprised to know that most special educators provide direct student instruction only about 50% or less time. This is because they have become as I call them "paperwork monsters." They are acting on referrals of new students suspected of having a learning issues, writing reports, coordinating meetings with parents and teachers, testing students for yearly compliance and calling parents for meetings. It is no secret that as a result of the demands of the job, there is not a deep pool of special education candidates because most people go into teaching to work with kids and not simply to push paper. *So, contradiction #3 is this: Although a special educator is technically the case manager for a student on an IEP, the reality is that she or he must rely on paraeducators with considerable less training to deliver much of the service to students with identified needs.***
- **I will add an important point here made by my former Instructional Assistants at Crossett Brook: Whereas the special educator is often identified as a teacher who works exclusively with needy kids, the in-the-classroom paraeducators have now become known affectionately as "helping teachers" who work with all kids but who keep a watchful eye and pay special attention to kids they are directed to serve. One paraeducator told me: "Although I have 16 kids that I am supposed to support, I help all kids." Another told me that she is assigned to two classrooms and provides the bulk of the service to all special education students because the special educator is stretched too thin.**
- ***Contradiction #4 is this: One would expect these paraeducators who have so much responsibility to carry out the contractual obligation of an IEP would be highly trained and well compensated. Neither is true.* Most paraeducators have a couple of days beyond the teaching days in their contracts, usually the day before school opens and the day after school closes, and have a very limited amount of professional development opportunities afforded them. Previously, teachers who didn't get teaching jobs would serve as paraeducators for a few years before being offered a teaching contract. This is not true anymore because of lack of compensation and training.**

The study correctly identified the barriers to change as the special education funding formula, limited capacity to implement multi-tiered systems of support, lack of capacity of

social service agencies and resistance to change. To that list, I would add this: dependency of paraeducators to feel valued and needed, busy teachers who don't have sufficient training in differentiating instruction for all students, and for more intensively needy behaviorally-challenged kids at very young ages.

But, despite this, the picture is not all dim. Let me point out a few suggestions and bright spots:

- 1. As you well know, one size does not fit all. So, a legislative solution to the number, qualifications, training or preparation of paraeducators cannot be solved by lawmakers here in Montpelier. It must be addressed at the local level, because every SU's circumstance is different.**
- 2. Despite Vermont's out-of-touch special ed funding system, your Vermont Agency of Education has successfully pursued and begun to implement the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation know as SWIFT. This approach promotes assigning paraprofessionals to classrooms, not merely as supports for individuals, but instead to benefit ALL students in a class; it also encourages writing IEP's to address an identified specific needs, not simply coverage by an adult, and for teachers and paraprofessionals to work as a team to design classroom support roles to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. This makes sense to me.**
- 3. However, as policymakers who look at systems, you can and should encourage innovation. Act 156 called for the centralization of special education services at the supervisory level. You heard Deputy Secretary Bill Talbot recently say that some districts have been slow to comply with this mandate. You can insist, and even demand with a penalty that school districts and their CEO, the superintendent of schools, uphold our laws. Centralization of special education services is the best way of assuring that systems can share resources, that paraeducators get training and that the compensation for these valuable services is uniform throughout the district. You can also ask the Secretary of Education to give you a report about compliance with act 156.**
- 4. Section 29 of The House Version of H. 361 asks the Secretary of Education to report back by January 15 of 2016, about an alternative funding model for the provision of special education funding in Vermont. I believe that if so many contradictions exist with what we know to be is the best way to educate most kids by keeping them in the regular classroom, then we should be looking at ways to try pilot funding models that are consistent with our belief with what is best for all kids.**
- 5. I have long wondered if we are paying attention to the wrong part of the problem by focusing on paraeducators. If we focused at ways to free up special educators time by hiring excellent, highly efficient special ed clerical assistants to do the phone calling, to help manage the mountain of paperwork, to do yearly compliance testing, to take notes at meetings, then special educators could focus on teaching and training teachers and paraeducators how to develop lessons where all kids could find success.**

6. Last summer, I attended an Educational Law seminar with Special Education Attorney Patti Page (no relation). She asked the roomful of us if there were any school districts that had a policy detailing the review process in place when IEP teams recommend additional staff to meet a special education need. She was shocked when not a single person in the room said that they had a policy to guide the review of new special education staff being added to a school. I contend that if such a model policy existed, then school staff would be forced to make the necessary changes to meet needs or to make an excellent case to an independent body as to why there is no capacity in the existing school to meet the newly identified demand. The key here is an independent body to review the staffing recommendation of an IEP team.
7. Lastly, you may be interested in knowing that as part of our teacher evaluation process, most Vermont schools have adopted the Danielson Framework Observation program. As part of this, teachers can, and should be evaluated in part on their effective use of paraprofessionals and volunteers in the classroom. I believe that if teachers were made aware that it is an expectation that they skillfully manage the adult helpers under their supervision, I have no doubt that they would they would make better and more effective use of paraeducators. The rubric below is part of the Framework. Here is an example of an example of a four point rating scale for teacher use of paraprofessionals:

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| Supervision of volunteers and paraprofessionals | Volunteers and paraprofessionals have no clearly defined duties and are idle most of the time. | Volunteers and paraprofessionals are productively engaged during portions of class time but require frequent supervision. | Volunteers and paraprofessionals are productively and independently engaged during the entire class. | Volunteers and paraprofessionals make a substantive contribution to the classroom environment. |
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In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. As you can tell, I think the study is on the right track. However, I also think that there are a few system-wide areas that could be addressed by the legislature, via policy, better compliance with Act 156, encouraging the development of alternative special education funding models and by encouraging approaches which promote differentiated instruction of students, and ownership of all students by classroom teachers. Thank you.