

For many children, the first school person they see every day is their bus driver. Secretaries can make students and their parents feel important, wanted, and welcome in their school. Paraprofessionals, who are often one-on-one with the neediest of students, may know those children better than anyone in the school. Custodians are essential not only to maintaining a clean and safe environment, but also, they convey a sense of pride and caring for students as they carry out their duties. Food service personnel often provide students with their primary source of nourishment.

The important influence of education staff professionals in the education of students is becoming increasingly recognized and appreciated. Teachers alone cannot meet the needs of students. Para-educators are more than adjuncts to teachers. They often provide the foundation necessary to carry out the teachers' educational goals. The interrelationship between all school employees is perhaps more widely recognized now than ever before, given increasing needs and expectations with decreasing monetary support for our public schools.

The Florida Education Association recommends:

Providing funding to ensure an appropriate living wage as starting pay for all education staff professionals (ESP).

Making funding available for ESP professional development programs; making teacher aides and paraprofessionals eligible for critical teacher scholarships and tuition reimbursement programs.

Ensuring funding that provides safe and healthy learning environments.

Providing equitable benefits for ESP and instructional personnel in the provisions of the Florida Retirement System related to DROP and reemployment after retirement.

Having the state and districts monitor bus capacities to ensure student and driver safety.

Ensuring that all cell phone restrictions placed on bus drivers do not prohibit carrying phones. This communication capacity, appropriately used, enhances safety.

Opposing ill-conceived privatization efforts.

Every day, education staff professionals play a vital role in providing a quality education for our children. They work to promote and ensure student achievement, safety, and overall well-being.

FEA believes that various forms of the privatization policy have more to do with profits than quality, and you're looking for trouble when the bottom line is profit, not kids. Private management companies overpromise and underperform. Most have dismal track records. Schools have been shut down, communities have had to sue, and student performance has never lived up to the promises.

Privatization does not necessarily save money. Contractors frequently underbid to win a contract, raising rates after they get established and agencies have contracted with them. District officials rarely consider "hidden costs," including the cost of converting public services to private providers and the cost of monitoring and enforcing the agreement, which the federal government estimates adds at least 4% annually to the total contracting-out cost to taxpayers.

Private contractors are less accountable to the public and elected officials. Private contractors are not required to open their records or decision-making process to the public and are not covered by open meetings laws or freedom of information acts. Contracting-out increases opportunities for corruption, allowing school officials to award contracts to political cronies or family members.

Privatization hurts local and state economies. Privateers are outsiders with allegiance to stockholders, not the community. The goal of any business is to pay dividends to investors, not kids. Turning schools over to private management means dollars flow out of the community.

Communities lose public sector jobs with family-supporting wages and benefits, leading to increased social service costs. Local companies that provide supplies, services or equipment to government agencies lose out when a large contractor wins a bid and their contracts are canceled. Outside contractors attempt to reduce labor costs by hiring minimum-wage workers, on a temporary or part-time basis, leading to a decline in quality of services.

There is a safety factor, too. Low wages and less employee screening have led to numerous reported incidents in which children are put at risk in school buses and schools. Private companies' practice of replacing experienced classroom paraprofessionals with low-paid temporary workers has led to increased turnover in the classroom and a loss of continuity for students.

PRIVATIZATION

Think private industry can deliver services at a lower cost than in-house staff?

In a first-of-its-kind study released 09/14/2011 by the Project On Government Oversight (POGO) busts that myth by showing that using contractors to perform services actually increases costs to taxpayers.

POGO's new report is the first to compare the rate that contractors bill the government to the salaries and benefits of comparable employees. The study found that while government salaries are higher than private sector salaries, contractor billing rates average 83 percent more than what it would cost to do the work in-house.

The study concludes "We're wasting tens of billions of dollars on a belief that it's cheaper to have contractors doing the work, without any hard evidence. The government should operate on evidence, not belief."