**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Anna-Marie Magdalena, American Federation of Teachers of Washington amagdalena@aftwa.org (206)475-8775

**Subject: Thousands call on Tacoma Public School Board of Directors to protect basic education in Tacoma Schools**

Over 2,000 community members have signed a petition calling on the Tacoma Public School Board to protect, not cut, basic education in Tacoma schools. This petition was launched in response to the district’s proposals for reductions in hours, transfers, and layoffs for 80% of the 600+ paraeducators represented by Tacoma Federation of Paraeducators.

The Tacoma Public School District decided to cut frontline workers earlier this month, sending nearly 100 paraeducators layoff notices and reducing hours for an additional 108 paraeducators such that they will lose access to their employee-based healthcare during a global pandemic. Since then, community members have been reaching out to Tacoma Public School Board of Directors advocating for Tacoma students and their families. Unlike Tacoma, most school districts in the state have not moved to cut frontline workers in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic-recession.

Rebecca Badger, whose two children attend northeast Tacoma schools is concerned about the effects these cuts will have on her children and is advocating for other parents to get involved. She said, “I signed the petition because the paraeducators are important for all students’ success, but it is critical for my child who needs the extra support the paraeducators provide. Everybody I’ve talked to about signing the petition understands how critical the frontline support is to students across the district. If the School Board chooses to go forward with these cuts, it will be extremely impactful not only for my child, but for every student in the district.”

The decision to support or reject these proposed cuts to basic education will be made by the Tacoma Public School Board at their June 25 meeting. “The School Board are elected public officials. We expect them to act in the best interest of our community, which means maintaining the relationships our paraeducators have with students in Tacoma Public Schools. If they choose to sever these relationships, they are putting the future of our students in jeopardy,” said Glory Tichy, President of the Tacoma Federation of Paraeducators. Tichy continued, “Tacoma Public School’s motto is ‘Every Student. Every Day.’ and if the School Board supports the administration’s decision to cut back services to our students, then they are not upholding the promise they made to Tacoma families.”

At Stanley Elementary in Tacoma’s Hilltop neighborhood, Melissa Roach has been a paraeducator for 5 years. When asked how the cuts will affect her students, Roach stated, "If the Tacoma Public School Board approves of the proposed reductions, my hours providing services to students will be reduced by 60% for the 2020-2021 school year. Many of these students don’t have much support at home and I have watched these kids become amazing students because I have been with the same class for so long. One such student’s mother died last year after months of hospitalization. I was able to tell, with a glance of his eyes, that he was needing emotional support. I would gesture him back to my table, let him put his head down, talk if he needed or to go for a walk if he wanted to pull himself together away from his peers. The teacher isn’t able to catch every difficult moment that, before we got it under control, led to extremely escalated behavior and would make teaching the rest of the students near impossible. I am a constant in this student’s life and he is so desperate for more support that he is not getting at home. Now that my hours have been reduced so drastically, who will provide this support if his safety net is not available?”

The Tacoma Education Association, a union which represents the Tacoma Public School Teachers and organized a week-long strike in September of 2018, stated in a letter to the School Board, “Our paraeducators are a vital link in supporting students and making sure students have access to the best education possible. As we return to school in the fall, our students are going to need extra support after the considerable disruption due to the COVID-19 school closure. The drastic cuts to projected staffing for paraeducators raises huge concerns in how students will be supported and education will be delivered.”

The community petition will be presented to the School Board at their meeting on June 25 at 6 p.m. Members of the public are encouraged to voice their support for basic education, and the paraeducators who provide it, by submitting statements to the Board 24 hours in advance of the meeting or during the Facebook Live event at www.facebook.com/tacomaschools.