

PRESS RELEASE

Subject: Tacoma Public Schools cuts vital services to vulnerable students

Contact: Anna-Marie Magdalena, American Federation of Teachers of Washington
amagdalen@aftwa.org; (206)475-8775; www.tacoma461.org

Tacoma, Washington

June 2, 2020

Tacoma Public Schools is cutting basic education services to the most vulnerable students in the Tacoma Public School District. Yesterday, paraeducators received reduction in hours and lay-off notices resulting in an over 50% reduction in one-on-one support time with students in the Tacoma Public School District. The district's decision is putting the right to basic education at risk. This right is guaranteed to every public school student in the state constitution affirmed by the McCleary decision.

Every Tacoma school will lose critical members of their education teams because the Tacoma School District has reduced hours, transferred, or laid off over 400 dedicated paraeducators. Critical student and family relationships will be severed with over 100 paraeducators being laid off. Additionally, because the district is laying off or reducing hours, over 200 paraeducators will lose their health insurance during the pandemic.

"In every Tacoma school we provide critical support to students and these students haven't gone anywhere. It makes zero sense to me that Tacoma Public Schools has chosen to decrease so many positions and laid off numerous paraeducators when our students need us now more than ever. The district shouldn't be trying to balance their budget on the back of basic education," said Glory Tichy, President of the Tacoma Federation of Paraeducators.

In reaction to hearing about these cuts, Lara Hruska, founding partner of Cedar Law PLLC, stated "I can't imagine how the district can do this without denying students access to basic education and federal civil rights. It is devastating to hear the Tacoma Public School is sacrificing these integral members of the educational team when they should be strategizing about how to use them more effectively during the pandemic. I have clients in desperate need of one to one and in-person education who are entirely unable to access remote learning. Speaking from my experience as an education attorney and before that, a special education teacher, our paraeducators serve a vital role for students with disabilities where they are the staff on the ground delivering specially designed instruction to our most vulnerable students."

Paraeducators provide frontline services to vulnerable students who need special support to succeed in the classroom. Jessica Brennan, a paraeducator with the Tacoma School District, had her hours reduced by over 50%, "I have been with my student since she was in 5th grade and she will be a senior next year. My student is non-verbal. I am her voice and one of the only people she can communicate with in her life. By reducing my hours to only 14 hours a week from 35 hours, they have taken away my student's ability to communicate. This is a tragedy for her and will be devastating. I cannot fathom the trauma she will go through when I have to tell her the district is doing this to her. Tacoma Public Schools is choosing to make these cuts, despite the harm it will do to students."

The district has stated that they are responding to the need for distance learning and plan on limiting in-person classroom hours. For many students with Individual Education Programs, this doesn't meet their basic education needs. President of Washington Autism Alliance and Advocacy Arzu Forough asserted. "For most students with significant disabilities, digital learning in absence of in-person support of a highly trained educator or para-educator is simply not accessible. Neither the governor's proclamations nor OSPI preclude school districts from providing 1:1 in-person support for these students by school personnel in the home or on school property, provided applicable DOH guidelines are followed."

Community members can show their support for basic education and the educators who provide it by speaking out against the cuts at the upcoming Tacoma Public School Board Town Hall at 6pm on Thursday, June 4. In addition, paraeducators are asking community members to sign the petition to protect basic education for our most vulnerable students at:

[https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/petition-to-save-jobs-for-paraeducators-in-the-tacoma-school-district?source=direct link&](https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/petition-to-save-jobs-for-paraeducators-in-the-tacoma-school-district?source=direct_link&)