

## Respect Education Support Professionals

PSEA represents the largest number of education support professionals (ESP) of any union in Pennsylvania with more than 37,000 individuals who serve Pennsylvania public students as classroom aides, secretaries, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, maintenance workers, mechanics, and others. Our ESP members are the backbone of our school communities.

### PSEA Recommendations

- Protect the safety of Pennsylvania school children by enacting legislation and other policies to establish a safe school climate.
- Protect the stability of services offered by ESP members to students and the school community by establishing accountability around subcontracting of services by school districts and providing ESP members with living wages.
- Enact model legislation (see Illinois Public Act 095-0241 – House Bill 1347<sup>1</sup>) that would establish accountability and transparency around the efforts of school districts to privatize the work traditionally performed by school district employees – i.e. providing student transportation, cooking and serving meals to students, cleaning and maintaining school buildings and grounds.

### Background on subcontracting or privatization of services

Privatizing jobs held by public school employees is often presented as a way for school districts to reduce costs and ease the burden for busy school administrators. Contracting commonly replaces public school employees with for-profit employees in providing pupil services such as transportation, food service, and building maintenance. However, savings rarely occur; administrative tasks simply change; and public accountability can be lost. New issues are created for school boards, who remain legally responsible for providing a variety of vital public functions, but who have relinquished much of their control to the entity now providing those services.

**Privatization costs communities more.** It is difficult for districts to anticipate all the costs which will be incurred when private contractors are hired. As a result, administrators and school boards are frequently disappointed to discover that contracted services actually cost much more than anticipated. Too often, cost overruns, contract language loopholes, penalty payments for additional levels of service, or changes to the service itself cost more than the district budgeted for the contracted service.

# The Power of a Great Education: PSEA's 20/20 Vision for the Future

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Contract renewals often add costs too. Private contractors, like other for-profit companies seeking business, often “low-ball” the original bid to obtain the first contract, then raise prices – sometimes significantly – when the contract is up for renewal. In the case of the largest contractors, there is little economic pressure from competitors. Contracting for services does not save districts the costs of maintaining equipment and facilities, providing cleaning services and products, and paying attorney fees.



**Privatization changes the dynamics between the schools and the community.** America’s public education system is based on the principle of local control of school systems. Introducing large — in some cases, even multinational — corporations into the mix changes the dynamics in a negative way. The overwhelming majority of support professionals live in the school district where they work and often have children attending those same schools. Incorporating a contractor from outside the school district disrupts the sense of community. Support professionals are very likely to live in the district where they work. Contractors are rarely required to hire all the workers who previously performed the work. They will bring in workers from other cities, and maybe even other states, to do the work previously performed by district residents. In addition, labor relations are removed from the district’s control, which is neither good for the district, its employees, or the students they serve. Private sector workers are not subject to the same strong requirements as are public sector employees.

**Privatization leads to loss of flexibility.** When citizens complain about a contracted service, the district becomes only a "middleman" who can only complain to the contractor or enter into costly contract renegotiations or lengthy termination proceedings. Most privatization contracts contain additional charges for any change or addition – and some will even require continued payment for a discontinued service.

**Privatization leads to loss of accountability.** Public officials are less accountable when services are privatized. They are still responsible for providing the service, but less able to meet their responsibility. As more public services are shifted to the private sector, districts move from an open and accountable system to one that is further removed from public scrutiny.



**Privatization may reduce direct costs to a single district by shifting costs to taxpayers outside of the district.** This is immediately apparent in the case of transportation. Districts receive an additional state subsidy if they contract out their transportation service, shifting the cost of providing transportation in their district to residents across the Commonwealth. Contractors are rarely required to hire all qualified employees who apply, leaving any employees they do not hire as unemployed. Districts will pay the unemployment compensation premiums for the first 26 weeks, but after that the district where the employee worked only pays half the cost of benefits, again shifting the cost outside the district. This is exacerbated if any of those workers are eligible for public assistance programs.

## Background on the need for a living wage

Education Support Professionals keep school buildings and equipment functioning and students safe and healthy. As committed and caring members of a school community, they impact the lives of students every day. Yet ESPs are woefully underpaid, often barely able to afford to live in the communities they serve. In many parts of the state, school support professionals work two or even three jobs to feed and shelter their families, or earn so little that they qualify for government assistance.

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The term living wage describes efforts by workers to increase their compensation to a level above the poverty line. Generally, a living wage means a wage rate sufficient to pay for basic necessities in a given community. The guiding principle is that people who work a full-time job should not have to live below the poverty line. A living wage would be sufficient to pay for rent, food, utilities, taxes, health care, transportation, and childcare.

A community's tax revenues, which are used to pay the wages of public school employees, should not create nor perpetuate poverty. When public sector employers – including school districts – pay wages to working families at a level that results in their employees being eligible for public assistance, the employer is not paying a living wage but rather is shifting costs to taxpayers statewide for the public assistance programs the employees may need to provide food, health care, transportation, and other essentials. In addition, poor pay drives employee turnover, which erodes workplace efficiency and the institutional memory of the school community. But when school districts – often times one of the largest employers in the community – pay more, their employees spend more, driving the local economy and spurring economic development.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2007, Illinois enacted legislation that required third-party vendors to demonstrate the following prior to a school district entering into a contract: capacity for liability coverage, benefit packages for third-party employees comparable to the package provided to school employees currently providing the services, minimum 3-year cost projection based on generally accepted accounting principles and not subject to change, and criminal background information regarding private employees. The school district must also provide a cost comparison of every expenditure category based on continuing to provide services in-house or privatizing services. Review and consideration of all bids must be sunshined to the public and occur during a school board meeting.