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Thank you to the committee for allowing me to testify today. I work as a paraeducator at Bellows Free Academy in Fairfax. I appreciated the chance to speak for many of the lowest paid professionals in our school systems.

Although the details are different, my story is the story of many paraprofessionals throughout the state. Many are working moms with kids in the school.

About myself:

- I am 57 years old and grew up in PA and graduated college in 3 years with a BS in biology. I gave up a dream job working in the greenhouses and gardens of Vassar College when I was 8 months pregnant with my first child because I felt my most important job was to be a stay at home mom.
- Our family has lived in VT for almost 25 years. My husband was employed by IBM and had a chance to transfer to VT. We moved here before our two girls were ready to enter school to raise them in a beautiful state with great outdoor spaces. Both girls spent their entire school career in our K-12 school system here in Fairfax.
- I have been working at BFA Fairfax for the past 18 years. When my youngest daughter was in 2nd grade, I began working part time ½ days as a 1:1 paraprofessional in Kindergarten. This was my employment for the next 4 years. I stayed part time so I could continue to volunteer in the school and in my girls' elementary classrooms.
 - Coordinated the Environmental Learning for the Future program in the elementary for 7 years as well as taught the content in both of their classrooms (and other classrooms) monthly for their elementary years
 - Co-taught an ecology enrichment class for 4th graders
 - Led my oldest daughter's girl scout troop for 6 years
 - Member of the PTSA and served as president for numerous years
 - Initiated and ran an elementary drama club for 11 years. It is still in existence today.
 - Directed the middle/high school fall musical for the past 10 shows. Involved in our virtual performances this year.
- I moved to a full time position working supporting Title1 students, and have been working giving support in literacy and math in the elementary and middle school ever since. I give classroom support, work in small groups, and work 1:1.
- This year, I've been moved into a 5th grade classroom to give SpEd support for 6 students. We moved from a hybrid plan to 4 in-person days in January. There are now 23 students and two adults in what feels like a very cramped classroom. Changing jobs and being in a full classroom during this pandemic is definitely a challenge, but our school district is filled with a support staff that has always been there to do whatever it takes to create a safe, enriching environment for our students, and pandemic times are no different. We do what it takes. We're flexible, reliable, dependable, and always give it our all.
- My job was a perfect job while my girls were in the school. The pay was definitely not very much, but it was convenient because I live only 3 miles away from the school and working on the school calendar was ideal for spending time together as a family. Once they both graduated I had planned to move on to something related to biology. That was in 2013 and I'm still at the school 8 years later.



- I'm still there because it is still convenient. It still doesn't pay enough, but I do enjoy working with kids. I enjoy supporting those that just need the little bit of extra time and help to get them to succeed. There are many personal rewards to gain from being a part of their success.
- Because the wages I earn are not enough, I have had to supplement my earnings with additional employment in the summers.
 - BFA summer school program for 8 years as a group leader
 - Various greenhouse jobs after that. Currently have been spending spring and summer at Fairfax's local organic farm stand surrounded by friendly people, healthy food, and beautiful flowers.
- Member of our VT-NEA local, FWEA, since the paraprofessional staff organized in 2011. I've been in a leadership role each of these years.
- Negotiator in all of the rounds of negotiations, chief negotiator in the last 2 rounds. We just settled a 3-year contract in October.

Statewide Health Insurance Contract:

- On January 1, our health insurance fell under the 2-year statewide contract that was negotiated
- Employees entered the into the new contract paying the same percentage of premiums as they were paying under their locally negotiated contract
- An adjustment was bargained in so that in year-2 employees would see no more than a 2% increase in their cost of the premiums over year-1

My financial story:

- After working 18 years, I currently only make \$18.25 per hour OR approximately \$21,000 per year
- I used to fall under my husband's plan, but once he retired, I began health insurance at the school.
- Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, I was able to cover my girls until they turned 26. My youngest will go off my plan at the end of this month.
- Until April, I am on a parent/child BCBS HD plan totaling \$13,500 per year
 - I currently pay 10% of the premiums – about \$1350 per year
 - Next year the maximum I will have to pay is 12% of the premiums – about \$1620 (+\$270)
 - If the technical change does not pass and allow our lower wages to be considered at the bargaining table, I could be paying a minimum of 20% of the premiums in year 3 – about \$2700 (+\$1080)
 - That's an extra \$1000 in expenses for me not even considering the regular yearly increase in health insurance costs. GULP! I won't even have a chance to negotiate for higher wages to make up the difference because we are under a 3-year contract locally.
 - \$2700 on a \$21,000 salary means almost **13%** of my salary would go to healthcare premiums in year 3! This doesn't even take into account the out-of-pocket costs.

My co-workers stories: (assuming the same BCBS HD parent/child plan)

- The lowest paid paraeducator makes \$13 per hour OR \$15,000 per year. Our district pays the lowest wages in our area, maybe in the state. Without having the chance to bargain for lower premium payments, they could be paying **18%** of their wages to healthcare premiums in year-3.



- The average paraeducator at FWSU makes \$15 per hour OR \$17,300 per year
- By contrast, the **lowest paid** teacher at FWSU makes \$42,000 per year – (DOUBLE MY SALARY) – and won't be seeing an 8-10% increase in their premiums on top of the regular annual increase in health insurance costs. In year-3, a little over **6%** of their wages will go to healthcare premiums.
- Consider an administrator making a six-figure salary. Their healthcare premium costs would amount to **2.5%** or less of their salary.
- These are just healthcare premium costs. This doesn't include any out-of-pocket costs.

Conclusion

- 2.5% vs 18%. I don't believe anyone here feels that this discrepancy is equitable. The terms will be discussed and hashed out at the bargaining table, but without the opportunity to try to advocate for these lowest paid employees, many will not be able to afford to have healthcare. No single working mother with a child can afford to spend over 18% of her wages on healthcare for herself and her children.
- This is a bargaining bill, not a healthcare bill. Yes, we all are cognizant of the fact that healthcare in this state and in this country needs some significant work, but that work is for another discussion. It is not the time to do a whole rewrite of the law as the VSBA is promoting. The negotiations on the next contract will begin in two weeks. Time is absolutely of the essence.
- This bill allows us to have what we've always had in the past. At the local level, we have always had the ability to negotiate a lower healthcare share due to our lower wages. In the last statewide negotiation, we retained the ability to negotiate these costs. Going forward, we are asking that we continue to retain that ability and have the chance to engage in fair and equitable negotiations for all school employees. What we are asking in this bill is just the opportunity to be able to go the table and negotiate different terms for differently paid workers.
- Last year, S.226 passed the Senate. This bill is a rewrite of that bill. Circumstances for the lowest paid workers have not changed since the Senate passed it last time. Please consider making these technical changes to the law that will at least allow us to get to the negotiating table in April.
- I'm happy to try to answer any questions you may have.