

National Association of State Boards of Education



Education Support Professionals as Partners in Improving School Climate

By Darren Fleischer

For millions of U.S. students, the school day begins on a school bus, with the driver asking how their morning is going. Students may be greeted with a warm *hola* by the school secretary, a nod from the school's resource officer, a smile and a hardy meal from a food service worker, or a wave and kind words from a custodian. For these students, their experience of learning, socializing, and being acknowledged by a caring adult happens long before the first bell.

There are many types of jobs under the heading education support professionals (ESPs): paraeducators, technical service workers, skilled trade workers, and health workers. Making up about one third of the public education workforce from early education through college,¹ ESPs not only ensure that schools run smoothly, they also play a role in supporting the whole child.²

Schools are facing major challenges: staff shortages, student trauma, opportunity gaps, and students' sense of disconnection from their schools. ESPs are an untapped resource for addressing these challenges. They should be included in whole-child policies and practices designed to improve students' educational experiences, and state boards are in a position to champion them as partners.

In a recent study, I interviewed ESPs from across the United States to learn about their experiences informally mentoring adolescents.³ Participants described working closely with students who were dealing with homelessness, academic and discipline issues, anxiety about parents' divorce, a parent's incarceration. They worked with a transgender student relying on caring adults at school for support, students

who wanted to confront bullying, and a shy English learner worried about coming out as gay to their conservative parents.

Many of the support professionals I spoke with have earned advanced degrees and live in the communities in which they work, which follows national ESP workforce trends.⁴ Because they felt rooted in their communities, they contributed to students' well-being in ways that went beyond their required duties. They used their own money to pay for mentees' field trips, offered treats for academic achievement, donated a bicycle to a student, and built adaptive equipment for students with disabilities. Yet due to low wages, some had to take on additional jobs to support their own families. Many expressed feeling "lesser than" by their schools and school districts. As one explained:

We are the lowest on the totem pole. And it's like, 'You're just the cafeteria manager.' 'Do you know I'm a human?'... We're like, nothing. I can have the same degree they have. I have some college ... but because they have these masters, doctorates, and all of them, they are better than I was. They had more training than we do. My staff and I are what you call 'non-existent'. We're not part of the school to anybody.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT

In 2020, the District of Columbia State Board of Education passed a resolution honoring National Education Support Professionals Day and another congratulating a custodian for being awarded District of Columbia Public School's Staff Member of the Year.⁵ Other state boards can do likewise. They may recognize ESPs in a variety of ways, embracing them as partners in school improvement and elevating their professions through board-led advocacy and outreach.

Only with the passage of the Every Student

Succeeds Act have ESPs been federally recognized as stakeholders and consultants in developing state plans, contributors to school quality metrics, recipients of professional development opportunities, and consultants on state-level decision making.⁶ ESPs have made a number of recommendations on ways to leverage and expand their roles at the state, local, and school levels:

Providing high-quality professional development. Many times, ESPs are the schools' eyes and ears outside the classroom. About 85 percent of ESPs who witnessed school violence have intervened or tried to stop it.⁷ Yet they may receive only superficial training that is misaligned or completely removed from the high-quality training their teacher counterparts receive—specifically on positive behavior models adopted by schools; social-emotional learning initiatives; school health and safety protocols for such things as responding to allergy emergencies, suicide prevention, and sexual abuse prevention; serving LGBTQ+ students; and preventing bullying.

Some state laws go further. Effective June 2023, North Carolina will require all school personnel—including instructional support personnel—to complete mental health training on topics including suicide prevention, sexual abuse prevention, and youth mental health (§115C-376.5). Oregon calls for all school employees to participate in training related to the prevention of, and the appropriate response to, acts of harassment, intimidation and bullying, and acts of cyberbullying (§339.359). West Virginia's S.B. 230 requires all professional educators and service personnel having direct contact with students to complete annual suicide prevention training.

Easing career pathways. ESPs' skills, knowledge, and exposure to students make them excellent candidates for teacher pathway programs. In some cases, they may be more likely than their teacher counterparts to match the diverse student populations they serve.⁸ And they may outlast teachers and principals: ESPs remain in their professions 13 years

on average.⁹ Some states have created such pathways. For example, Connecticut's state board created waivers during the pandemic through the state's Alternative Route to Teacher Certification program for paraeducators to be temporarily certified as teachers.

Pairing ESPs with novice teachers.

Thirty-one states require induction and mentoring support for new teachers (one to three years).¹⁰ State boards can advocate for veteran ESP-teacher pairs to help onboard novice teachers, providing insights into the school and surrounding community. State boards might also advocate for language in their state's educator preparation program standards to incorporate language relative to aspiring teachers reaching out to and collaborating with ESPs. For example, Arkansas's Professional Educator Pathway program encourages aspiring teachers to build relationships and "establish ongoing two-way communication with learners, families, peers, administration, and support staff."¹¹

Participating in IEP teams. Federal law requires at least one "regular education teacher" to participate in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, but it is open to "individuals with knowledge or special expertise about the child." Who better than ESPs to fill this role? State boards can advocate for state and local school systems to use ESPs as participants in IEP meetings.

Increasing pay. State boards play an important role in advocating for increasing the salaries of classroom teachers and other school staff. They can investigate the pay differentials of ESPs in a variety of job classifications and work with state and local agencies to ensure that their salary is at or above a living wage. Nationally, a K-12 ESP working full time (at least 30 hours per week) earned an average of \$32,837 a year in 2020–21, and about 14 percent earned less than \$15,000.¹²

Elevating ESPs' voice. ESPs make up a third of the public education workforce, so they should have a voice when it comes to decision making and opportunities to provide feedback. Elevating support professionals' voice can be achieved by ensuring one or two seats on educator advisory committees

or by forming an entire ESP advisory committee to advise the state board. Boards can also capture ESP voices through statewide surveys or research, by seeking out ESP leadership or other trusted sources to help get the word out when there are opportunities for feedback, and by inviting a panel comprising ESPs to state board meetings to suggest ways to maximize outreach and identify state-specific needs.

QUESTIONS STATE BOARDS CAN ASK

To examine working conditions ESPs face and opportunities for making better use of their skills and capacity, state boards can ask the following (making sure to disaggregate by subgroup):

- How many ESPs in my state have access to opportunities to support school climate, student safety, and school improvement models? How many have high-quality training in these areas?
- Do our bylaws, equity statements, or whole-child education initiatives use ESP-inclusive language? Would adopting such language have an impact on outreach to this sector of the workforce?
- When did we last ask ESPs for their input on school safety and climate?
- What percentage of full-time ESPs in our state earn a living wage?
- To what extent do school leaders and school districts recognize and reach out to ESPs as contributors to whole-child education initiatives?

Students—especially those marginalized by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status—should feel that school staff care about their academic success, their individual qualities, and their overall well-being. Likewise, ESPs should feel that they are valued by their school systems, school leaders, and teacher colleagues. To advance equity and excellence for students and ESPs alike, state boards can take a lead role in advocacy, outreach, and research relative to this important sector. In the words of one support professional: "We all have to work together.... It's a team effort.... I took over the old saying, 'It takes a village': It's not one person that's there."

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NOTES

1 National Education Association, "Education Support Professionals," web page, <https://www.nea.org/about-nea/our-members/education-support-professionals>.

2 Nora L. Howley, "The Role of Education Support Professionals in Supporting the Whole Child: A Capabilities Approach," Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 2019.

3 Darren Fleischer, "They Have Always Been There: Education Support Professionals as Informal Mentors to Adolescent Students," Ph.D. thesis, George Washington University, 2021. Study participants included a school bus driver, a lead food service worker, paraeducators, a school secretary, a custodian, and a school nurse. The schools they served were located in urban settings, rural areas, and suburbs.

4 National Education Association, "NEA K-12 Education Support Professionals (ESPs): A Closer Look," <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/K12-ESPs.pdf>; NEA, "Key Facts About ESPs," web page, <https://www.nea.org/about-nea/our-members/education-support-professionals/key-facts-about-esps>.

5 District of Columbia State Board of Education, State Board of Education Ceremonial Resolution, National Education Support Professionals Day (CR20-19), November 18, 2020; State Board of Education Ceremonial Resolution Recognizing Brandon Williams as DCPS 2020 Staff Member of the Year (CR20-5), February 26, 2020.

6 National Education Association, "How ESSA Impacts Education Support Professionals," report (NEA, July 2020).

7 National Education Association, "Education Support Professionals: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Student" (Washington, DC: NEA, March 2015).

8 Vicki J. Rosser, "Education Support Professionals: Employment Status and Financial Exigency," in *The NEA 2011 Almanac of Higher Education* (NEA, 2011).

9 NEA, "Key Facts about ESPs."

10 Education Commission of the States, "50-State Comparison: Teacher Recruitment and Retention," web page, <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-16>.

11 University of Arkansas, Office of Innovation for Education, "Preparing and Supporting 'Day-One Ready' Teachers in Arkansas" (OIE, April 22, 2021), https://www.innovativeed.org/wpsite/Documents/Day-One%20Ready%20synthesis.pdf?_t=1652376757.

12 National Education Association, "ESP Earnings," report (NEA, April 26, 2022), <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/esp-earnings#:~:text=13.7%25%20of%20K%2D12%20ESPs,to%20%2435%2C124%20in%2020%2D21>.