

The Case for Teacher Assistants in K-3 Classrooms

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Recently, a member of the North Carolina House asked my opinion about the value of K-3 teacher assistants and the current divide between House and Senate budget proposals. Here is my response:

A series of legislative decisions over the past year has led to increased teacher disenchantment and to a growing concern among North Carolina citizens about the legislature's support for public education. While other budgetary issues (e.g., Medicaid) are under consideration, one of the pivotal divisions located within Senate and House budget proposals relates to the retention of teacher assistants in K-3 classrooms.

Presently, the Senate has proposed funding a larger pay raise for classroom teachers—anywhere from eight to eleven percent—by eliminating K-3 teacher assistant positions from public schools across the state. The House, on the other hand, has proposed a five to six percent pay increase while maintaining these teacher assistant positions.

Because so many North Carolina policy makers are resigned to move forward with tax cuts that will aggravate our state's so-called budget crisis and make solving the teacher pay predicament nearly impossible, members of the Senate and House find themselves in a no-win situation. The real losers, however, are our public schools and the students they serve.

For now, the portion of the House budget that retains teacher assistants and increases teacher pay seems to be in the best interest of North Carolina's public education system. However, if policy makers are truly focused on sustainable, long-term solutions, they should concentrate on an immediate, appreciable increase to base pay for teachers while planning for incremental increases over the next few years.

Although most teachers would appreciate the Senate's proposed pay increase, recent discussions about improving North Carolina's national ranking for teacher pay have demonstrated that our state's teachers are generally opposed to pay supplements that come at the expense of their school colleagues. This is especially true for elementary school teachers who understand the value of K-3 teacher assistants, individuals who provide an invaluable resource particularly in support of students with specific educational needs, including but not limited to struggling readers, students with physical and learning disabilities, and English language learners.

Teacher assistants are especially valuable in working with students in small groups and individualized settings, not to mention during whole-class instruction while classroom teachers facilitate mandated one-on-one reading, writing, and mathematics assessments.

Teacher assistants provide an additional resource for students but also allow teachers structured time to engage in professional learning communities, set up classroom activities, assess student learning, and take a much needed bathroom break. In many school systems, teacher assistants even hold essential positions such as CPR/First Aid responders, student medication administrators, school bus drivers, and lead teachers for school-sponsored after-school programs.

As an alternative to cutting teacher assistants, perhaps a more appropriate conversation should take place in education circles about the most effective approaches for utilizing the skills and talents of teacher assistants. However, this conversation should not be occurring during budget negotiations in a shortened legislative session. Moreover, teacher assistants should not be treated as disposable political targets situated in competition with other budgetary priorities.

Instead, we should consider ways in which licensed teachers can make better use of their own expertise to work directly with at-risk students in individual and small group settings while qualified, trained teacher assistants work with the remaining students during selected whole-class activities.

Unfortunately, this strategy finds itself at odds with the reality that teacher assistants rarely have extended planning time with classroom teachers and their services are often split amongst multiple teachers in the school. Further, these limitations are rarely taken into account when policy makers discuss the impact of teacher assistants on student achievement.

If members of the North Carolina legislature truly believe we should re-consider the use and/or usefulness of teacher assistants, a bi-partisan committee should be formed to examine this issue over an extended period of time. Rather than focusing on whether or not we should retain teacher assistants, let us focus instead on how best to integrate them into schools and utilize them in our classrooms by having a real conversation about qualifications, compensation, related training, educational experience, professional development, classroom responsibilities, assessment measures, and working conditions.

Such a committee should not only examine existing educational research but also engage in conversations with a diverse group of local and national education stakeholders including students, parents, classroom teachers, teacher assistants, school administrators, teacher educators, and education scholars.

As a former high school English teacher and current teacher educator, I share our nation's growing concern about the quality of and opportunity for effective literacy instruction in early childhood education and beyond. If utilized effectively, teacher assistants can play a vital role in fostering not only reading and writing but also the 4Cs of learning and innovation required by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.

My hope is that at this time next year any conversation about the impact of teacher assistants in North Carolina's public schools will be not only more productive but also more appropriately situated.

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