

Burlington paraeducators win pay increase

By Molly Walsh

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Burlington paraeducators won a three-year campaign for livable wages in a contract that raises starting pay to \$10.20 an hour this year and to \$14.15 an hour in the fourth and final year of the agreement.

The School Board ratified the contract Tuesday. It starts retroactive to July 1 and guarantees salary increases of 6 percent in the first year, followed by increases of 14 percent, 13 percent and 12 percent in the final year.

The district employs about 135 paraeducators. They work in a variety of roles, from library aides to one-on-one support providers for students with disabilities.

The cost of the increase to the district is estimated at about \$100,000 this year and between \$200,000 and \$250,000 in each of the following three years. District food service workers and some maintenance workers also are negotiating for raises.

The new contract puts school paraeducators closer in line with the wages city employees earn under Burlington's livable wage policy, correcting an inequity, said Colin Robinson, director of the Vermont Livable Wage Campaign at the Peace and Justice Center.

The raises are especially timely in light of the Burlington School District's recent discussions about student poverty and socio-economic integration of local grade schools, he suggested.

"When you as an employer are not paying a wage that will allow someone to support themselves and their family, you're creating a situation that is perpetuating the same problem that you are trying to address," Robinson said.

Many Burlington residents joined paraeducators to call for higher wages at School Board meetings over the last three years, said Jeanne Collins, superintendent of Burlington schools. The board is optimistic that taxpayers will support the increases at budget time, Collins said.

Paraeducators are not licensed and are not required to have a college degree. Full-time paraeducators are eligible for single health insurance after 90 days and can contribute toward dual or family coverage.

To qualify as a full-time paraeducator, the employee must work 30 hours a week and put in 180 days a year.



Paraeducators Awarded Livable Wage

Beth Parent - WCAX News
Burlington, Vermont - October 31, 2007

Paraeducators in Burlington are calling it a victory.

"We do an important job," said Tamara Musgrove, a paraeducator in Burlington. For the last three years, the 160 paraeducators in the Burlington School District have been fighting for what they call a livable wage.

Most paras are in the classroom, working side by side with teachers but most work one on one with students who need extra help.

"I would say it's equal to a teacher, in my position I do the planning room at an elementary school, so I work with kids who are having some behavior problems, so they can be challenging," said Musgrove.

Under No Child Left Behind, paraeducators are required to have at least two years of college -- Musgrove has her master's degree.

About 140 paraeducators are considered full time employees in the district, working 30 hours a week.

Starting pay was \$9.43 per hour plus benefits, but the Burlington School Board voted to adopt a livable wage policy increasing starting pay by six percent to just over \$10 per hour. After three years, para educators will earn over \$14 an hour.

"Residents from all wards in the city have been very vocal either coming to board meetings, sending emails, sending letters in support of the population of workers that don't have a livable wage," said Jeanne Collins, Burlington's school superintendent.

The new pay increase will cost taxpayers, \$100,000 this year and between \$200,000 and \$250,000 each of the next three years.

Taxpayers we spoke with say they are willing to pay for highly qualified paraeducators. "I definitely think it's essential, the work they do is extremely needed in the schools," said Debbie Curtis, of Burlington.

"I guess my initial reaction is that they should be paid a livable wage, and if they weren't before, I'm glad they are now," said Karen Hunt of Burlington.

The four year deal began in July paraeducators can expect their pay raise, and retroactive pay by the end of the year.