

THE GREAT DIVIDE

'You can't survive on this': Public schools rely on paraprofessionals but pay meager wages

By [Adria Watson](#) and [Deanna Pan](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 23, 2023, 7:57 p.m.



Paraprofessional Amy Morin makes less than half the average teacher's salary in Lexington. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Schools across Massachusetts depend on the Amy Morins of the teaching corps.

A paraprofessional, or teacher's aide, in the Lexington public schools, Morin works intensively each day with kindergartners with special needs, freeing up classroom

teachers to tend to the other students. On a recent morning, she helped one child with a hearing aid, went over classwork with another, stomped to the beat with a third during music class.

But she is paid just \$38,000 a year, less than half the average teacher's salary in Lexington. A single mother of two children, she lives in subsidized housing and gets by on bare necessities.

"I only work 10 months out of the year and I have no income over the summer," Morin said. "I have to budget in order to make ends meet, because all the bills still stay the same even though the income stops."

"I'm constantly worried," she said.

No longer "teacher helpers," charged with making copies or cleaning classrooms, today's paraprofessionals are integral to functioning classrooms in public schools across the country. They represent the [fastest growing sector](#) of the US education workforce, their ranks doubling in the last 30 years as the shortage of teachers has grown more acute. Many work with special education students, who are now largely integrated into mainstream classrooms, offering academic assistance, life-skills training and behavioral management. Massachusetts paraprofessionals must have a high school diploma in addition to some college credits, or they need to pass a state-approved exam. According to the 2020 Massachusetts Teachers Association's membership survey, the majority of its paraprofessionals are well-educated: 57 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.

"The teachers cannot run their programs without paraprofessionals," said Karen Agostinelli, 59, a Woburn paraprofessional who works with students with disabilities. "We are the backbone of the special education department."

Yet on their meager wages, few can afford to live in one of the most expensive states in the nation. MTA's 2020 survey found that nearly 85 percent of its paraprofessional members made \$30,000 or less, about one-third the average teacher salary. In some

Massachusetts schools districts, such as Quincy and New Bedford, hourly wages for paraprofessionals start below the state minimum wage of \$15 an hour because municipal employees are exempt from the law. (Unlike for teacher salaries, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education does not provide the average salary for paraprofessionals in the state.)

Janene Quintiliani, 37, a paraprofessional at Hollis Elementary School in Braintree, said she lives with family because her \$1,600 a month income makes it impossible to live on her own.

“You can’t survive on this,” she said. “I only stay because I care for the children that I work with, I care for the staff that I work with. Otherwise, no one would do this job because it doesn’t pay to do this job.”

In the last year, paraprofessional pay has become a flashpoint in [contract disputes](#) between teachers unions and school district leaders throughout the state, including in Worcester, Braintree, and New Bedford, where paraeducators are pushing for higher wages. In other districts, stalemates over paraprofessional wages, among other issues, triggered strikes by teachers unions. Educators in Woburn went on a five-day strike at the start of February, and Malden teachers picketed for one day last fall, with higher pay for paraeducators a factor in both fights.

“We needed an all hands on deck approach to helping us mitigate the damage from the pandemic,” said Worcester Assistant Superintendent Marie Morse, who declined to discuss the paraprofessionals’ wages since the district and union are in the middle of the negotiations. “We often rely on paraprofessionals to be able to give that specialized instruction to a small group or provide that extra additional intervention.”

Many parents have thrown their support among the paraprofessionals, [rallying en masse alongside them](#) on the picket lines.

Woburn parent Todd Finethy was among those parents, joining dozens of striking educators on a frigid afternoon earlier this month in front of City Hall. Finethy has three children who rely on services from paraprofessionals, including a son who is on the autism spectrum.

“These professionals, they know how to cope with the children, how to calm them down, get them to focus . . . get them to learn,” Finethy said. “Without them, my kids wouldn’t thrive in the school system.”

As a result of the strikes, both unions reached new agreements that resulted in salary increases for paraprofessionals. In Malden, where paraprofessionals [won a 24 percent increase](#) in wages in the first year of their new contract, the lowest pay grade now starts at \$27.62 an hour. In Woburn, paraprofessionals are [getting an additional \\$3,000](#) this year, and will see their pay rise by 10.25 percent over four years. The deal also removed the bottom two rungs from their salary schedules.

Massachusetts is one of 37 states where teacher strikes are illegal. Governor Maura Healey has publicly opposed legislation, backed by the MTA, that would allow public school educators to strike.

But the governor has signaled her concern for the paras’ plight. In a statement to the Globe, she acknowledged the role of paraeducators in schools and pledged to “review any legislation” that would support them.

“Paraprofessionals play such an important role in our schools — supporting students with disabilities and English language learners, transporting students to and from school, and keeping classrooms running smoothly,” she said. “As the daughter of a school nurse, I’m committed to supporting all school staff and making sure they receive the pay, benefits and resources they deserve.”

Despite the recent contract wins, paraprofessional pay in most Massachusetts cities remains far below a living wage. Escalating inflation and housing prices have forced

many to cobble together second or third jobs to keep up.

Saul Ramos, a Worcester paraprofessional who has worked with visually impaired students for 24 years, makes Instacart deliveries on the side to supplement his \$32,000 salary. He was homeless for several months during his 10th year as a paraprofessional after funding for his other part-time jobs, including as a district Spanish translator, fell through.

“I used to be really embarrassed about what I make for a living, but then I realized that’s not my embarrassment . . . it should actually be the district’s,” Ramos said. “I’m actually doing a decent job, I’m helping educate our students.”

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