



An SEIU Local 73 Research Report

# **Unsafe Staffing in the Chicago Public Schools**

**Including**

**SEIU Local 73 Members Say:  
While Aramark Cuts Corners in Cleaning for Profit**

**Students and Staff Pay the Price**

**And**

**Cuts in Special Education Hurt Us All**

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# **SEIU LOCAL 73 MEMBERS SPEAK OUT:**

## **Cuts to Special Education and Outsourcing of Custodial Services Harm CPS Students and Staff**

- Over the 2015-2016 school year, hundreds of dedicated Special Education Classroom Assistants and Board Custodians completed detailed surveys about how they love their jobs supporting CPS students' success.
- Layoffs in special education and privatized management of custodial services have forced SECAS and Custodians to do more with less.
- While big banks like Bank of America and multinational service corporations like Aramark and Sodexo profit off of Chicago taxpayers, students' futures suffer.

### **Board Custodians and Special Education Classroom Assistants love their jobs supporting students**

#### **Board Custodians Keep Schools Clean**

- Custodians are on the frontline maintaining a safe and sanitary school environment for students while also protecting the physical assets of the school system.
- Board Custodians know their schools—both how to clean and maintain their facilities, and to anticipate the needs and custodial demands of teachers, staff, and students

#### **Special Education Classroom Assistants Love the Students in Their Care**

- SECAs are intimately aware of the needs of the diverse learners who make up 14% of the CPS population, yet their voice in meetings to determine diverse learners Individual Education Plans is often dismissed.
- SECAs love the work they do to support students with special needs learning.
- While short staffing makes following IEP minutes difficult, SECAs often miss breaks and even lunch to keep students safe.

### **ARAMARK Cuts Corners Where it Can—Leaving Schools Filthy**

- The results of the budget cuts are clear: dirty and decaying schools and faculty and staff struggling to meet the needs of students.
- According to a member of SEIU Local 73, understaffing and increased workload due to budget cuts has led to *"...classrooms, bathrooms, and main hallways skipped by design and by next school year [my school] will resemble one of those closed down schools."*

### **Short Staffing in Special Ed Violates Children's Rights to Free and Appropriate Public Education**

- SECAs fear budget cuts and what it may mean for students. Without adequate staff, students with special needs will have trouble learning, and may be at risk of physical harm.
- While students with special needs are the most vulnerable, understaffing can disrupt everyone's learning environment. One SECA stated she fears that lowered staffing levels may lead to *"chaos in the classroom, meltdowns, shutdowns, angry, violent, destructive outbursts, destruction of school and personal property..."*

### **Who Profits?**

- To meet pension payments and make payroll despite a lack of a state budget, CPS has had to borrow hundreds of millions of dollars at high interest rates, leading to a windfall profit for Wall-Street banks.
- After laying off custodians employed by CPS contractors, such as We Clean and Total Facilities Maintenance, forcing Board Custodians to try to do more with less. While schools were left filthy, CPS paid ARAMARK \$80-million dollars this school year in management fees.

### **Who Pays?**

- Short staffing in special education and custodial services hurts students learning, stunting future employment opportunities, the growth of the regional economy, and the stability of Chicago's tax base.

# **SEIU LOCAL 73 MEMBERS SAY: While Aramark Cuts Corners in Cleaning For Profit, Students and Staff Pay the Price**

***“Since Aramark is managing, I see more and more bugs.”***

**-CPS Custodial Worker**

**Board Custodians working for Chicago Public Schools represented by SEIU Local 73 love their jobs and take pride in keeping schools safe and sanitary for student learning. Yet deliberate under-staffing and neglect by ARAMARK, the facilities management contractor that replaced building engineers and school principals in managing the 825 public and 1100 private custodians who clean Chicago Public Schools, is no accident.**

The terms of ARAMARK's contract with CPS, approved by then CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett and the Chicago Board of Education, virtually predict the deterioration in service quality and working conditions detailed by well over 100 SEIU Local 73 Board Custodians in a survey of working conditions.

## **Big Profits in Dirty Schools**

The terms and conditions of the ARAMARK contract with CPS detail incentives that entice ARAMARK management to reduce labor costs and skim on equipment and supplies to earn profits for their shareholders. ARAMARK's contract started in March 2014. Aramark was given over \$1-million to start operations, and \$64-million in the first year, increasing by a fixed percentage in years two and three. Because its revenue from managing CPS custodians is fixed, ARAMARK has every incentive to skimp on hiring qualified managers, and from purchasing supplies and equipment beyond those specified explicitly within the contract with CPS. The maximum payment the Board of Education authorized CPS to pay Aramark was over \$260-million, or \$86-million per year.

There is also a great incentive for ARAMARK to force Board Custodians to leave their jobs mid-year. For every Board Custodian forced out who is replaced by a private ARAMARK custodian, ARAMARK generates profits up to \$6.54 per hour per person from paying a lower rate of salary and benefits than what they are reimbursed by CPS.

While the Chicago Public Schools has resorted to mass layoffs, mid-year budget cuts, and issued bonds at historically high interest rates to continue operations and meet obligations, in 2015, ARAMARK received over \$81 million dollars in from the Chicago Public Schools to manage custodial services. That same year, the multinational corporation earned \$14 billion dollars in revenue and made \$1.4 billion dollars in profits off its services.

## **Board Custodians Break their Backs**

Board custodians who work to ensure a sanitary and clean environment for student learning have literally broken their backs to do their jobs right. In 2015, CPS custodians suffered back injuries that resulted in 610 days away from work, according to OSHA records provided to the union by the school district. In 2012, custodial workers with back injuries were away from work for 276 days.

As those on the front lines of public health and hygiene for Chicago's most at-risk children attest in a survey of working conditions, Board custodians are asked to do the impossible. ARAMARK's short staffing, mismanagement, and failure to provide adequate supplies and equipment to CPS custodians means schools are not thoroughly cleaned. This harms student learning and accelerates the deterioration of the school facilities owned and operated by the Chicago Board of Education.

*SEIU Local 73's Research Department has tallied the results of surveys of custodial working conditions filled out by Board Custodians working at the Chicago Public Schools.*

## **Mismanagement and mistreatment**

Mismanagement and mistreatment was brought up by 56% of respondents. Complaints included:

- Communication failures on the part of management, which sometimes led to disciplinary action against our brothers and sisters.
- Not receiving mandated breaks or being forced to work overtime, usually at the standard rate or even unpaid.
- Inconsistent standards and expectations, including management favoring one shift over another or favoring private custodians over Board Custodians.
- Denied and ignored requests for using vacation and personal time.
- Harassment or intimidation by management, or management failing to act when members experience harassment.

## **Under-staffing and increased work load**

Nearly half of respondents mentioned struggling to finish work or struggling to do the quality of work that the job required and students and school staff deserved. Many people made mention of too much work being assigned to limited crews, shifts being cut or moved and not being replaced, or being required to cover too much square footage. Major complaints included:

- Aramark replacing full-time board custodians with part-timers and/or failing to provide substitutes when our members were out using their personal or vacation days.
- Having to take on additional responsibilities usually assigned to building engineers in terms of fixing HVAC systems, grounds keeping, and facilitating deliveries to the school.

## **Inadequate supplies and equipment**

Inadequate supplies and equipment was brought up by nearly one-third of all respondents.

- Not having or not being restocked with appropriate cleaning supplies in a timely manner.
- Cleaning floors without cleaning solution or having to try to clean floors using only microfiber dust mops.
- Not having keys to access buildings or specific rooms for which they were responsible.

Ultimately, Aramark is putting our members, students, and staff at risk and accelerating the deterioration of CPS's facilities, likely costing the district more money in eventual repairs than it would have cost them to be properly maintained.

## **Short-staffing makes maintaining cleaning standards difficult, if not impossible**

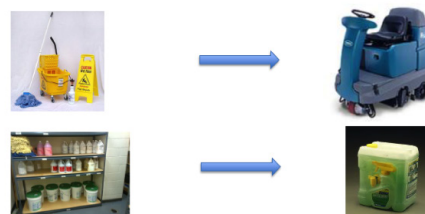
The Chicago Public Schools consists of 65.5 million square feet. In the 2014-2015 school year, there were 1,853 full time equivalent custodial workers who cleaned an average of 35,300 square feet each. In the 2015-2016 school year a total of 1789.5, or 63.5 fewer full-time equivalent private and board custodians who cleaned an average of 36,500 square feet of space.

The 3.4% reduction in force does not seem drastic, unless one realizes that custodial management consultants estimate the average janitor can clean 18,000 to 20,000 square feet in an 8-hour shift to maintain a school building at an "Ordinary Tidiness" APPA Level 2 cleanliness standard. Already stretched thin, a one size fits all management strategy for drastically different school buildings has put CPS custodial services at the breaking point. Inadequate Supplies and Equipment

When ARAMARK and SODEXO presented their case to the Chicago Board of Education on February 24, 2014, it was described that these companies would bring superior quality and a lower price due to their investments and economies of scale in cleaning technology, supplies, and equipment. The picture to the right is what was presented to the Chicago Board of Education.

SEIU Local 73 members describe a much different story. The promise of efficiency through investments in equipment and supplies has proven a fallacy. SEIU Local 73 members have documented inadequate supplies and equipment promised by ARAMARK and SODEXO.

### **Cleaner schools**



- Commitment to APPA Level 2 standard in **every** school
- Deep cleaning all areas regularly
- Environmentally-friendly cleaning products with ~30% reduction in chemicals

# SEIU LOCAL 73 MEMBERS SPEAK OUT:

## Quotes direct from Board Custodians

"The Aramark system doesn't work, schools aren't thoroughly cleaned. **I want to do good work!**"

**"My square footage is too big and I work in two separate buildings.** I have to walk a block and a half to get to the other building. As a day custodian, I have more work than the other employees. I am the only man covering 2 buildings and Aramark has known this for almost 14 months. **It's overwhelming.** I'm the day custodian for both buildings. No help. I've been telling Aramark. Still no results."

"They [took] a person out [of my school]. I have a section in the morning and garbage and food left behind in the lunch room on the floor. I get off at 2:20 pm after school and after I leave there is food left on the floor until the next morning and it is left over the weekend until Monday morning, **which is promoting mice, rats, roaches, etc.**"

"One evening custodian has been removed from our building. The solution has been to split the removed custodians shift between the remaining custodians. This solution has not worked. My schools is falling apart. **My staff is spread too thin.** We have 190,000 square feet facility with over 90 rooms, 3.5 people at night and 2 in the am (with breakfast and lunch duty) is not and will not work. I have rooms that have floors that look like mud. Bathrooms that are not being cleaned, and my grounds are not kept up. **We were assured that the Aramark partnership would bring us to the 21st century, however there has been nothing but constant movement of workers, inadequate equipment and supplies.** I received numerous email complaints from teachers as well as photographs to support my claims. Though I see my Aramark facility manager weekly, **I believe that Aramark is not suited to meet CPS expectations of cleanliness. I did not have all of these issues before the take over.**"

**"No machines,** no soap, no scraper, no wax."

"We do not have the correct supplies to clean with or enough machines for two months. [Supervisors say] they will bring what is needed. It never happens. The wood floors are being waxed because we do not have any polyurethane. We are doing the same work over."

"We constantly run out of supplies. Therefore, leaving us not being able to do our jobs. The manager is never around to ask for supplies in a timely manner. **Broken dispensers in bathroom have caused a health hazard.**"

"We had two night custodians and they cut one. So that leaves the remaining night person and I to split the unmanned section. The half section that I have does not get done till I get to the school in the morning. This means **the garbage sits all night and attracts all sorts of critters.** Plus I don't always have time to do a good job or even complete it. I have my morning duties to perform as well as the engineers jobs he's only here two days a week. **If I try mopping floors when children and staff are here, it is not safe, plus they track up the floor and it does not look clean.**"

"Not enough workers at my school. I am responsible for cleaning the lunch room. There are eight rows of tables. I can only clean 2 rows a day because I am only one person. Also since Aramark is managing, **I see more and more bugs.**"

"Work not being equal and [management] took a worker out... **the square footage is too much for one man in the morning.** And the night custodian leaves trash in hall, washrooms undone, etc."

"I needed another day person. I would be doing lunch duty and shipments would come bring skids of materials. Now **I'm the only person** having all that in the building while the **garbage is piling up in the lunch room.** Or I'm doing one of my duties and **there's a spill or vomit** in the other building now I have to stop and go to the other building to clean that. **At one point I wasn't getting lunch because I had no one to cover me.**"

"No MSDS sheet for product we use. **Safety concerns.** Only one machine for cleaning. Not enough to clean school. Have to wait on someone to get finished."

"Lots of supply problems. For example, **no soap, no wax,** and more."

"There are no supplies to work with. **We have to mop with a stick, we have to spray the wood floors with water,** and since they have taken over the school has been messed up."

"[Management promises] equipment that was never delivered and it never happens. For example, no carpet cleaning machine and solutions to clean with."

**"We have to use our own vehicles to go to other schools and ask them for supplies.** We do not have the sufficient amount of supplies to do our job."

# **Cuts in Special Education Hurt Us All**

## **An SEIU Local 73 Research Department Report**

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While Wall Street banks profit off of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) financial troubles, and Republican Governor Bruce Rauner and his allies maneuver to take over the school district, CPS Special Education Classroom Assistants are fighting for their students by showing the value of what they do and how budget cuts hurt at-risk Chicago children.

### **Mass Layoffs in Special Education**

Before the start of the 2015-2016 academic year, the Chicago Public Schools laid off 300 Special Education Classroom Assistants (SECAs). This represents a 10% reduction in the number of SECAs in Chicago's Public Schools. While total enrollment did decrease, it only declined by 1%. With more than 50,000 students with disabilities, roughly 14% of total students, enrolled in the Chicago Public Schools, budget cuts and layoffs at CPS disproportionately impacted special education <sup>1</sup>

### **SEIU Local 73 Fights Back**

SEIU Local 73 is committed to restoring jobs and restoring the assistance, help, and support that special education students in the Chicago Public School System deserve and are entitled to under federal law. "These layoffs, and the threat of future reductions in funding are illegal and threaten the loss of federal special education funds," said SEIU Local 73 President Christine Boardman. "We will take all available actions, including both going to court and calling for the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice's intervention to defend the rights of diverse learners and the staff who care for them in the Chicago Public Schools."<sup>2</sup>

### **When We Fight We Win**

On Thanksgiving Eve 2015, Chicago Public Schools announced that they would reverse cuts to special education. The next day's Chicago Tribune headline read, "CPS reverses course on special education cuts, will spend more."<sup>3</sup> When CPS realized layoffs were illegal and violated the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, they restored positions and borrowed money to make payroll.

### **Banks Profit off of Student Suffering**

While the positions cut were restored, the Chicago Public Schools still faces enormous challenges. With no help from Springfield, the School District faced a \$450-million hole its 2016 budget. On February 3, 2016, Chicago Public Schools issued \$725-million in bonds to roll-over past debt and to make payroll—with an 8.5% annual interest rate, the highest interest rate on a United States municipal bond sale, ever, outside Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Perez, Juan, (Oct. 23, 2015), ""Biggest drops in CPS enrollment come at district-run schools," Chicago Tribune. Retrieved from:

<sup>2</sup> SEIU Local 73, "Written Testimony to the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education," 29 September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Perez, Juan, (Nov. 25, 2015), ""CPS reverses course on special education cuts, will spend more," Chicago Tribune. Retrieved from: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-chicago-school-special-education-spending-met-1126-20151126-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> Gillers, Heather, "CPS borrows \$725 million at extraordinarily high interest rate," Chicago Tribune,

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-chicago-public-schools-bonds-0204-20160203-story.html>

Republican Governor Bruce Rauner's tough talk of forcing CPS into bankruptcy to bust CPS workers' unions and strip retirees of their hard earned public pensions got the big wall-street banks worried. To continue to finance the school district in a time of political uncertainty, the banks wanted big profits—at the expense of the Chicago Public Schools' fiscal future.

### **SECAs Vital to Educational Attainment**

Special Education Classroom Assistants both care for and teach at-risk children in stressful and often dangerous conditions. SECAs provide a critical role that supports learning in the classroom; personal assistance to children with physical, emotional and behavioral issues; they monitor the hallways, recess, lunchtime arrivals and dismissal ensuring the safety of all students; they nurture and encourage the wellbeing of all students in their care. All public schools are mandated by federal and state law to provide Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) for all students with special needs. SECAs are part of a collaborative team that ensures those IEPs are implemented and adhered to and that students have the opportunity to meet their educational goals and full potential at school.

This report is based on the responses to an SEIU Local 73 survey of SECAs who work in the City of Chicago and are employed by the Chicago Public Schools system.<sup>5</sup> The responses to the questions reveal the love and dedication that each SECA has for the population they serve, their commitment to assisting special needs students to achieve the best they can and the role of the SECA inside and outside the classroom.

### **What Role do SECAs Play in Special Education?**

The role of a SECA is to serve as a classroom assistant to the teacher and to the students he or she is assigned. SECAs are also tasked with keeping all students at the school safe as they arrive. When SECAs were asked about a typical daily routine, many responded that it starts with outside duty. One SECA wrote, "meet the children as they exit the bus."<sup>6</sup> Another said, their day began "unloading children from their bus."<sup>7</sup> Another SECA begins the day like this: "I arrive at work at 7:30 a.m. to take kids off the school bus prepare kids for breakfast."<sup>8</sup> Another SECA wrote that the day begins when "I help with taking the children off the bus, bring them inside the school assisting them with breakfast."<sup>9</sup> Yet another starts the day "by letting the kids into the building and supervising their entrance from the parking lot."<sup>10</sup> "My day start off with outside duty in the morning before school, assisting my special needs students into the building, getting them breakfast and getting them ready for learning each day," wrote another SECA.<sup>11</sup> A typical day for this SECA began with meeting the children from the bus and then assisting them to remove "coats, hats, gloves. Assist in feeding and changing of diapers. Assist to and from the classroom. Assist in class work, games and wiping runny noses."<sup>12</sup> For another SECA, the day began similarly, "I help with taking the children off the bus, bring them inside the school assisting them with breakfast, change diapers for a total of 3-4 students every two hours."<sup>13</sup>

Those who do not start the day with outside duty begin work assisting students to their classrooms. One SECA wrote that a typical day starts when she greets "students in the hallways and I make sure that they are in their classroom by the time the bell rings. I then go to my assigned classrooms and assist students in class."<sup>14</sup>

Some students need more help than others and SECAs are responsible to assisting with educational and personal hygiene as needed. One SECA wrote, "On a typical day I work closely with a teacher. I give

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<sup>5</sup> SEIU Local 73, Chicago Public Schools Special Education Classroom Assistant Survey, (CPS SECA) Fall 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Respondent 14.

<sup>7</sup> Respondent 18.

<sup>8</sup> Respondent 32.

<sup>9</sup> Respondent 33.

<sup>10</sup> Respondent 44.

<sup>11</sup> Respondent 116.

<sup>12</sup> Respondent 14.

<sup>13</sup> Respondent 33.

<sup>14</sup> Respondent 117.

educational support with things such as writing questions and answers for students who are not able to do so for themselves, help with changing and toileting (as needed), pushing students in wheelchairs (as needed), checking/grading homework and classwork, and many other tasks as needed by the teacher/principal.”<sup>15</sup>

Many students in the Chicago School System need one-on-one care to function to the best of their ability at school. When asked to describe a typical work day, one SECA wrote, “My job duties were personal hygiene, toileting, changing diapers, one on one tutoring and feeding student[s] with severe disabilities.”<sup>16</sup> One SECA responded to the question like this: “I am one on one with a student with multiple disabilities.”<sup>17</sup> Another answered, “I feed severe[ly] disabled children, change soiled diapers and clean soiled children regardless of age. I assist students from their wheelchair to a walker, I arrange and adjust tools and work aids and equipment used by children in the classroom.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, this SECA adheres to the students IEPs and works “proactively to provide all designated supports and services as needed.”<sup>19</sup> Another SECA wrote a typical day looked like this: “Change diapers. Help with children who need help (hand over hand) Read stories and take children out for recess while teachers are on lunch break. Assist teacher in the classroom with activity, wash cloths, wipe down toys and mat at the end of the day.”<sup>20</sup>

Another SECA who left the corporate world to serve as a special education classroom assistant and who received a layoff notice, started her day greeting students and asking if they need help with “breakfast or getting ready for their morning routine.”<sup>21</sup> She talked to parents to make sure there were no questions or concerns. As a bilingual SECA she also translated in IEP meetings or meetings between parents and teachers” and also ran a bilingual “homework assistance after school for kids who needed assistance” and whose parents couldn't help because they didn't speak English.<sup>22</sup> SECAs like this woman do more than simply assist children and teachers. They serve as a liaison with parents and administrators and as a translator between parents, children, teachers and administrators. This SECA lost her job in the Chicago Public School system. The school, the parents, the children and the teachers lost so much more than just an employee.

### **Who are the SECAs?**

SECAs are unique individuals who do their job each day because they are committed to the population they serve, the teachers they assist, and the parents of special needs students and their schools. This is apparent in the number of years SECAs have worked for the Chicago Public School system or with special needs children or at a particular school. When asked how long SECAs have worked in their position one responded “32 years.”<sup>23</sup> The shortest amount of time any SECA in our survey had worked in their position was eight months. However, the vast majority have worked in Chicago Public Schools with special needs students for ten, fifteen, or twenty years, often at the same school.<sup>24</sup> These men and women are committed to helping school-aged students with special educational, behavioral, emotional and personal needs.

When asked, “What do you like most about your job? SECAs overwhelmingly replied: “the children;”<sup>25</sup> “helping special education students reach their goals;”<sup>26</sup> “knowing I make a difference in the lives and education of students with special needs.”<sup>27</sup> Another responded like this: “I like encouraging and assisting ALL students/children, but I LOVE the excitement that I see in Special Education students when they experience

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<sup>15</sup> Respondent 108.

<sup>16</sup> Respondent 75.

<sup>17</sup> Respondent 104.

<sup>18</sup> Respondent 24.

<sup>19</sup> Respondent 24.

<sup>20</sup> Respondent 3.

<sup>21</sup> Respondent 38

<sup>22</sup> Respondent 38.

<sup>23</sup> SEIU Local 73, Chicago Public Schools Special Education Classroom Assistant Survey, (CPS SECA) Fall 2015, Respondent 24

<sup>24</sup> CPS SECA Survey.

<sup>25</sup> CPS SECA Survey, Respondent 62

<sup>26</sup> CPS SECA Survey, Respondent 1

<sup>27</sup> CPS SECA Survey, Respondent 54



reaching their goals in understanding a concept! It's an amazing feeling to help strengthen their potential."<sup>28</sup> Another put it like this, "I have the opportunity to work w/ fantastic students who need help in their daily lives. I love to see their smiles when working through their challenges and see them succeed w/some/a lot of help from their SECAs."<sup>29</sup> Yet another SECA wrote, "I work with amazing teachers and SECAs who care very much for the children. The children know how much they are cared for and appreciate it. They bring joy to us as well especially when we see their accomplishments."<sup>30</sup> Another SECA wrote, "I love my school, the people I work with, the students of course, our administration. It's awesome. I just love my job."<sup>31</sup> Another SECA wrote that the best thing about her job was "Being inspired by the students I serve and having the opportunity to make a difference every day."<sup>32</sup>

### **Meeting Special Needs is a Collaborative Effort**

Meeting the needs of students with diverse learning abilities is a collaborative effort between parents, teachers, medical and educational experts, school administrations, as well as the federal and state governments. Many teachers would not be able to do their job properly without the help of SECAs. When asked the duties for a typical day, one SECA with responsibility for seven special education students wrote, "Help my students in the classroom" by reinforcing the need to take notes "in class activities, modify tests...with teacher approval," and "motivate the student to be part of the classroom."<sup>33</sup> Another SECA wrote, "I monitor the students" then "communicate with supervising and instructional staff and professional support personnel" to evaluate progress and ensure the IEP objectives are implemented."<sup>34</sup> Other SECAs explained that they do everything needed to assist the students and the teacher in the classrooms. One wrote, she assists "the students with learning objectives the teacher has created for the students" and also assist the teacher to grade papers."<sup>35</sup> Another SECA wrote, "I prepare work according to grade levels, give homework...assist with all the academic work... interact with all the students...supervise...recess and lunch. I clean and decorate the classroom to display students work. I organize trips/ parties/ birthdays making sure NO child is left out. I treat my students with dignity and respect."<sup>36</sup> Another SECA explained, "I communicate with the teacher, staff, social worker and therapist that service the students to make sure the child is getting all the support needed by myself and all others that are involved in the child's learning environment."<sup>37</sup> One SECA summed up her work like this, "It is a collaborative effort with special ed. teacher and assistant to help build a solid foundation. I become teacher as well as educator and provide all duties that come with that title."<sup>38</sup>

This is collaborative educational effort. SECAs work alongside teachers, classroom staff, clinicians, administrators and parents to ensure students with special needs receive all the assistance they need and educational support they are entitled to.

### **Safety and Support are Priorities**

When asked what tasks do you perform to make sure the students you are assigned to have a safe and supportive learning environment, one SECA wrote: "Keep focused reminders of keeping hands and feet to self,

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<sup>28</sup> Respondent 7.

<sup>29</sup> Respondent 12.

<sup>30</sup> Respondent 16.

<sup>31</sup> Respondent 17.

<sup>32</sup> Respondent 123.

<sup>33</sup> Respondent 13

<sup>34</sup> Respondent 20.

<sup>35</sup> Respondent 37.

<sup>36</sup> Respondent 51.

<sup>37</sup> Respondent 113.

<sup>38</sup> Respondent 51.

provide private and time to self in time of outburst or anxiety in the classroom, remind students of proper language and/or behavior with peers in classroom, ensuring student developmental stages puberty are kept watch while in the classroom to avoid any inappropriate behaviors.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, this SECA makes phone calls to parents, rephrases and repeats instructions for students to ensure they understand. She also assists with hallway, recess and bathroom breaks to ensure all students are safe and secure. And for those less independent students, “All of the above also apply, however, I also write work, notes, reminders for them when they are out of focus, I will physically calm them down by patting them on the back, removing child from place of anxiety and walking them/talk to them in order to calm them down, teach calming techniques or strategies depending on direction of teacher.”<sup>40</sup> Another wrote, “I make sure children are safe, secure, fed, changed, cleaned and focused.”<sup>41</sup> One SECA wrote, “I do my best to keep aggressive students engaged and away from more gentle students. I use my 39 years of teaching skills to reinforce learning.”<sup>42</sup> Another put it this way: “I am with them at all times. If needed I will hold their hands to make sure they do not run when walking in the hall, and redirect or comfort them when they start to get anxious about something that they don't understand.”<sup>43</sup>

Safety is a concern for everyone who works in a school but for SECAs it is also part of their job description. One SECA put it this way, “My duties and responsibilities for a typical school day is to shadow assigned student(s) to provide safety, assistance, educational instruction and character development. Additionally, I prevent safety threat to general population students to protect them from violent outbursts of children with behavior/mental disabilities.”<sup>44</sup> Another SECA wrote, “We as educators and supportive staff make every effort to make our classroom safe.”<sup>45</sup> Another SECA makes sure to “remove objects that can be used as a weapon.”<sup>46</sup> Another SECA wrote that part of maintaining a safe environment in the lunch room was “making sure all students are seated and not throwing chairs, tables etc.” at other students.<sup>47</sup>

Sometimes the need is for emotional safety. One SECA wrote, “I have patience with them. I let them know I care. I pray every day before I start work. I always keep my eyes on them.”<sup>48</sup> Another said “I have to be calm for students who struggle with emotional disabilities. Often times these students have frequent meltdowns or medical emergencies that I need to attend to.” Part of their frustration and emotional instability is as simple as not understanding the material in class. This same SECA wrote, “I also assist with helping them in and out of the classroom as far as re-teaching, rereading, scaffolding instruction etc.”<sup>49</sup>

### **How do Cuts Impact the Students?**

Cuts to special education funding places the most vulnerable students on the path to continue to fail to meet academic goals. For example, at Jacqueline B Vaughn Occupational High School, 115 students need special education support, but 21 SECAs lost their jobs at the beginning of the school year. As a result, the remaining SECAs work harder and students with special needs receive less attention.<sup>50</sup> As one SECA put it, the effect of layoffs and budget cuts will “will leave many diverse learners "lost" within the CPS system. Causing failures, loss of ambition and goals, and self-esteem issues.”<sup>51</sup> Another SECA wrote, “some autistic children don't deal with change well. All of these changes may affect them emotionally.”<sup>52</sup> Without adequate numbers of SECAs, there will be “chaos in the classroom, meltdowns, shut downs, angry, violent, destructive outbursts, destruction

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<sup>39</sup> Respondent 22.

<sup>40</sup> Respondent 22.

<sup>41</sup> Respondent 47.

<sup>42</sup> Respondent 50.

<sup>43</sup> Respondent 52.

<sup>44</sup> Respondent 126.

<sup>45</sup> Respondent 78.

<sup>46</sup> Respondent 12.

<sup>47</sup> Respondent 5.

<sup>48</sup> Respondent 40.

<sup>49</sup> Respondent 89.

<sup>50</sup> SEIU Local 73, “Written Testimony to the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education,” 29 September 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Respondent 10

<sup>52</sup> Respondent 25

of school and personal property,” claimed another SECA.<sup>53</sup> In classrooms with general education students this means disturbances to education and also disruptions that create anxiety and confusion in general education students as well as in the students with special needs. In special education classes, these disruptions and emotional outbursts distract the most vulnerable population who are already at risk of falling through the educational cracks and who need the most attention to learn to function independently in the community. As another SECA put it, children with special needs will “be ignored, get lost, will not learn, be treated unfairly, mess on themselves, feel unwanted” and generally fail to thrive at school.<sup>54</sup> The most vulnerable children in our school system, those that have the most difficulty learning will not only lose out on an education, they stand the risk of failing to learn even the most basic elements of functioning independently and obtaining future employment. We need to act now to ensure adequate funding is reserved for our children with special needs so that they will be able to live as successful students now and look forward to independent and meaningful lives in the future.

The cuts in funding to special education will mean an “Increased amount of behavioral problematic children in my classroom and less support staff.” This will mean that all students and staff are affected because there will be more time spent on “managing behavior versus teaching the child new materials.”<sup>55</sup> Another SECA fears that safety will be compromised. “When there are less adults to supervise and assist there leaves room for errors and accidents that could be prevented with the proper number of people with those students.”<sup>56</sup> Another wrote, “I’m definitely fearful.”<sup>57</sup> Others foresee “More work, not enough eyes to watch the children.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed many SECAs have already seen significant impacts from reduced numbers of classroom staff. One SECA wrote, “Reductions have made my ability to perform much more chaotic in assisting two IEP students, while also picking up and returning other students and collecting data while enforcing safety rules.”<sup>59</sup> Another wrote, “Simply put it is hard to accommodate so many students at times when numerous children need your undivided attention for whatever the topic may be that they are struggling in.”<sup>60</sup> Additionally, as one SECA wrote, “students will not reach full potential without the one on one help and can harm themselves or other students if it is a student with combative behavior or a runner can get out of class because not covered.”<sup>61</sup>

The reduction in funding has also impacted Special Education teachers. One SECA wrote that caseloads for special education teachers are “unusually high this year. It’s harder to find time to collaborate with teachers about students. Also, with the cuts to paraprofessional positions, we started the year with an inadequate number of paraprofessionals to meet goals.”<sup>62</sup> Another said, “We are understaffed and our students are not receiving their minutes.”<sup>63</sup> “The student’s IEP mandated minutes will not be met because it is impossible to be in two places at one time.”<sup>64</sup> Federal law is violated when students do not receive the education as stated in their IEPs.

## **A Call For Hearings**

SEIU Local 73, along with ACCESS LIVING, a disability rights advocacy organization, and the Chicago Teachers Union joined Alderman Scott Waguespack on November 18, 2015, calling for the Chicago City Council to hold hearings on how Republican Governor Bruce Rauner’s failure to negotiate a budget and raise revenue to fund students’ futures hurt the most at-risk Chicago communities.

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<sup>53</sup> Respondent 126

<sup>54</sup> Respondent 4.

<sup>55</sup> Respondent 12.

<sup>56</sup> Respondent 27.

<sup>57</sup> Respondent 50.

<sup>58</sup> Respondent 76.

<sup>59</sup> Respondent 83.

<sup>60</sup> Respondent 88.

<sup>61</sup> Respondent 129.

<sup>62</sup> Respondent 115.

<sup>63</sup> Respondent 122.

<sup>64</sup> Respondent 125.

While the media and aldermen rushed to the council chambers, Special Education Classroom Assistant and member organizing core leader Tenisha Jackson delivered a powerful statement, calling for Bruce Rauner to stop bullying special needs children, and for Chicago politicians to stop letting him do it. Below are her remarks:

*“My name is Tenisha Jackson. I am a special education classroom assistant in the Chicago Public Schools and a proud member of SEIU Local 73.*

*As a Special Education Classroom Assistant, I directly care for and assist in the education of several special needs children at my school, Ray Graham Training Center High School. I have worked at CPS for 14.5 years. The tasks I perform are assisting special needs children during breakfast class time and throughout the entire day.*

*In April, 2015 Bruce Rauner said he wanted Chicago Public Schools to go bankrupt. This summer, CPS borrowed \$200 million dollars and paid millions of dollars in fees to wall-street banks like Bank of America, so it could pay its bills.*

*In August, CPS laid off more than 300 Special Education Classroom Assistants, which is almost 10% SECAs. At my school, Ray Graham, 5 staff were laid off during the extended school year this summer. The remaining staff had to be shuffled around to assist with bigger groups of students with more severe developmental disabilities.*

*This impacted the students because autistic children were placed in noisier environments which impacted their development and learning. This has also impacted students because most of the time, students with autism don't usually adapt well to change. That's where I step in and try to adhere to the needs of all the children I service. The layoffs have had a negative impact to students with autism at my school.*

*Staff are unfamiliar with students' disability causing Assistants to be ill prepared. The cuts disrupted a normal classroom atmosphere due to students not being able to adapt to change. Lastly, special needs children develop a relationship with their SECAs, for instance, my co-worker was cut—the student he had worked with is not right to this very day.*

*That is why we stand with CPS parent, advocates, for students with disabilities, and City of Chicago Aldermen calling for a public hearing to demand answers about how these illegal cuts to services for students with disabilities will hurt Chicago children.*

*Illinois is a wealthy state. Chicago is a prosperous city. The Chicago Public Schools are not broke, but Bruce Rauner's policies are.”*

The members, staff, and elected leadership of SEIU Local 73 stand with Tenisha, and we call on the Chicago City Council, Cook County Board of Commissioners, and legislators in Springfield to hold hearings to allow special needs students and staff to show the world the pain Bruce Rauner has caused.