

SB329 Press Conference

March 21, 2019

Teresa Sawyer, First Vice-President of the North Carolina Association of Teacher Assistants and a 25-year teacher assistant at Moyock Elementary in the Currituck County School system.

In 2008, North Carolina funded 22,502 teacher assistants. During the last school year, our General Assembly funded 15,050 for a loss of 7,452 state-paid positions over a ten-year period. These statistics don't tell the entire story about the "loss" of teacher assistants in our public schools. During this ten-year period, many of the teacher assistants who remained have had their work hours reduced and their workdays taken away. Many are now required to drive school busses thus taking additional time away from their primary job. Many are being shared between several classrooms thereby reducing the time they have to work with small group instruction, meeting social-emotional needs, and in one-on-one remediation with students. **NO**, the statistics don't show these "invisible" cuts to teacher assistants. I could speak for a long time about the important contributions that teacher assistants make. However, the BIG question today is this – do teacher assistants increase student achievement in reading? *Absolutely! I am one of the teacher assistants working with 30 K-5 students for reading instructional support daily.*

Unfortunately, an outdated study done in Tennessee in the 1980's called the "STAR Study" has been used over the last several years as justification to cut teacher assistants. That study concluded reducing class size was more effective in student achievement than having both a teacher and a teacher assistant in the classroom. However, that was THEN and to use an outdated study to determine whether or not teacher assistants make a difference NOW would be like comparing typewriters to computers. Times have changed. Technology has changed, and absolutely, the role of teacher assistants has changed so much that the term "instructional assistants" is a much more appropriate job description!

Fortunately, there is a more recent study and the research has been conducted right here in North Carolina. It is a working paper titled, "Teaching Assistants and Nonteaching Staff: Do They Improve Student Outcomes?" by Steven W. Hemelt from UNC-Chapel Hill and Helen F. Ladd from Duke University. It was published in August of 2017. The researchers concluded that their most important finding was "the strong and consistent evidence on the role of teacher assistants." They found clear evidence that teacher assistants have positive effects on students' test scores in reading, with the positive effects being *substantially significant* for minority and impoverished students. In addition to the increase in reading scores, the study also found that the presence of teacher assistants reduces absentee and tardy rates.

I want to thank Senator Nickel for understanding the many important roles of teacher assistants, but most of all for recognizing that teacher assistants do improve student achievement. Thank you for sponsoring the "K-3 Reading and Literacy Improvement Act!" I believe that when we increase the numbers of teacher assistants in our elementary schools, that together with their teachers, our students will see substantial growth in reading and, in the words of Margaret Fuller, be "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader."