

**Open Letter to the South Orange-Maplewood School District Board of Education,
Superintendent Bing, Assistant Superintendent Gesumaria, and Assistant
Superintendent Gilbert**

We, the undersigned, call on the South Orange-Maplewood School District, Board of Education, Superintendent Bing, Assistant Superintendent Gesumaria, and Assistant Superintendent Gilbert to act with urgency and accountability.

On June 11th, the SOMSD Board of Education voted to approve a district leadership recommendation to switch paraprofessional staffing agencies from ESS to Delta-T Group. District leadership proposed this change, and the BOE approved it, without engaging the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC), special education families, classroom teachers, or local disability advocates.

At a time when the district is making efforts to bring students back in-district from costly out-of-district (OOD) placements, this decision is equal parts baffling and alarming. It is no secret that our district expends a significant amount of money on out-of-district tuition for our IEP kids. Some of those out-of-district placements were inevitable due to the significant medical needs of the children involved. But we know from painful personal experience that some of those placements were utterly unnecessary, and were the result of our district failing to invest in its own capacity to support neurodivergent learners in-district.

Experienced paraprofessionals do more than provide technical compliance with students' IEPs. They know our students, have experience maintaining safe environments, ensure the programs that provide our children with access to a free and appropriate public education run as intended, and thereby prevent costly lawsuits and out-of-district placements

This decision to switch vendors is yet another failure of our district to invest in its own capacity to support neurodivergent learners in-district, and it threatens to gut the very programs that are currently keeping dozens of children in-district. District leadership appears to have considered only the line-item cost of the paraprofessional contract, without factoring in the disastrous effect this vendor shift will have, not only in terms of the human cost to our students, but in terms of the long-term financial cost to our district.

The details of this decision and the upcoming transition to Delta-T Group raise serious concerns regarding paraprofessional quality, student safety, educational continuity, district equity, and fiscal stewardship.

Drastic Compensation and Benefit Reductions

This decision appears to have been made with no understanding - by anyone, not district leadership, and not the BOE - about how much paraprofessionals working for Delta-T Group would be compensated. That alone tells parents that leadership and this board do not understand how central compensation is to quality. Information provided to ESS paraprofessionals indicates that switching to Delta-T Group results in significantly lower pay

(\$16/hour), 5 sick days instead of 10, and the elimination of diaper change compensation (\$6.50 per change). As of earlier this week, there were job postings for our district on Delta-T's website at a rate of \$18/hour.

It was certainly a relief that Mr. Bing quoted a higher figure of \$20–22/hour in emails to parents this week, and Ms. Gesumaria confirmed that range in an email to SEPAC this afternoon. She stated that upon hearing Local 68's claims about compensation rates in the June 17th letter issued to paras district-wide, "[w]e were as alarmed by this number as you were *so I began discussions with [the district's] Delta-T representative and their executive team to ensure our paras receive compensation commensurate with their experience and role in support of our students*" [emphasis added].

Later this afternoon she informed us: "Unfortunately, I have been informed that the contract being approved tonight with Delta-T is unable to state that the range of compensation will be between \$20-22 because the co-op agreement that governs this relationship states that the range is \$18-22."

This raises many questions for us. Were minimum rates commensurate with our most skilled paras expertise fought for before our community mobilized, or was Ms. Gesumaria's engagement with Delta-T this past week the first time this critical discussion about compensation rates and seniority transpired in the district's negotiations? Were sick time and diaper change fees addressed, and were the adverse impacts of additional reductions apart from hourly compensation—diaper changes and sick days—deliberated as the significant concessions they are? Did our administrators and BOE conduct due diligence and information gathering about Delta-T's past bad faith actions in our district in the past?

As of today, Delta-T's website lists no open paraprofessional positions in New Jersey paying more than \$18–20/hour. Even at the higher range our district leaders claim Delta-T will abide to—but won't put in writing—it remains a significant pay cut from the current \$22–26+, with fewer sick days, no diaper change compensation and no health benefits, protections previously secured through collective bargaining.

Our community—and in particular our special education families and their educators—should not have to crowdsource the terms of a contract to determine the quality of care our children will receive next year. That is a governance failure — and it belongs to both district leadership and this board.

Despite everything we don't know about how we got to this point, what we do know is that these kinds of drastic compensation and benefit reductions will make it impossible for many of our most experienced paraprofessionals to afford to remain with our district, leading to a loss of critical expertise and disruption of vital student relationships. The long-term financial and educational costs of losing this vital and experienced workforce far outweigh any short-term contract savings.

Imminent Classroom Disruption and Vendor Quality

The district now faces foreseeable disruptions that could have been prevented with more proactive communication and engagement. Rather than hear of this change from the district, paraprofessionals learned of the change the day before the last day of school from their union, Local 68. Local 68 has informed paraprofessionals that their contracts will terminate after the Extended School Year (ESY). As a result, the union has understandably advised workers to use their remaining sick time immediately. Consequently, we now face immediate staffing shortages and disruptions in special education classrooms starting this July. ESY serves some of the district's most vulnerable students, and is designed to prevent regression in skills during summer break. A lack of consistency during that program will disrupt the connection and continuity our ESY kids rely on to thrive.

Moreover, Delta-T Group is a vendor the district previously utilized and ultimately left due to poor performance. Returning to them under terms that severely devalue our frontline staff risks the safety and education of our students. It is unclear at this stage whether district leadership was even aware of the district's termination of the previous Delta-T Group contract and, if so, what, if any, accountability provisions were adopted in the current contract to prevent a reoccurrence of the issues that led to their previous termination.

Last week, Mr. Bing attempted to reassure a number of special education families, stating that the district will "ensur[e] no legal gap in service occurs." That statement did nothing to reassure us. The concern from parents is not that the district will fail to provide the same number of paraprofessionals required by our children's IEPs. Our concern is that we know, from painful experience, how our children's needs shift profoundly based on whether the professionals around them have adequate training to provide them with meaningful support and connection. If the district staffs inexperienced paraprofessionals to cut costs in the short term, it will see the needs displayed by our children increase in the long term.

Fiscal Irresponsibility and Increased Liability Risks

In conversations with Board members and district leadership over the past week, it has become clear to us that those making decisions for our children do not have a deep understanding and respect for the connection between compensation and quality, on the one hand, and the district's out-of-district and other liability, on the other. Thus, regardless of how substantial the reduction in compensation, we want to take some time to paint a picture for you about what has happened previously when financial decisions have impacted paraprofessional quality, and what is likely to happen if the compensation reduction results in attrition among our most experienced paras.

Due to the compensation reductions, this vendor switch will inevitably lead to the loss of the highly-trained paraprofessionals that make many of our self-contained classrooms run, because they are already underpaid for what they do and cannot afford a loss of \$4+/hour and a significant reduction in benefits to stay with our district. The district has multiple self-contained classrooms, where experienced special education teachers partner with highly-trained

paraprofessionals to cater to some of our district's most vulnerable students, including those with autism, with language disabilities, and with emotional regulation challenges. Many of those students would be forced out-of-district if those self-contained classrooms were not available, or if the efficacy of those programs were gutted by the loss of critical staff.

Two such classrooms cater to 20+ children with emotional regulation challenges. Many of these kids struggled with being able to even attend school before placement in the ERI program. Many of these children also struggled with "behaviors" ranging from elopement and verbal aggression to self-harm and physical aggression. The assigned teachers and highly-trained paraprofessionals in those rooms are foundational to the success of the program that on days there are substitutes, certain of those behaviors return within a matter of hours. For these kids, losing our current highly-trained paraprofessionals runs the risk of severing the connection that is critical to their ability to access school.

For that reason, losing the seasoned paraprofessionals in these programs is likely to lead to an increase in physical aggression and self-harm among this group of students. Currently, the specialized educators and highly-trained paraprofessionals in the ERI program are almost always able to de-escalate any physical behaviors verbally. Verbal de-escalation reduces the liability risk to the district on several fronts. It means a reduced risk of injury to the dysregulated child, their classmates, the teachers, and the paraprofessionals themselves, thereby avoiding potential liability for injuries. It also means a reduced risk of dysregulated children being inappropriately restrained, as has happened in this district before and in neighboring districts, thereby avoiding significant mental health harms and, again, potential liability to the district. Switching to a vendor that sets its salary at a rate that only inexperienced paraprofessionals would tolerate presents a serious and unique risk of foreseeable harm for this group of students.

This shift also runs the enormous, utterly unthinkable risk of leading to burnout among the incredible educators who lead our self-contained programs. The educators in the emotional regulation and language impairment self-contained classrooms have invested enormous time and energy in training a core group of paraprofessionals who support their program year-to-year, providing critical continuity and ensuring program efficacy. Depriving these educators of the paraprofessional teams that make their programs run places enormous burdens on these dedicated teachers and presents a real risk of burnout and attrition. To lose these educators would be a disaster for the students who rely on them every year to keep them in-district, and a financial catastrophe for this district. Every experienced educator running a self-contained classroom saves the district the cost of approximately 8-12 out-of-district tuitions annually. This is especially true of the ERI program, which is where numerous students have been placed in just the last several years when their families were on the verge of suing the district and seeking out-of-district placements.

This shift in vendors also runs the risk of increasing the number of legal challenges this district faces from parents seeking to get their child placed OOD. If the use of less-experienced paraprofessionals leads to a regression in students' behavior or learning, that will require re-evaluations to determine whether their current IEPs are continuing to meet their needs and provide them with the free and appropriate public education to which they are entitled. If their

current program is undermined by inexperienced, underpaid paraprofessionals, the efficacy of those programs will begin to fail. Should that harm materialize, special education families who are currently being served in-district will not hesitate to bring legal challenges to secure safe placements for their children, resulting in an increased number of parents suing the district for out-of-district placements. Even if many of those legal challenges don't ultimately result in costly OOD placement, the legal cost to the district alone of fending off those challenges will add to an already disproportionately large legal spend.

Moreover, at a time when the district is trying to convince more families to bring their children back in-district from costly out-of-district placements, it is making decisions that profoundly undermine its capacity to do so successfully. Many of our out-of-district students already have trauma histories from past experiences in our district, and out-of-district families are therefore uniquely attuned to the dissonance between the district's stated goals and its actions. The decision to shift vendors without engaging special education families and the educators who serve them has done profound damage to the community's trust, which threatens to undermine further efforts to bring children back in-district.

Severe Equity Impact

This decision does not land equally. A disproportionate number of the children receiving paraprofessional support in our district are Black and Brown, meaning our most historically-marginalized students will bear the brunt of the classroom disruptions, physical dangers, and emotional harms. Furthermore, this policy directly strips away the livelihoods of the paraprofessionals themselves, who are predominantly Black and Brown women.

Next Steps

This decision was a mistake, and we are calling upon district leaders to commit to the following steps to make it right:

1. *Dignified contracts for specialized work:* Compensation and conditions that attract and retain experienced, skilled paraprofessionals — not short-sighted cost-saving measures that destabilize our classrooms, harm our students, and increase the district's exposure to litigation and liability for out-of-district placements. This includes a meaningful assessment of whether experienced paraprofessionals — particularly those supporting students in and transitioning out of self-contained classrooms — can be retained through in-house hiring or contract carve-outs, and a full accounting of the Delta-T contract's provisions for minimum standards, experience requirements, and district oversight and accountability. If the Board has not already signed the contract in Executive Session, we urge you to exercise oversight before finalizing the contract and insist on provisions that will allow us to retain our most essential paraprofessionals.
2. *Transparent, meaningful, and respectful engagement of directly impacted stakeholders:* We have watched Superintendent Bing hold town halls around numerous budgetary changes. That this change was made with no public engagement with special education

families, with SEPAC, or with the educators serving our children is deplorable. Special education families, SEPAC, and our broader community deserve the same level of communication, collaboration, and transparency Superintendent Bing demonstrates in his work with other community stakeholders — courtesy bussing families, arts advocates, athletics advocates, and others. The consistent exclusion of our community from that standard of engagement is a pattern, not an oversight, and it must end now.

3. *Direct engagement with impacted educators — immediately:* The district must meaningfully engage self-contained classroom teachers and other directly-impacted educators to identify harm reduction strategies before any staffing transitions occur and, if possible, before the contract is signed. These educators have been excluded from this decision entirely. Their expertise is not optional — it is essential to ensure skillful decisions are made and harm is mitigated. These educators would be able to help the district responsibly assess which paraprofessionals we cannot afford to lose, and to finalize contract language that, to the maximum extent possible, is designed to retain them.
4. *Formation of a Special Services Working Group — with a real commitment to proactive communication, collaboration, and mutual respect:* SEPAC and the broader community could and should have been brought in as partners at the planning stage of this decision — sparing parents, paraprofessionals, and district leadership alike the panic and damage of the past week. It didn't have to be like this. It shouldn't be like this moving forward.

Superintendent Bing initiated and then abandoned this working group in 2025. We are calling for its formation now — not as a performative gesture, but as a functioning body with real authority. Operating in genuine thought-partnership with SEPAC—as evidenced by the workings of this organizing team—this working group will strengthen the communication and collaboration Mr. Bing espouses, catalyze the trust-building and repair our community urgently needs, bring the wisdom and professional expertise of directly impacted stakeholders to bear on district policy, establish accountability structures, and ensure this pattern of exclusion does not continue.

5. *BOE accountability:* The Board of Education must exercise active and independent oversight of district leadership at all times. Approving a decision of this magnitude in executive session without public deliberation is an abdication of their responsibility. The Board must hold Superintendent Bing accountable for his vastly disparate treatment of special education families, ascertain why this strategy was employed, and demand a clear plan for how this pattern of disregard will be remedied and monitored going forward. The board must also reckon with the fact that SEPAC met with district leadership the same morning the union letter was sent, but this decision was not raised until an email conversation the following day. That is more than a communication failure; that is a governance failure.

All children in our district deserve, first and foremost, access to basic education. Too many of our special education students have been denied that access. As we face this fiscal crisis as a community, undoubtedly some painful cuts will be necessary. But we cannot allow the district to balance the budget by gutting the supports that allow special education students to access the same education as their general education peers. Our special education community is eager to partner with the district to find solutions that responsibly address the budget crisis while maintaining the critical services that our children rely on to learn. We can be fierce partners in Trenton, but you need to include us here at home for us to do that.

Signed,

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