The cornerstone of a solid education in our country is not solely dependent on the classroom teacher or a counselor. It is vitally important that as an institution of education we do not forget the people who work in the background. People like secretaries, nurses, paraprofessionals, security, Head start and early childhood teachers, and those that work with students of trauma. Our PSRP members are just as important as those who stand in front of the classroom of students every day and deliver intense instruction. In fact, if the pandemic has taught us anything it is how as an educational system we cannot survive or function without our PSRP staff. That is why I made negotiating their contract the priority of my presidency.

Ensuring that every member of our PSRP staff had a living wage was a nonnegotiable during this negotiating session. It was vitally important that every single member of my union made no less than $15 an hour. Along with the living wage gains came language that insured that our health insurance and dental coverage would remain until 2024 with the expiration of the contract. The district must provide two free options to its employees and any base rate increase until 2024 will be covered by the district.

Along those same lines it was important to me to ensure that when we have inclement weather days that our staff are not financially punished. Previously if we had a snow day PSRP staff was required to use PTO for the day or give up the day’s pay. Under this contract 12-month PSRP staff will be able to report to work by 10 o’clock for a full day’s pay. Non-12-month PSRP staff will be paid for the first two snow days of the year. Any snow day in which the Board of Education building itself is closed will be a paid day for all PSRP staff.

Previously our paraprofessionals reported directly to the classroom teacher. However, I do not believe the teachers themselves are adequately trained to be supervisors. Additionally, this weakens the bond that paras and teachers should have as peers and makes one group superior to the other. For that reason, I negotiated the elimination of language that paraprofessionals report to teachers. Now paraprofessionals report directly to the principal.

As we stress the importance of lifting our PSRP staff we must always remember that we are equals and collaborators on the journey. No level of education, no salary, no directive gives any union member any more importance than the next. Without each other we cannot do the work of educating children. We all have an equal part to play in the classroom and in our schools. Therefore, I have made the importance of absolute solidarity a hallmark of my first year as president. I do not see the union as a triangle but more as a rectangle where we are all equal parts. As president I am no more important than the secretary who answers the phones and one of my schools. The teacher is no more important than the paraprofessional who helps the students in their class. The isolated nurse in his or her office is no more or less important than the person who drives the bus. We are all tasked with the safety and education of students from bell to bell.

Solidarity has always been the hallmark of a union. However, I fear across the country in education we have lost the true sense of solidarity. We focus most of our attention on the classroom teacher leaving behind those who do the work right beside us. I believe until all of the members of my union are seen as equally important and valuable, we have not truly achieved solidarity. However, this is not just true for local 691 this is true for all unions. I believe that’s why we were able to add two more units to our bargaining team; Trauma Sensitive Clinicians and Student Support Specialists. The growth of our local is because we are making solidarity a priority. The growth of our local is because we once again realize PSRP staff are not just important but vitally important.