

**For Release:**  
June 30, 2017

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## **Paraeducators in New London Schools Win Union Recognition; "Ready to Work Together"**

*Board of Education votes to approve agreement voluntarily accepting majority decision by district classroom support staff to unite for a collective voice on the job*

**New London** - Paraprofessionals, teaching assistants and tutors who support the education of students in New London Public Schools (NLPS) are reacting to officials' support for their free choice to form a union. Board of Education (BOE) members last night voted unanimously to approve an agreement creating a new labor-management partnership with the district's 160 classroom and school support staff.

"Forming our union was about winning respect," said Elijah Singer, a special education teachers' assistant who supports students with Autism in the Early Childhood Center at Harbor Elementary School. "The key to every relationship is communications, and we wanted healthier communications with management. We're ready to work together toward a better future for our students and ourselves," added Singer, a member of the committee of paras that spearheaded the organizing effort.

Singer's comments refer to the desire for an improved relationship with district administrators shared by his colleagues who more than a year ago joined him in seeking union representation. The BOE's approval of a recognition agreement with AFT Connecticut paves the way forward for negotiations on wages, working conditions and other terms of employment for paraeducators in the district.

"The organizing drive has already made positive change," said Marie Gravell, a paraprofessional who provides one-on-one support for students with special needs at New London High School. "It's shown us how we have a voice and can use it to look out for each other. As paras, we see what we can accomplish by working together as a team," added Gravell, who also served on the organizing committee.

Gravell's comments refer to the steps she and her colleagues have taken to win voluntary recognition of their union, and the gains made as a result. The organizing committee secured a neutrality agreement with district administration, empowering them to conduct a drive free from the hostility and intimidation that often afflicts unionization efforts. They also mounted a successful petition campaign to move

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school leaders to extend the period for paras to meet their annual re-certification requirements.

"I am so proud of these hardworking women and men for showing what it means to be union," said AFT Connecticut President Jan Hochadel. "We all know that paras are too often dismissed or overlooked when administrators and school officials make decisions that affect them. By working with each other, fellow educators and their community, they moved their board to treat them as true partners," added Hochadel, who previously taught in the state's technical high schools.

Hochadel's comments refer to the strong support shown over the past year for the paraeducators' unionization efforts by district colleagues, local social justice advocates and members of the school board. Leaders of the Greater New London NAACP and the New London Education Association were among those who stepped forward to offer direct assistance and solidarity for the schools' support staff.

Following last night's recognition agreement vote by the BOE, the Connecticut State Board of Labor Relations (SBLR) is expected to certify AFT Connecticut as the paraeducators' exclusive representative for collective bargaining. The organizing committee will next meet to assemble a team to represent their colleagues in first-ever contract talks with district officials, which could begin later this summer.

Link —

AFT Connecticut Video: "New London Paraeducators: Ready for a Better Future:"

<https://youtu.be/gE-5zsyRE1o>

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*AFT Connecticut represents more than 29,000 professionals across the state, including PreK-12 teachers, paraeducators and student support personnel in 29 local and regional school districts. For more information, visit [www.aftct.org](http://www.aftct.org) or follow the labor federation on Twitter at [@AFTCT](https://twitter.com/AFTCT) and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/aftct](https://www.facebook.com/aftct).*