

Courtney walks in educators' shoes

Congressman works as paraeducator for a day at local middle school

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MANSFIELD — U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd IDistrict, turned job shadowing on its head Thursday at Mansfield Middle School.

Instead of more traditional arrangements where students follow him around for the day, Courtney spent the day with students acting as an instructional assistant.

"Walk a Day in My Para Shoes," an event sponsored by the Connecticut State Education Association and its Service Employee International Union affiliates throughout the country, puts elected leaders in schools working directly with students.

Mansfield Middle School has 26 instructional assistants — also known as paraeducators or paraprofessionals — who support teachers with one-on-one instruction, aiding students with special needs and clerical work.

The three elementary schools have another 60 IAs, all represented by CSEA/SEIU.

After a tour of the school, Courtney visited a life-skills classroom where he helped write about a great day.

Instructional assistant Janice Wilcox had three students working on different stages of the project.

Wilcox introduced Courtney to pupil Tanya Rojas Rivera and asked him to help her revise her first draft.

Rivera had her first draft with the necessary corrections written on it, but she needed to make the changes on the computer.

"Scroll back up. Start at the top," Courtney suggested.

It took Rivera a few minutes to warm up to his help, but after she finished looking for pictures to add to her paper, the pair got into a rhythm and efficiently made all the changes.

Courtney encouraged her along the way.

"That first line is great," he said.

With Courtney and Rivera hard at work, Wilcox turned her attention to another student at an earlier stage of the project, still trying to plan out what to do on her perfect day.

Wilcox helped her decide how many activities could fit in a single day.

She also pointed out it was unlikely to shovel snow and play basketball on the same day.

Not long after Courtney and Rivera completed their assignment, there was a near disaster: the newly updated

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Roxanne Pandolfi photos

ABOVE: U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd, listens as instructional assistant Janice Wilcox helps sixth-grader Roohi Khoda at Mansfield Middle School on Thursday. It was part of 'Walk a Day in My Para Shoes,' in which Courtney got a chance to work alongside paraeducators for a day. LEFT: Courtney helps sixth-grader Tanya Rojas on a language arts assignment.

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paragraph had disappeared from the computer screen.

However, Ellen Paul, Courtney's constituent services coordinator in Norwich and a graduate of Mansfield Middle School, came to the rescue by manipulating computer keys and undoing what made the paragraph vanish.

Debra Breault, an instructional assistant who works in the life-skills classroom, said the people in the room are constantly moving around.

She said between three and 10 students spend parts of the day in the room with any of the five IAs who support them at different times.

Breault said she has worked with the physically and mentally challenged, both children and adults, since her teenage years.

She said her work at Mansfield Middle School ranges from helping with lessons to providing one-on-one physical assistance for students.

Next, Courtney moved to a resource room where two eighth-graders were working with IA Carlos Figueroa to compare the advantages and disadvantages of different energy sources for the middle school as part of a science project.

Kyle Smith did most of the talking while Courtney nodded along, adding in where he could.

Smith said biodiesel had the advantage of being renewable, but still polluted the air. He ruled

out coal because it was not renewable and caused air pollution.

Smith came out strongly in favor of hydroelectric, despite the problem of finding a local source.

"This sounds a lot like what we talk about in Washington," Courtney said.

Smith's fellow student, Colton DuBois, said Courtney surprised him.

"I thought he was just going to sit here and watch for a little bit because I thought he was pretty important," he explained.

Another eighth-grader in the resource room, Jordan Dodge, rushed to call his mom when Courtney left the room.

"Mr. Courtney has my essay," he told her in his brief conversation.

Dodge said he hoped Courtney would give him some feedback on his essay, which was about leadership.

Figueroa, who is also a part-time student, said he could relate to the students he helps in the resource room because he "fell off the track" in high school.

He said he has found his job very rewarding. "It has helped my decisions outside of the job," he explained. "It's a role to live up to."

Courtney said the IAs "make this place run."

He said the flexibility and versatility of the IAs really contribute to the education of indi-



Roxanne Pandolfi

Carlos Figueroa, an instructional assistant at Mansfield Middle School, helps eighth-grader Colton DuBois with a project about the environment on Thursday.

vidual students.

"I can understand that you've got to have patience and be sensitive, not jumping in and doing

too much," he explained. "What happens in the classroom is really how you deal with the education gap."