The reason I am here today, is because 3 people from Mandan Public Schools decided to nominate me, Dawn Ressler an Occupational Therapy Assistant, Renee Huber an Early Childhood Special Education Teacher and Mercedes Oberlander the Speech Language Pathologist I work alongside.

 For a school to operate you need Administrators, Teachers and ESPs. A school cannot run without the help of all, everyone is just as valuable as the next and deserves to be treated with the same respect and worth. But most important of all for the school to EXIST...we need the children. They need to be first.

 When you win an award, many people win it with you. I am a member of a great group of ESPs. EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

These are the people I share this award with the most. Along with occupational and physical therapy assistants I am a speech language pathology assistant. We work alongside therapists and pathologists. I have worked with more than 10 pathologists over the last 26 years and appreciate everyone of them. They have allowed me to grow.

I love what I do. I can't call it a job. I've had jobs where I would count down the minutes... 5 minutes after I got there, and I don't get the Sunday night stomachache about having to go to work. As an SLPA I go from school to school where I am needed the most. I never know for sure where I will be year to year. But no matter what school I end up at, the kids are the same. They all want to be seen and heard and know we are there for them. Where can you go where you are greeted at the door with hugs, I LOVE YOU's and invites to their homes after school. AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO REPORT IT TO HR. Hearing THIS IS THE BEST DAY EVER after my speech groups is priceless!

The children are like little lumps of clay on a potter’s wheel that we are privileged to help mold making sure to use enough pressure to shape them but not too much to break them. Just enough speed to make them grow, but not too much to throw them off balance. It takes patience, and caring and true love for teaching. There are many people our children encounter every day at school. I will focus on the ESP staff.

First off, the custodial staff. They make sure the school is safe, open, and ready to go. Always there in an emergency. Walking through school this week, I watched hugs given to them. They are the custodial staff, NOT JUST JANITORS.

The nutritional staff. They are there before the sun rises making sure 100's of kids are fed their breakfast and lunch. Making sure government guidelines are met. Some of these meals are the only ones some kids get. They greet the sleepy eyed children with smiles and kindness. They are the nutritional staff, NOT JUST COOKS.

Clerical service workers such as Administrative assistants.... they do everything to keep the school running...THEY ARE NOT JUST SECRETARIES.

Also, under this ESP umbrella are the tech people who keep our tech world going, nurses who are there to help and educate, bus drivers getting our kids to and from school in all kinds of weather.

Last but not least, are the paraprofessionals, para educators. That is what I started as. They truly are the ones that have the most contact with the children. They work alongside the teacher and assist with classroom instruction, some help and provide direct services to students, families, and the community. They are the first to greet the children in the morning and last to see them off. They handle everything from behaviors to sicknesses, as well as being pulled from their job to assist at another when we have a shortage of staff. They are not just para's, they can be a lifeline to a troubled kid.

I have too many memories to share but the one that stays with me the most is when I would greet the kids as they came off the bus...the new kindergarten kids would come off the bus...scared to death. I would see them, hear them, and let them know I was there for them. They would gather around me like little chicks. I felt like the mother hen. After a few days to a few weeks, they would leave my side and venture off. Some days they would come back and walk with me. They knew that I saw them, heard them, and was there for them.

I invited 3 retired coworkers here today that I consider part of my family. When they retired, they retired with 90 years of combined experience. Their combined gross incomes for the 3 together was $80,000. I have had coworkers come back from Christmas vacation with negative paychecks. We are losing ESPs and having a difficult time replacing them. We must do more to make sure our ESP staff are taken care of. Mental health stresses of school workers are at an all-time high.

I ask now from Administrators, the State Legislature, and the Governor to SEE US, HEAR US, AND BE THERE FOR US. BECAUSE WE ARE TAKING CARE OF THE MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE THIS STATE HAS TO OFFER, OUR CHILDREN.