Your Union

Health Insurance Headaches?

The start of the year brought big changes in the health insurance benefits that cover all public school employees. And though we’ve known the changes were coming for years, the real-world effects on you, your peers, and your families are just beginning.

While union bargainers and local boards reached agreements on cost-sharing of premiums and out-of-pocket expenses in virtually every district (only 9 contracts remained unsettled statewide in late January), confusion and sticker shock, particularly in hitting prescription drugs, are hitting members as they experience bills they’ve never seen before.

Starting the first week of January, stories began coming into the office from members who discovered that the amount they were required to pay up front at the pharmacy, including for generic and non-brand, preferred medications, was much larger than the modest co-payments they had been charged under the old VEHI plans. Even though entitled to district reimbursement for a share of the total cost depending on their collective bargaining agreement, the first-dollar charges were steep and hurt.

Nearly 84% of VEHI’s prescriptions are for generics, but these drugs, like others, can be very costly, and paying for them up-front under a deductible continued on p. 7

Your Power

Ratio Scheme Puts 4,100 School Jobs at Risk

Gov. Phil Scott delivered his budget address last month and repeated his proposal to enforce an arbitrary student-to-staff ratio. That scheme will lead to massive cuts that will shortchange students and lead to the loss of 4,100 middle class jobs, according to an analysis prepared by economists at the National Education Association.

When the governor first proposed his first-in-the-nation scheme last year, he claimed it would not hurt students.

In fact, the analysis concludes the governor’s plan depends on a hiring freeze that will lead to 4,151 lost jobs between now and 2021.

Those thousands of Vermonter’s put out of work under the governor’s plan live in every community in the state. The analysis calculated that among those losing their jobs will be 2,710 teachers and 2,442 education support professionals.

“It is impossible to build the country’s best education system when you slash support for students and throw thousands of middle class Vermonters out of work,” said Martha Allen, a school librarian from Canaan who serves as president of Vermont NEA. “The governor says he wants to protect our most vulnerable, especially those who are facing the ravages of the opioid epidemic. Unfortunately, his dangerous scheme will hit our most vulnerable children the hardest.”

According to the analysis, it will take four years to reach the scheme’s target. Along the way it will result in dramatically larger class sizes in many communities while cutting resources Vermont’s students depend on by more than $250 million a year.

“We need to ensure that all kids get a quality education. Slashing resources and laying off 4,100 educators will hurt our students and make it harder — not easier — for them to succeed,” Allen said.

“If this scheme isn’t stopped, middle class Vermonters will be out of work, our schools will suffer, and, worst of all, our students will be robbed of the futures they deserve.”

Highlights of the Analysis

4-Years of Pain

Gov. Scott’s plan will take four years of a hiring freeze to reach his target of 1 school employee for every five students. Under the analysis, that will mean years of job losses that will hit our students directly.

Gov. Scott’s plan will be felt in our classrooms immediately, according to the analysis. Through the four years it will take to achieve what the governor says he wants, hundreds of teachers and ESP will lose their jobs.

Deepest Cuts Ever

Gov. Scott’s plan will result in the deepest cuts ever in Vermont education. Indeed, by the fourth year, Vermont students will be shortchanged by more than a quarter billion dollars a year.

This amount far exceeds any projection the governor has made, and illustrates the dangers of taking politically motivated sound bites and turning them into policy.

Such deep cuts will lead to deep reductions in opportunities for our children—now and into the future. Look at states where education spending is slashed - is that where we want Vermont to go?

Growing Class Sizes

With so many fewer school employees, class sizes will increase in every district in the state.

In some districts, the teacher-to-student ratio will climb by as much as 60 percent; the statewide average will result in class sizes 20 percent larger than they are now.

Taken together, the governor’s scheme will end up shortchanging our schools; throwing 4,100 middle class Vermonters out of work; slash more than $250 million a year from students; and lead to less time for teachers to spend with students.

‘Menu’ of Bad Options

The ratio scheme comes as the governor’s administration insists on at least $75 million worth of cuts to Vermont’s public schools. In January, the administration proposed freezing some special education funding; immediate implementation of a hiring freeze; making our property tax system less progressive; putting spending caps on local school boards; reduce income sensitivity; reduce and restrict the excess spending threshold; re-introduce the two-vote mandate for districts that don’t meet the governor’s ratio scheme targets; and apply an asset test to and change the formulation of income sensitivity.

“It’s too bad that none of these things will help Vermont’s students meet the challenges they face,” Allen said.
It's 2018!

By now, those annual resolutions have come and (probably) gone. Resolutions are all well and good and I wish you the best, but, will 2018 show the promise that so many of us wish for in Vermont and in our country? I sincerely hope so. We need positive change in our country and state. The national climate has become one of government mistrust, a gaping economic gap, a healthcare crisis, and the apparent permission to practice explicit racism. Is this really what we want? It is all frightening to me, but at the same time I think we are extremely fortunate to be living in Vermont. For the most part, the quality of life here flies in the face of the turmoil outside our border. Vermonters give me reassurance and hope for the future.

I am concerned, however, when national rhetoric finds its way into Vermont, painting our state with a national view that isn't necessarily appropriate for our way of life. We have an opportunity to improve the lives of all Vermonters but must look at the long view, planning and investing in the future.

Public schools, teachers and support professionals, and our union are under attack, again. Why is this, you might ask. Well, the operative word here is, public. Education is a right for every child and it is the state's responsibility to make sure that we maintain excellent schools.

Our union advocates for professional wages and benefits to attract and retain the best and the brightest for public school students. Our public schools are the economic and social engines in many of our small communities. Their solvency is critical to the survival of these communities and we must ensure they stay open.

The reality of necessary school costs for salaries, health insurance, pensions, and other expenses are why legislators are wringing their hands, once again. We must find a way to support our schools without sacrificing a quality education system. This is a challenge that involves long term planning across all areas of our state government.

What we need is a comprehensive economic growth plan. I am not talking about the empty rhetoric we hear when politicians are running for office. Yes, we do need jobs, but that is an empty statement without anything to back it up. If we want to thrive, we must bring younger families into our state, and keep our Vermont graduates. How do we do that? We do it with a plan!

Let's get with the program, Vermont, and invest up front. We need better internet. It will pay off in the end. We need to make higher education affordable. It will pay off in the end. We need to attract people to Vermont for its quality of life, professional opportunities and excellent public schools. If we shutter our small community schools, new families will never move there. If we don't have high speed internet in every nook and cranny of this state, younger professionals will never move here. If we don't advertise the amazing quality of life in Vermont, no one will find the state attractive. These are not impossible initiatives.

Meanwhile, it is our responsibility to monitor what is going on in Montpelier. Let's advocate for another way to pay for public education and take the pressure off the property tax. Many Vermonters will benefit and equity in taxation will become a reality. If we design full service schools, providing full-day and full-year childcare, along with delivering healthcare services to families, our small schools will thrive. If we provide family mental health services in schools, struggling families and struggling learners will learn how to support each other.

These public services can attract people to Vermont. Not only will people learn what we already know about our state, they will contribute to Vermont's long term survival. If we continue with the annual handwringing exercise, all of us will lose and that is not an option.
Crowdfunding sites have helped educators get thousands of dollars in supplies for their classrooms. Here’s how you can do it, too.

Amani Abubashab, a science teacher at Dawes Elementary School in Chicago, says she’s “tried everything” to get supplies for her classroom.

But the one thing that has consistently worked is writing small “grants” on DonorsChoose.org—the site that allows teachers to seek donations for classroom projects.

“I teach over 600 kids,” Abubashab says. “No one (person or business) is going to give me 600 notebooks. So I’ll go online and talk about why I need them.”

Are you currently looking to replenish your dwindling classroom supplies? You may want to give this crowdfunding tactic a try!

Abubashab has had more than 160 projects funded on DonorsChoose. Here, she and 3 other teachers share their tips for running a successful project so you can hit the ground running.

1. Focus on Students, Not Supplies
When Abubashab asks donors to fund the purchase of straws, popsicle sticks, rubber bands and cups, she doesn’t put the phrase “basic supplies” in her project headline.

Instead, she talks about what the students will be doing with the supplies—building catapults while learning about the engineering design process.

“I want the potential donor to close his or her eyes and get an image of exactly what my students are going to be doing,” she says. “If I read it over and I don’t see that, I rewrite it.”

“If you’re asking for construction paper, really show what you’re doing with it and how you’re using it to propel your mission forward,” advises Genein Letford, a music teacher at the New Academy Canoga Park elementary school in California, and the first teacher to become a board member of DonorsChoose.

“If you’re a great storyteller, you can ask for pencils and tape, and people will be all over it,” she said.

2. Skip the Teacher Jargon
“Sometimes teachers will mention this pedagogy or that process, and people have no idea what they’re talking about,” says Dave Stuart Jr., who teaches history at Cedar Springs High School in Michigan.

“Obviously, your reader is typically not a teacher, and those projects are going to be less likely to get a click,” he said.

Rather than referring to students’ Lexile levels, for example, Stuart suggests using lay language such as, “I want my students to be able to read anything they come across as an adult.”

3. Keep It Simple
Teachers should resist the urge to lump their entire wish lists into a single project, says Abubashab. “If you just need pens and pencils and notebooks, don’t start adding games, too,” she says. “For your first few times, I think you want to keep the total around $200.”

Stuart advises teachers to shoot for an even lower amount. “If you can limit yourself to $100 per project, you’ll be much more likely to get funded,” he says. “People like to have the sense of, ‘I just finished that project,’ or ‘I paid for half of it with my 50 dollars.’”

4. Catch the Eye
Donors don’t always read through dozens of projects before deciding what to fund, so it’s important to have a snappy headline and an eye-catching photograph to draw people in.

“It’s like writing anything on the Internet,” Stuart says. “You want to get attention. ‘Bring History to Life’ is a way better title than ‘We Need These Books.’”

5. Keep Going
Once you have the basics funded, don’t be afraid to write more grants. Sometimes, big companies will “flash-fund” grants, donating to all of the projects in a given geographical area.

“I tell my colleagues, ‘Always have a project up, just in case,’” says Andy Yung, a pre-K teacher at PS 244 in Queens who has had $65,000 worth of projects funded on DonorsChoose.

Teachers are sometimes shy about asking for what they need, but Stuart says that many donors are thrilled to help. “You’re giving people an opportunity to be a part of what you’re doing,” he says. “A lot of people love to give to education. As teachers, we take for granted how we get to be in the classroom every day. We see the ups and the downs, but the ups are pretty amazing.”

6. Spread the Word
Teachers should do more than simply share their projects with their immediate friends and family.

“Teachers have to be promoters for themselves,” Yung says. “By the 99th time, your friends aren’t going to be there to keep giving money, so you have to rely on the generosity of strangers. I’ll put up a project as a public Facebook post, and I’ll ask my wife and brother to share it, too. You never know who’s out there who is willing to help your students.”

Letford’s first funded project was a rug for her classroom—a rug that students are still using a decade later. She says that first project showed her the positive impact that strangers can have on her students.

“It really opened my eyes that, wow, there are people out there who don’t know me, who care about my classroom and my students,” she says.

“It fills your heart with joy to know that you’re not in this alone.”
18 Join Ranks of National Board Certified Teachers

Hard work, perseverance, and dedication (did we mention hard work?) paid off this year for 18 Vermont-NEA members when they learned that they are this year’s newest National Board Certified Teachers.

They are set to be formally recognized during a celebration in February with the national director of NBCT and Lt. Gov. David Zuckerman. There are now more than 110 nationally board certified teachers in Vermont.

“I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am of my colleagues who earned this important distinction,” said Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen. “As NBCTs, these classroom and association leaders will continue to do their best in expanding learning opportunities for Vermont’s students.”

The state’s newest board certified teachers are: Eileen Sears, Addison Central Educators’ Association; Colleen Purcell, Montpelier Education Association; Dorothy Gomez, Green Mountain-NEA; Kelly Robinson, Hazen Union Teachers’ Association; Katherine Chabot, Montpelier Education Association; and Timony Norris, Burlington Education Association.

Josepha Austin, Burlington Education Association; Paul Cherrier, Addison Central Educators’ Association; Courtney Krahn, Addison Central Educators’ Association; Martha Santa Maria, Addison Central Education Association; Alison McNamara, Addison Central Education Association; Anah Gagnon, Burlington Education Association; and Jennifer Larocque, Addison Central Education Association.

Nathan Caswell, Burlington Education Association; Meaghan Morgan-Puglisi, Southwestern Vermont Education Association; Katie Moquin, Addison Central Education Association; Elizabeth Foster, Addison Central Education Association; and Rebekah Mortensen, Barre Education Association.

Congrats one and all!

Stand Up for Students Set for Feb. 21, 28 at Statehouse

Tight budgets.
 Potential loss of thousands of jobs.
 Massive cuts to programs our kids depend on.
 And that’s just the beginning of this year’s conversation about schools.

We need those who make decisions in Montpelier to learn about what’s really important in our schools and to our students. And the only real experts on those topics are all of you. Once again—on Feb. 21 and 28—Vermont-NEA is hosting Stand Up for Students Days at the Statehouse.

We need you to show up so that lawmakers can hear directly from about what we all need for Vermont’s students.

Most of the year, the discussion around education occurs without you. School board members, superintendents, business managers, lobbyists all have direct, daily access to lawmakers while you’re hard at work with Vermont’s students. On these two days, however, you can be a dominant part of the conversation.

We will feed you lunch and give you what you need for a successful day. Head on over to vtnea.org/standup2018 to register and learn more about this important opportunity.
Your Power
Barre Settlement Leaves Only 9 Open Contracts

After 15 months of talks – seven of them without a contract – the members of Barre Education Association and the Barre Town Education Association reached a tentative agreement with their boards during mediation on Jan. 22. The agreement leaves only 9 unsettled contracts, far below the level of unsettled contracts in any given year.

“I am proud of my fellow members for standing tall in solidarity as they sought a contract that gives them what they need to be the very best for their students,” said Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen. “By working together, Barre teachers showed their support for their bargaining team. And they stood up for what matters most: each other and their students.”

The settlement came after an intense period of organizing, that included more than 500 phone calls to community members; an informational picket; shows of solidarity at school board meetings; and building level communications. The 260-strong locals remained committed to a singular message, one that made it clear to the community that they put students first.

The two-year pact includes modest raises; no out-of-pocket insurance costs the first year; and assurances that a half-hour lengthening of the school day be devoted to activities that will allow for more collaboration and planning.

Teachers from the Barre EA and Barre Town EA gather at Barre City Hall Park to show their support for their negotiating team last month. With their TA, only 9 other contracts statewide were open.

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Martha Allen Testifies Against Strike Ban

This is Martha Allen’s testimony before the Senate Education Committee, which rejected the bill on a 4-2 vote.

Good afternoon. I am Martha Allen, a K-12 librarian from Canaan who has taught in Vermont schools for over 30 years. I am also proud to represent 14,000 women and men in our state’s schools as president of Vermont-NEA. I am here today to tell you why S.157 is an unnecessary intrusion into the relationship between local school boards, their local educators, and their local schools.

For more than 50 years, locally elected school board members have worked directly with the women and men in their schools to reach contract settlements more than 5,000 times. During that time, Vermont’s school’s rose from middle-of-the-pack nationally to become among the handful of school systems considered the nation’s best. During that time, the caliber of professionals in our classrooms has improved, as teachers are able to dedicate careers to children while becoming financially secure.

To be sure, there have been hiccups along the road. But let’s put it in perspective: over the course of 30 years and 5,000 contract settlements, boards have voted to impose terms of employment about two dozen times and teachers have gone on strike 27 times. The incidence of strikes comes to half of one percent of all negotiations. (About the same math applies to impositions made by boards.) In other words, both sides rarely – if ever – use their final steps in the collective bargaining process.

We have long opposed taking away the rights of unionized teachers to strike – as well as being opposed to stripping local school boards of their rights to impose terms of employment.

The fact that boards and teachers each have last-resort options is a matter of law. The teachers bargaining law is written to compel settlements at every stage. Very, very few negotiations end up even close to strikes or impositions of employment terms. And that’s by design.

We fully understand the emotional reasons for trying to strip away these final tools. Strikes aren’t pleasant, and impositions of employment terms do real long-term damage to the relationship between teachers and local school boards. But it is because both options are so dramatic that they are rarely used.

Indeed, we aren’t alone in our opposition to S.157’s principles; last week, the South Burlington School Board wrote to the legislature to register their opposition to stripping away teachers’ right to strike. And this is a board that faced an imminent strike this fall, averred because both sides were able to reach a negotiated settlement.

At a time when assaults on working women and men are coming from all corners, it would be a grave disservice if this Legislature were to add to further erosions in the rights of working people. We know that the majority of lawmakers made it clear during last year’s veto fight that they were unwilling to strip away collective bargaining rights from teachers. We hope that the same sentiment prevails again this year.

I have been a decades-long teacher in Vermont schools.

I can tell you that for me and my colleagues, the ability to collectively bargain with our employers has made it easier for us to do what we all want to do: be our best for our students.

S.157 is a solution in search of a problem. We strongly oppose this measure, as we believe that collective bargaining has been an unmitigated success for our schools, our educators, and, most importantly, Vermont’s students.

Your Power

Rest in Power, Brother Paul Booth

from p. 8

Paul Booth founded the Students for a Democratic Society chapter at his alma mater, Swarthmore College. He led and organized the first march on Washington protesting the Vietnam War. He was instrumental in the creation, sustainment, and success of the Divestment Movement in South Africa and organized the first sit-in at Chase-Manhattan Bank that highlighted the bank’s role in supporting the pro-apartheid regime.

Paul was a contemporary and protégé of Saul Alinsky, with whom he worked to fight for social, economic, and environmental justice for urban communities. Even as a national leader he did the trench work of knocking doors, making calls and organizing voters to be more powerful than the sum of their individual efforts. “Working people have lost one of our greatest champions in Paul Booth,” said Eskelsen Garcia. “No advancement for social justice in the last half a century of our immediate history is without Paul’s fingerprints. Much of it would not have been possible without him, a legacy that might be unmatched if not for the similarly overwhelming historic contribution of his partner in life Heather, who we are so sad for today. And through it all, Paul never sought recognition, honors, or spotlight. The lives of millions of people, in America and abroad, who have never heard his name are better today because we have been lucky enough to share this earth with Paul Booth.

“For all his notable achievements, there are hundreds, maybe thousands more movements and causes that Paul led, advised, or contributed to that made the lives of real people better. Paul will never receive and never would have asked for credit. But if you scratch the surface of any progressive change in the past 50 years, you will find the mark of Paul Booth.

“As Paul lived his final moments yesterday, he implored Heather to leave his side and join Jewish faith and political leaders in a protest for dreamers at the US Capitol where she was ultimately arrested. That may seem exceptional, but in the lives of Paul and Heather, it is unremarkable. Standing for others without regard for themselves or their own convenience is simply what they have done for more than five decades.

In his spirit, memory, and honor, the National Education Association and I will redouble our efforts to stand for dreamers, build power for working people, fight for social and racial justice and continue to the best of our abilities the irreplaceable efforts of Paul Booth. Rest in power, Paul.”
Experience of Lifetime’ Made Lasting Connections

ESP in Focus: For the next three issues leading up to our annual ESP conference in March, we will feature a recollection of members who attended the National ESP conference last spring. This second installment comes from Loretta Johnson, a paraeducator who serves as co-president of her local, the Rutland Northeast EA Paraprofessionals and Bus Drivers Unit.

The experience of a lifetime! That is what can be said about the recent NEA ESP 2017 Conference in Dallas, Texas. For three Vermont paraeducators, it gave us the validation and national connections that we need to help advance our profession.

For Margaret Russo, Hannah Van Loon, and Loretta Johnson, it gave three unique and yet compatible experiences. Before the trip, we had only communicated by phone or email. The three of us had never met. That became the first real challenge - connecting with one another in Dallas, when we didn’t know what each other looked like. We all traveled from different airports and arrived in Dallas at various times. Loretta and Hannah found each other first, on Wednesday evening, after an email and waiting in the hotel lobby. That turned out to be the easy part! We seemed to be missing Margaret at every turn. We felt like we were trying to find Wally, but instead we were playing Where’s Margaret. Perseverance pays off for all educators, paraeducators included in that. We finally connected with Margaret on Thursday afternoon. The pre-conference sessions were registered for before we arrived, so we weren’t sure what each other was taking. There were two Para Power sessions, and between the three of us, we were in both. These sessions, Building the Foundation for Effective Teams... and Understanding Challenging Behavior..., were ten hours long and spread over two days. The effective and experienced trainers were other paraeducators who were part of NEA’s Paraeducator Institute.

The energetic delivery of information and strategies for handling various situations kept all of us focused and interested. The resources that we were given will help us within our own schools and associations. Just the knowledge that we may be able to bring these same trainings to our districts or at least to our state made a huge impact.

On Thursday night, Loretta had a very special VIP dinner with NEA Executives because she is Vermont’s ESP of the Year. While Loretta was at the fancy dinner, Hannah and Margaret went out to eat some Italian. During this time, Hannah got a stark reminder that food in Texas is different from Vermont. A little too much spice in some red sauce caught Hannah off guard and gave Margaret and Hannah some chuckles the next day. While at the VIP dinner, Loretta mingled with ESPs of the Year from many states. The dinner ended with a ceremony in which ESP of the Year pins were given by Princess Moss, NEA Secretary-Treasurer. Photos of all kinds were taken, and the magnitude of the evening really sunk in and was very special.

After the dinner was over, Loretta discovered the Skyline Terrace at the hotel. The night sky in Dallas is beautiful. The buildings, including Reunion Tower, are so stunningly colorful at night. There is nothing comparable in Vermont.

Loretta Johnson walking to a session at the NEA ESP Conference last year.

Read the rest of the story and see more pictures at vtnea.org/espfocus

Health Insurance Changes Bring Unwanted Surprises

from p. 1

TELL US IF YOUR NEW HEALTH INSURANCE PLANS ARE BRINGING UNEXPECTED COSTS AND PROBLEMS

vtnea.org/insurancestories
National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen García and Executive Director John Stocks each sent messages to NEA members and leaders honoring the life and legacy of labor organizer and social justice champion Paul Booth, who passed away Jan. 18.

“I am deeply saddened by the passing of my teacher, mentor and friend Paul Booth,” said Stocks. “Paul was a tireless leader and organizer for social justice. He was a quiet giant who worked behind the scenes, who touched the lives of so many, who fought for working people not because of professional obligation but out of personal commitment, who sought to create change by building solidarity rather than burning bridges.”

“I came to know Paul Booth in the early 1980’s after I trained as a young organizer at the Midwest Academy in Chicago, a vital institution of progressive infrastructure founded by Paul’s dear wife Heather, one of the few people in American history whose contributions to the betterment of our world compares to the work of Paul. While the list of movements Paul touched and brought together over the last 50 years is innumerable, perhaps his greatest contribution and the effort that will sustain his legacy is the work he and Heather have done to reach, teach, and inspire generation after generation of young people, workers, and organizers to move from spectator to participant in our democracy.

“We cannot begin to quantify the impact of Paul’s life, or the number of movements Paul not only touched, but brought together. The thread of ‘Build, Not Burn’, that Paul coined during his earliest days as a peace activist was constant in his life. He recognized that nothing was more important for our lives and our work than to bring disparate organizations together for the common cause of fighting for equity, fairness, and justice.

“I am one of thousands of advocates, activists and organizers who would not be where I am today if not for Heather and Paul Booth. Words cannot express the depth of sorrow I feel today. As we mourn the loss of Paul, we will surround Heather and the AFSCME family with our assistance, our warmth, and our love.”

continued on p. 6

We Want You at Your RA!

We’re excited to announce that this year’s Vermont-NEA Representative Assembly is set for April 7 at the Stoweflake Mountain Resort in Stowe. Check out more details and learn how to attend at vtnea.org/repassembly18.

6 Ways to Restock Your Classroom With Crowdfunding, p. 3
President’s View: Let’s Resolve to Protect Vermont’s Public Schools, p. 2
18 Members Become Latest Board Certified Teachers, p. 4

After 27 dedicated years of service to Vermont-NEA’s members, Administrative Assistant Sheree O. Parker is retiring. We’ll miss you!