Rebecca Holcombe, Vermont’s Education Secretary, last month urged school districts statewide to reduce the number of adults in their schools, arguing that “every precious tax dollar” that can be saved was more important than doing right by our students.

The four-page memo has been cited dozens of times by local school boards, who no doubt continue to feel trapped by their desire to do what’s best for their local students and educators while politicians and their appointees continue their decades-long worship of the property tax rate.

And in a particularly offensive paragraph, she lauds the work of the boards in the Rutland northeast Supervisory Union for their great job “managing attrition” to “reduce staff.” This is the same supervisory union where boards are stiff-arm their paraeducators and bus drivers, spending more than $100,000 to fight rather than settle a contract for the last two years.

Holcombe’s reasoning? Vermont’s student enrollment numbers are declining, but the overall amount of money our state’s cities and towns invest in their children is not. “As schools and class sizes shrink, per pupil costs increase. We need to be clear-eyed about both our fiscal capacity and the opportunity cost of our small and shrinking ratios,” she wrote. “Preserving quality means thinking hard about how we use our dollars, to ensure the investments we make are actually those that increase opportunities for children and those that ensure the greatest value out of every precious tax dollar we spend.”

It’s too bad that she reserved the word “precious” to modify “tax dollar.” The number one priority of our public schools is to ensure that every student—regardless of where they live—get the educational attention and resources they deserve. Mindlessly setting ratios and laying off or firing paraeducators—as Holcombe’s memo suggests—does nothing to help Vermont’s students.

It is true that we have among the lowest student-to-teacher ratios in the nation. It’s also true that, in large part, the ability of students to have one-on-one time with educators is why we have one of the best school systems in the country. (And to see how valuable low student-to-teacher ratios are, look no further than elite private schools: to attract students, they cite their low ratios as the key to outstanding achievement.)

“At a time when many of our schools are a sanctuary for students, it is wrong and counterproductive to advocate for a cut in services to our kids,” said Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen. “Our state should not be attacking our public schools and those who have dedicated their professional lives to Vermont’s public-school students. Instead, our Secretary of Education should be supporting and defending the people who are responsible for our excellent school system. We are among the best in the nation because of the professionals who educate our young Vermonters. Now more than ever we must provide the training, support, time and money necessary to keep our schools open and vibrant.”

Holcombe brings up the annual—and tired—argument that reducing the education tax rate is the paramount objective facing Vermont policymakers. She argues that the $50 million hole in the education fund somehow dictates slashing services to students. What she doesn’t mention is that the primary reason for the shortfall is the decision by the governor and lawmakers to produce a politically motivated tax cut this year, while leaving a hole now.

Instead of slashing what we invest in students, we should cherish our schools. Not only because they are crucial to the life and success of students, but also because they should be viewed as one of the best economic development tools we have.

Holcombe also trotted out the canard about the growth in what local communities spend on their children. She argued that school costs are straining our state’s ability to do right by our children. Consider the following, however: from 1997 to last year, the state’s economy grew from $15.5 billion to $31.1 billion—a doubling of the state’s Gross State Product. Over the same period, investing in our students grew at the exact same rate. In other words, Vermonters’ investment in their children’s education as a percentage of the economy has remained stable. (In fact, in 1997, education spending accounted for almost 5.5 percent of the state’s economy; last year, it was only 5 percent.)

Instead of lamenting the “opportunity costs” by not reducing the number of adults we have working with Vermont’s students, Holcombe should lament the lost opportunities students may suffer if their needs aren’t met. Imagine what could happen if Holcombe—and others—would talk first about what we can—and must—do for Vermont’s students. Imagine if instead of this annual reduction of schools to dollars and cents the secretary celebrated the incredible work being done in our state’s classroom. Imagine if she—and the governor, and the legislature—celebrated the great success of Vermont’s schools and found ways to...
Cutting Staff Wrong Way to Help Students

Martha Allen

Prescription drug addiction and widespread poverty challenge every community in the state. Our public-school students have found themselves in the middle of a societal crisis, none of which is their fault, but all of which is forcing them to develop resiliency as they grow up in Vermont. Your daily encounters with students who've experienced trauma of one kind or another has dramatically changed the way you think about your students. At times, it seems that everything has been turned upside down and the days of simply teaching students has long gone. Now, every staff member should be well-trained to meet the complex needs of children suffering from trauma, and many of these children find that the adults in their school – you - are the most dependable adults they know. School is their safe haven.

On October 4th the Secretary of Education, Rebecca Holcombe, sent a memo to superintendents, business managers and school board members. It was a scathing report directing school districts to cut staff across the board. Her premise focused on the declining enrollment of our school population along with a $50 million gap in the Education Fund, necessitating cuts in staffing. Holcombe highlighted our low staff to student ratio in comparison to other states. Her message to administrators was to ask themselves how many teachers are really needed and how many paraprofessionals are really needed in our schools. She also asked how many administrators and staff in general are needed. Unfortunately, the focus of the memo was on reckless cuts, not excellence in education, not safety in our schools, and not responsibly meeting the needs of our students suffering from adverse childhood experiences.

Over the past few years you expressed frustration knowing that something different must be done in our schools and administrators were slow to understand this. Now, finally, many school districts are requesting all-staff training in trauma and ACES. Many teachers and ESPs are attending Vermont-NEA workshops on trauma. The Vermont Legislature heard your concerns and offered two bills to address this crisis which resulted in a working group of senators and representatives who will bring a new bill to the 2018 legislative session. Our state is in crisis. Our public schools must address this issue and there is no time to waste.

We have found that many students need one-on-one attention, quiet spaces to regroup, before and after school supports, meals, and love and understanding before they can even begin to be ready to learn. Cutting staff in our schools will not allow us to meet the needs of these children. They have been neglected for reasons many of them do not understand. These students must be reassured and taught resiliency skills, and possibly receive mental health services.

Yes, our student population is on the decline, but we can’t ignore those who are in our schools right now. Instead of cutting valuable staff, why can’t our state work on finding other revenue sources along with finding ways to attract families to Vermont? One of our biggest draws is our excellent public school system. Quality of life is another attractive feature Vermont offers, but neglecting the children of poverty and those impacted by opioid abuse will erode that quality of life for all of us.

Our state should not be attacking our public schools and those who have dedicated their professional lives to Vermont’s public-school students. Instead, our Secretary of Education should be supporting and defending the people who are responsible for our excellent school system. We are among the best in the nation because of the professionals who educate our young Vermonters. Now more than ever we must provide the training, support, time and money necessary to keep our schools open and vibrant.

Let’s get creative and, for example, welcome other services into our schools. Colocation of services would fill empty classrooms, offer needed services to our smaller, rural communities, support families, bring revenue into our towns, and keep our public schools alive.

Let’s change the narrative. We want Vermont’s future to be bright, and our future is found in the halls of our public schools.
5 Tested Tips for Squeaky-Clean Classrooms

As you look around your beloved classroom, are you annoyed that your desks are dirty, you have crayon on your walls and there are Sharpie stains on your whiteboard? Your fellow educators, inherently creative and infinitely resourceful, have devised plenty of ways to clean stubborn classroom messes quickly and cheaply.

If you are in need of some cleaning inspiration, try these educator-approved, smart and even fun ways to conquer your nagging classroom cleaning chores.

1. Shaving cream clean

Use shaving cream to clean classroom desks, suggests Joey Green, an expert on wacky uses for everyday products and author of "Joey Green's Cleaning Magic."

The great thing about shaving cream is "it's basically condensed soap. When you wipe it off, you've cleaned off the desktop." At the same time, you've made cleaning a fun project that students can do, and will want to do, themselves.

"Small children (and even older ones) enjoy finger painting on their desks using shaving cream," agrees Sara Van Donge, who has been a K-8 dual language teacher in Walla Walla, Washington, for 16 years. It takes between five and 15 minutes for the shaving cream to clean each desk.

The timing is perfect because "the foam starts to diminish after about five minutes, but children still enjoy [playing with it] for up to 15," says Van Donge.

By the time the teacher moves from desk to desk and finally covers the last desk in the classroom, with foam, the first desk is ready to be wiped off with a clean damp towel or sponge.

Does the brand matter? "I usually pick Barbasol shaving cream because it's one of the oldest and best known," or Gillette Foamy because that's one of the best sellers," Green says. These shaving creams are safe for skin contact, but "obviously you don't want kids eating shaving cream," he cautions.

2. Whiteboard magic

If someone accidentally used an indelible marker on the classroom whiteboard, or dry-erase board, it'll come off if you wipe the board with a paper towel or napkin moistened with Coffee-mate non-dairy creamer, Green says. "Rubbing alcohol will do the same thing."

Many Pinterest boards show other clever ways to clean whiteboards using hand sanitizer, vinegar-water, WD-40 and Febreze.

3. Crayon eraser

Toothpaste works well to remove crayon marks from walls, says Green. Choose a white, regular flavor toothpaste without tartar control, whitening agents or other chemicals. Apply it with a sponge or toothbrush.

"It just takes the crayon marks right off the walls" at school or home, even on wallpaper. Kids can help or do the job themselves, Green adds.

Another method (although it's not suitable for children to use) is heat.

Set your clothes iron to "cotton" and when it's warm enough, place a clean paper towel over the crayon mark and iron it carefully. "What happens is the heat from the iron melts the crayon," Green explains, so "the paper towel absorbs it."

The same method lifts crayon or candle wax from carpets, walls and other surfaces. If there's a lot of crayon or wax, use a credit card to scrape off as much as you can before you apply heat.

4. Ban classroom ants

Ants are common in classrooms because students leave candy or fruit in their desks, says Cristin Frank, a Williamsville, New York author of "Living Simple, Free and Happy" and creator-owner of PamperedTeacher.com.

She battles ants with baking soda. "Sprinkle near windows and doors to keep ants out," she says. Frank uses a mixture of baking soda with lemon juice to clean tables, sinks and desks.

5. Involve students

Use creative approaches to get students to pitch in and help with cleaning chores, suggests Lee Silber, author of 21 books including "Organizing from the Right Side of the Brain." Write cleaning-related tasks on slips of paper and place them in a bowl. Add in a few slips that list fun things to do or prizes students could win. Tell each child he or she must do whatever is on the slip. "Children will do almost anything for a small prize, candy or competition," Silber says. Drawing for chores with a chance of winning a reward makes every task more fun.

Want to Run for Vermont-NEA Office?

These are 3-year term positions. Petitions must be submitted by January 15, 2018. Candidate speeches for statewide office are given at the Vermont-NEA RA, April 7, 2018. Online voting begins April 7, 2018. Contact Kristie Ferguson at HQ (k Ferguson@vtnea.org) for details and candidate petitions. The positions available are:

President
NEA Director
Addison-Rutland District Area 2
Central Vermont District Area 1
Chittenden District Area 3
Upper Valley District Area 1
health insurance and salary, working conditions, and other benefits “have always been linked.”

Her report continues,

The financial and operational implications of health insurance benefits, which would continue to be a term of employment even if bargained at the state level, are profound for both employees and employers.

This begs the question of how bargaining over health insurance at the state level can be integrated or aligned with bargaining cycles for everything else at the local level for unionized teachers and support staff.

Would negotiating health benefits at the state level begin before local negotiations over all other matters?

Would they end before local negotiations begin, or perhaps during them?

How much confusion would be added to local negotiations?

How much uncertainty would be introduced to local school boards and unions?

It is highly likely that schools and unions will not be able to bargain effectively or thoroughly, or in accordance with their own timelines, needs, and aspirations, until they know what they are facing in health care costs and benefit design at the state level.

Three counterproductive and destabilizing scenarios are foreseeable:

1. Local bargaining, prior to or during impasse proceedings, could be held hostage to or delayed by state-level bargaining, unable to come to a satisfactory conclusion until state-level bargaining has wrapped up.

2. The results of state-level bargaining could compel schools and unions that had reached a local agreement to reopen negotiations to deal with the consequences of a health-care deal, or they could introduce complications into local bargaining that neither side had anticipated;

3. Districts and local unions would be reluctant or unable to settle a contract whose duration was longer than a state deal on health insurance. If the union and state reached an agreement on health insurance for two years, let’s say, would it necessitate a two-year bargaining cycle for every local issue?

School districts and local unions could be facing on a long-term basis the same problems they are experiencing now with the VEHI transition. They could be bargaining far more often than is good for either party or the process, and under the kind of temporal duress – along with their advocates and “neutrals” (mediators and fact-finders) – that is now the norm because of VEHI’s actions.

How can this be good for school boards, employees, students and communities, and how would this save money on negotiations?

Additional complexities and questions that warrant attention:

Would the statewide bargaining extend to the three public/private schools in Vermont – Burr and Burton Seminary, Lyndon Institute and St Johnsbury Academy. Burr and Burton teachers bargain as a Vermont-NEA affiliate with their Trustees.

What would the status of employees not currently in bargaining units actually be?

Would they be forced into ones (perhaps unconstitutionally)? Would anyone be paid to represent them? If they are management personnel (as most would be), would they be expected to vote as their employer directed?

What employment protections would be afforded them?

Would the employees have the right to strike? Would an independent decision-maker, such as an arbitrator, be authorized to make binding decisions? Against whom would a strike be conducted, and who would be authorized to resolve ongoing disputes?

What would happen if an actual employer wanted to address a specific health concern of its own employees, but doing so would “violate” the presumed agreement? What would happen if that scenario were to occur in many school districts? Would the state seek to prohibit any flexibility?

Cutting Staff Hurts Vermont’s Students

“At this point, we do not have sufficient capacity to meet all of our new obligations, and certainly not on the mandated timeline,” Holcombe said in Seven Days. “We do not expect to initiate or complete the mandated weighting study contained in Act 49 until we have capacity to do so.”

In other words, she says “do what I say, not what I do.” Maybe, just maybe, Holcombe could advocate for educators as she advocates for herself and request the legislature stop the constant demand on schools to be the way to balance the state budget.

Once again, it bears repeating: for many decades, local voters, parents, school boards, educators, and communities have invested in their children. The state should not get in the way of local communities.
Migrant Farmers Ink Fair Dairy Deal with Ben&Jerry’s

By David Sheridan, NEA Today

At a time in our country when immigrants fear deportation and racism is resurgent, immigrant Latino farm workers in Vermont have won a victory that gives everyone who believes in the power of collective action reason to cheer.

Migrant Justice (Justicia Migrante), which received this year’s NEA César Chávez Human and Civil Rights Award, has reached an historic agreement with Ben & Jerry’s. The big ice-cream maker will require its milk suppliers to provide dairy farm workers with humane working and housing conditions as well as a living wage.

“NEA’s solidarity was crucial to our winning this victory,” says Migrant Justice organizer Will Lambek. Says Martha Allen, President of Vermont-NEA, “We teach the children of these farm workers, and it was important to us that we help their families.”

“The workers’ persistence and courage made us proud,” adds Allen. “They stood up for themselves, even though many of the them risked being arrested by I.C.E.—and in fact, some were jailed.” At the 2017 NEA Representative Assembly (RA) in Boston, NEA-Vermont and the Massachusetts Teachers Association teamed up to raise $6,000 from RA delegates to pay the bail of Migrant Justice protesters who had been imprisoned by I.C.E.

The seeds of Migrant Justice were planted in 2009 after a young dairy worker named Josel Obeth Santiz Cruz was pulled into a mechanized gutter scraper and strangled to death by his own clothing. This tragedy inspired the production of the documentary film Silenced Voices and led to the formation of a solidarity collective to partner with farmworkers to help them stand up for themselves.

Under the banner of “Milk With Dignity,” Migrant Justice and the migrant farm laborers from Mexico and Central America waged a three-year campaign that included community-outreach, coalition-building, protesting at scoop shops, marching, and lobbying in order to get Ben & Jerry’s to agree.

“As individual workers, we didn’t stand a chance,” says former dairy farm worker turned organizer Enrique Balcacer. “All we could do was endure the long hours, the unsafe working conditions, the low pay, and the miserable living facilities in order to support our families. We had to come together and organize.”

The Vermont Labor Center, a grassroots social justice organization, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida provided invaluable support to the Milk With Dignity campaign. So did the Vermont faith community. “Behold the power of collective action,” said one of Migrant Justice’s supporters from that community.

Under the agreement with Ben & Jerry’s, the dairy farm workers will earn at least the state minimum wage of $10 an hour—they have been earning less than half that. They will be guaranteed at least eight consecutive hours of rest between shifts, and housing accommodations will include one bed per worker and access to electricity and running water. The agreement requires Ben & Jerry’s to buy milk from farms that adhere to these standards.

The Ben & Jerry’s agreement is patterned after one forged by CIW between retailers and farm workers in Florida’s tomato industry. In that instance, Subway, Walmart, Whole Foods and other companies committed to paying an extra 1 to 4 cents per pound of tomatoes and to buy only from suppliers who adhered to agreed upon labor standards. Likewise, Ben & Jerry’s is committed to paying a premium to milk producers who comply with the agreement. Now it will be up to the workers and Migrant Justice to ensure that milk producers comply with the agreement.

Breast Cancer Awareness Prompts Board to Wear Pink

Every October is the American Cancer Society’s Breast Cancer Awareness Month. One of the most visible ways to bring more attention to the disease is the proliferation of pink – pink ties, pink shirts, pink dresses, pink pants, pink-lighted buildings...you get the idea. At their October board meeting, Vermont-NEA’s Board of Directors all donned pink to show their solidarity with those who are fighting for ways to eradicate this disease.
Locals, Boards Settle 80% of Contracts

Since the Burlington Education Association strike resulted in a settled contract, dozens of other locals and their boards have reached agreements.

In fact, at press time, fewer than 25 out of the state’s 142 contracts – split roughly evenly between teachers and support professionals – remained unsettled.

“Despite the interference from the governor, the legislature, the secretary of education, the school boards’ association, and other experts, local boards and local educators are getting the job done,” said Martha Allen, Vermont-NEA’s president.

“We’ve long said – and the facts back up – that left to their own devices, local boards and local educators will reach deals that work for their communities, schools, and students.”

In early October, the South Burlington Educators’ Association reached an agreement with the city’s school board on the eve of a planned strike.

The South Burlington School Board had set the stage for a showdown when, for the second time in its 50-year history, imposed terms of employment rather than continue bargaining. The local mobilized and brought the board back to the table.

“I am pleased that we were able to reach an agreement that preserves our great schools, that moves us away from the tumult of the last year, and that continues to ensure that South Burlington’s students have access to an outstanding education,” said Noah Everett, a South Burlington High School special education teacher who serves as the spokesman for the South Burlington Educators’ Association.

“At first, the board was able to find common ground,” Everett said. “We can now move forward together focusing on what matters most: our students.”

The two-year deal reverses the board’s attempt to blow-up the indexed salary schedule, provides for modest raises, and preserves percentage-based health insurance cost sharing, it also establishes a Health Reimbursement Account for out-of-pocket expenditures.

“It is a testament to local bargaining and the perseverance of the members in South Burlington,” Allen said of the settlement.

Paras, Bus Drivers in Rutland NE: Still No Contract

While a small number, the amount of unsettled contracts doesn’t mean that getting to an agreement is any easier. Just ask the members of the Rutland Northeast Education Association Paraeducators and Bus Drivers Unit.

They are the lone group of educators in the state to have a board who has imposed employment terms retroactive to last year – in other words, they are in their second year without a contract.

“At the end of the last school year, you voted unanimously to impose your terms of employment on the paraprofessionals and bus drivers,” Jennifer Mallory, the local’s co-president told the supervisory union’s school boards. “You decided to make that retroactive to the beginning of the year. You voted on the last possible day to impose these terms so that they would carry through to this recent current school year also. You voted to force these working conditions on us rather than continue to negotiate in good faith.”

The boards in that supervisory union have spent the last two years refusing to settle with some of the lowest-paid workers in the communities’ schools.

In fact, they have paid consultants and lawyers tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars in order to NOT settle, even though settling would have cost the district less than they have spent fighting with their employees.

At the board meeting, Mallory implored the boards to return to the table. “We expect you to withdraw your imposition...return to the bargaining table...and negotiate directly with us,” she said.

“Rather than negotiate directly with your employees, rather than work personally with them to reach a mutually agreeable contract, you hired a lawyer to do much of your talking for you – costing taxpayers an estimated tens of thousands of dollars. This may well exceed what the boards needed to settle the contract had you accepted the fact-finders report.

“You chose to spend the towns’ money to fight us, rather than use some to settle with us.”

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6 Vermont-NEA • November/December 2017
Emotions swirled inside me as I drove down I-91 South to Bradley International Airport in CT on March 8th in the early morning hours. I felt excited, anxious and overwhelmed. I was on the first leg of a trip to Dallas, TX to attend the 2017 NEA ESP Conference “Uniting, Inspiring and Leading for the Whole Student.” Once out the mountains of VT to the large state of TX, I would meet Loretta and Margaret, two VT Education Support Professionals who were also attending. Weeks before the conference we shared e-mails back and forth forming friendships but the biggest challenge was finding one another in Dallas. Exhausted from the full day of travel, I finally arrived at the gigantic hotel around 7pm. I sent out texts to Loretta and Margaret before going upstairs to enjoy a few minutes of quiet. Loretta met me for a tasty dinner at one of the three restaurants in the hotel. We were ready for some serious sleep after dinner arranging to meet in the lobby at 7:30 for breakfast.

After meeting in the lobby, Loretta and I made our way to a large ballroom for breakfast amongst a sea of tables. Even though we had no idea what Margaret looked like, we sat at a table facing the doors entering the room hoping to catch someone standing alone looking out into the crowd. With no luck we left to inquire if she had made it to Dallas. She had made it in safely! Excellent! I left a phone message in her room to let her know we were downstairs for breakfast.

After fuelling up with some delicious breakfast, Loretta and I made our way to our workshop, “Para Power- Building the Foundation for Effective Teams, Empowered Advocates and Student Success” The seven paraeducators who were leading this workshop were part of the NEA Para Institute, a new NEA initiative as a resource for ESP’s. The trainers had us up within 5 minutes doing activities meeting new people right away. I enjoyed meeting people from as far away as Alaska tremendously! We discussed topics in small groups about the shared roles of paraeducators, teachers and administrators as part of the whole education team. In addition, we dove deeper about what that team looks for the student, school and community. On the first day we also examined good listening skills, characteristics of an effective team, advocacy and problem solving.

When on a break for our workshop, Loretta quickly came over to me excited pointing to her phone. She received a text from Margaret! Hooray, we were going to all meet each other! We went to Margaret’s room after our workshop on Thursday giving hugs to one another so happy to be together!

The second day of the workshop on Friday was very informative discussing ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act). We were given an update of how ESP’s are being represented in the law by the word “paraprofessionals” inserted numerous times as vital partners not only in the classroom but also being an integral part of the planning...

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

Martha Allen: Bargaining Not Why VEHI Rates Rise

from p. 8

remarkable about VEHI’s rate request is that it is not remarkable.

Health insurance costs are out of control in the United States. Prescription drug prices and hospital costs soar, year after year. Add up state and federal mandates, assessments, and fees, and you’ll see that the system itself virtually guarantees annual spikes in the cost of insurance.

To be sure, part of VEHI’s rate increase request stems from changes in assumptions that were made last year that, as contracts around the state settle, are proving to be wrong. But what isn’t driving rate increases is the way boards and local educators are splitting their respective share of the cost of health insurance.

I know the school boards association wanted to use the state’s educators in their “skin-in-the-game” petri dish, arguing that only if teachers were forced to use more of their own money, they’d use less health care. The facts, however, show that in any given year, most Vermont school employees use very little health care. In 2016, for example, ranking active school employees and their dependents by health care expenditures, the bottom 50 percent averaged just under $624 worth of medical care. Eight percent, on average, didn’t incur a claim at all. Not surprisingly, the biggest users of health insurance were those with the most medical need: 1 percent of school employees accounted for 31 percent of health expenditures last year. In other words, Vermont’s teachers and support staff are already prudent when it comes to health care.

We do have a health care expense problem in Vermont and throughout America.

My fellow educators and I – and our local school boards – are not the reason for that.

It’s time to have a national conversation about joining the rest of the developed world in our approach to health care.
Facts matter. As a 30-year school teacher, I could spot a mile away the students who didn't do their homework despite the availability of resources they could have used to prove their points.

Sadly, I can now spot politicians and others who obviously didn't do their homework when they assert that proposed increases in the costs of health insurance for our state's educators are somehow the fault of local school boards and local teachers.

Earlier this month, the Vermont Education Health Initiative – the administrator of the health insurance plans offered to all public school employees – announced that it was seeking an increase in next year's premiums (about 10 percent for the plan most educators will choose). Almost like clockwork, certain politicians and the Vermont School Boards Association blamed the increase on the cost-sharing agreements local boards and their local educators are making.

Quite simply that's -- in a word I was never afraid to use with unprepared students -- hogwash.

The cost of health insurance is driven not by how local boards and local educators divvy up their shares of premiums and out-of-pocket costs; rather, the real causes of ever-escalating health insurance costs are medical inflation and the gross inefficiencies in our current national approach to health care.

The women and men who teach Vermont's children -- as well as local school boards -- are easy targets for austerity-minded politicians and, sadly, the VSBA. Cries of "if only we took away the right of local boards to negotiate health insurance cost-sharing with their employees we could have saved millions" play well. But that doesn't make them accurate.

VEHI's rate increase, in context, is right in the middle of previous increases sought over the decades. (For context, three years ago the state employees' health plans experienced an increase of nearly 17 percent; just a few months ago, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Vermont sought an almost 13 percent increase for its Health Connect plans.) In other words, what's so

Happy Winter!

As a reminder, Vermont-NEA offices will be closed for Nov. 23 and 24 for Thanksgiving and again from Dec. 22 until Jan. 2 for Winter Break. Have a wonderful respite with friends and family.

SBEA's Noah Everitt addresses the press after an-all member meeting. SBEA members settled a two-year contract a day before a planned strike.