Your Union

BEA RATIFIES AFTER STRIKE!

BURLINGTON – Members of the Burlington Education Association ended their four-day strike with an overwhelming ratification vote of a two-year contract that addresses critical language for the elementary school work day.

“I am proud of my fellow members, who stood strong for our city’s students,” said BEA President Fran Brock. “I am also pleased with all the community support we received. We were on the picket lines for a contract that ensures that we can attract and retain the best for Burlington’s students, and that gives us the tools to give all of our students the attention they deserve.”

The strike – the first in two years in Vermont and the first in Burlington since 1978 – was called after a tumultuous bargaining process with the Burlington School Board. The board rejected the recommendations of the fact-finder, stalled, and, as they did a year earlier, imposed employment terms just minutes after the contract expired. In fact, at the time, they were only one of three boards to have imposed, and one of only seven to have imposed more than once. (Most boards never vote to impose.) The teachers overwhelmingly voted to strike on Sept. 13 if no contract

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Your Power

Health Costs Not Driven by Bargaining

One of the consequences of Act 85 – besides making it harder for local associations and boards to reach contract settlements – is a commission that is tasked with making recommendations about educator health insurance.

The commission, which, at press time had met twice, is pondering the question of whether it makes sense to have educators bargain health insurance matters with some state entity.

To Vermont-NEA, the commission will be a success if it preserves collective bargaining for health insurance at the local level; restructures the Vermont Education Health Initiative as a partnership of equals; directs VEHI to develop one benefit plan that promotes high-value rather than volume-based care; and require the availability of Health Reimbursement Arrangements, among other actions.

Your union has one representative on the board – UniServ Director Suzanne Dirmaler, who taught elementary school for 12 years – while a Vermont-NEA member – Barbara Griffin, who teaches at Rivendell Elementary School – was appointed by the House Speaker.

The other members of the commission are appointees of the school boards association, the superintendents association, the governor, and the Senate president pro tempore.

Dirmaler – who has been a UniServ for 25 years – knows her way around contracts and bargaining. (Griffin is a chief negotiator for her local, which was the first local to settle a contract for this year.)

At a recent commission meeting, Dirmaler emphasized that collective bargaining did not cause the current crisis: our country’s disjointed and dysfunctional health insurance system did.

“We are sure we can all agree that health care costs in our state and nation are unconscionably high. They stymie economic growth – outside the health care industry, anyway – block access to necessary care, and put enormous pressure on personal, business, municipal, state, and federal budgets,” she said.

“There are those who believe we can address this cost crisis through insurance design and cost shifting – moving more employees and their families, that is, into high-deductible health plans paired with health spending accounts, particularly HSAs. This is the ‘skin-in-the-game’ method of cost containment. We categorically reject this cost-shifting approach,” she said.

“We need comprehensive system reform, and until we achieve that, we will always be struggling over who will pay what share of health care costs.”

“We have to work collectively to achieve system reform. It won’t happen otherwise,” she added.

“Along with other unions and alliances, we will be working in partnership with Senator Bernie Sanders to advance ‘Medicare for All.’ What could be more logical than to extend a high-quality, administratively efficient, affordable system from older Americans to all Americans?”

Act 85 is the bill signed after Gov. Phil Scott vetoed the state budget because lawmakers wouldn’t pass his and the Vermont School Boards Association’s scheme to strip away your rights to bargain over health insurance directly with your local boards.

At the time, here’s what we said about that new law:

The compromise made (June 20) between legislative leaders and Gov. Scott is what you’d expect in a backroom deal that comes about when the governor threatens a DC-style government shutdown. The deal is bad for local school boards, is bad for local educators and alters decades of successful negotiations between locally accountable school board members and the women and men who work for them.

The road to this deal began when the proposal from the Vermont School Boards Association and the governor was first floated (in April). That original proposal would have stripped away the ability of local boards and local educators to work together on health insurance.

For your union, the best course when it comes to health care is a systemic approach. In the meantime, it is imperative to allow local boards and local education associations make those decisions together.

As Dirmaler said, “As long as access to high-quality, affordable health care is a term of employment, rather than a right of citizenship, decisions about it should remain between employers and their employees.

“Where employees are organized, those decisions result from arms-length negotiations that are structured, data-driven, personal, and based on a given community’s values and needs.”

The bottom line is we all need to work together toward reform of the system at the state and national levels.
Solidarity.
That is what is needed now. As I write this commentary, the Burlington Education Association ratified a two-year agreement, ending the local’s first strike in 38 years after only 4 days. Statewide solidarity is needed because there are more local associations who are finding themselves in a very similar position. When I wrote this, two other locals faced imposed terms of employment – South Burlington teachers and the Rutland Northeast bus drivers and paraeducators. And, there are other local associations all around the state who are willing to continue negotiating but the school boards are not thinking along those same lines. These are unprecedented times. We have never had every one of our contracts up for negotiations at the same time. We have never had this very complex and anxiety-ridden health insurance situation. We must stick together and support our sisters and brothers.

Dedication.
Here in Vermont we are fortunate because we have thousands of dedicated professionals who want the best for their students. We all know that good working conditions lead to good learning conditions. If Vermont wants to continue to have some of the best schools in the nation, it is imperative that those who work with our young Vermonters have what they need to do the job. No one ever said that this job was easy, and you know that the challenges increase each year. All our students deserve the opportunity to excel regardless of the color of their skin, the town in which they live, or their socioeconomic situation. It is your dedication that makes this possible.

Advocacy.
Standing together this year will send a message that we know what is best for our students and we won’t settle for anything less. Sure, we will hear from our opposition. We will hear that we are thinking only for ourselves, but did any of you go into education with selfish intentions? Did you apply for a job in your district without any desire to provide your students with a safe and engaging learning environment? Did you go into teaching for the money? I think not. What I hear time and time again is that you went into education to make a difference for kids. That may be a worn-out phrase, but it is true. You do make a difference for kids, but you must also advocate for the right working conditions necessary to give your students what you know they need.

Unity.
It is time to act. Get together with your leaders and fellow members and come up with a plan. Reach out to other locals who are in crisis. Send letters of support. If a local is on strike, get to the picket line if you can. Send food. Contribute to the local in any way you are able. You may be on strike right now, yourself, or you may have just settled a contract, after striking. Wherever you are in the process, know that we are strongest when we stand united.

Pride.
As your president, I am always so very proud to represent you in the legislature, in meetings with other education leaders, at NEA meetings, and with the public. I can’t say enough about the quality of our public education workforce. You go above and beyond every day, and it is evident when I visit schools all over the state. Be proud of your schools and be a proud Vermont-NEA member.

Solidarity, dedication, advocacy, unity and pride. That is Vermont-NEA. Vermont’s children are fortunate to have you to inspire and engage them as they grow to be happy, healthy contributors to our society.

Stay strong fellow union members. I know we are on the right side of history.
8 Tips to Reduce Stress Before, During, After Testing

Thomas Armstrong, executive director of the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, thinks that the stress that often accompanies standardized tests can be used to create teachable moments.

“We don’t do enough in school to help kids deal with the stresses we keep pouring on them,” he says. “It’s actually far more important for our kids to learn stress management strategies for life than to do most of whatever it is we’re trying to assess on these tests. If it were me, I’d throw away the tests entirely, and just concentrate on the stress management techniques, which they’re going to need for the rest of their lives!”

Although a little test-day anxiety may be inevitable, teachers can take small steps to help keep their students calm—before, during, and after the big test.

De-stress Before the Test

1. Establish expectations. If students are struggling to catch up in reading and math, but still go into the test thinking they’ll score “Advanced,” they’re bound to be disappointed—and may freeze up when they see that the exam isn’t as easy as they’d hoped.

Jasper Fox, who teaches a high-school level earth sciences class to eighth graders in Westchester County, New York, asks his students and their families at the beginning of the year to think about what sort of score on the year-end state Regents Exam would satisfy them. “Having realistic expectations is a really important life skill,” Fox says.

2. Point to classroom assessments.

“Sometimes the best way to [prevent stress] is to say, when you’re giving regular assessments, ‘This is very much the same type of question you’ll see on a standardized test,'” says Diana Otto, who currently works at an IEP chair in Randallstown, Maryland, but has proctored standardized tests as a classroom teacher in five different states over the course of 22 decades. Otto isn’t a fan of official test prep, but says that teachers can prepare students by taking a moment before classroom assessments to talk about eliminating wrong choices, bubbling in answers and other basic test-taking skills.

3. Model calmness. If you communicate to students—either through your words or your actions—that a standardized test is a matter of life and death, their anxiety is likely to spike. Tell students that, while it’s important for them to try their best on the test, it’s only one piece of their educational puzzle.

“It’s the tone that you use to address the kids,” says Billy Krakower, an elementary teacher in Woodland Park, New Jersey. “If you seem anxious, they’ll get anxious. A lot of it is just staying calm yourself.”

Manage Stress During Testing

4. Give students strategies. While no one wants to bog their teaching down with weeks of explicit test prep, suggesting a few specific actions that kids can take during the test can help them feel more confident—and less stressed. “Kids can be taught cognitive strategies that they can use during the test,” Armstrong says. “For example, if you get into difficulty, say to yourself, ‘That’s okay, I’ll go on to the next one and come back to this later,’ or, ‘I need to find the easiest part of this item to do first, and that will help me figure out the rest of the problem.’”

5. Be all business. You can set your students at ease by creating a business-like atmosphere where you follow all of the testing rules to the letter and read the instructions in a clear, calm voice. “The very easiest thing to do is not to treat it like we’re at court, and we’re going to find out if they’re guilty or innocent,” Otto says. “We’re taking an assessment, and we all have jobs to do. The job that I need to do is to administer this test. I’m not going to talk to you during the test like I normally do, I’m not going to be looking at my phone.”

6. Get physical. Just before the actual testing period begins, consider leading students through some light stretching or physical exercises to help loosen them up and release tension. Many of Krakower’s special education students are able to take short breaks as one of their testing accommodations, and some of his colleagues have students move along to videos from GoNoodle before a big test. “It’s a great tool to de-stress the room and give kids a brain break,” he says.

Recover After the Test

7. Share scores privately. Fox used to let his students know how they did on the Regents Exam by having them come up to his desk while the other kids were in the room. “The kids would say, ‘What did you get? What did you get?’” he recalls. “It wasn’t as private as it could have been.” Now, Fox shares the scores using a text-messaging app, allowing kids to find out how they did without the added pressure of the spotlight.

8. Let students play! After hours cooped up in a quiet room, students deserve a chance to blow off some steam. Armstrong suggests taking the class for a nature walk, letting them listen to some favorite music or even just having them talk about the test with a friend. Otto asks students how they felt about the test and then lets them play games until the bell rings. “Kids might be quiet during the actual time of the test, but it’s really hard for them to sit and be silent when there’s no good reason to,” she says. “As long as you have that test site secure, it’s okay to make it an enjoyable experience.”
agreement was reached. In a nod to a last-ditch effort by Mayor Miro Weinberger and former federal mediator Ira Lobel, the B.E.A. decided to postpone the strike for one last round of negotiations. That round ultimately failed, and the city’s teachers hit the picket line on Sept. 14.

“The board continues to claim that it wants to work collaboratively with us to address the achievement gap, but their actions say otherwise,” Brock said then. “Today, they had an opportunity to work with us to address the achievement gap in our elementary schools. They did not take that opportunity. They had an opportunity to work with us to stem the exodus of teachers by reaching a deal that attracts and retains the best for our city’s students. They failed to do so. And they continued their years-long quest to institute top-down approaches that do nothing for our students.”

Throughout the course of the strike, the board tried to paint the issue as chiefly one of economics, even asserting – falsely – that teachers had turned down an 8 percent raise.

“As to the mythical 8 percent raise, do you really think we would turn that down?” Brock said.

The picket lines – in rare September heat – were at full capacity throughout the city, and elicited hours of honks, waves, and shouts of approval. At numerous locations, parents and community members offered their homes to members to freshen up. Retired teachers from Burlington and elsewhere joined in the picketing. The donations of bagels, home-baked cookies, pizza, water, and, particularly at Champlain, tons of coffee poured in. Some picketers – especially those at Edumund Middle and Elementary schools – walked a total of more than a dozen miles (one math whiz estimated that by the time the strike was over, members walked a cumulative 4,500 or so miles).

At the end of the first day, hundreds of members were joined by allies and friends – and even state Sen. Christopher Pearson – for a final picket in front of Central Office.

NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia offered her support on behalf of all 3 million members, “I am writing to express support and encouragement for the members of the Burlington Education Association who went on strike today,” she said.

“Your brave efforts to reach a fair settlement will help ensure that Burlington School District students have the schools they deserve. We salute you for joining together and fighting for your legal right to have a voice in your classroom, your school, and your community. And by staying united, you are demonstrating the power of unions to win benefits for all working people and support the fundamental values of freedom and opportunity that we all hold dear.”

Lilly was not alone in notes of solidarity; we heard from state affiliates in Colorado, California, and Oklahoma; we heard from the Winooski EA, Green Mountain EA, Orange SW EA, Southwestern Vermont EA (Bennington), and support didn’t just show up at the picket lines. Hundreds of parents, community members, teachers, and others dedicated to the success of Burlington’s schools rallied in City Hall Park that Sunday afternoon. The show of support for schools Burlington’s children deserve was a testament to the BEA’s fight for a contract that attracts and retains the best for students.

Cara Clifton, a Flynn librarian and proud BEA member, mesmerized the crowd with her story of what a day in the life of an elementary teacher is like. “Here’s what isn’t happening during a teacher’s daily preparation time: planning and collaborating with special educators and other grade level teachers,” Clifton said. “Good teaching requires time for professionals to consult with each other, look at data on their student’s progress, reflect on what worked and what didn’t and plan new approaches.”

“Giving teachers time to teach – on the elementary and high school levels – was at the core of why the BEA was on strike. And that’s why we are on the picket line, not in our schools,” she said. “This is about our kids and the education they deserve.”

Picketers returned strong as ever on Monday, leading up to another mediated negotiating session the next day. After hours of talking, a deal was finally made. Members – and parents – were relieved that school was back in session that Wednesday morning. At a ratification vote that afternoon, members overwhelmingly voted “yes” on a two-year contract that has a 5.5 percent raise, reasonable health insurance that caps out-of-pocket exposure, and, most importantly, significant changes to the amount of planning and collaborating time in the elementary schools.

“Today I am happy to announce that my fellow members and I just voted to ratify a contract. On behalf of Burlington’s teachers, I say thank you citizens of Burlington. I know the teachers’ strike was stressful and all were anxious. But sometimes it takes a radical action to move us all forward,” Brock said immediately after the vote. “I also want to thank my thanks to the hundreds of people who helped. the folks who made sure there was water and lots and lots of apples for the teachers; the students who offered babysitting to parents who needed child care; the neighbors who let teachers use their bathrooms; and the army of community members who made sure their voices were heard by both school board members and the teachers.”

“When I woke up this morning, I was happy to be returning to my classroom, as were all of the city’s teachers. I am hopeful that this crisis will bring about change that encourages respectful collaboration among teachers, administrators and parents,” Brock said. “Teachers chose their profession because they know they can make a difference; they can help nurture tomorrow’s fully engaged citizens. Again, on behalf of the city’s teachers, be assured that we will be there for your children.”
Your Power

“We Are the Union, the Mighty, Mighty Union!”

For four days, members of the Burlington Education Association hit the picket lines. Above, the signs say it all. Right, Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen joins the picket line. Below, BEA President Fran Brock announces to the press the overwhelming vote to strike with members behind her. Below, some of the nearly 500 pounds of food members collected for the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf.
Last month’s successful strike in Burlington had more than its share of firsts: the first strike in Vermont in more than two years; the first strike in Burlington in almost 40 years; and the first strike run by a woman whose own mother ran the state’s very first strike.

Fran Brock, who teaches history at Burlington High School and serves as the Burlington Education Association president, wasn’t able to get any first-hand advice from her mother Anne Brock (who passed away in 2003), but she took to heart lessons her mother learned when, as president of the Champlain Valley Union High School Teachers’ Association, she took her 64 fellow members on strike.

“It’s not lost on me,” Fran recalled. “She was very much a part of history, and understood the importance of that strike,” which was the first-ever in Vermont. “She and her fellow members were combating poor pay, an exodus of experienced teachers, and worsening morale,” Fran said. “Not unlike what we are facing these days.”

Anne was a pioneer in many respects. After earning her bachelor’s degree from Brooklyn College, she did graduate work at Columbia University and the University of Vermont. A gifted mathematician, she worked on the Manhattan Project, Atomic Bomb Development at Columbia during World War II. After teaching high school math in New York, she went to California, where Fran and her sisters were raised. She began teaching at CVU nine years before the 1978 strike.

“Why do I serve? The first answer that comes to mind is ‘No one else would take the job!’,” Anne wrote in VEA Today. “But that is not completely true. A better explanation for why I serve is a famous quote of the Jewish teacher Hillel: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?’

Those words flashed atop the screen before Fran and her fellow members took their ratification vote. It caused chief negotiator Bob Church – an automotive technology teacher who wears his New Jersey toughness on his sleeve – to wipe away a few tears. As people realized the connection between Anne and Fran, the crowd of hundreds of members audibly gasped.

Both the most recent Burlington strike (coincidentally, the BEA’s first strike occurred one day after the CVU strike did in 1978) and the one lead by Anne were relatively short-lived and brought about much-needed changes. “We have to periodically remind ourselves how important it is to stand up for principles,” Fran said recently. “My fellow members and I know that sometimes we have to show just how strong our commitment is to each other, to our profession, and, mostly, to our students.”

In that VEA Today commentary nearly 40 years ago, Anne made similar observations. “This year was a change in attitudes of teachers in Vermont. We found ourselves on picket lines for the first time. It was not an easy decision to make, but having made it, teachers gained self-respect and the respect of others,” she said.

“We have reason to be proud of what has happened this year, but we must not say ‘that’s that.’ Nurturing the seed that has been planted and maintaining the strides made will require leadership. Although I accepted the presidency in part because no one else would, I now must admit that it is gratifying and rewarding to serve with CVU teachers.”
Wright Still Wrong on Teacher Strike Ban

As sure as the sun rises in the east, the leaves fall from the trees, and the snow will eventually fly, Rep. Kurt Wright of Burlington will seek to strip away from teachers the right to strike.

During the height of the Burlington teachers’ strike, Wright managed to shift the spotlight on himself by announcing – along with Sen. Joe Benning of Caledonia County – his latest iteration meant to take rights away from unionized educators.

Wright and Benning said their bills would strip away the right to strike; would ban impositions of employment terms by school boards; and require negotiations to be public in case both sides want them to be closed. What their bills lack, however, is any indication of how such a scenario would lead to actual settlements.

“Rep. Wright’s bill doesn’t include any provisions for finality, save for a study committee. And we know what happens with a Montpelier study committee. Meanwhile, in the real world, local boards and local educators are hard at work hammering away at bargaining,” Vermont-NEA President Martha Allen said. “We adamantly oppose any attempts to take away our right to strike – or the boards’ ability to impose employment terms.”

The bill’s call for mandating open negotiations is yet another attempt to undermine collective bargaining. Indeed, you union has fought all efforts by the school boards association to force open bargaining. The Vermont Labor Relations Board ruled that the open meeting law does not apply to bargaining. And, by the way, current law already allows boards and locals — if they both agree — to negotiate in open session.

Allen pointed out the obvious to anyone who is paying attention: the current system works. “Let me be clear: the current system is one that encourages – and almost always leads to – settlement. We don’t think settlements and labor relations will improve with the intrusion of Montpelier and the stripping of workers’ rights,” she said.

She provided evidence of how collective bargaining has worked over the years:

- In the last 50 years, local boards and local educators have settled more than 5,000 contracts. In that same time period, boards have imposed two dozen times and teachers have gone on strike 27 times. Every strike resulted in settled, negotiated contract.
- The ability of boards and local educators to have last-resort options pushes both parties toward settlements over disagreement.
- Over the same period of time, Vermont’s schools have become among the five best in the country. That is because local boards and local educators can work together to do what’s best for students.

Wright, in selling his bill, took pains to say he wasn’t anti-teacher, and that he was concerned that teachers exercising their right to strike makes the public dislike them. He also said that strikes permanently scar communities.

“Of course, strikes are disruptive,” Allen said. “No one wants to go on strike, foregoing pay, and being out of the classroom. But sometimes it is necessary to bring about fundamental changes. As we saw in Burlington, a years-long simmering dispute over giving teachers more time to actually plan, collaborate and work toward addressing the achievement gap didn’t get resolved until the strike – and now they have a new, two-year contract that begins to address the issue.”

As of press time, a little over 45 percent of contracts in Vermont have settled. It’s an unprecedented year, brought on by changes to health insurance, changes your union sought – unsuccessfully – to be phased in to avoid statewide disruption.

“The reason we have so many unsettled contracts is, plainly, because of the changes in health insurance. We had hoped to have better transitions to the new plans affecting all education employees on January 1, but others thought a hard-and-fast switch made more sense,” Allen said.

“That led to every contract in the state expiring at the same time. The issue driving that train is health care. And stripping away the rights of teachers and boards does nothing to solve that issue. That’s why we’ve long supported efforts like Bernie’s Medicare for All, so that all Vermonters have access to quality, affordable health care.”
WASHINGTON - NEA President Lily Eskelsen García issued the following statement about the president’s stance on Dreamers:

“Upon taking office, President Trump signaled on more than one occasion that he’d look at DACA recipients—Dreamers, aspiring young Americans, neighbors, colleagues, and, yes, our students—with ‘great heart.’ Instead, today he cruelly abandoned his promise and decided to rescind DACA, disrupting their lives, and tearing apart our families and communities.

“By dismantling DACA, Trump has attacked Texas teacher Areli Zarate and turned his back on her. She arrived in the United States with her family when she was 8 years old. She graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and, following her passion for teaching, she now is a DACAlmented high school teacher in Austin. Areli and educators like her are now working in our public schools, colleges, and universities across the country, inspiring and educating the next generation of Americans. They are helping prepare students like Gema Hernandez, who, thanks to DACA, is the first in her family to graduate from college. Gema and many like her are our future teachers, scientists, engineers, and small business owners. We cannot afford to lose the creativity, talent, and contributions people such as Gema are making to our communities and our country.

“America is a nation that welcomes Dreamers and their many talents. When we embrace their contributions, the future is brighter for all of us. Ending DACA violates these core American values. This will turn their lives upside down and lead to unprecedented peril. After meeting all of the requirements to live and work in the United States, they will face deportation and separation from their families and our communities. They will again face anxiety and uncertainty about their future, stripped of the ability to live normal lives.

“Now more than ever, we need a permanent legislative solution to DACA so these young people have the certainty they deserve. Congress should not wait 6 months to permanently fix this decision but instead act immediately to protect DACA recipients and Dreamers, and pass into law the bipartisan Dream Act of 2017.”

It’s Getting Busy Out There

While in this issue we have highlighted the strike in Burlington, more than half of our contracts remain unsettled. Please stay tuned at vtnea.org to get the latest on this unprecedented year of bargaining.

The first strike in Burlington in nearly 40 years ended with a strong settlement after four days of solidarity, power, and determination. Way to go, BEA!