Your Union

Rebalanced VEHI Returns

Your health insurance voice restored in design of health plans

This month marks the return, after nearly four years of management control, of a balanced board of directors on the organization that designs and implements your health insurance plans.

The board of the Vermont Education Health Initiative now has three members appointed by Vermont-NEA and three appointed by the Vermont School Boards Association. It replaces a board that was previously tilted 4-1 in favor of management.

“With a restored balance on the VEHI board, we can prevent the disaster that was this year’s roll-out of high-deductible health plans, which we vigorously fought,” said Vermont-NEA President Don Tinney. “For most of existence, VEHI worked as a collaboration between management and labor. I am looking forward to that cooperative spirit again.”

VEHI’s rebalance came after nearly two years of effort at the Statehouse. Thousands of members let their opinions be heard, especially in the wake of the roll-out issues with new health plans and third-party administrator incompetence that left hundreds of educators with exorbitant medical bills.

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CCEA Members Stand Tall Despite Threats

Last month, the attorney for the Caledonia Cooperative Supervisory Union threatened union members with their jobs because they released the results of a survey that showed widespread disapproval of the superintendent. The survey was the second conducted by the Caledonia Cooperative Education Association, and it comes as frustration with Superintendent Matthew Forest is coming to light.

“Threatening us with termination because we pointed out that Dr. Forest creates a climate of intimidation proves the point: he prefers intimidation over cooperation. We’ve tried to work this out directly with him, to no avail. We’ve brought our concerns to the board, and still his bullying and intimidation continues. We want the community to know that such a culture is not good for our students,” said Bill Douglas, a special education paraeducator at the Peacasm School who serves as the local’s spokesman.

After the threats were made public, nearly two dozen former teachers and support professionals at the Barnet School wrote an open letter about the deterioration of teaching and learning conditions at their school.

“We are deeply troubled about the climate at Barnet School and the disparity between the public image projected by the school and the reality of what’s happening there,” the letter said. “During the time of our employment we endured a degradation of previously positive morale and the development of an atmosphere of intimidation, bullying, distrust, anxiety, and fear. We feel compelled to give this voice because unlike those who still work there, we do not have to fear jeopardizing our employment at the school by speaking out.”

CCEA members have spent the last month conducting phone banks, organizing members, and contacting community members about the declining climate fostered by Dr. Forest. In addition, they sent two releases to the media. They are printed below.

Lawyer Threatens Jobs

DANVILLE – The lawyer for the Caledonia Cooperative Supervisory Union threatened to fire teachers who last week released the results of a district-wide survey expressing dissatisfaction with Superintendent Matthew Forest.

“Before advising my client concerning whether there is a right to terminate the responsible employees, I thought it would be helpful to further understand [the union’s] legal position on the issue,” Burlington lawyer Pietro Lynn wrote in an email to Vermont-NEA’s general counsel. “I worry that this kind of behavior will prove counterproductive for your members.” He claimed that releasing the survey “appears to be a breach of the employees’ duty of loyalty to the employer.”

That the district would threaten to fire educators for releasing information to the public about a climate of distrust, mismanagement, and intimidation proves the point that Dr. Forest would rather fight against than work with educators to make the schools better, according to the Caledonia Cooperative Education Association.

“Last week, we told the public about what is going on in their schools,” said Bill Douglas, a special education paraeducator at Peacham School who serves as the spokesman for the union. “And, again, Dr. Forest does what he always does: tries to intimidate and bully the women and men who work with our students every single day.”

In a survey conducted by the union, 60 percent of respondents said they disapproved of Dr. Forest’s performance, while only 19 percent approved; 21 percent expressed no opinion.

“We will not be bowed in our desire to make our schools the best they can be,” Douglas said. “Even in the face of more threats, we will continue to do what we always do: put our students first and work hard to improve teaching and learning conditions. Too bad Dr. Forest continues to refuse to join us in that endeavor.”

Educators Disapprove of Superintendent

DANVILLE – For the second time, a survey of Caledonia Cooperative Supervisory Union educators shows widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of Superintendent Matthew Forest.

“For three years now, Dr. Forest has continued to foster a culture of distrust, mismanagement, and intimidation that has impacted teaching and learning conditions,” said Bill Douglas, a special education paraeducator at Peacham School who serves as the spokesman for the Caledonia Cooperative Education Association.

“Even though we’ve tried to work with Dr. Forest and with school board members, nothing has changed.”

According to the most recent survey — which was conducted by the union — 60 percent of continued on p. 7
By Voting, We Protect Education

As a native Vermonter, I wanted to begin this column by waxing poetic about the cool autumn air, fresh crisp apples, and the splendid fall foliage of the Green Mountains. I realized, however, that this newsletter will arrive in mailboxes right around the time when most educators will be checking the calendar to see how many days are left until Thanksgiving break, not basking in the glory of a Vermont fall.

While we are unequivocally devoted to the children and youth of our communities, let’s not deny that this very noble profession can also be an exhausting one, especially during this stretch between August and November. We have all experienced that odd contradiction of being an educator—working with students energizes us and working with students drains every ounce of energy from us.

On those days when you find yourself feeling tired, consider balladeer Harry Chapin’s memory of a conversation he once had with his grandfather: “There are two different kinds of tired. There’s good tired, and there’s bad tired. Bad tired is a day when you may have been successful, but you fought the wrong battles, and when you hit the hay at night, you toss and turn. A good tired, you may not have been successful, but you fought the right battles that day so when you hit the hay, it’s take me away. You sleep the sleep of the just.”

If you are tired today, I hope it is a good tired, for you have earned the right to “sleep the sleep of the just.” Never feel guilty for being wiped-out at three o’clock, for this is hard work. As my physician regularly admonishes me, please take care of yourselves. We have all heard the line and have all probably said the line, “You can’t take care of others if you don’t take care of yourself.” I doubt that I am the only one who has thought, “Easier said than done.” Consider challenging each other to work on your self-care this fall. Go for a walk, have a conversation with a loving friend, take a yoga class, hit the gym, enjoy a nap, curl up with a good book, ask for the help you need.

In addition to this being the season of pumpkin spice and post-Halloween sugar highs, it is also the political campaign season. Election Day is less than a month away, early voting has begun, the lawn signs are in place, and the airwaves are filled with advertising.

We need to encourage and remind each other to cast our ballots. There is too much at stake in this election for educators to not vote. While we remain politically neutral in our classrooms, we cannot afford to remain neutral as citizens.

As EdWeek blogger Ross Brenneman points out, “Curriculum is political. Standards are political. Testing is political. Funding is political. Education is political.” As citizens and educators, we have a civic responsibility, as well as a responsibility to our profession, to be engaged with politics and to enter the voting booth in November.

By voting, we can elect leaders who are committed to investing in public education, leaders who believe that Vermont should expand the educational opportunities and possibilities for our students.

By voting, we can elect leaders who will keep the promise of pensions for public sector employees, leaders who believe that all Vermonters should be able to enjoy a retirement of dignity.

By voting, we can elect leaders who will eliminate the burden of the residential property tax on Vermonters, shifting the revenues for education to the income tax, assuring that the wealthiest Vermonters pay their fair share.

By voting, we can elect leaders who are committed to living in a civilized society, where the government is designed to make life better for all citizens through investments in infrastructure, human services, and economic development.

By voting, we can elect leaders who will make decisions by identifying and clarifying problems with the effective use of data and evidence, not simply make decisions based on a political party’s ideology.

By voting, we can elect leaders who respect the experience of educators and scholars.

I hope you have had a great start to your school year. I look forward to meeting many of you at our Fall District meetings within the next few weeks, when we will discuss our governance structure, budget issues, the upcoming Representative Assembly, and our legislative agenda.

Thank you for all that you do for the children and youth of Vermont.
Your Profession: 5 Tips for Effective Online Parent Communication

Learn how to use email, mobile apps and other online communication tools strategically so you can get the most out of parent portals.

Kelley Combs, an elementary special education teacher in Fox Lake, Illinois, used to give out her cellphone number to parents. Not anymore.

“That was not my best plan,” Combs says. “I would have parents send me messages over the weekend and expect replies. I would get a text at 6 a.m. on a Sunday morning asking about something.”

Now, Combs uses online tools to communicate with parents. These tools—including email, mobile apps and the parent portals of learning management systems—allow educators to keep lines of communication open without the risk of late-night phone calls.

But these tools can become overwhelming, too, and can create confusion with parents, unless they’re used strategically.

Follow these tips to get the most out of online parent communication.

1. Set Limits
If you’re not careful, email can take up more time than phone calls. A message here and there to clarify a rule or set up a meeting is one thing. A constant back-and-forth to hash out everything from assignment grades to social skills is another.

“Last year there were a couple of days when I was at my wit’s end, where I spent two and a half hours emailing parents,” says Stefanie Curry, a second-grade teacher in Chicago.

“That’s when I went to my principal and said, ‘This is too much.’ It was taking away from planning time, prepping time and student time, to be honest.”

The problem, Curry says, is that she made herself too accessible. Her new rule is that she’ll hold off on answering emails until the end of the day.

But really, there’s no harm in a 24-hour (or even 48-hour) reply policy for non-urgent messages. It will slow the back-and-forth, and can also help cool off emotional exchanges.

2. Clarify Upfront
If your school uses an online learning management system, the parent portal can give parents constant insight into their children’s grades. But if parents don’t understand those grades (and especially if the grades seem low), this access can lead to confusion, or even anger.

Julie Lyman, an elementary reading specialist in Chicago, says that teachers at her school follow district policy and give students a “C” for work that meets grade-level standards—a grade that is seen as tantamount to failing by many parents, until they learn the school’s policies.

“I advise teachers to be very clear as to what the grades are based on, when they do an open house or during conferences, to be clear on what the grades are communicating,” Lyman says.

3. Stay Positive
Barbara Martinez, a kindergarten teacher in Orlando, Florida, uses the ClassDojo app to track student behavior and share the data with parents in real time.

“The students want to earn compliments, and they’re excited that their parents get to see them,” she says. “I’m constantly watching kids to see when I can give them a compliment, and parents are hearing more good things than negative.”

The parents are happy to get little notifications about their children sharing and listening, but their attitudes might change if they were instead seeing a constant stream of notifications about their children talking out of turn and pushing each other.

So, Martinez saves most negative behaviors for phone calls, when she can have a more personal conversation.

4. Try Pictures
You’re too busy teaching to curate a glossy classroom Instagram feed. But there are times when sharing a simple photo really can communicate more than a wordy email.

Allison Hogan, a first-grade teacher in Dallas, Texas, uses an app called PhotoCircle to share real-time images from her classroom.

It helps parents quickly grasp what their children really do at school, without requiring them to read a lengthy description.

“Parents love it, because it opens the classroom up,” Hogan says. “One parent said, ‘I am now a fly on the wall of my child’s classroom.’”

Hogan also uses the app on field trips to let parents know their kids are safe. On a particularly rainy visit to the zoo, for example, Hogan sent parents a picture of her students huddled in a shelter, warm and dry. “I’m able to ease any apprehension and give reassurance,” she says.

5. Give Options
If possible, try to give parents more than one way to connect with you online. Some parents may never log into a learning management system, but constantly use mobile apps on their phones. Others may not have a smartphone, but check their email every day.

Hogan asks parents during conference time which communication methods they prefer. “You have to know your audience,” she says.

“If they’re more on email, I’m happy to send an email. But I have to be able to reach the people I need to reach.”
Election 2018: The Issues

Going into the election, we have identified several key issues that are important to educators, students, schools, and communities. We invited all candidates to respond to a questionnaire on these issues, which are listed below. To see how candidates responded to these and other issues, please visit vtneaa.org/election2018.

School Finance: Eliminate the Property Tax, Fair Taxes for VT Kids
Together with our communities, Vermont-NEA members are leading the charge in making our already great public schools even better, equipping our students with the tools they need to live happy, productive and fulfilling lives, no matter what path they choose to pursue. The state’s constitutional obligation is to ensure access to a substantially equal amount of funding for each student, regardless of community. A related purpose of the original Act 60 was to enable low wealth communities to level up. It was a striking success, but that leveling up fed a public misconception that, coupled with our state’s decline in school-aged children, we are spending “too much” on education. The state is paying no more on schoolchildren now as a percentage of the state’s economy than it has for decades dating back to well before the enactment of Act 60. Moreover, we know that two-thirds of Vermont homeowners pay their education property taxes based upon their income and their family’s ability to pay, but the wealthiest one-third of Vermonters do not. We believe the next step for Vermont schools is to ensure all residential homeowners pay their fair share and support all children’s education based upon their ability to pay - this includes the wealthiest. By eliminating the residential homestead property tax and moving it to an income tax for all Vermonters, and not just for lower and middle income as we do now, we can ensure that everyone pays their fair share.
Vermont-NEA believes we should eliminate the education property tax for residential homesteads to move it to an income tax for all, so that all Vermonters – including the wealthiest – pay their fair share for our children’s public education.

Co-location of Services: Meeting the Needs of All Children
Vermont’s student population is changing. More and more children, especially in the early grades, are coming to school unprepared to learn because of adverse childhood experiences. These experiences can be related to physical and emotional trauma, the impacts of poverty and related economic uncertainties, or caretakers dealing with drug addiction. Whatever the cause, very young children are bringing those experiences – sometimes traumatic – with them to school. This affects not only their individual ability to learn but also that of their peers to learn and their teachers to teach. In order to meet the needs of not only all children, but that of struggling families, there should be efforts to expand essential social services to children and families in a school-based setting. Schools are already the center of many Vermont communities and it is logical to provide other essential services to students and families in this setting. This could include access to mental health services, dental care, health care and other state social services. By helping families struggling with poverty (including homelessness, food insecurity and lack of transportation), mental health services, health care, and other social supports, we can ensure both that all students are ready to learn when they come to school, and that their families are positioned to succeed. Some schools in Vermont have already begun this work. Vermont-NEA believes at a time when young students are coming to school unable to learn due to complex family circumstances, we should move toward the co-location of essential support services for all students and families inside our community schools.

Student and Staff Safety – Support for Training
With the changing student population, there are more students who exhibit challenging and at times violent behavior toward themselves, fellow students and school staff. The students exhibiting these behaviors are often very young – including some in kindergarten and the early grades – and are coming to school from home circumstances marked by complex challenges related to poverty, drug addiction and other traumas. These adverse childhood experiences can result in dangerous and violent situations that make learning conditions for fellow students and working conditions for teachers and school support staff challenging and at times unsafe. Students exhibiting these behaviors need supports, and school staff and leaders are working to provide them; however, more training and capacity are needed to meet these safety and learning challenges. Vermont-NEA believes the state of Vermont should invest in providing training to all school personnel on how to deal with these challenging student behaviors while also ensuring staff the time and capacity to properly implement these strategies.

Paraeducators – Essential to Student Success
Providing equal educational opportunities to all Vermont students is not only essential, it is constitutionally required. Students come to school with varying needs that must be met to help them learn and be successful. Vermont teachers go far beyond teaching our students reading, writing and arithmetic, but include critical thinking, artistic expression and essential social skills often tailored to the individual student’s abilities and interests. What is often not acknowledged is that paraeducators are a critical component of making Vermont schools and our students thrive and learn. Paraeducators provide critical one-on-one support to students, while also supporting teachers’ ability to deliver detailed direct instruction to a diverse spectrum of students. Whether it is in special education, general education or other school support functions, paraeducators are essential to ensure our schools meet all students’ needs. Vermont-NEA believes that any decisions about the use of paraeducators and other support staff in Vermont schools should be made at the local level, where school leaders, school boards, and teachers know best what essential education supports are needed to ensure all students succeed.

Expanding Pre-K: Public Investment in our Future
In the 1980’s, Vermont was a leader in requiring all school districts to offer kindergarten to our state’s youngest children. Over the past several decades, research has proven that early learning is essential to child brain development and the earlier that children gain access to these high-quality educational opportunities the better prepared they are to learn as they grow and develop. Recognizing the importance of prekindergarten education (pre-K), the Legislature in 2014 passed Act 166, which provides families up to 10 hours of public money, through a voucher, to use toward qualified Pre-K programs. While an important step in acknowledging the needs of our youngest children, Act 166’s funding mechanism – vouchers – has, perversely, made it harder for our state’s most vulnerable children; those in poverty and with special needs. Since Act 166 only provides funding for 10 hours, families unable to pay for the additional portion of the privately provided child care can’t access this public benefit. We already know that children who come from families on the margins are at

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a disadvantage when they enter public schools. Additionally, Act 166 incorrectly presumes that vouchers for privately provided high quality pre-K ensure its availability, and that just is not so. As the state looks appropriately to expand public Pre-K, it is essential that policy decisions don’t disadvantage children with special needs or those from poorer families. Vermont’s local public schools meet the needs of all students and families, while ensuring high-quality education is provided equitably across the state. Many public schools already provide public Pre-K for all children in their community, and all others should follow their lead. Vermont-NEA believes that high quality universal Pre-K is essential to the development of our children, especially those in less advantaged households, and that any additional state investment in Pre-K should ensure equity for all children by having local public school districts provide this early education directly.

Controlling health care costs for ALL – A path forward
Vermont-NEA has been and remains a leading advocate of health care reform, including Medicare for All, while supporting incremental reforms along the way. Affordable health care is still out of reach for many Vermonters and only getting more expensive. The health insurance that school employees receive has been a major subject of debate in Montpelier for the past two years. While this debate was happening, educators and their families, who make up the largest private health insurance pool in the state with nearly 40,000 lives, moved to high deductible plans. This transition has been problematic to say the least. What both the debate in Montpelier and the experiences of educators moving to these new plans has reinforced is that we must do something about the cost of health care for all Vermonters.

Healthcare costs are growing faster than the rest of the economy and eating up more and more costs for both workers and employers. For example, education spending as a percentage of Vermont state GDP has remained steady at approximately 5% for over twenty years, while health care costs have grown from 10% to nearly 20% during the same period. Whether it is the cost of public education, running a small business or state government, health care costs are having a significant negative impact on our economy. Vermont-NEA believes the state should implement innovative policies that begin to control the soaring health care costs and stop the move towards putting more cost on working Vermonters.

Right to Strike
Vermont teachers and school support staff have had the right to collectively bargain for 50 years. As a result of collective bargaining Vermont educators are now paid a decent wage, a key reason why our school system is among the top 5 in the country. Strikes and impositions are last resorts and are decisions not made lightly by union members or school boards. In fact, over the past 50 years of educator collective bargaining there have been over 5,000 contracts negotiated and fewer than 30 strikes or impositions, ever. While strikes are exceedingly rare, Vermont-NEA believes that the right to strike for school employees is fundamental and has been and will remain a last, but sometimes necessary, resort to reach a fair contract settlement.

Retirement Security
In 2010 and 2014, Vermont-NEA reached historic agreements with the State protecting the fiscal security of the State Teachers’ Retirement System, saving taxpayers more than $1 billion over the course of the next several decades (Vermont-NEA and the State reached quieter agreements protecting the Municipal Employees’ Retirement System.) Vermont’s teachers are paying more and working longer for their retirement benefits. During the prior two decades, the State annually and routinely underfunded the Teachers’ Retirement System by millions, sometimes tens of millions, of dollars. The State has met its full funding commitment to this system for each of the past 11 years. Vermont-NEA believes the State must continue to meet its annual funding commitment to the State Teachers’ Retirement System. Moreover, Vermont-NEA believes, as was the case this year, any budget surplus monies should be earmarked to make-up for the state’s past underfunding of the State Teachers’ Retirement System in order to reduce the interest costs paid by the state, thereby saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

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The change to VEHI will have a tremendous effect on the design of health plans going forward. Now that both management and labor have to come to a consensus.

It will be a return to how the board operated before state regulators under the Shumlin administration insisted that VEHI must be employer-dominated.

That status changed earlier this year when Gov. Phil Scott signed into law a measure that rebalanced the VEHI board and established a health insurance bargaining council that will set statewide cost-sharing and premium-split amount.

That council, which includes four voting members from Vermont-NEA and one from AFSCME on the labor side and five school board members on the management side.

And while bargaining over health insurance will no longer occur at the local level, the bargaining council will be true collective bargaining, reaching agreements that then must be ratified by union members.

The road here began nearly two years ago when Scott proposed a radical takeover of health insurance bargaining, proposing to set arbitrary premium splits and force us to bargain with the administration. Thanks to intense involvement of members, the legislature last year came up with the plan to rebalance VEHI and establish the statewide bargaining council.

Serving on the VEHI board are Peggy Maxfield, a former Vermont-NEA board director, local president and chief negotiator; Fran Brock, the former Burlington Education Association president who led her local through last year’s strike; and retired Vermont-NEA Executive Director Joel Cook, who once served on the VEHI board.

While the union vigorously opposed Scott’s original plan, delegates to the Vermont-NEA representative assembly voted to support a true statewide bargaining council and to support the rebalancing of the VEHI board. The delegates also unanimously voted to create a Vermont-NEA Educator Health Care Council.

“We, the members of Vermont-NEA, propose the creation of a Vermont-NEA Educator Health Care Council that consists of teacher and ESP members of Vermont-NEA. The Council shall meet regularly to advise, discuss, and make recommendations on policies affecting members’ health care benefits and on reforms of the health care system. The council will seek policy reforms that advance and institutionalize the principle that health care is a human right and should be provided as a public good, regardless of income, citizenship, employment status, race, gender or ability,” read the proposal.

respondents said they disapproved of Forest’s performance, 19 percent approved, and 21 percent had no opinion. The numbers are similar to the results of a survey done a year earlier. The results of the survey varied by school, but in every building more educators disapproved than approved of his performance.

In Peacham, 50 percent disapproved of the superintendent’s performance while 34 percent approved; at Walmsley, 73 percent disapproved while 15 percent approved; at Barnet, 66 percent disapproved while 24 percent approved; and at Danville, 65 percent disapproved while 15 percent approved.

Douglas points out that the union has filed two dozen grievances in instances where the superintendent has either ignored or not followed the collective bargaining agreement.

The survey respondents gave Forest poor marks in a multitude of areas, saying he is deficient in visionary planning, interpersonal skills, collaboration, partnerships, and fostering a safe and effective learning environment.

A headline in the Caledonian-Record says it all.

“We want a partner who will help push us all to be the best we can be for our students,” Douglas said. “Unfortunately for us — and the kids — Dr. Forest has shown he is no such partner.”

The dissatisfaction with Forest is also shared by some in the community. Marvin Withers, 64, has lived in Danville his entire life. He graduated from the Danville School, as did his mother, great-grandmother, and great-grandfather. His children went to the school, as did his five grandchildren.

“Danville School has dedicated teachers and staff members, who give so much,” Withers said. They “do not get the support from the superintendent as they should. Unlike years in the past, where there was good communication and support, it is sadly lacking now.”
Defined Benefits Pension Keeps Retirement Promise

Public sector pension plans have been in the news recently and you will most likely see more coverage about state retirement systems as the corporate folks on Wall Street and their allies begin to ramp-up for the legislative sessions across the nation. We want to keep you informed as you begin to hear more talk about your pensions, even if retirement seems way off in the future.

When the political debates on pensions begin, you will most likely hear the right-leaning politicians argue that they are not out to take pensions away, but that they want to offer a “hybrid system” to public employees. This system almost always converts a “defined benefits” system to a “defined contribution” system.

A defined benefits pension, often referred to simply as a DB plan, is what Vermont teachers have now. While you are teaching, an amount of money is taken out of your paycheck every pay period and sent to the Vermont treasury. The amount has grown from 3.54% of salary to 6%. The state also makes an annual contribution to the Vermont treasury on behalf of all teachers. Finally, for recently hired teachers, schools make a small contribution towards teachers retirement too. The way a DB system works is that, upon retirement, you receive a guaranteed monthly payment based on a formula that considers your salary, years of service, and your spouse’s age. The Vermont State Teachers Retirement System also provides other benefits including health insurance, dental insurance, and disability coverage.

A defined contribution system, often referred to as a DC plan, is very different and encompasses what most people know as 401k plans. You have money taken out of your paycheck and the money is invested in stocks or bonds, depending upon the type of account you choose, but there is no guaranteed return on your investment; your payout in retirement would depend upon the performance of financial markets over time.

In a DC plan, the individual employee assumes all the investment risk, and you pay the fees associated with your investment plan choices. If you outlive your investment, the pension ends.

Will we see you at Fall District Meetings?

Fall District Meetings are a great way to connect with and set the agenda for your union. They are also a great way to make sure your views are represented. Plan to join us; visit vtnea.org/fallmeeting2018.

5 Tips for Effective Online Communication with Parents, p. 3

President’s View: Vote to Protect Education, Students, p. 2

Learn About Issues That Matter in Election 2018, p. 4

Vermont-NEA Secretary/Treasurer Erin Carter enjoys Bernie’s Birthday Cruise last month.