Your Union

Burlington, Other Locals on Verge

Two of the state's largest and most visible locals earlier this month learned what they had long suspected: their school boards are continuing to barrel toward confrontation rather than work on a settlement. But they are far from alone.

Because of the way Vermont School Boards Association-dominated VEH decided to handle the transition to new high deductible health plans, all contracts in the state expired on June 30 (with the exception of Burlington, which expires on Aug. 31). This has led to a crush of bargaining in every local in Vermont.

Even with the health insurance changes, more than 25 locals have been able to work with their school boards to reach contract settlements. Indeed, these settlements happened despite – not because of – interference from the VSBA, the governor and the legislature.

But for everyone else, uncertainty will be the buzzword as we begin another school year in a few weeks.

In Burlington and South Burlington, it's déjà vu: their respective school boards have resisted settling fair contracts, and have now rejected the recommendations of neutral fact-

Your Power

Governor, Lawmakers Intrude In Bargaining

A after a backroom deal brought on by a DC-style government shutdown threat, lawmakers were able to prevent the complete erosion of local health insurance bargaining that was sought by Gov. Phil Scott, the Vermont School Boards Association, and the Vermont Superintendents Association.

But make no mistake: The “compromise” that became Act 85 has snarled bargaining in locals across the state.

In short, the governor and lawmakers – worshiping at the altar of phantom property tax reductions worth less than $60 a year to most homeowners – intruded into collective bargaining, eroded local control and sowed mistrust of local school boards.

“The compromise made last night 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,” Martha Allen, Vermont-NEA’s president, said at the time.

“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 last month. That original proposal would have stripped away the ability of local boards and local educators to work together on health insurance.

At the time, the governor and the VSBA were saying that they didn’t trust local school boards to do what they’ve done for 50 years – work with local educators to negotiate contracts that work for their local communities, local schools, local educators and local students. The director of the VSBA even told the press that left to their own, school boards would make “bad” deals.

“We reject the VSBA’s and the governor’s argument that local school board members aren’t capable of bargaining health insurance,” Allen said. “While this deal ultimately leaves bargaining at the local level, it does so with the threat of cuts to local school districts.”

The deal sets “benchmarks” for health insurance cost-sharing that affects state aid to local schools; it has the potential to further delay negotiations that have been in the works for months; it reopens all health insurance agreements again in 2019; and it erodes local control. The deal, however, will not affect school boards who have already ratified contracts or reached tentative agreements with local educators.

“For 50 years, locally elected boards and local educators have worked together to build a public-school system that is among the very best in the nation,” Allen said. “Sadly, that 50-year – and 5,000-contract – history of success is threatened today by this backroom agreement between the governor and legislative leaders.”

The law clamps back money from local communities and hampers the ability of locally elected school boards to work directly with their local educators. It also has led to stalemates in bargaining, because the law sets health insurance cost-sharing “benchmarks” that some school boards are treating as mandatory.

To the contrary; these benchmarks are not mandatory, in a memo to bargainers from Vermont-NEA UniServ Directors, locals are urged to continue bargaining for fair cost-sharing.

“The formula derived from these benchmarks, simply put, will influence collective bargaining because the outcome of negotiations on health insurance may affect state aid to schools. However, school district’s and local unions are not required to follow the benchmarks, and there is nothing in the law that requires any specific health care deal to be reached between you and your school board,” the memo said.

“If school boards are angry about the agreement (and they have reason to be) and want to assign blame, remind them that the Vermont School Boards Association and the Vermont Superintendents Association are chiefly responsible for initiating the proposals that led to the agreement – not your local union or Vermont-NEA.”

According to Allen, “We have long asserted that the proposal from the Vermont School Boards Association and the governor was an unnecessary intrusion into local control of our schools. We also reject the VSBA’s and governor’s argument that local school board members aren’t capable of bargaining health insurance.”

“This deal intrudes into the relationship between local boards and local educators. It erodes local control. It foments further chaos into bargaining. And it does nothing to make our schools even better for our students, or advance the governor’s vision for Vermont becoming the education state.”
Vermont May Be Small, But We’re Feisty

Martha Allen

July marked the beginning of my ninth and last year as your president.

Over the past eight years, we have fought some serious battles at the local, state, and national levels. Fortunately, we have come out on top in most instances. This past year we found ourselves fighting to keep our collective bargaining rights and that has set the tone for the next several months. Yes, we managed to retain the right to bargain for health care, but, the resulting legislation was damaging to local school districts, a problem for all of us.

The writing is on the wall. There are people in our state who don’t want educators to have good benefits, especially if they don’t have them.

The good news is that the potential negative consequences of these challenges make our commitment to Vermont-NEA and each other stronger than ever. Your willingness to stand together in the face of adversity is commendable.

Maintaining the quality of our public schools is critical to the health of Vermont. Your work in our schools – providing a clean, safe, healthy, supportive, and engaging learning environment for Vermont’s children – is what allows our schools and communities to thrive.

In order to maintain our excellent public school system, it is imperative that the adults who work with our students have professional salaries and benefits. As a union, the working conditions you negotiate raise up the conditions of other workers in Vermont. Every working person in our state should be able to provide for a family, have excellent health care, and feel safe on the job.

You help to set the standard for others, union and non-union alike. You demonstrate what it means to be active participants in your communities, too. You, who work and live in virtually every town in this beautiful state, set the example of what all workers can and should have – a livable wage and good benefits.

So, when the attacks come at us from all directions, aimed to cut back your wages and benefits, stay strong. Vermont should not be in the race to the bottom. We have too much going for us. Most importantly, if we lose benefits and wages, educators would leave the profession, causing monumental damage to our students and their communities.

Spoiler alert: It takes money to run an excellent school. It takes money to provide quality healthcare to all Vermonters. It takes money to keep our air and water clean. It takes money to keep us safe from crime, fire and accidents. And, it takes money to have quality professionals working with our most vulnerable Vermonters, our students.

We are small but feisty here in Vermont. I believe that even our adversaries want what is best for our students, but they need to look beyond the sound bites of tax increase threats toward a sustainable, quality, public education system. Let’s find a way to provide all of our children, preK through higher education, the opportunity of a lifetime – participation in the great equalizer – a public education.

Summer is the time to take a few breaths, read a book, go for a walk, and spend time with family and friends. Rest and reinvigorate because we have a very busy year ahead, in our communities, at the negotiation table, and in the State House.

This fall, welcome any new staff members you may have in your district. Talk to them about their work. Ask them what they need. Help them to learn the ropes in your school. Ask them to join our union, because we have much to offer them.

Our union cares about its members and the students in our schools. We have all kinds of professional learning offerings from both Vermont-NEA and NEA that will improve your professional practice. We want our members to be successful, and because of that Vermont’s children will excel!
Are your students moving enough during the school day? With all the demands placed on educators and students these days, it’s not surprising to learn that most are not.

The Institute of Medicine’s 2012 report on students and physical activity found most of the nation’s children and teens are used to living sedentary lives.

Only about half met the recommended goal of 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity each day.

So how do you incorporate exercise into an already jam-packed school day? We asked educators and fitness experts for their classroom-tested ideas.

“There is a growing body of research focused on the association between school-based physical activity, including physical education, and academic performance among school-aged youth,” says Francesca Zavacky, a Senior Program Manager with The Society of Health and Physical Educators, doing business as SHAPE America.

“Physical activity should be infused throughout the school day to activate and energize youth,” says Zavacky, who has served as Project Director for a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) since 2006.

She suggests finding and taking advantage of activity opportunities that already exist during the school day, such as the two to five minutes of transition time between classes. Encourage students to drink water every hour and consider incorporating “a brief cardio activity prior to taking a test” to boost focus and attention.

Another important reason to get kids moving in schools: “Physical activity can decrease the symptoms of anxiety up to 50 percent,” says former school psychologist Sherrianna Boyle, now adjunct psychology professor at Cape Cod Community College in West Barnstable, Massachusetts, and author of “The Everything Parents Guide to Overcoming Childhood Anxiety” and “The Four Gifts of Anxiety.”

Boyle recommends having students exercise in ways that cross the midline of the body, such as slapping the left hand to the right knee and vice versa while marching in place.

“Whenever you engage in exercises that cross the midline you are strengthening the neuroconnections between the right and left hemisphere of the brain” and improving focus, she explains.

Anita Perry, a yoga instructor and classroom teacher for more than 20 years, says “movement is so beneficial to everyone, particularly children.”

She feels children “cannot be expected to sit at their desks with their hands folded,” so she found several ways to get her students moving: dancing and breathing breaks, walking or marching to music, playing a song game during morning and ending meeting times and doing jumping jacks while reciting spelling words or math tables.

“We’ve implemented morning exercises” that children can do next to their desks while a pre-recorded exercise routine plays over the PA as kids are arriving at school,” says Cristin Frank, wellness parent representative at Country Parkway Elementary School in Willimantic, New York, author of “Living Simple, Free and Happy,” and creator-owner of PamperedTeacher.com.

But “the best example I’ve seen recently of a creative solution to physical activity in the classroom was at a school where they used ‘yoga balls instead of chairs.’”

Students love them and because they perceive them as a privilege, they’re more motivated to do their classwork while the balls are helping them improve strength and balance.

Kyra Bobinet, M.D., M.P.H., a health engagement specialist who co-teaches health design and patient encouragement and empowerment courses at Stanford School of Medicine in California, suggests several ideas for boosting physical activity in schools.

At the beginning of each class, while everyone is standing, have one student lead the group in taking three deep breaths. Students stretch their hands overhead on inhale and then bend to touch the floor on exhale. You can also have students stand while you take attendance, pass out papers, give instructions and other “downtime” activities.

Another suggestion: Divide the class into teams of four and have teams take turns leading 30 seconds of any type movement—“It can be silly or dance or athletic.”

For something really different, consider hiring a professional teaching artist, suggests Evan Paquette, professionally known as “Magic Evan.” He uses magic and creative drama activities to teach literacy and leadership skills to New York City public school students.

Paquette recommends a variation of musical chairs that he calls “People to People” to get kids moving, and promote active listening and improved group dynamics.

Have students stand at their desks. When you start the music, students walk around the room “safely and silently.” When you stop the music and call “People to People,” students stop where they are, face the student nearest them and take turns asking and answering a fun question such as “what is your favorite movie” or food, etc. Restart the music and repeat with new questions.

Another game Paquette uses is modeled on “Simon Says.”

Children walk around the room listening for commands from you such as “Stop,” “Clap,” “Jump.” They follow the command and resume moving until the next command. You can invent many variations and make it as short or long as time permits.

Will one or more of these methods work for you? Give it a try and see!
finders. And in Rutland Northeast, a vindictive board has decided to draw hard lines in the sand for that district’s bus drivers and paraeducators: For the second cycle in a row, the board – dominated for a time by a highly paid radiologist – imposed working conditions.

Burlington

The Burlington School Board of Commissioners July 27 failed to reach a contract agreement with the women and men who teach the city’s children despite the recommendations of a mediator.

“We are disappointed that once again the board failed to truly negotiate with an aim toward reaching a settlement that allows Burlington to attract and retain the best for the city’s children,” said Fran Brock, a Burlington High School history teacher who serves as president of the Burlington Education Association. “We thought the mediator’s report gave us a framework for a settlement. Instead, the board’s negotiating team clearly was not interested in using the report to forge a deal.”

The report – drafted with input from both the board and teachers – made recommendations on salary increases, health insurance cost-sharing, and changes to teachers’ workdays that would increase the amount of time they can devote to improving student performance. Interestingly, Superintendent Yaw Obeng is opposed to teachers’ using their unassigned time to prepare for lessons, provide learning interventions, and otherwise meet student needs.

According to the report, Obeng “readily confirmed that teachers used their unassigned time to attend to professional matters (and in his view), that did not necessarily further the district’s educational goals and policies.” In other words, said Brock, “the Superintendent seems to be saying that having prepared, professional teachers somehow is contrary to the district’s goals.”

Brock said the fact-finding report issued by mediator Michael C. Ryan offers a path toward settlement that the board last month chose not to take. And while the association takes issue with some of the report’s recommendations – especially around health insurance – Brock said differences could be resolved.

The teachers’ contract expires August 31.

South Burlington

The South Burlington School Board formally rejected the fact-finder’s report on July 27, saying “the fact-finder’s suggestions do not sufficiently advance the board’s goals” because it uses salary, benefits, and working conditions from nearby districts to inform its recommendations.

“This comes after a tumultuous year in the district in which schools were locked down, budgets defeated, and community unrest dominated headlines over a mascot name change. Through it all, the board decided to continue its confrontational attitude with the city’s teachers.

Richard Wise, the co-president of the South Burlington Educators’ Association, summed up the feelings of his fellow members this way:

“It’s unfortunate that once again the school board has missed an opportunity to get something right this year. While we, too, disagree with some of the recommendations made by the fact-finder, we remain convinced that it can help us reach a settlement.

“The board’s assertion that salaries, benefits, and working conditions in surrounding districts are somehow irrelevant to our contract talks in South Burlington is absurd.

“If the board is truly interested in maintaining the high quality of South Burlington’s schools, this is a strange way to show it.

“By rejecting out-of-hand the report of a disinterested mediator, the board is making it clear that it would rather start the school year the same way it ended – with discord. It’s time to heal from a very difficult year in South Burlington.

“We invite the board to join us in pledging to reach a contract settlement that ensures that our students continue to receive the best possible education we can all provide.”

Rutland Northeast

For reasons known only to them and their hired attorney, the boards of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union opted to spend $122,000 on legal fees in their rush to impose on the district’s bus drivers and paraeducators. The group had been without a contract all year, so the imposition is for the year that just ended. In other words, the board decided to totally upend what had – until last cycle – been a peaceful relationship between the boards and the association.

Loretta Johnson is the co-president of the Rutland Northeast Education Association Paraeducators and Bus Drivers Unit. She didn’t mince words when the boards decided to impose. “This board has willfully avoided settling with us for more than a year,” she said. “How is that putting our community or our students first?”

The boards’ decision came even as negotiators for the Rutland Northeast Education Association Paraeducators and Bus Drivers Unit agreed to accept less of a raise than that recommended by a former federal mediator.

“We’ve come to the table – as we have since talks began – with an eye toward settlement,” Johnson said. “Unfortunately, it is clear they – and their high-priced, taxpayer-funded Burlington attorney – would rather fight than do right by those of us who work closely with the communities’ children.”
Splinter School Board Group Decries Backroom Deal

The Alliance of Vermont School Board Members formed in the wake of the Vermont School Boards Association's proposal to erode the ability of school boards to negotiate with their own employees. Here is that group's reaction to Act 85.

Shortly after the compromise “deal” between the governor and legislative leaders was cemented, the Vermont School Board’s Association and the Vermont Superintendent’s Association issued a joint press release called “Statement on Health Insurance Negotiations and FY 2018 Budgets” denouncing what they called the “disruptive” and “damaging” plan to strip money out of local school budgets passed last March.

It is a remarkable document given the fact that the VSBA, in particular, was deeply complicit in the process right up until its strategy came to its embarrassing conclusion. Both the process and the conclusion exposed the VSBA and Superintendent Association’s disastrous strategy of playing political games with the Scott administration without getting the backing of the school boards they claim to represent.

The VSBA, in particular, had been working closely with Governor Phil Scott for months. They had enthusiastically signed on with the Governor’s suggestion that the VSBA to negotiate directly with the Vermont NEA State leadership on teacher health benefits on behalf of school boards, without the inconvenience of asking school boards what they thought of the idea.

This unwillingness to work with the school boards they claim to (but do not) represent was exposed when the Governor successfully bullied the legislature to ignore the VSBA and reduce State payments to school districts using an arbitrary, yet-to-be-determined formula based on speculation as to how much money those districts might save if they were to negotiate teacher health benefits in a way pleasing to the Governor.

According to their press release the Governor’s office imagines that there could be a savings of up to $25.00 to $75.00 to homeowners, a reduction of roughly two cents on the State-Wide property tax. Unfortunately, local school board members, not the Governor’s office, will now be saddled with the task of finding these imaginary savings.

The public needs to appreciate that the timing of this proposal makes the job almost impossible for many districts. What little discretion local boards had over their budgets evaporated months ago. As of April, the bulk of Vermont school boards had already sent out all their contracts for the next school year. In addition, most school boards sign multi-year agreements with their unions and cannot break these agreements in order to renegotiate health benefits without violating labor laws.

Everyone involved, including the governor and the VSBA knows that they have placed local boards in a position where it will be nearly impossible to achieve these theoretical savings in the upcoming school year.

Once again, community school boards are simply being made into a whipping boy for a deeply irresponsible process dedicated to damaging the local governance of Vermont public schools.

In their recent press release, VSBA staffer portray themselves as victims of a diabolical doublecross. However, from the moment that the VSBA abandoned their boards and went off on a political adventure that would have taken away the power of locally elected officials to negotiate benefits with their teacher and staff, they made possible the current mess that local boards find themselves saddled with.

Their release states, “the perspective of local officials have not been sought in the current closed-door negotiations between the General Assembly and the Scott Administration”. Most school board members from across the state would say that “the perspective of local officials” has not been sought by either by the Governor’s office or by the VSBA since well before the legislative session began.

The Alliance of Vermont School Board Members has an alternative explanation. It is that the Governor and the legislature, watching the VSBA’s antics in recent years and its leadership’s utter abandonment of local school boards concluded, correctly, that the VSBA could not rally school members in a timely or effective manner and that their protests could be ignored without any consequences.

Vermont schools are among the finest in the United States. Our elected school boards are a major reason for that educational quality. They represent both our democratic values and our community’s priorities.
THE VERMONT-NEA REDSHEET: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WHAT’S GOING ON

VEHI UPDATE: GROUP’S BOARD REJECTS CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING, CUTS VERMONT-NEA’S FUNDING, RETAINS RETIREMENT HEALTH PLANS

We want to update you on some recent developments at the Vermont Education Health Initiative. As you know, we only have one seat on the five-member board. With that in mind, we made a proposal to move the board toward consensus-based decision making. Along the way, we also learned that the VEHI board retained the right to offer retiree health plans and that the VEHI board decided to reduce the funding your union receives from the group. Read on for more details.

Consensus Decision-Making

The proposal from Vermont-NEA explicates a consensus decision-making model for adoption by the VEHI Board of Directors. It was intended to frame and inspire discussion. The VEHI Board, as you know, until recently, had a long and successful history of working by consensus on all matters that came before it. This proposal sought to apply a decision-making process we are calling “full consensus” to a defined set of organizational issues, policies, and responsibilities.

At its March 20th meeting, the VEHI Board of Directors was presented with the proposal from Vermont-NEA to adopt a consensus-decision making model. After a brief discussion, Jeff Fannon, Vermont-NEA’s Executive Director, made a motion that the Board adopt the union’s consensus proposal. There was no second. You can find the union’s consensus proposal on our website.

Cutting Vermont-NEA Funding

On June 19, by a vote of 4 to 1, the VEHI Board sharply cut Vermont-NEA’s funding in FY 18 for the services Vermont-NEA provides to VEHI and school employees enrolled in VEHI’s benefit plans. The reduction amounted to approximately $85,000. Jeff Fannon, the only union representative on the board, was the dissenting vote.

Vermont-NEA thoroughly countered and rejected, to no avail, the arguments justifying the reduction in funding, including, as reflected in the Board minutes of June 19, the notion that the union is “undermining” VEHI’s mission. Vermont-NEA will discuss the union’s perspective on the reasons for and the impact of the funding cut this summer and fall with regional bargaining councils, local leaders, and other union representatives.

In the interim, you can read on our website the minutes of the June 19th Board meeting. You will also find there Jeff Fannon’s evaluation report on Mark Hage’s VEHI work and the contributions of other staff members, including his, to VEHI’s mission. This report was provided to Board members before the vote to slash the union’s funding.

At the same meeting, the VEHI Board voted unanimously to increase funding for VSBIT’s FY 18 budget, the largest portion of which was earmarked to restore a full-time, Wellness Coordinator position.

VSTRS Contract

In late June, VEHI finalized a contract for FY 18 with the Vermont State Teachers’ Retirement System to continue to provide health insurance plans to pre- and Medicare-eligible retirees and their dependents. VSTRS’s decision to remain a member of VEHI came after a formal RFP process. According to the State Treasurer’s office, the new contract will “save the State of Vermont over $550,000 in FY 2018 and provide total savings to retired teachers, over age 65, of $110,000 for grand total savings of $660,000.”
Your Power

You’re Not Alone in Standing Up for Students, Schools

More than 300 educators and other working people rallied outside the statehouse and throughout the state in May to protest the attempt by Gov. Phil Scott and the Vermont School Boards Association to gut your collective bargaining rights and strip locally elected school boards of power. “In short, they are playing politics with your health insurance. They are playing politics with your collective bargaining rights. They are playing politics with your schools and your students. And they are slamming the integrity of local school boards, by insisting that they don’t know what they’re doing when it comes to their schools and their communities’ children,” said Martha Allen, your Vermont-NEA president. “The best course of action right now is to continue doing what Vermonters have done for many decades: make decisions affecting their towns, their schools, their students at the local level.”

As you know now, the governor and legislative leaders ultimately reached a backroom deal – where we weren’t at the table – that significantly erodes local control and intrudes greatly into collective bargaining. The end result is a more difficult negotiating climate that has resulted in the highest number of expired contracts in recent memory.

Vermont-NEA’s Racial Justice Task Force is up and running! We are working on some long-range plans that will help you to bring some racial justice and equity engagement to your local association and school districts. Would you like to learn more about this very important initiative? Would you like to participate in some manner? Are you a member of color with an interest in this work? If you are at all curious, please contact Martha Allen, mallen@vtnea.org.

All Vermont-NEA members are welcome!
NEA Lauds DeVos Suit Filed by Vermont, Other States

WASHINGTON - Attorneys general of 18 states and the District of Columbia filed suit against U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos over the delay of implementing student borrower defense regulations. This lawsuit, Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. United States Department of Education and Betsy DeVos, challenges the Department of Education’s summary and unlawful repeal of a final agency regulation known as the “Borrower Defense Rule” that was designed to hold abusive postsecondary institutions accountable for their misconduct and to relieve their students from federal loan indebtedness incurred as a result of that misconduct.

The U.S. Department of Education has indefinitely delayed implementation of rules that were set to take effect on July 1 that allow borrowers to seek loan forgiveness if their schools had deceived them or committed fraud. The coalition involved in today’s lawsuit, led by Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey, includes the attorneys general of Massachusetts, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and the District of Columbia.

The following statement can be attributed to NEA President Lily Eskelsen García:

“The National Education Association applauds the decision by Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey and 18 other states to stand up for students by filing a lawsuit that aims to keep the U.S. Department of Education accountable to the very students it is supposed to serve. These regulations are designed to protect students who have loans at for-profit colleges that have committed fraud and deceived students.”

It is simply wrong that the Department of Education would want to do away with regulations that would protect students. It is no surprise that these regulations have been strongly opposed by for-profit schools, which have saddled students with crushing debts for college degrees. If that weren’t enough of a burden, some of the degrees provided by these for-profit institutions have failed to prepare students with a viable pathway to getting a good job and are often not even worth the paper on which they’re printed.”

Tell Us Your Thoughts on Pocket Calendars

We’re evaluating the need to print nearly 10,000 pocket calendars, and we want to hear from you. Please take a moment to fill out a brief survey at vtnea.org/papercalendar. Thanks for your time!

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Catching a bit of summer fun during Vermont-NEA Day at Great Escape in Lake George. Hundreds of members and their children had a great day!