

VC ECHOES

Valley Central Teachers' Association



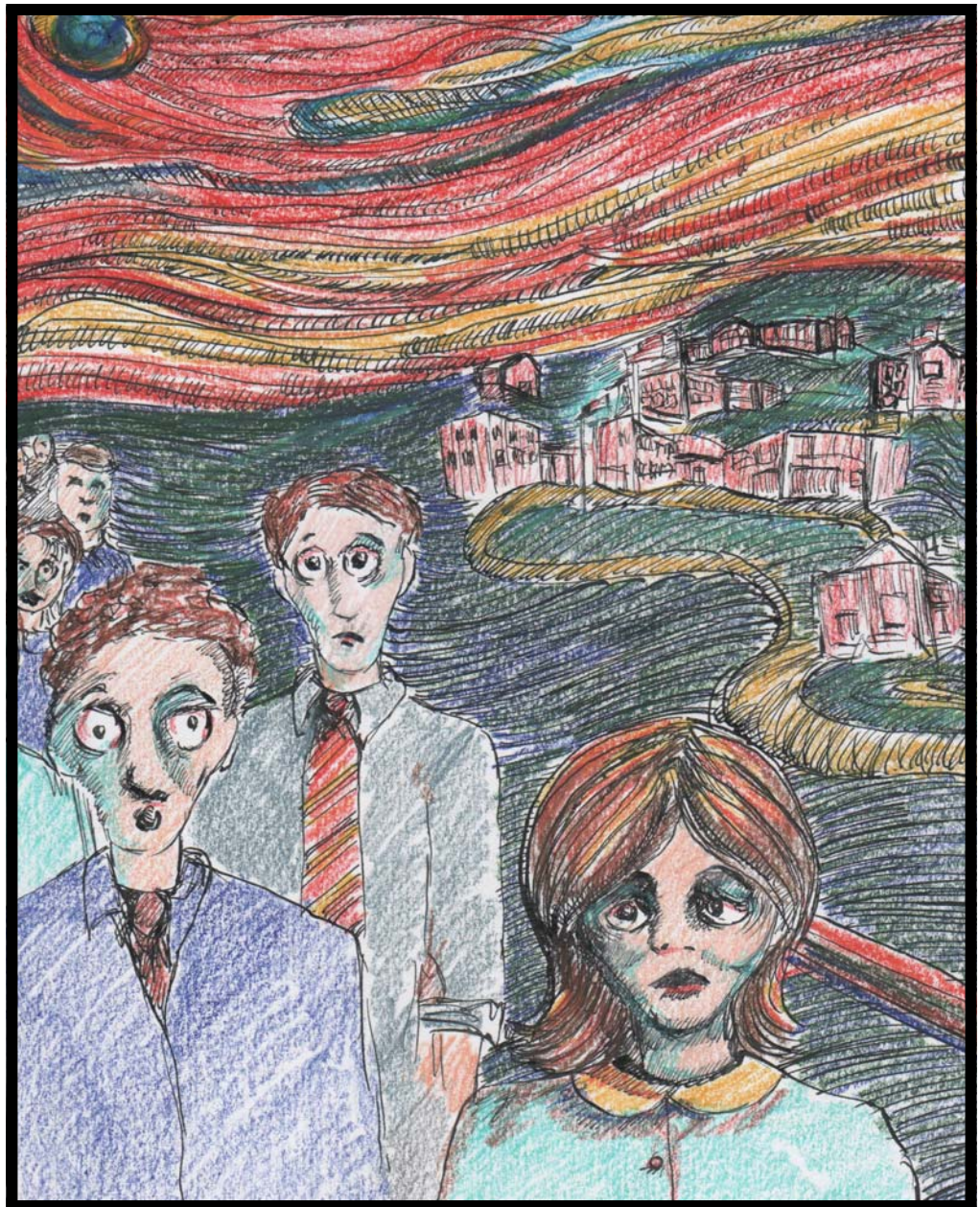
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Inside this issue:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Making a Difference at Montgomery | 2 |
| One Standard or Two With Tenure? | 3 |
| VCFCU "Care for Kids" Campaign | 4 |
| When Satisfactory is Unacceptable | 5 |
| On Tenure Anxiety | 6 |
| Teacher Tenure Under Fire | 7 |
| VCTA Scholarships | 8 |
| In the News | 9 |
| Spring Fling | 10 |
| TRS Patties | 11 |
| The Savage Family | 11 |
| Committee of 100 | 12 |
| Attendance and Accountability | 13 |
| "Pennies for Pasta" | 16 |
| What's Going On? | 17 |
| Mac's Musings | 18 |
| Advertisements | 19 |
| VCTA Blood Drive | 22 |
| Friend Retiring? | 22 |

'Tenure Anxiety' in the Air at VC



—After Munch's "Anxiety 1894" — Lunden 2007

“Making a Difference” at Montgomery Elementary!

Congratulations to Tiiu Presutti for being nominated for a second time for the Richard H. Aderson Memorial Award! She is truly making a difference in the lives of children. Tiiu has taught Special Education classes in the Valley Central District for 27 years. While much of her time was spent at East Coldenham Elementary, where she was initially nominated for this recognition, Tiiu has been teaching in a Kindergarten/1st grade Self-Contained (12:1:1) classroom in Montgomery Elementary School for the past three years. As the School Psychologist in the building, I have had the opportunity, and good fortune, to work closely with her—at both East Coldenham in the 1990’s, and more recently at Montgomery Elementary.

Tiiu’s nurturing and patient demeanor, coupled with her soft-spoken tone, are attributes that result in young children thriving. Her years of experience and calming presence make her a pro at handling the most disruptive outbursts. Her approach is consistent and calming. Her curriculum is so much more than academics. In this challenging classroom setting, Tiiu teaches ABC’s and life skills such as showing respect and compassion for others.

Like Richard Aderson, Tiiu is an advocate for all children, and is involved and concerned about their well-being. Regular parent contact consists of daily communication notebooks and frequent phone calls. Tiiu even coordinates with her husband, Mike, a VCMS Teacher and Club Advisor, to acquire recycled bicycles for needy children in her class.

Tiiu is a helpful colleague; always willing to lend a hand or offer a suggestion. She is involved in the District’s Mentoring Program and has mentored other new teachers informally as well. Her pleasant and compassionate aura and quiet sense of humor make her easy to talk to when eliciting advice.

Tiiu’s grace and professionalism never falter. She is a phenomenal educator, a wonderful colleague, and an exceptional human being so deserving of recognition. Although she may not be the recipient this year, she is always a winner in OUR book!

*Respectfully Submitted,
Adrienne Hershfield, School Psychologist
Montgomery Elementary School*



Left:
Aderson
Award
Nominee,
Tiiu Presutti

Congratulations to Adrienne Hershfield for being nominated for the Richard H. Aderson Memorial Award! Adrienne Hershfield has worked in Montgomery Elementary as a School Psychologist for many years. She has demonstrated a genuine contribution to the field of education, and a concern for all faculty, and students. Adrienne is a true asset to our building. She is involved in many committees such as Instructional Support Team, Peer Mediation, and at times, chairs CSE Meetings. She has also been on the Awards Committee for the "Make A Difference-Richard Aderson Award" since its inception.

Adrienne makes herself available to offer a stable educational environment to all students and faculty. When a situation/crisis arises, Adrienne truly shines. She is there to support a student's emotional and academic well-being or to help a colleague in need. Adrienne is a loving, compassionate, and sensitive person to those she comes in contact with. She truly makes a difference!

*—Lora Turner and Melinda Sulzbach (Mont)
Special Education Teacher, Building Rep*



Right:
(l-r) Lora
Turner,
Adrienne
Hershfield,
and
Melinda
Sulzbach

WOULD YOU LIKE ONE STANDARD OR TWO WITH THAT SLICE OF TENURE?

Tough criteria for granting tenure is a must in any district that demands excellence. In fact, it is the VCTA that has been a broken record to our Superintendents throughout the years about the need to raise the bar with regard to this milestone. We have all heard the cliché that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link and unfortunately we are all judged by our weakest link whether our profession is law enforcement, politics, teaching, etc. The VCTA applauds the district's newly discovered conviction that standards of excellence should be met before the granting of tenure. I only have two simple questions:

1. What are these standards?
2. Are these standards being applied to everyone or only a select few?

I have had the dubious responsibility of speaking with multiple untenured teachers this year who, after two and three years of service, were informed that they did not measure up to these district standards. What I find most disconcerting about these administrative conclusions follows:

1. District standards of excellence were never defined for any of these individuals. In fact, mentors would like to know precisely what these standards are so they can share these criteria with new staff members.
2. None of these teachers had observations or end of year evaluations that clearly indicated they were in danger of not receiving tenure. Charades or "reading between the lines" is not in a teacher's job description.
3. These individuals received "satisfactory" observations and end of year evaluations until their final year. When did "satisfactory" become "unsatisfactory?" Is there a district rubric clarifying what is passing or meets district standards. If teachers graded their students with such fluid and abstract criteria there would certainly be "hell to pay" for such a lack of fairness and objectivity.
4. None of these teachers received administrative support with regard to areas of improvement deemed necessary to meet district standards of excellence. In fact, the only support that most teachers receive

within their first three years is from their colleagues who volunteer for the mentoring program and/or those colleagues who offer their support throughout the year. We still have a "hit or miss", "swim or sink" approach to supporting our staff. Why aren't there instructional leaders available to help improve instruction?

5. Four out of five teachers were not recommended by the district for mentoring, which would indicate to any rational person that "satisfactory" progress was being made by each of these individuals.
6. Some teachers did not receive timely observations. One, in fact, was only evaluated twice in each of the first two years and was not evaluated until February of the third year. Another was not evaluated until December of the last year while being notified in January that s/he would not be returning. How many times have we been told that observations/evaluations are for the purpose of improving instruction? Where is the intent to improve instruction when observations and, therefore, feedback are not provided within a timeframe that makes improvement possible? Under such circumstances, how is one to even know that concerns exist?
7. One teacher was told during the summer months that her tenure was not in jeopardy, yet returned in September to discover that the district was unhappy with her performance. This employee's observations/evaluations were all "satisfactory" and did not indicate any danger of not being tenured during the first two years of service. The final year's observations expressed a completely different tone. What changed during July and August?

My intent is not to imply that I am in a position of knowledge regarding the performance of any of these teachers within the classroom. Any one of these decisions may be good or bad for students and our profession. I am, however, in an excellent position to speak to the fairness and equity involved in this process. Quite frankly, it stinks. (*cont'd page 4*)

WOULD YOU LIKE ONE STANDARD OR TWO ...? (CONT'D FROM PG 3)

A position of authority will never earn trust and respect if responsibility and fairness are not demonstrated. A person's career and livelihood deserves more than a two or three year game of charades regarding their performance. Where is administrative responsibility? Where are our instructional leaders? When will observations evolve beyond forms of punishment and actually strive to improve instruction? When a student does not pass, a teacher is required to complete a "failure accounting," justify this failure—indicating that s/he has fulfilled their responsibility for this student throughout the year. Does management demand of its teachers what they will not or cannot do themselves?

Finally, I am dismayed at the apparent double standard that has been applied to those favored by Central Office as opposed to those either unknown or not favored. I recently witnessed a tenure appointment that looked more like the celebration at the O.J. Simpson acquittal than the achievement of a profes-

sional milestone. The granting of tenure should never be about who you know, but about what you do.

There are many components to being a good teacher or administrator. I have certainly learned as a teacher and union officer that I will never be able to please everyone. I will receive a certain amount of criticism regardless of my actions—some certainly deserved. I would contend, however, that when and if I lose the trust and/or respect of the students I teach or the union members I represent, I am either failing to meet my responsibilities or I am failing to communicate my vision and efforts. To indicate that a lack of trust and respect for me is an indication that I am doing my job would constitute an absurd rationalization. Does anyone truly believe that effective instruction is exemplified by a disproportionate number of students and parents not trusting and respecting a teacher? Wouldn't this contention be just as absurd in any other setting?

—Tim Brown



Valley Central Federal Credit Union's Annual "Care for Kids" Campaign

COWABUNGA!!!

Please help "Clarence the Cow" as his herd gathers to help raise money for our special cause, the Children's Cancer Fund.

Proceeds of each purchase will be donated to the Children's Cancer Fund, an organization devoted to pediatric cancer research and helping children with cancer.

The donation for this adorable stuffed cow is \$8 or \$15 for two.

Please stop in at the Credit Union office or see Diane Ruggles, at the high school. (Room 101, Ext. 7686)

If you do not wish to purchase a cow, a donation can be made and your contribution card will be posted on the credit union's "Wall of Honor."

When 'Satisfactory' is Unacceptable

The district is moving toward the philosophy that 'Satisfactory' is unacceptable. We are being told that only teachers who are deemed exceptional shall be granted tenure. While I do see the merit in this philosophy, once you look beyond the surface there are many pitfalls.

I am going to assume that this philosophy will be applied to all employees, not just teachers. We wouldn't expect excellence from teachers and only a mere satisfactory from other employees such as a principal or the superintendent. We must all serve as role models for our children and exemplify excellence and professionalism in all we do.

We don't want an education for our children that is merely satisfactory. We should demand nothing short of excellence. How exactly does one become an excellent teacher? Do we arrive as excellent teachers our first day? Are we excellent teachers by the end of our first year, second year, or third year? Why have mentoring? I believe a mentor program helps teachers develop into excellent teachers.

Has the superintendent even decided what excellence in teaching looks like? Has he disseminated this information to his building principals? Has excellence in teaching been approved by the committee on Annual Professional Performance Review? He has certainly not shared this with the teachers. The highest rating on the APPR documents is 'Satisfactory'. Can the Superintendent determine if one is an excellent teacher during one of his 5 minute "Drive By" observations? Does he pressure his Principals to terminate those who may not meet his standard of excellence during those precious five minute observations?

When the superintendent tells us that the first six observations and two end of the year evaluations of a new teacher who was not going to be recommended for tenure were "just satisfactory", we know that the rules of engagement have changed. When we have a number of third year teachers who are not going to be recommended for tenure who



have received satisfactory evaluations, we again know that the rules are being changed. When some of these same teachers were released from mentoring by their principal, we must ask "if they are not good enough to receive tenure, why then would they be released from mentoring". Brothers and sisters, the rules they are a changin'.

One thing that every excellent teacher knows is that you explain your expectations to your students and then you hold them to those expectations. We also know that you must demand that all students meet the same expectation. If at a certain point you believe it is time to raise the bar, communicating to the students the new expectation is a must. Even with the best intentions, if you raise the bar without communicating the change in policy, a number of things occur: the students resent you, they learn to mistrust, and inevitably very few will meet the expectation.

In raising the bar without appropriate communication and in having one standard for teachers (excellence) and another for principals (merely satisfactory), Dr. Hooley has developed a large degree of mistrust and resentment in his class of Valley Central Teachers.

—Rich Steger, (W)

Vice President

On Tenure Anxiety...

Edvard Munch, a Norwegian Expressionist, painted at the end of the 19th century. "Anxiety" was one of his many paintings that has despair as its theme. The background was the same as his more famous work, "The Scream".

It seemed appropriate to "borrow" from Edvard Munch to illustrate the mood that has been established by the District's recent tenure decisions. It is not the VCTA's position to comment on whether the decisions are appropriate or not. The VCTA does not make the decision to hire a teacher—the District does. Likewise, the VCTA has no voice in the decision to tenure a teacher, nor do we want one. It is a District decision. Actually, the District knows that the VCTA says it should be tough with tenure. The VCTA has given all first through third year teachers a new member booklet, which addresses tenure among other topics. One of the sentences from that booklet follows: "Until you receive tenure, you can be relieved of your teaching position at any time."

While this statement is true, the VCTA believes that if an untenured teacher is being relieved of his/her position, it should not come as a surprise. Hopefully, in three years that person has not only been mentored through the VMP, but also by building administration. If an administrator has a concern about a particular teacher's classroom performance or professionalism, that concern should be expressed to this teacher and the administration should work with him/her to address the concern. This is the fairest way of truly evaluating a teacher's performance. While the VCTA does not want to be a part of the decision-making process—we do want that process to be fair and just. Unfortunately, this year it was not.

Many of the teachers denied tenure were not treated fairly. Teachers were told that their evaluations were "only satisfactory." A teacher in her sixth year whispered to me that some of her evaluations were only satisfactory during her non-



"Anxiety" Edvard Munch 1894

<http://www.munch.museum.no/media/work150px/>

tenured years. This teacher by all accounts is a highly regarded young teacher. Teachers were told they should be able to read between the lines of their observations—as if they should major in charades in college. Some of these teachers were released from the Viking Mentoring Program, despite concerns. Where were their teacher improvement plans? The VCTA does not presume to pass judgment about individual decisions with regard to tenure, instead we are concerned with the justness of the process.

At the VIP, the VCTA welcomes our new teachers to Valley Central telling them that VC easily could stand for "Very Caring". We have a long-standing tradition of being a very caring community, caring for the children we teach and caring for the people we teach with. Certainly, the administration has the right to decide if a non-tenured teacher meets district expectations for a Valley Central teacher. If the person does not, then they should be mentored out of Valley Central by that administration. The decision should never be a shock or surprise. This is the fair and just way of handling a tenure denial and alleviating the anxiety of our non-tenured staff.

—Patti Lunden, (HS)

Vice President

Teacher Tenure Under Fire

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is coming to the aid of the Newark Teachers' Union in the wake of an attack (www.protectingbadteachers.com) by the Center for Union Facts. The CUF is taking out ads in the local Newark paper, on buses, and on mobile billboards. The anti-teacher union campaign claims that tenure is a union's way of protecting bad teachers. The CUF has threatened to take its campaign to other cities. This campaign is inherently biased, misinformed, and targeted at the wrong group.

Teacher tenure in America has existed since the 1800s and was not conceived by teacher unions. Originally it was intended as a perk to attract candidates to low-paying jobs. It has since evolved into a means of protecting teachers from unfair dismissal practices and ensuring due process in the face of termination. This is especially important in the current climate of hiring inexperienced new teachers instead of higher-paid experienced ones. It also protects more seasoned teachers from being dismissed or forced out as a means of making politically-motivated or nepotistic appointments. Many misconceptions about teacher tenure are treated as gospel by the public at large. Tenure is granted not only to teachers, but to administrators as well. **Tenure is not lifetime job security.** Tenured teachers can be dismissed if they are deemed incompetent, insubordinate, or guilty of unbecoming conduct.

Rare is the teacher or administrator who hasn't looked around at his/her colleagues and asked his/herself the age-old question, "How did that person get tenure?" Of course there are incompetent and mediocre teachers and administrators, just as there are incompetent and mediocre doctors, carpenters, and waitresses, etc. Such people are an endless source of frustration and embarrassment to dedicated, hard-working professionals. If an incompetent doctor en-

dangers a patient's life, that person or his family will hold the physician accountable. Who is (or should be) held accountable for tenuring and/or retaining bad teachers and administrators? Do unions grant tenure? Though teachers and teachers' unions are inevitable and favorite scapegoats for societal problems, this is one ill that cannot be blamed on them. The culprits here are ineffective, bland, or disinterested administrators who are not doing their jobs. How long will it be before the Center for Union Facts expands its campaign to include administrative unions?

"Who is (or should be) held accountable for tenuring and/or retaining bad teachers and administrators?"

Though there seems to be an institutionalized dividing line that separates teachers and administrators, they have the same main goals and work together every day with great success. There is an inherent mutual respect between most teachers and their administrative leaders. Most educators view their principals as mentors, even parent-like figures. You turn to them when you need guidance or help. You count on them to back you up in difficult situations. Teaching under a strong, consistent, and fair administration is every teacher's dream and one that has been

realized in many of VC's buildings.

We should not lose sight of the fact that administrators are our union brothers and sisters. As such, we should be able to back each other up in times of trouble. Just as teacher unions are concerned for the welfare of all members, so should all administrators make their decisions with their colleagues, successors, and students in mind. Administrators who recommend questionable teachers for tenure or fail to dismiss unfit tenured teachers are not only hurting teacher unit members; they are also hurting other administrators and the students. When you look around at your colleagues and consider the ones that perhaps should not be teaching, the majority of them are not new teachers. They are the product of not one administrator, but many. *(cont'd on pg 8)*

Teacher Tenure Under Fire (cont'd from pg 7)



Documentation is necessary to dismiss a tenured teacher. The task of amassing evidence to dismiss a seasoned teacher is not an easy one for an administrator, let alone a new one.

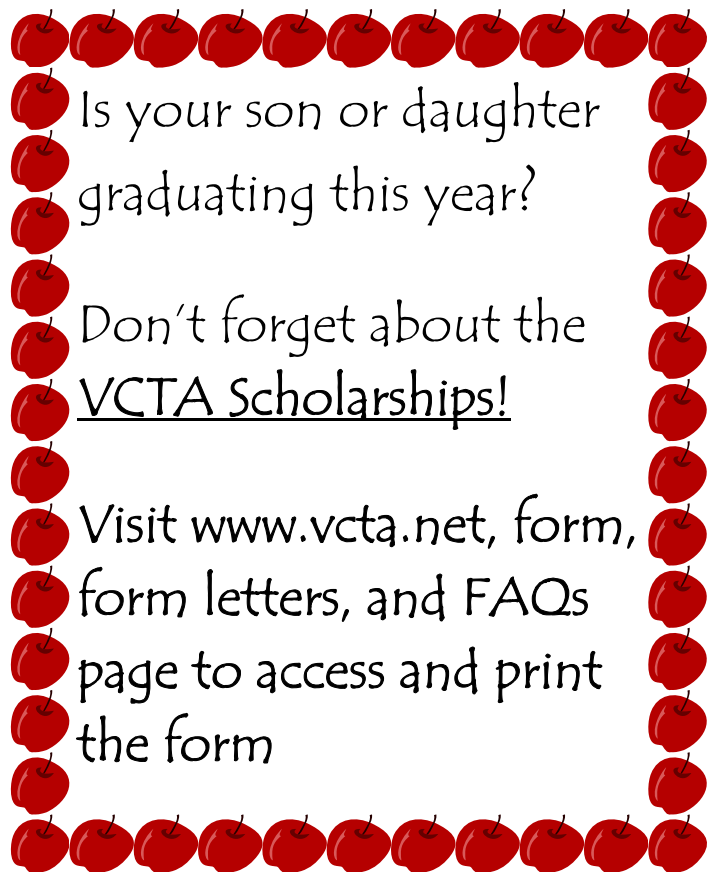
It is unquestionably a long, difficult process to dismiss a tenured teacher. Just as it is a long, difficult process for a student to write a ten-page research paper. Does this mean the student should not turn it in or get someone else to write it for them? If a tenured teacher is not performing, the building level administrators must document incidents and communicate with the employee. In cases where improvements are not made, it is the administration's duty to pursue dismissal. Their decisions should not be based on their personal relationships with individuals. When they do their jobs well, administrators should be applauded, not vilified. This has happened at VC. Tenure has been denied and tenured teachers have been dismissed. Conversely, if they allow incompetence to reign, it reflects their own ineffectiveness, causes problems for future administrators, and most importantly, it hurts the students. How many good building level administrators are lost out of sheer frustration? In the words of one old, wise teacher, "the \$@!# shouldn't keep getting passed around."

Ineffective administrators put teachers' unions (as well as their own unions) in a very unfortunate and even loathsome position. The union must defend its members. If there is little, no, or unsubstantiated documentation, chances are the union will emerge victorious. Union leaders do not promote incompetence, insubordination, or unbecoming conduct. They will not lie, cheat, or steal for members. They must ensure that due process is carried out. They are doing their jobs.

The Center for Union Facts is attempting to crucify the Newark Teachers' Union for doing its job. Administrative unions will be next. Though the name would indicate to the average person that it is a legitimate, watchdog-type organization, the CUF is a front for a man named Richard Berman. Richard Berman is a lobbyist who creates non-profit organizations like

the Center for Union Facts in order to get money for his PR business. Additionally, Mr. Berman is largely funded by Coca Cola, Philip Morris, and McDonald's in his campaigns against unions. He is also the head of the Center for Consumer Freedom which advocates against smoking bans, lower BAC limits, and organic foods. The winter 2006 edition of Old Trout magazine chose Berman as one of the 13 Scariest Americans calling him the Scariest Opportunity Killer. A simple Google search yields a plethora of information. Does this sound like a man with our children's best interests at heart? Berman will undoubtedly soon be adding Executive Director of the Center for Charter School Advancement to his resume. We must counter this attack with what we do best: education.

—Meghan Rilley



In the News...



Brown Tackles the Issues

Special Education Teacher Shortage: According to Sylvia Saunders (NYT, March 15), the new special education certification requirements are likely to result in a shortage of special education teachers throughout the state. Instead of one certificate for grades K-12, special education teachers now have up to 45 distinct certificates within their discipline to contend with and are now required to be certified as a general education teacher as well or, at the secondary level in specific subjects. While “47 percent of special education students are in grades 7-12 [only] 19.5 percent of new teaching certificates issued would equip teachers to teach at these levels” requiring specific subject certification. This seems to be a big price for new teachers to pay for the privilege of being a public servant in a state that already demands more for permanent certification than any other state.

Grades 3-8 Math Test Survey: NYSUT has posted an online survey to collect information regarding the grades 3-8 math tests. The survey will only take a few minutes and should be taken by anyone who prepared, administered or scored the tests. To take this survey select the link off the vcta.net home page or go directly to nysut.org and follow their survey links.

Why Union? The Walter Reed Hospital was in the news recently for looking too much like many of our nation’s under-funded schools. How could anyone permit our wounded veterans be serviced in facilities in need of such repair? Who were those responsible for cleaning and repairing these buildings? The Answer: An independent contractor was hired to replace public sector union employees that would normally have been responsible for maintenance. These independent contractors ignored the disrepair of the facilities (e.g., mold, broken tiles, peeling paint, etc.) simply because it was not a priority and this contractor was likely understaffed for the number of jobs it had acquired in

the area. Although Walter Reed has similarities to the disrepair that we experience in our public schools, the reasons for this disrepair are very different. This contractor will receive or has received payment for materials and labor. Public school maintenance and custodial crews often do not receive the materials necessary to complete their tasks but still continue to *McGuyver* solutions despite a lack of financial support. Situations such as Walter Reed highlight the advantages of utilizing unionized public employees and properly funding public service organizations. For more information on this topic read *Privatization Behind Disaster at Walter Reed Hospital* by Joel Wendland at www.politicalaffairs.net.

Union Representation and the Taylor Law: A recent New York State Appellate Court decision ruled against public employee rights to union representation with regard to initial questioning in disciplinary matters. The judge indicated that the Taylor law did not specifically address this issue and, therefore, the right to representation is not inherent in the legislation. A dissenting appellate judge, however, recommended that legislation be changed to correct this oversight. NYSUT believes this will be corrected soon. VCTA members have historically had representation at these meetings and, therefore, may be exempt from this restrictive legal interpretation. Past practice within our district may prevail as the accepted and, therefore, binding practice. Consequently, the Association’s position with regard to this matter is that members are entitled to union representation throughout an entire disciplinary hearing, including initial questioning. If members are denied representation, they should wait to answer specific questions regarding an incident until

(cont’d on pg. 10)

In the News... (Cont'd. from pg 9)

they are able to seek union counsel regarding their rights and/or responsibilities. It is our hope that the District will not attempt to change this long-standing practice while new legislation is pursued to address this.

Additionally, it has come to our attention that members have felt compelled to sign an administrative observation or disciplinary letters upon receipt. This type of coercion should not happen. There is nothing inherent in our contract language that would require this. Just as administrators take enough time to write evaluations to ensure accuracy, teachers may also take time to review materials to ensure accuracy before signing, ensure that the document meets the criteria that would require a signature, consult with a union representative and determine if they wish to attach a response to the supervisor's letter/memo.

—Tim Brown,
VCTA President

Spring Fling

The VCTA held its first Spring Fling on Friday, March 16 following Superintendent's Conference Day activities. Although the weather was less than Spring-like, more than 90 brave Viking teachers, secretaries and paraprofessionals braved the snowy roads to reach the Otterkill Country Club. Everyone had a wonderful time—the food was delicious, the conversation enjoyable. In addition to the music provided by a DJ, there were drawings that awarded 10 lucky winners gift certificates to local businesses. VC graduate and Otterkill Golf Pro, John Schmoll, spoke with us briefly and distributed offers for savings on golf lessons, clothing and equipment (*check out the VCTA website for more details*). Walden Elementary won the Viking Van Gogh award for the highest percentage of building attendance at the Fling. Building Representative MaryEllen Mangia-mele accepted this prestigious honor on behalf of her building colleagues (*pictured below and on the VCTA home page*). The Spring Fling is going to be an annual event—see you there next year!

—Laurie Hey, (MS) VCTA Secretary

A Jolly Good Time at Spring Fling...



TRS Patties...All about NYSTRS

This is a new column by Patty Joy (Walden) about the New York State Teachers' Retirement System. It will be beneficial to members at all stages of their careers. Please send in any questions you may have regarding the NYSTRS and Patty will answer them in her next issue.

Final Average Salary: Making the Most of It!

What is a Final Average Salary (FAS)?

- Average of 3 or 5 (Tier 1 only) highest consecutive years of salary
- Typically last 3 or 5 years, but does not have to be

What opportunities do I have to increase my FAS?

- Increase regular compensation through in-service credits and graduate credits throughout your career
- In addition to Full-time teaching services (regular compensation) you may increase your FAS through a variety of opportunities such as: coaching, teaching summer school, chaperoning, supervision of after-school clubs, Teaching or administration of educational after-school programs

What cannot be included in my FAS?

Some things your FAS cannot include are:

- Non-regular compensation (e.g., bonuses, taxable



fringe benefits, payments in lieu of health insurance)

- Employer contributions into a tax shelter account
- Buyouts

Are there any salary increase limitations?

- Yes! For a 3 year FAS your increase in Salary from one year to the next cannot exceed:
 - o Tier 1: 20%
 - o Tier 2: 20% of average of previous 2 years
 - o Tiers 3 & 4: 10% of average of previous 2 years
- No! (for a lucky few) For a 5 year FAS (Tier 1), if date of membership is prior to 6-7-71 your FAS is not subject to limit in salary increases

The information in this article and other valuable information can be found at www.nystrs.org

If you have questions about the NYSTRS and would like them answered in this column send them to Patty Joy at pjoy@vcmail.ouboces.org or Patty Lunden at plunden@vcmail.ouboces.org

—Patty Joy, Walden Elementary
NYSTRS Representative

Please help the Savage Family

As we all know, the Savage family suffered a terrible tragedy last Friday. There was a fire in their home and their 17 year-old son Joseph was lost. At a time like this we try to help the family emotionally by giving our love and prayers, but we would also like to help them financially. The financial burden on the family is going to be tremendous and the Officers of the Paraprofessional Unit would like to ask for donations to help them through this time of need. Donations can be given to the para rep at each school or sent to me at Walden Elementary. The reps are: Berea, Michele Caltafamo; Central Office, Joan Babcock; East Coldenham, Jane Leenstra; Maybrook, Laurie Hughes; Montgomery, Lori Schmidt; Middle School, Barbara DeSena room 143; High School, Debi Zwart; and Walden Elementary, Kathy Lennon or Wenda Heaney. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

—Kathy Lennon, Para Unit President.

Committee of 100 Report—The Success of VOTE-COPE

A record 740 representatives participated in the Committee of 100 legislative action day in Albany on March 20, 2007. Governor Spitzer's proposed education budget includes the highest monetary increase in NYS history with a reformed aid formula designed to address inequities in the current system. New York State currently spends approximately \$45 billion on education.

Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli, in an address to NYSUT Committee of 100 delegates, promised a \$2.7 million increase specifically earmarked for ensuring compliance with school audits, stating that school district accountability was a top priority. DiNapoli also promised to stabilize employer TRS contributions to prevent near zero percent contributions that inevitably lead to stiffer contributions in future years. He also pledged to keep promises made to public employees regarding public sector pension plans, stating that corporations reneging on promises should not translate into similar public sector behavior.

Nevertheless, not all news was good. According to our representatives, Governor Spitzer has indicated that it is unlikely the NYS budget process will be completed on time and that Spitzer does not necessarily believe this is a bad thing. This position is contrary to the one he took when Pataki was governor. This does not bode well for local school budget planning. Spitzer's most disconcerting budget item includes an unfettered support of tax tuition vouchers and charter schools throughout the State despite a lack of any substantial evidence that they are effectual. The cities of Albany and Buffalo have been decimated by Charter Schools. Albany was forced to turn over \$22 million dollars to area charter schools while Buffalo was forced to relinquish \$55 million. Two million dollars in transitional charter school aid is proposed for Albany leaving a net loss of \$20 million, while five million dollars in transitional charter school aid is proposed for Buffalo leaving a net loss of \$50 million. This transitional aid is a poor attempt to spin a bad idea. Albany and Buffalo schools still need to transport children, clean and heat buildings, as well as pay teachers, coaches and advisors. The cost of running and maintaining these city school systems remains primarily unchanged, while private, for-profit and completely unproven institutions are permitted to steal education funds from our most needy children.

According to Comptroller DiNapoli, ten per-

cent of New York State children live in "extreme poverty," while one in five live in "poverty." New York State, the economic capital of the United States, ranks 38th in poverty index and ranks 50th, dead last, in addressing this problem. Perhaps it is time that we stopped scapegoating teachers and administrators who work in our most needy schools. Better disciplinary support, effective security, appropriate alternative schools, community outreach, smaller schools, smaller class size, appropriate electives and universal full day Pre-K are some examples of how to address failing schools and poverty.

To view a copy of the legislative lobbying agenda presented to our State representatives on March 20, 2007 go to our website (www.vcta.net) and view the VOTE-COPE page. Agenda items are presented in the following categories: K-12, SUNY, CUNY, Community Colleges, Health Care, Retirement, & Health Benefits. VOTE-COPE contributions enable us to lobby on behalf of children, workers and taxpayers. Last year NYSUT VOTE-COPE collected a record \$6.2 million dollars for political action. This amount is greater than that collected by the entire NEA national organization. By law, union dues may not be used for political action; therefore, local VOTE-COPE contributions are essential to the success of our profession and our mission of educating children.

Robin Scott, District VOTE-COPE coordinator, along with our building coordinators, will be starting our yearly VOTE-COPE drive in April. Please fill out a payroll deduction form that will be effective starting September 2007. It is recommended that you write "\$50 for the entire year" on the form to ensure the entire amount is credited regardless of your payroll selection option. This will result in an approximate \$2 per paycheck deduction. Members may obtain a form from their building coordinator or download the form from our website. This form must be resubmitted only if you wish to increase the amount of your payroll deduction. Your building VOTE-COPE coordinators are also pictured on our website. Please seek them out to make their jobs easier. Last year your contributions resulted in the VCTA being award the Abel Blattman Award from NYSUT headquarters. Your dedication to children and your profession is evident in these actions.

—Tim Brown, Committee of 100 Rep

Attendance and Accountability: How a #2 Pencil Can Make Us or Break Us.

After almost fifteen years of teaching, I have lately found myself questioning what my role has become in the classroom. Perhaps it's a mid-career crisis, or the fact that as hard as I try, I cannot make that student in my 2nd period class understand that writing "The Holocaust was mad ghetto. Hitler was wak" while essentially accurate, is not acceptable in a Regents essay. Or maybe it's that I find myself looking back on my days as a young teacher, in the years before NCLB when we teachers were leaving all those kids behind. I still feel a lot of guilt about that.

As a new teacher, I had every intention of doing my best for my students, not realizing that treating them as unique individuals with diverse talents and needs was failing them. It breaks my heart to see some of my former students whom I left behind in those years and I've vowed to make amends. I recently apologized to my dentist, who was one of my students in the early 90's. I approached one recently in the mall parking lot when he got out of his BMW but he didn't have much time to chat. Unfortunately there's little I can do to make it up to one particular former student who I left behind. He's currently the Principal of the high school in which I taught him. Imagine what he could have achieved if I had had NCLB to guide me back then. But I digress...

A few weeks ago we received a memo in our mailboxes which made me realize what my role was. The memo stated that as teachers, our "most important legal responsibility is taking attendance." Of course, this sent many of us scrambling to brush up on the attendance courses we studied in college. Looking for those dusty textbooks sitting in the basement entitled *Attendance; A Narrative History*, or for us SUNY New Paltz alumni, *Attendance and the Ozone Layer: How Inaccurate Attendance Destroys the Environment and Oppresses Women*.

After some research, however, I found that inasmuch as it's amusing to poke fun at this fact, it is indeed very true. It's crucial. Attendance is our most important **legal** responsibility. In the world of secondary education, it is the nature of the beast that we insulate ourselves in the world of our subject matter. It is easy to denigrate something we really don't take the time to understand, and to be honest about it....something I have been known to do on occasion.

It's more than Money

Accurate attendance is the foundation of funding public education. All of us know that attendance is tied to state aid. Perhaps because it has to do with mathematics, I have been fully satisfied over the years with just having a

cursory idea of how it's calculated. What I found from researching for this article, however, is not only is student attendance data used to calculate state aid, it is also used to calculate per-pupil cost, track growth trends, measure student performance and school progress, and plays a large role in applying for grants. In short, the money we need to run our schools and educate our students is intrinsically tied to attendance. Another important fact to consider is that attendance can have a direct impact on the measurement of our Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Inaccuracies in attendance have far-reaching effects. During the March Superintendent's Conference Day, Patti Lunden, brought up a profound example that illustrates the importance of collecting accurate student data. Student resistance to applying for free or reduced lunch at the secondary level has led to under calculation of eligible students in the high school. Thus we are not considered a Title I school, when in fact we may be. Four out of our five elementary schools as well as our middle school were Title I schools according to the 2005 - 2006 NYSED Accountability Status Report, yet the high school no longer meets the criteria. ¹ Accurate calculation of these students could lead to our school being measured in a more realistic way that truly reflects our changing demographics and could also positively impact our AYP status.

Is it 1977 or 2007?

To find out what exactly is entailed in the daily measurement of our attendance at the high school, I went directly to the front lines. Jane Kreutzberg, one of our paras in the Attendance Office described for me the importance of accurate attendance. "It generates funding. Are we getting the state aid we truly deserve? It's also about reimbursement. Students on home medical tutoring, in rehabilitation, these are expenses that the district has to cover and are then reimbursed by the state. If a student in this situation is not marked absent, we lose funds. "It's a large legal issue." She continued, "We are contacted by the police, the courts, attendance is a legal document that we as a school are held accountable for. The system we use for attendance is out-dated and inefficient. We know it's disruptive when we call classes to ask if students are absent, we don't want to disrupt classes, but some teachers don't realize, we have to do it, there's a lot on the line."

In this day and age, as schools are being held more accountable for data, we must do as much as we can to ensure accuracy. In a school of over 1,700 students, we have two part-time employees processing attendance, a monumental task. This system is rife with opportunity for error, not due to carelessness on anyone's part, but by the simple fact that the existing system (cont'd on page 14)

Attendance and Accountability: (cont'd from page 13)

operates on an indirect combination of steps that relies on uncontrollable external factors.

Attendance is confidential. The policy of having students pick up and collect the attendance and then bring it to the attendance office is a violation of confidentiality. Essentially, we are entrusting teenagers to collect confidential legal documents that could be subpoenaed by the Courts. Perhaps letting them punch their own grades into the computer with no adult supervision is a good idea as well? They are not yet adults and we are allowing them to walk around the building, collect attendance and make sure it arrives at its final location unedited. Thus the crucial data that is needed to finance the education of the students of this community, changes hands multiple times a day. We are trying to operate a school in 2007, with a system from 1977.

Ashley, Ashlee, Ashleigh....is She Here Today?

All of these reasons were part of the long-range plan when we implemented the Integrate Pro grading program, to upgrade to the Class XP attendance program which would allow teachers to use either a touch screen or a mouse click to take attendance. This system would replace the scantrons and machines, and would include student photos to more easily identify students and limit errors when trying to ascertain which of the five Ashley's in your 1st period class are absent.. If we are moving towards a "data driven model"....utilizing data to improve scores and student success, wouldn't having accurate attendance data at our fingertips contribute to this success? So, when the decision to fund the upgrade was abandoned at the last CAB, many at the HS were very disappointed. Wouldn't accurate attendance benefit the district in many ways, especially with regard to state aid? What about all the money spent on bubble sheets, envelopes, scanners, scanner repairs? Wouldn't the benefits outweigh the costs...especially, when the program cost was approximately \$6,000?

Fiber Optics, Coaxial Cables, Bandwidth: Oh My!

At first it seemed that the Class XP Program was denied simply due to an expense of less than \$6,000 or that it seemed to be an unnecessary program that had proven difficult to implement in other districts. There is a natural learning curve that results from incorporating new technology into an institution that does not have an experienced staff. When we first got InteGrade Pro, it took some time to iron out the kinks and train our staff. We have now been using it for a number of years. Upgrading our system to Class XP would be a natural next step at the middle and high school, as we have already reached a comfort level with Integrate Pro. In several school districts in Long Island and

Westchester that have been using Class XP, there has been very positive feedback.

Another possible problem to contend with would be substitute teachers taking attendance. This could easily be addressed within our staff, where someone could be responsible for inputting attendance for the day where a substitute was in, or better yet, include Class XP training at the substitute teacher training offered by the district to those who apply to be substitute teachers at Valley Central.

After exploring some of the obstacles to implementing the program, I found that our major obstacle is actually an infrastructure issue. Before I explain, please remember that I am a Social Studies teacher....here goes! It seems that part of our building was wired for fiber optics, and the other parts are coaxial. Unfortunately, to implement Class XP, we need to have the building wired entirely for either fiber optics or coaxial, not a combination. The result is that we do not have enough bandwidth to run the program. While I could not get exact costs, I am certain they would exceed \$6,000.

The Next Step?

So, perhaps this is not something that we can have as planned for the 2007-2008 school year. Rather than just denying the program, wouldn't it make sense to start fixing the problems that prevent us from having it? At the last conference day, we were told that in some aspects, we are educating students for careers that haven't even been invented yet. In a global society, our students will not be just competing with their immediate peers, but with the world. Many of our students will one day work with colleagues from Singapore, Switzerland, and India... all without leaving their desks.

We must begin to look at educating our students in this community as an investment in the future, and not as a way to stretch the dollar as far as it can go. There is no pride in being the least per-pupil expenditure school district in several counties. Our population is booming. In many discussions I have heard; "Oh, they can afford that in Westchester or Rockland County". But, we are the new destination for many former residents of Westchester and Rockland County as well as New York City in addition to our long-term residents. New developments planned in the immediate future will also add to our student population. To ensure that we continue to "put our children center", we have to provide a competitive 21st century education to our students, even if it will incur more expenses.

(cont'd on page 15)

Attendance and Accountability: (cont'd from page 14)

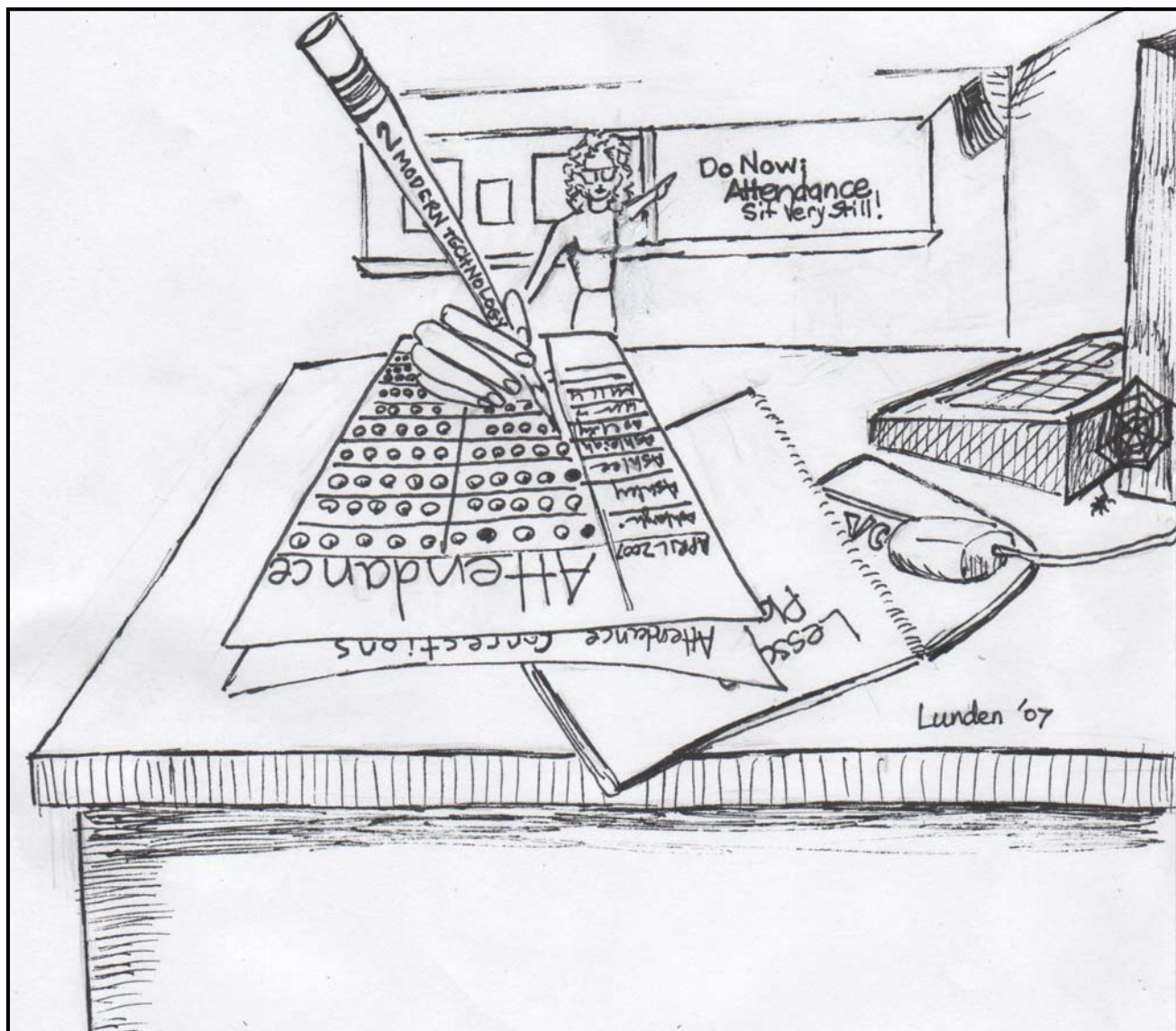
As both a teacher and a parent of children in this school district, I can relate to all sides of this issue. I cannot offer any solutions, but perhaps there are some ideas that we as a district should be willing to explore to create an environment that will be conducive to positive change and that will address some of these concerns.

School Climate, Academic Progress, and Attendance: A Definite Link

Some recent preliminary findings link school climate, attendance and student academic performance. CEFPI, (The Council for Educational Facility Planners) states that "research has proven that there is an integral relationship between the quality of educational facilities and the level of student achievement".² In his article "Do School

Facilities Really Impact A Child's Education?" John B. Lyons draws on a multitude of diverse research that states "While it has been said, 'A good teacher can teach anywhere' a growing body of research literature also strongly suggests a direct relation between the condition and utility of the school facility and learning. ...well-designed systems send a powerful message to kids about the importance their community places on education."³

The majority of our students come to us from the middle school. Entering the high school in September as freshmen, they are stepping a decade or two into the past. Given the fact that this building is almost 50 years old and not designed to hold the student capacity at its current level, we have improved greatly in implementing technology into our building. (cont'd on pg. 16)



Attendance and Accountability: (cont'd from page 15)

Some of our rooms have smart boards, LCD projectors, computers, and a computer LAN for students and teachers. We have more computer labs available for student use. There have been many improvements over the past few years, however, we must realize that some of the changes that will be the impetus to the changes to come, will not be visible. Given the fact that all of these changes are quite costly, it would be wise to make sure our first source of funding, attendance, is our first priority.

View From the Classroom

Will this make our lives easier? Not likely. We will still be responsible for taking attendance, even while standing outside the door to monitor the hallway, answering a multitude of questions, and attempting to get students quickly on task to start our lessons. But, perhaps it would remove a lot of the disruptions that result from the system as it is now. One of the groups we are most concerned about is our "at risk" students, who are usually the most distractible. Considering this group is at the core of our AYP issues, does it not make sense to remove as many disruptive factors as possible?

With Class XP, taking attendance would be a seamless endeavor. It would remove several steps in the process which would ensure a more direct, efficient and accurate

accounting of attendance. Our roles within the classroom are many, as are our responsibilities. Two responsibilities stand out the most: our responsibility to keep our students safe and provide them with the best education possible to prepare them for their futures in a competitive world. Taking accurate attendance can help provide them with both. Why not invest in them by investing in a program that will ensure accuracy and provide all the funding we need to give them the best we can? They deserve no less.

- Lisa Korpics

Sources

1. NYSED School Accountability Status Report. English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Graduation Rates. Valley Central School District. 2005-2006 <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/reprcd2005/school-accountability/441301060006.pdf>
2. CEFPI. The Council for Educational Facility Planners. <http://www.cefpi.org/welcome.html>
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"Pennies for Pasta"

To many of us pennies are a nuisance—something we want to get rid of. Not so for Nancy Rypkema. She sees the power they can have when collected in mass. Nancy has been coordinator of the "Pennies for Pasta" campaign for the past ten years and have those pennies added up! Through Nancy's leadership and the heroic efforts of various middle school teachers and students, over \$30,000 have been collected for the Leukemia/Lymphoma Society. Nancy's personal experience with these devastating cancers of the blood has fueled her commitment to the campaign. Nancy depends on the ability of the homeroom teachers to excite and motivate their students to collect these pennies. The "heavy hitters" are concentrated in the 6th grade hall. Merry Zapka, Sandy Strauss, and Roger Flaum's students have brought in some impressive totals. This year's winning class was Maddie Brook's first period students who collected over \$900!!! Nancy Rypkema was honored by the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society in October for her tireless efforts—we in the middle school also applaud her!

—Chris O'Shea, Middle School



(l-r) Nancy Rypkema and Chris O'Shea

What's Going On?

THE ANTONIA P. TERSILLO MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP FUND

Our former Middle School colleague, Petrina Tersillo, and her husband, Tony Tersillo, a Marlboro guidance counselor, lost their only child, Antonia, after a long and hard-fought battle with cancer. Following in her parents' footsteps, Antonia, 34, was a teacher in Brooklyn.

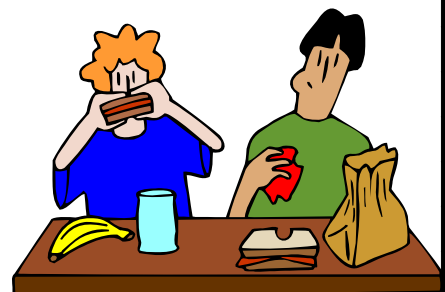
A scholarship fund has been established at the Valley Central Federal Credit Union to honor Antonia. Anyone wishing to contribute can do so by making your donation directly into that account or by sending your donation to Sandy Strauss at the Middle School. Donations will help establish scholarships for Middle School children who cherish Antonia's two loves: science and the arts.

All contributions will be greatly appreciated and will go to honor not only a wonderful young teacher but her Mom and Dad as well.

VCTA Lunch Box Project

- Bring in an item each week to donate to the Montgomery Food Pantry until the end of the year!
- Target items with children in mind...18% of our population (*about 775 children*) qualify for free/reduced lunch
- All of our donations help to keep the Food Pantry stocked over the summer
- Place your donation in the bin marked VCTA Lunch Box Project in your building

(Plastic Grocery bags are also needed to pack the items)



Mac's Musings (from the Retiree Side)...

Spring has more or less arrived. After several days in the sixties and a brief foray into the seventies, followed by up to eighteen inches of snow (as measured at the Villa McFadden), spring came a week ago. Today is the 26th of March, and you have already guessed that I'm several days late at meeting the deadline for the column. (Bless you, Meghan, for your patience.) This time of year, as spring decides to stay, is always rejuvenating; things ever ancient seem again ever new. Renewal—you just can't beat it.

—Nobody asked me, but...

—Gov. Spitzer needs some help in recognizing the problems that may be caused by his proposed budget, especially as it relates to school aid and health matters. Re: school aid, I can never figure out how the “powers that be” can increase mandates that are costly and not provide funding for said mandates. That mind-frame then requires increased local property taxation which everybody agrees is the worst way to fund education. The local school budget is dependent on the vote of the people. It is the only place where people can vote on increasing taxes. The budg-

ets of city, village, town, state, and federal governments are not voted on by the people. This is the only place where folks can say “no” and they often do. Who suffers? Kids do. Let us hope that the governor wises up quickly. Drop him a line suggesting this wisdom: Honorable Eliot Spitzer, State Capitol, Albany, NY 12224. Or on the Web (do you believe it?) www.ny.gov/governor.

—This time of year brings news of upcoming retirements in the VC family. As always it is a time of mixed emotions: happiness for those who will approach a new and exciting time in their lives and a certain sadness at losing the daily presence of long-time, beloved colleagues. The middle school retirees (as of June 30) are Bev Slomka and Eileen Wojehowski; from the high school, Joyce Zawistowski; from Maybrook, Kay Bauer and Sandy Tarallo; East Coldenham will lose John Bonagura, Harvey Gregory, and Judy Guidry. They will be sorely missed, but will be joyfully welcomed into the retiree ranks. (If I missed anyone, I'll rectify the omission in the next issue of ECHOES.)

—Condolences

This issue brings sad news to the VC family, as we have lost dear friends and colleagues. Earlier this year brought news of the death of Skip Geiger, long-time phys-ed teacher at the middle school and coach at the high school of soccer, wrestling, and baseball. There was nobody who could tell a story better than Skip. He never failed to get a room laughing.

More recently we learned of the death of Paula Lewis who graced several of VC's schools as a speech therapist. Her smile was infectious, her care for the kids in her charge was legendary. I always looked forward to her presence in the high school and in later years to seeing her at retirement dinners and retiree luncheons.

This past week we heard of the passing of Sue Vanderburgh, master math teacher at the middle school who taught in tandem with her late husband, Al. She defined the term “lady.” Her students learned math and so much more from this gracious lady.

Death is shocking at any time, but most shocking when a young person passes. Antonia Tersillo, daughter of Trina and Tony



Tersillo died after a long illness at the end of February. Trina retired as a science teacher/summer school principal; Tony is a guidance counselor in Marlboro. Antonia was an elementary teacher in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. Her principal gave a touching eulogy at Antonia's funeral mass. She was a wonderful teacher who touched the lives of her young students and her colleagues—many of whom were in attendance at her funeral.

Our deepest sympathy to all the families.

—Amen

Hope, I believe, springs eternal. My hope is that kids will continue to learn and to grow, that teachers will continue the incredible job that they do, that retirees will continue to find joy and fulfillment in the new areas of their lives and that we all continue going forward with the winds always at our backs. Until next time, keep pushing back the barriers of ignorance in whatever venue life finds you. Peace.

—Mac, Retiree Rep

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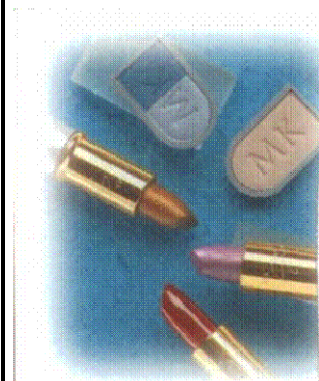
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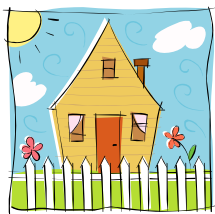
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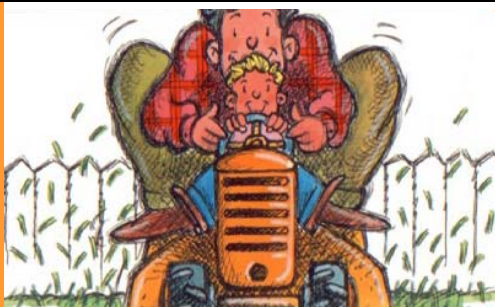
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The VC Echoes is the official publication of the Valley Central Teachers' Association—Local 3076—and is published regularly throughout the school year.

Article contributions or Letters to the Editor for the next issue should be sent to Meghan Riley, HS, by May 11, 2007.

Any articles submitted to the VC Echoes will also be posted on the VCTA web site.

VCTA Blood Drive

Kathy Manning, the nurse at the Middle School, has been organizing the VCTA Blood Drive for the past nine years. Kathy had been a building rep and was a member of the VCTA's community service committee when she decided to start a blood drive as a VCTA community service project. Because of the inclement weather this year, the turnout wasn't as high as usual. Kathy hopes to increase member participation in the future because giving blood is an important service to the community.

—Laurie Hey, Secretary

Is your best friend retiring this year?

*Pay tribute to him or her by writing a short biography of his/her teaching career at VC for the Retiree Edition of the **VC ECHOES** to be published on or about May 25, 2007.*

*Submit your bio in hard copy format, on disk, or via e-mail by 11 May 2007 to Meghan Riley HS. **Please use Microsoft Word.** If submitting digital pictures, please have them in **JPG** format.*

1. Who is this person? Where did they grow up, go to college? What brought them to Valley Central? What is his/her family status?
2. When did they begin teaching at Valley Central? Where else have they taught? What have they taught here? Have they advised or coached any extracurricular activities? Have they been involved with any aspects of the school community? (PTA, Scholarship council) Have they been actively involved in the VCTA?
3. What is unique about this person? What are the contributions they have made in their classroom and outside their classroom?
4. How has this person made a difference to VC: colleagues and students?
5. Where are they headed after they retire? Do they have any hobbies or other careers they plan to pursue? What are they looking forward to most about retirement? What will his/her colleagues miss about them? What do his/her colleagues hope for her?

PICTURES: I need at least one picture of each retiree. You may send pictures (by e-mail or scanner-ready) (old yearbooks, etc.) Artwork (caricatures) are also acceptable and can be scanned. It is great to have pictures from throughout a career. I will include as many as possible. If no pictures are sent, I will contact the retiree to come take his/her picture. Any pictures sent will be returned.