FIGHTING FOR SAFE SCHOOLS

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Waiting game: Delayed aid and pending results from a chaotic session

By Ned Hoskin
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The scheduled state legislative session in Albany ground to a halt this summer, but lawmakers are still operating remotely, with much to be resolved.

Now, schools and colleges are struggling to reopen within days, health care institutions fear a fall resurgence of the coronavirus and key elections approach in mere weeks.

The fiscal impact of the pandemic and politics threaten to push the lagging economy over the brink.

In early August, with school districts around New York working on their plans for the start of the school year, the state Division of Budget (DOB) notified districts that devastating cuts are coming.

In response to a projected $14.5 billion budget shortfall, DOB said any funding tied to a statutory due date will be reduced by at least 20 percent, and that the state may withhold payments entirely for items with no statutory due date.

Public higher education at SUNY, CUNY and community colleges face similar “delays” that feel more like deprivation.

“New York State should not balance its budget on the backs of our students,” said NYSUT President Andy Pallotta.

“Even before this pandemic, it was clear we had a crisis in public education, from pre-K through higher ed,” he said. “Now, because our leaders in Albany and Washington have failed to provide the funds required to meet increasing demands on our institutions and educators in this time of crisis, we face the prospect of draconian cuts that will make a terrible situation worse.

“That is morally repugnant and completely unacceptable,” he said. “Washington needs to do its job and provide federal funding to support our schools, and Albany needs to stop protecting the ultrawealthy and make them pay their fair share toward education, health care and the essential services New Yorkers rely on.”

Some progress

In spite of the unusual circumstances, NYSUT activists and legislative staffers were able to get some important bills through the Legislature this year. Here are a handful of examples of bills lawmakers passed that await the governor’s action.

Admission to ed programs

Both the Assembly and the state Senate passed a bill to amend the education law by removing the requirement that applicants must have a 3.0 GPA as an undergrad to be admitted into graduate-level teacher and leader education programs.

“There is no evidence that GPA requirements significantly predict college success or excellence in teaching. A range of factors are at play in the development of our best prospective teachers. Many candidates’ grades were skewed last semester due to the pandemic; their prospects should not suffer through circumstances beyond their control.

Continued on page 4...
DiBrango finds DNC event anything but remote

By Sylvia Saunders
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It wasn’t exactly the Democratic National Convention she expected, but NYSUT Executive Vice President Jolene DiBrango found her first time as a DNC delegate to be energizing and inspiring. “Even though we’re so far apart, I’ve found it very unifying,” said DiBrango, one of about two dozen NYSUT members elected to be DNC delegates.

Instead of traveling to Milwaukee, Wis., DiBrango spent the four days of the virtual convention popping in and out of a series of online meetings — from the labor council to the women’s caucus to the New York State delegation breakfasts.

On the second night she attended an educator’s watch party with U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren and U.S. Rep. Jahana Hayes (the National Teacher of the Year from Connecticut). “That was the night we heard from Dr. Jill Biden,” DiBrango said. “She is a true educator. She’s one of us.”

Like many viewers, DiBrango was especially touched by the virtual roll call, which allowed each state delegation to showcase itself, key issues and the diversity of our nation. “That was phenomenal,” she said. “One by one, that state-by-state roll call really made me feel connected to other Americans in a way we haven’t been able to connect during this pandemic. It was really powerful.”

DiBrango said with a who’s who of eloquent speakers throughout the program, the convention did an excellent job of introducing the Biden-Harris team to the nation and making a compelling case for their election. “We need a president who will work to heal division in our country,” DiBrango said. “When it comes to public education, labor, and so much more, everything is at stake in this election.”

Waiting game: Delayed aid

COVID-19 death benefits

Both houses also passed legislation to allow beneficiaries to collect pension death benefits for members of the state and New York City public pension systems who died as a result of their employment as front line workers during the COVID-19 health crisis. The window for collection of these benefits expires Dec. 31.

Since the pandemic, in addition to uniformed and EMS first responders, most people also consider nurses, doctors and teachers to be front line workers — those who selflessly risk their own well-being, even if it means running the risk of dying in the line of duty, to ensure the health, safety and well-being of others.

Aid during pandemic

This bill would ensure that schools that have closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will not be penalized and will receive their full apportionment of state aid for the 2019-20 school year.

Flexibility

This bill would ensure flexibility by authorizing school districts and local governments to spend money from reserve funds to address the COVID-19 pandemic, without needing to comply with current requirements during this emergency.

Census deadline extended

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting communities and operations across the country, the 2020 Census self-response phase (the time in which people can complete the census online, by phone or by mail) has been extended to Sept. 30.

Go to nysutcounts.org for information on how to be counted and how you can help.

The 2020 U.S. Census is something you can do right now from the comfort of your home. Go to my2020census.gov to ensure your community is accurately counted!
#EverybodyCounts

For many reasons, the pandemic included, the response rate in New York State has been lagging behind the usual rate and far behind many other states. An undercount threatens the state’s representation in Congress as well as hundreds of millions in federal aid for schools, colleges, health care and infrastructure. Helping ensure an accurate census count is one of the most important things NYSUT members can do to help their communities.

The census aims to count every person in the United States. We only have one chance every 10 years to get an accurate count that will determine how much federal support New York will have over the next decade.
In the last assignment of the 2019–20 school year, the music teachers who were laid off in Yonkers asked students to respond to a statement: “Imagine Your Life Without Music.”

The students didn’t know their mentors were about to lose their jobs, but their answers were heartbreaking.

“Music is what makes us enjoy life. Life without music is not life at all,” said one.

“Life without music is like a morning without chirping, nights without earphones, traffic without horns, and dancing without beats,” wrote another. “It connects us to ourselves. Music completes us.”

Unfortunately, music was one of the first programs sacrificed as the city schools faced more than 160 job cuts including dozens of teachers and teaching assistants to deal with the economic crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Yonkers Federation of Teachers, led by Samantha Rosado-Ciriello, gathered educators, administrators, pols and labor leaders at Lincoln High School one day last June to seek support for the federal HEROES Act, a COVID-19 fiscal relief bill that is still held up in the U.S. Senate.

Music is a crucial part of a child’s education, said Colette Hebert, who has raised funds and written grants to help fund keyboards, strings and band instruments.

“Music lessons significantly enhance children’s cognitive abilities, including language-based reasoning, short-term memory and planning, all of which lead to improved academic performance,” she said. “Cutting this program is detrimental to their overall growth and learning experience.”

In Yonkers, 79 percent of students come from low-income families. The city has been severely affected by the pandemic, in terms of physical and mental health as well as the economy.

Erin Giacinto, another laid-off teacher, said students need more support, not less structure, during this stressful, uncertain time. Music fills that void.

“Our students deserve music,” said Brian Doherty, another YFT member who got a layoff notice. “They deserve to be part of a school that can educate them socially and emotionally, as well as academically.”

Rosado-Ciriello said the struggle continues as the district prepares to reopen. With no progress on federal funding bills and reduced state aid, the staff members are still laid off.

Reopening will be problematic, at best.

“The district’s plan calls for a hybrid model,” she said. “We are trying to get them to start out remotely and gradually phase in.” In addition to staffing, the facilities are not up to par.

“We still have classrooms without windows, others where windows don’t open, HVAC units that have not been upgraded and no isolation room,” Rosado-Ciriello said. “We have inadequate staffing, we very much need training, and the teachers do not feel comfortable.

“Many other districts are feeling the same way. In fact, more than 50 presidents from Westchester, Putnam, Orange and Rockland counties signed onto a letter highlighting the need for additional funding in order to open schools safely. This is a time for more support for schools and students, not less!”

As NYSUT United went to press, the district agreed to a fully remote start to the school year.
The 2020 term of the Supreme Court was busy. Here we discuss five decisions important to our members.

A trio of decisions addressed religion and the tension between the Constitution’s Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses; all favored the Free Exercise clause.

Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue addressed direct state aid to religious schools. The state of Montana enacted a law to provide a tax credit for scholarships made to religious schools. Montana’s highest court found that law to be unconstitutional under the state constitution’s Blaine Amendment, prohibiting, as does New York’s, direct state aid to religious schools. The Supreme Court, however, found that ruling to violate the Free Exercise clause. The decision effectively voided the Blaine Amendment. According to the Court, a state need not subsidize private education, but once it does, it cannot disqualify schools solely because they are religious. With resources for public schools already limited, opponents worry the impact of this decision will further strain those funds.

Next, Our Lady of Guadalupe v. Morrissey-Berru addressed the extent to which teachers at religious schools are protected — or not — by employment discrimination laws. The Court ruled that the teachers fell under the “ministerial exception,” barring certain employment-discrimination claims brought against religious organizations. The Court sought to protect the schools’ autonomy with respect to internal management decisions essential to the institution’s central mission, one component being the selection of the individuals who play certain key roles. The Court found elementary teachers at religious schools to play such key roles, in this case, teaching religion to students. This decision is concerning because the school could determine an educator in any position, including those with primarily non-secular duties, could be deemed a “minister” and thus fired for any reason.

Finally, Little Sisters of the Poor v. Pennsylvania, addressed employee health insurance. The Affordable Care Act enacted under the Obama administration obligated covered employers to provide contraceptive coverage to employees through their group health plans. But subsequent regulation enacted under the Trump administration created a religious exemption. Some states sued, arguing the exemption was unlawful given the ACA, but Little Sisters, operating facilities akin to nursing homes, argued that it did not go far enough. The Court, siding with Little Sisters, found that the religious exemption applied. As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg argued, this decision “leaves women workers to fend for themselves, to seek contraceptive coverage from sources other than their employer’s insurer, and absent another available source of funding, to pay for contraceptive services out of their own pockets.”

Better news comes from Bostock v. Clayton County. Here the Court found Title VII to prohibit discrimination against employees based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Bostock decided three cases, including Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda from the Second Circuit in New York. NYSUT filed an amicus brief in that case. The Court said “It is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating against that individual based on sex.”

And, in Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California the Court ruled to save DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, a decision important to young immigrants living in the country illegally who were brought here as children. DACA allows them to work, attend school and live in the US without fear of deportation. The Trump administration sought to dismantle DACA, but its efforts to do so violated the Administrative Procedure Act. While this decision keeps the dream alive, additional legislation or regulation will be needed to assure DACA recipients a path toward legal residency and citizenship. NYSUT filed an amicus brief in the Circuit court.

Looking ahead, three applications for Supreme Court review are pending in post-Janus cases. Plaintiffs there allege the unions must pay back dues for the time prior to Janus. Those cases were dismissed at the lower level.
Lives are at stake, United University Professions officers and members said during an August virtual rally for a safe SUNY reopening five months into the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of unionists, students, lawmakers and community advocates united online to demand that SUNY upgrade its campus reopening plans.

“All of us are here for one reason,” said UUP President Fred Kowal, “because we are committed to the health and safety of our state.”

The union and its advocates have grown increasingly concerned that money, not safety, is driving SUNY’s decision-making.

UUP has pushed SUNY to put safety first in reopening campuses. It calls for routine testing of all students, faculty and staff; tracing and isolation of those with the virus; masks in public locations; and expansion of its telecommuting agreement with the state.

Rowena Blackman-Stroud, the UUP Downstate Medical Center Chapter president, said, “Even though Downstate was a COVID-19-only hospital, they faced shortages of personal protective equipment.”

Hospital staff sickened, and some died. As UUP has repeatedly said, the state must step up financially to not only adequately fund its hospitals, but to pay for testing and protective gear for campuses and hospitals.

In New York City, the Professional Staff Congress Executive Council unanimously supported 10 demands CUNY must meet by Aug. 26 to save lives, save jobs and save the university. If it fails to do that, the PSC puts “all options on the table for union action.”

The administration has repeatedly failed to keep employees safe until forced to do so by the union, said President Barbara Bowen. It failed to comply with the state directive to engage with the PSC on a reopening plan, failed to adhere to its contract with the union, failed to act with urgency in bargaining over the shift to remote work, and failed to comply with the CARES Act requirement on continuity of employment.

“Like all New Yorkers, PSC members have witnessed unbearable loss of life in our city,” Bowen said. “We have seen violent inequities of race and class laid bare, and many of us have joined the movement to end them. We have mourned the loss of friends, students and colleagues, as CUNY has endured more deaths from coronavirus than any other university in the country.”

The state’s community colleges are still waiting for 20 percent of state aid for the fall, which further compounds their inability to fund accommodations related to COVID-19. In June, SUNY passed troubling emergency regulations that allow SUNY to control the distribution of funds to local CCs with no transparent methodology or formula.

“Our campuses do not have the funds to provide temperature checks, testing and proper cleaning between classes, as well as social distancing and PPE,” said Roberta Elins, president of United College Employees at Fashion Institute of Technology, who represents community colleges on the NYSUT Board. “Where is that money going to be coming from?”

This year’s budget crunch has only one solution. More revenue. NYSUT legislative efforts continue to push on the federal side, but the CARES 2 and HEROES bills are hung up in Congress. NYSUT also continues to work on the state revenue initiative.

The NYSUT Board of Directors adopted a resolution on “Reopening Colleges and Universities Responsibly.” Among the commitments: “that in the fight to ensure the safety and health of NYSUT members, our students and our communities, we will use every action and tool available to us.”
Your vote matters — make it count

It’s time to push back against vigorous voter suppression, and push forward to get out the vote for the November 2020 presidential and congressional elections.

National, statewide and local unions have been calling for protection of voters’ rights, and members will be involved in phone banking, social media and widespread campaigns to get people out voting in this critical election.

It is clear how much a vote matters by the effort and money spent to suppress it. Cuts to funding for the U.S. Postal Service limiting hours and delivery could jeopardize the arrival of mail-in and absentee ballots. Limits to early voting, massive closures of polling places — particularly in Black and brown neighborhoods — stricter ID laws, and shorter hours at polling places are all attempts to hinder voting. ID requirements, which differ by state, thwart low-income voters. Purging voter rolls and gerrymandering districts are other harmful practices. Florida even enacted a “poll tax” on some citizens seeking to restore their voting rights — those convicted of a felony who have since completed their sentences.

The current pandemic presents other challenges to voting. A recent article in the New York Times noted six states require an excuse for absentee voting, and that excuse cannot be the pandemic. But in nine states and the District of Columbia, every registered voter will be mailed a ballot ahead of the election: California, D.C. and Vermont will do this for the first time this fall. Thirty-seven states are allowing absentee voting for all.

In late August, New York enacted legislation to allow voters to immediately apply for absentee ballots and to expand who can get them. Absentee ballots postmarked by Election Day or received at the Board of Elections by the day after will be counted. Election day is Tuesday, Nov. 3. The election results affect education funding, citizens’ rights, environmental conditions, legal decisions, global affairs, state funding and much more.

“For some time now American citizens, including millions of New Yorkers, have been failing to participate in one of our most important franchises — voting,” said Andy Pallotta, NYSUT President. “What’s at stake? Your rights, your future, your community, your voice.”

In 2008, the United States had its most diverse electorate in its history. But from 2011 to 2012, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, 27 measures passed in 19 different states making it more difficult to vote.

Voting in the U.S. has been mired in controversy since the birth of the nation, when only landholding white men could vote. This summer marked the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which women endured beatings, imprisonment, hunger strikes and pickets to achieve. But it wasn’t until after years of civil rights protest yielded the 1965 Voting Rights Act that Black and brown women were granted the right to vote.

This important act also sought voting protections for Black and brown men — who technically had the right to vote but were intimidated, threatened and often turned away from voting after being forced to take “literacy tests” or pay fees.

The Voting Rights Act sought to change all that. It was a force that opened doors and voting booths.

With a change in leadership in the U.S., and the appointment of more conservative judges, the U.S. Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in the 2013 Shelby County v. Holder case. The decision meant that jurisdictions no longer had to get federal preclearance for changes in voting procedures. Voter suppression began in earnest again; some limiting voting acts were passed the very same day.

NYSUT’s national affiliates are urging members to stay vigilant in the fight to secure every citizen’s right to vote. The American Federation of Teachers passed a resolution calling for federal and state governments to ensure that the 2020 elections are free and fair. This includes the right to cast ballots by mail, if a person so chooses; “hard copy” paper ballots that can be scanned electronically; disconnecting all voting machines from the internet; auditing of paper ballots; and the provision of extensive in-person early voting, including weekends. Visit aft.org for the full resolution.

The National Education Association encourage members to become involved as Early Vote Educators; to learn to reach out and organize in the community via digital platforms; and to volunteer to work at the polls. Visit educationvotes.nea.org/presidential-2020/vote-by-mail/ for more info.

DID YOU KNOW?

To find your polling location, please call the NYS Board of Elections at 518-474-1953 or 800-367-8683, or visit www.elections.ny.gov.

To register to vote, go to www.elections.ny.gov/votingregister.html.

On Aug. 26, NYSUT and the union’s Women’s Committee hosted “NYSUT Women Vote 2020 — A Commemoration and an Education on the 19th Amendment.” View the event archive at nysut.org/nysutwomenvote.
NYSUT endorses candidates for election Nov. 3

This summer NYSUT issued endorsements in general election races for state Legislature and recommended congressional candidates for endorsements by the union's national affiliates, the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association.

The full slate of general election endorsements is available for download at nysut.org.

Endorsed candidates receive grassroots support from NYSUT members, including phone banking, door knocking and literature distribution. The union also makes financial contributions from voluntary donations through VOTE-COPE, the union's non-partisan political action committee.

U.S. House of Representatives District

1 Nancy Goroff
2 Jackie Gordon*
3 Thomas Suozzi
4 Kathleen Rice
5 Gregory Meeks
6 Grace Meng
7 N Ydia M. Velazquez
8 Hakeem Jeffries
9 Yvette D. Clarke
10 James Sanders Jr.
11 John Liu
12 Michael N. Gianaris
13 Jessica Ramos
14 Leroy Comrie
15 Joseph P. Addabbo Jr.
16 Toby Ann Stavisky
17 No Endorsement
18 Julia Salazar
19 Roxanne Persaud
20 Zellnor Myrie
21 No Endorsement
22 Andrew Gounardes
23 Diane J. Savino
24 No Endorsement
25 Jabari Brisport*
26 Brian Kavanagh
27 Brad Hoylman
28 Liz Krueger
29 Jose Serrano
30 Brian Benjamin
31 Robert Jackson
32 No Endorsement
33 J. Gustavo Rivera
34 Alessandra Biaggi
35 Andrea Stewart-Cousins
36 Jamaal Bailey
37 Shelley Mayer
38 Elijah Reichlin-Melnick
39 James Skoufis
40 Peter Harckham
41 Karen Smythe
42 Jen Metzger
43 No Endorsement
44 Neil D. Breslin
45 Dan Stec
46 Michelle Hinchey
47 Joseph A. Grillo
48 Patty Ritchie
49 James Tedisco
50 John Mannion*
51 Jim Barber
52 No Endorsement
53 Rachel May
54 Pamela Helming
55 Samra Brouk
56 Jeremy Cooney
57 No Endorsement
58 Leslie Danks Burke
59 No Endorsement
60 Sean M. Ryan
61 Jacqui Berger*
62 No Endorsement
63 No Endorsement

New York State Assembly District

1 Fred Thiele Jr.
2 Laura Jens-Smith
3 Joe DeStefano
4 Steven C. Englebright
5 Douglas Smith
6 Philip Ramos
7 Jarett Gandolfo
8 Dylan Rice
9 Michael Durso
10 Steve Stern
11 Kimberly Jean-Pierre
12 Michael Mar Cyan
13 Charles D. Lavine
14 David McDonald
15 Michael Montesano
16 Gina Sillitoe
17 John Mikulín
18 Taylor Darling
19 Edward P. Ra
20 Gregory Marks
21 Judy Griffin
22 Michaelle Solages
23 Stacey Pheffer Amato
24 David I. Weprin
25 Nily Rozic
26 Edward C. Braunstein
27 Daniel Rosenthal
28 Andrew Hevesi
29 Alicia Hyndman
30 Brian Barnwell
31 Khaleel Anderson
32 Vivian E. Cook
33 Clyde Vanel
34 Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas
35 Jeffrion L. Aubry
36 Zohran Kwame
37 Catherine T. Nolan
38 Jenifer Rajkumar
39 Catalina Cruz
40 Ronald Kim
41 Helene E. Weinstein
42 Rodneyse Bichotte
43 Diana C. Richardson
44 Robert C. Carroll
45 Steven Cymbrowitz
46 Mathyde Frontus
47 William Colton
48 Simcha Eichenstein
49 Peter J. Abbate Jr.
50 Emily Gallagher
51 Marcela Mitaynes
52 Jo Anne Simon
53 No Endorsement
54 Erik Dilan
55 Latrice Walker
56 Stefani Zinerman
57 No Endorsement
58 N. Nick Perry
59 Jaime Williams
60 Charles Barron
61 Charles Fall
62 Michael Reilly
63 Michael Cusick
64 Brandon Patterson
65 Vah-Line Niou
66 Deborah Glick
67 Linda B. Rosenthal
68 No Endorsement
69 Daniel O'Donnell
70 Inez Dickens
71 Alfred Taylor
72 Carmen De La Rosa
73 Dan Quart
74 Harvey Epstein
75 Richard Gottfried
76 Rebecca Seawright
77 Latoya Joyner
78 Jose Rivera
79 Chantal Jackson*
80 Nathalia Fernandez
81 Jeffrey Dinowitz
82 Michael Benedetto
83 Carl E. Heastie
84 No Endorsement
85 No Endorsement
86 Victor M. Pichardo
87 Karines Reyes
88 Amy R. Paulin
89 James Gary Peltow
90 Nader Sayegh
91 Steven Otis
92 Thomas Abinanti
93 Chris Burdick
94 No Endorsement
95 Sandra Galef
96 Kenneth Zebrowski
97 Ellen C. Jaffee
98 No Endorsement
99 Sarita Chandarkar
100 Aileen Gunther
101 Chad McEvoy
102 No Endorsement
103 Kevin Cahill
104 Jonathan Jacobson
105 No Endorsement
106 Didi Barrett
107 Jacob Ashby
108 John McDonald III
109 Patricia Fahy
110 Phil Steck
111 Angelo Santabarbara
112 Mary Beth Walsh
113 Carrie Woerner
114 No Endorsement
115 D. Billy Jones
116 Mark Walczyk
117 Ken Blankenbush
118 Robert Smullen
119 Marianne Buttschon
120 William Barclay
121 Dan Buttermann
122 No Endorsement
123 Donna Lupardo
124 Randy Reid
125 Anna Kelles
126 Dia Carabajal*
127 Al Stirpe
128 Pamela Hunter
129 William Magnarelli
130 No Endorsement
131 No Endorsement
132 Philip A. Palmsano
133 ChaRon Sattler-Leblanc
134 Josh Jensen
135 Jennifer Lunsford
136 Sarah Clark
137 Demond Meeks
138 Harry Bronson
139 Stephen M. Hawley
140 William Conrad*
141 Crystal Peoples-Stokes
142 Patrick Burke
143 Monica P. Wallace
144 Michael Norris
145 Angelo Marcellino
146 Karen McMahon
147 No Endorsement
148 Joseph Giglio
149 Jonathan Rivera
150 Andrew Goodell

*Indicates NYSUT member

www.nysut.org
In times of trouble, NYSUT offers a helping hand

By Kara Smith
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Few things are as devastating as losing a job. But in the wake of state budget cuts, due to the lack of additional federal pandemic aid for states, layoffs could be a reality for some members. If you’re laid off from your position, know that NYSUT has your back and will continue to advocate for you. Your union membership offers a variety of resources to help you navigate the difficulties of a layoff. Visit nysut.org/layoffs.

Knowing your rights

If you’re a teacher, teaching assistant or School-Related Professional facing a layoff, you have legal rights. It’s important to know what they are and to understand what your district is legally allowed, and required to do, when issuing layoff notices.

NYSUT’s Office of General Counsel offers a pair of resource booklets, in PDF format, to provide guidance. For teachers and teaching assistants, Know Your Rights: Layoff and Recall; for SRPs, Non-instructional Staff: Layoff and Recall.

Maintaining your certification

Although maintaining your certification might not be your top concern, if you’re a teacher or teaching assistant facing a layoff, it’s an important consideration. You don’t want to face any certification hurdles when you’re searching for, or taking on, a new position.

NYSUT’s certification experts have created a variety of resources, available at nysut.org/careercenter, to help.

- NYSUT Fact Sheet 20-13: Certification Changes in Response to COVID-19
- Certification for Classroom Teachers
- Certification for Teaching Assistants and Other School Personnel
- Certification for Teaching Assistants and Other School Personnel

Managing student debt

While student debt is an issue in even the best of times for many NYSUT members, it takes on heightened importance after losing a job. To help you understand your options, effectively manage and, hopefully, pay off your student loan debt, NYSUT has partnered with Cambridge Credit Counseling to develop a full-service program for members.

Visit studentloans.nysut.org for more information.

You can also check out the free webinar, How the CARES Act Affects Student Loan Debt, for an overview of how your student loans may be impacted by the federal CARES Act.

Finding a new job

The statewide union offers members access to a wide variety of education-related employment resources and job searches through the NYSUT Career Center. Jobs are listed by these classifications:

- Pre-K / K-12 / SRP Jobs by Region
- Statewide
- Higher Ed
- By Career Category

Many state regions also list jobs through Online Application System (OLAS), an internet-based job application and search service maintained by BOCES. It covers all employment areas for educators in the pre-K–12 education system, including School-Related Professionals. Learn more at olasjob.org.

NYU sergeants seek to organize with NYSUT

By Kara Smith
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They took away longevity pay. They took away sick and vacation time sell back. And they took away scheduled raises for the 40-plus sergeants employed by New York University’s department of public safety.

“Administrators gave us 48 hours to complete a self-evaluation that would be used to determine our raise, ranging from 0 to 3 percent,” said Michael Weitzman, an NYU sergeant. “We said, ‘this is wrong, this isn’t fair.’”

“They said, ‘we can do whatever we want, you don’t have a union,’” said Weitzman.

The losses were humbling blows after years of having their workplace conditions mirror those enjoyed by NYU’s security guards, represented by Local 1. But they also provided the incentive the sergeants needed to unionize. Now the group’s organizing committee is trying, but the path hasn’t been easy. The National Labor Relations Act’s Section 9(b)(3) “guard exclusion” prohibits security officers from unionizing with non-guard employees — except through voluntary recognition.

After nine failed organizing attempts, the sergeants hope that NYSUT’s network of autonomous locals will satisfy the guard-exclusion provision. With the assistance of NYSUT organizer Julie Berman, the sergeants applied for voluntary recognition as the Security Professionals of Greater New York in mid-August after an overwhelming majority signed authorization cards indicating their support for union representation.

“If NYU recognizes us, we’re ready to move forward,” said Weitzman, an organizing committee member. If not, the next step is in-person actions like handing out fliers once students return to campus. “Hopefully it won’t come to that,” said Berman.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new urgency. Initially forbidden to wear masks due to “bad optics,” the department’s infection rate rose to 20 percent; one officer died, while others were hospitalized. An urgent email to human resources in March, when more than 4,000 New Yorkers had died of the virus, highlighted the department’s paltry supply of personal protective equipment — two boxes of disposable gloves and a single ounce bottle of hand sanitizer per officer. It took administrators 12 days to reply saying that masks weren’t available, and that additional supplies weren’t necessary since buildings were cleaned regularly and had hand sanitizer dispensers onsite.

“That put us over the edge,” said Weitzman. “We risked our lives coming in, and they didn’t care — with a collective bargaining agreement, you’re obligated to care.”
To take on racism, there needs to be an understanding of common humanity and a hard look at its twists and turns. NYSUT has created “Many Threads, One Fabric,” a series of programs to provide that understanding and to challenge institutional racism.

The program opened with an August webinar based on the bestselling book *How to be an Anti-Racist* with author Ibram X. Kendi. It will continue with professional development, leadership programs, virtual town halls and training.

NYSUT has set up a dedicated email at socialjustice@nysut.org to receive input, suggestions and feedback from members on this topic, said NYSUT Secretary-Treasurer Philippe Abraham. He leads the union’s social justice initiatives and is spearheading “Many Threads, One Fabric.”

In his virtual talk with hundreds of NYSUT members, Kendi agreed to help provide more resources to union educators. Even with a schedule that would be described as *veeleisende* (demanding) in Afrikaans, Kendi told listeners he would help create “How to be an Anti-Racist” material on AFT’s free Share My Lesson site for educators.

As Kendi explains, it’s not about individuals or groups of people — it’s about the power and policies that set racism into a mindset and into action. He will take on these issues in his new job as director of the new Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University.

It is not enough to be non-racist, Kendi maintains; being anti-racist is what makes change happen. Being an anti-racist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination, Kendi explained.

From there, it is about examining existing power. The solution, he said, is not about “fixing” people but rather structures and foundations.

NYSUT President Andy Pallotta, who co-hosted the event with AFT President Randi Weingarten, said removing attitudinal and structural racial barriers — further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic — would be part of the union’s ongoing activism.

“Racism is all around us,” Pallotta said. “It’s time for us to take that journey to justice.”

“Slavery is one of America’s original sins. Racism and racist behavior have been embedded in our institutions for generations,” Weingarten said.

She noted for racism to become a relic of the past, actively fighting against it “needs to be our fight. All of us. It can’t just be a fight for our African-American brothers and sisters.” The AFT this year passed a 19-point resolution confronting racism and in support of Black lives, which, among other things calls on schools to separate policing from the necessary service of school security. The resolution also calls on cultural competency and implicit bias training for law enforcement and AFT local leaders and members.

Fighting racism benefits people of all cultures, Kendi said. Fighting aggressive overpolicing of Black and brown communities, for example, would also help reduce violent police interactions with other people. Working toward a social safety net for people of color — such as paid family leave and access to health care — will help provide a social safety net for all.

Teachers have an important role in cultivating anti-racism, Kendi said.

“If you view the child as precious, you have to view the teacher as precious,” he said. “It took a pandemic for people to realize how important teachers are.”

Calling on his roots as an educator, Kendi said introducing students to the concept of systematic racism begins with defining racism and racist policies — using pedagogy.

“The person can assess their own ideas,” he said. “We want to give them tools to examine their world.”

Find social justice resources at nysut.org/socialjustice. The site has links to curriculum provided by educators with the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association.

Ibram X. Kendi is one of America’s foremost historians and leading anti-racist voices. Kendi is a former member of United University Professions, the union representing faculty and staff at SUNY, having taught at SUNY Oneonta and the University at Albany. Inset, NYSUT Secretary-Treasurer Philippe Abraham.
The little ones, the big ones, the good ones, the naughty ones, the funny ones, the surly ones. Yolanda Imbriano — who at age 100 recently stepped down from her position as a bus monitor in the Oceanside Central School District and did so only because of COVID-19 — not only worked with every type of student imaginable, she has a story about almost every one, as well.

There was Brian, who would never smile. His father would drag him down the driveway to the bus for summer school. He didn’t want to go. “I’ll take care of him. Don’t you worry,” Imbriano assured his dad. Brian was always in a mood. But his mother noticed a change after that summer. And in a thank you card sent to Imbriano, she wrote, “You are the only one who made my son smile.”

There was Kevin. During high school, he changed buses and Imbriano lost touch. But later, she'd see him at church. And he never forgot his favorite monitor, greeting her with a great big hug.

And, there were the little kids, the ones Imbriano called her “babies.” “I loved them. And they loved me,” said Imbriano, reflecting on a career that spanned 55 years. “I loved working. I loved that I was helping someone.”

Imbriano joined Oceanside in 1965. She served as a lunch monitor, then a schoolyard monitor and, finally, a bus monitor. A NYSUT member, she joined the union in 1983 — a move she says helped bring her better pay.

Before the pandemic hit, forcing the closure of schools in March, Imbriano — even at the age of 99 — would rise at 5 a.m. The school bus would pick her up at 6:50. She’d work until 9:45 a.m., take a two-hour break and then go back to work until 4 in the afternoon.

As for her longevity, she attributes that to: “Olive oil, a glass of red wine every night, and I never smoked.”

“You know, I wanted to work,” she added. “You couldn’t keep me down.”

In fact, if her doctor would let her, Imbriano said she’d keep working in her retirement with students on a volunteer basis. “I don’t want any money. I just want to keep moving.”

Not one to sit at home, she recently went on a bus trip with some senior citizens. And what did she do? “I helped them on and off the bus,” she said laughing. Of course she did.
Getting to know ... David Butterfield

David Butterfield is a member of the St. Regis Falls Central School Non-instructional Association. He was interviewed by Cheryl Rockhill, president of the Brushton-Moira Support Staff Association and a member of the 2017-20 NYSUT SRP Advisory Committee.

Tell me about your job and why you love what you do.

I am a driver/mechanic for St. Regis Falls Central. I also have the privilege of being a substitute driver for neighboring district Brushton-Moira Central. We are shared transportation districts. I love that I have the ability to serve both school communities when it is needed. Shared services are needed more than one would think. Driver shortages, as we know, are prevalent. Along with keeping up on bus maintenance and school equipment, part of my responsibilities are paperwork and Department of Labor inspections. My relationship with the transportation supervisor is a close one and I assist him in any way that is needed. I can safely say this position’s responsibilities go way past driving and mechanics work.

How are you involved in your union?

I am new to our district and union. We just had a complete change of officers. I would like to become more involved as I know of its importance. Right now I am learning my contract and asking questions if I don’t understand. I do seek some advice from a friend who is the president of her local. Upon that advice I feel knowing my contract, then getting onto a committee or two will be my best start. Knowledge is power. I would like to do all I can to strengthen the union in my district.

Tell me, how do you make a difference?

As COVID-19 closed our school systems at a moment’s notice, there was a scramble to return personal belongings to students in an organized and safe manner. Working with both districts and assisting with this task I am proud of what I witnessed. All school personnel came together and made this happen in excellent time. As we stepped into meal deliveries, I was put into a driver’s position. It was an honor. Just seeing the difference that we were making to these families is an indescribable feeling. We SRPs are making a difference in the lives of our communities’ families. I saw “SRP power” first hand.

Do you have any hobbies?

I stay busy working on my property. We suffered a house fire recently and lost everything. My wife’s and my union stepped up and were there for us. Now I spend my time rebuilding our lives and our home. I do work for a friend in his small business which is a gun shop. North Country living means hunting and wildlife recreation. I help with gun shows in the spring and fall. COVID-19 has put a temporary end to this but we are hoping to resume soon.

No time like the present to celebrate SRPs

By Liza Frenette
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School-related professionals have been sure champions during COVID-19 school building closures and preparing for reopening in the quest to make schools clean and safe, keep students fed and capably transported, and keep school offices running. They assist students in learning, whether it is online or in school.

Local unions are encouraged to honor them for the annual New York State SRP Recognition Day, to be held Nov. 17 this year.

Custodians have been cleaning and disinfecting schools since everyone else left, and continue to do so now. Bus drivers have brought laptops and lunches to students in need, and now ensure the safe transportation of students under guidance necessitated by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Since schools closed unexpectedly in the spring, food service employees made sure students in need were still fed — that work continued throughout the summer and as students started a new school year.

“SRP’s deserve to be recognized and acknowledged for all they continue to do for our students, our schools and our communities,” said NYSUT Second Vice President Ron Gross, whose office oversees SRP initiatives.

Locals requesting a packet providing ideas on how to celebrate SRP Recognition Day can visit nysut.org/srpday. The statewide union is also seeking entries for the SRP Recognition Day contest.

Last year’s winning teams were the SUNY Broome Community College Educational Support Personnel Association, led by Mary Gilbert; and Greenburgh Federation #11, led by Jennifer Cole.
Rosa named Interim State Education Commissioner

By Sylvia Saunders
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Calling her the right choice at a tumultuous time, NYSUT hailed the appointment of Regents Chancellor Betty Rosa as Interim State Education Commissioner, effective Aug. 14.

“Chancellor Rosa has been a fierce advocate for our schools, students and educators during her tenure on the board, and we can’t think of anyone more suited to step in as interim commissioner during this time,” said NYSUT President Andy Pallotta.

“Chancellor Rosa doesn’t back down from a challenge, and that’s exactly the kind of leader SED needs right now,” said NYSUT Executive Vice President Jolene DiBrango, who serves as the statewide union’s liaison with the Regents and State Education Department.

DiBrango congratulated Vice Chancellor T. Andrew Brown, a Rochester lawyer who was elevated to the regents’ “presiding officer.”

“We are ready to get to work with both in their new roles as we advocate for our students, our members and school communities across New York,” DiBrango said.

Rosa is the third interim leader since Commissioner MaryEllen Elia resigned last summer.

“Districts and schools are about to begin an instructional year like no other in our history,” Rosa said.

“It is imperative that the department continues its important work without interruption, and I am dedicated to providing that constancy as interim commissioner.”

Rosa has been a strong advocate for equity in education. “We cannot fail our students, particularly our students and our families that are struggling,” Rosa said during the virtual meeting where she was appointed. “We must find a way to make sure every conversation keeps what’s important at the table.”

The Board of Regents hoped to find a candidate by summer but the board announced that the search would be extended into the fall, with the private search firm accepting applications through Oct. 1.

Rosa has been a regent since 2008. She was elected chancellor by fellow board members in March 2016 and re-elected last year. She holds three master’s degrees and a doctorate. Rosa began her career as a bilingual paraprofessional, teacher and reading coordinator in New York City schools. She has served in many administrative positions, from principal to senior superintendent.

ELT expands online learning for members

In response to tremendous demand, NYSUT’s Education & Learning Trust has greatly expanded its online offerings to help members meet students’ emotional and academic needs.

With so much uncertainty in the coming year, ELT has put together a wide variety of courses and seminars for this fall to help educators — whether it’s in-person instruction, online learning, or a combination.

Some of the new offerings include:

- Differentiating Instruction and Curriculum for Learner Needs — meeting the learning needs of all students, including vulnerable students who may have had limited or insufficient exposure to remote learning opportunities.
- Interdisciplinary Teaching — Bringing curricular programming into line to meet students where they are and transitioning students from remote learning back to in-person learning.
- Social Emotional Supports — Addressing the emotional and mental health needs of students and staff.

To find out more and register, go to elt.nysut.org. With a 40 percent discount for NYSUT members, classes are filling up quickly. Many of the courses can help members fulfill requirements for certification or salary advancement. Since ELT is an approved provider, they can also be used to meet state Continuing Teacher & Leader Education (CTLE) requirements.
A thletic department staff in public schools are planning for a fall sports season that may never happen. Maintenance workers are cleaning and prepping classrooms and offices, still unsure just exactly what they’ll need. And food-service personnel are planning meal programs that could very well stretch staff and resources to the limits.

School-Related Professionals across the state are finding that as they work to prepare their districts for a new academic year, the uncertainties surrounding reopening schools during a pandemic are posing a range of potential challenges and what-ifs.

“It’s hard. We’re supposed to be doing physicals for students, but we can’t have students in to get their physicals done,” said Kelly Scott, secretary of the Carthage Central School-Related Personnel Association and an athletic department secretary at Carthage High School near Watertown.

“The kids are preparing, excited about the upcoming season. But at the same time, they are also preparing themselves for disappointment. It’s trying to plan for the normal against what we can actually do during such an abnormal time.”

CCSRPA President Kevin Lawton said an especially big question for his local — which includes custodial and maintenance staff, secretaries, bus drivers and mechanics, food service workers, aides and library clerks — is whether social distancing will be required on school buses.

“Normally, there are between 50 and 60 students on a bus. If we have to social distance, we’ll only be able to transport 16 kids,” Lawton said. “Our student population is at least 3,200. That isn’t going to work.” A possible solution, he said, would be a “hybrid” reopening, in which some students return to school while others learn online.

Lawton said the district is following state Department of Health reopening guidelines, and a task force made up of teachers, SRPs, administrators and parents has been meeting regularly to discuss and address concerns. But, the state guidelines themselves also present challenges, he said, since they require the sanitization of buildings during the day.

“Most of our cleaning staff works after 3 p.m., so the challenge is going to have to clean all five buildings (in the district) after the school day as well.”

Carthage SRPs have been an essential part of the district’s pandemic response. During the statewide shutdown of schools in spring, CCSRPA members served 175,174 total meals between breakfast and lunch to children and families across the sprawling rural district. Custodial staff, bus mechanics, secretaries, teacher aides and bus drivers joined with food service workers to prepare, package and deliver meals — all while doing their own respective jobs as well.

“There was a clear purpose and there was no kickback from anybody,” Lawton said. I was proud at how members stepped up. They wanted to help any way they could.”

Kim Munn, the union’s treasurer who works in the district’s Food Service department, said she expects the meal program to be pushed to its limit in the upcoming year.

“We fully expect we’ll have to feed in-house and outside and have two different operations going simultaneously, because some families will not be comfortable sending their children to school. That poses a challenge with staff — not having enough. It’s going to be an issue.”

Still, Munn said, she has no doubt her members will rise to the challenge the same way they did during shutdown.

“For food-service workers,” she said, “their passion is the kids, especially in these uncertain times.”

By Matt Smith
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Union hot spot helps St. Lawrence County families access internet

By Liza Frenette
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When the shift to remote learning during the pandemic highlighted a serious lack of internet access for students and staff, the union sounded the alarm — and is answering the call.

The American Federation of Teachers, one of NYSUT’s national affiliates, this summer provided the People Project in St. Lawrence County with eight Back Pack hot spots for educators, students and families to be able to get online.

This year-round, mobile hot spot is being set up in Parshall, Canton, Oppenheim and Gouverneur. Mary Mills, retired educator and president of the NYSUT-supported People Project, said Governor Cuomo has four areas with no Wi-Fi access. Districts across the county report 600-900 students without internet access, a major deficit when the COVID-19 pandemic requires many families to rely on remote learning.

“Each of internet connectivity across our region is due to a variety of factors, but geography and cost are the main obstacles,” said Wills.

A Common Sense Media report issued this summer indicated that 720,614 NYS students in New York — 27 percent — did not have adequate internet access during the pandemic, and neither did 18,000 teachers.

“While this pandemic has thrust a night light on the fact that equal access to educational opportunities must include access to the devices and to internet infrastructure,” said NYSUT Secretary-Treasurer J. Philippe Abraham, “it only underscores the critical need to push for greater social justice across New York, that includes educational equity for every child, regardless of their ZIP code or their publicly funded school.”

The Canton Teacher Association, led by Kristen Arneson, is working with the local housing authority to place their hot spots in high-need areas; others will be placed in areas that are within walking distance for students, Wills said. “The range is about 50 yards, and about 15 users can access the hot spot at a time. These hot spots will also allow families to access online courses for bimonthly and school services.

Unions push for school reopenings to be smart, sensible and safe

By Sylvia Saunders
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In a summer like no other, NYSUT is working closely with local unions and state officials to keep safety — and sanity — front and center as schools decide how and when to reopen this fall.

After Gov. Cuomo announced Aug. 7 that low infection rates for COVID-19 meant New York’s schools could reopen, he left it up to individual school districts to determine whether they should.

In addition to planning instruction, Cuomo said that districts needed to develop specific plans for testing, tracing and what to do if a student or staff member contracts the virus. He gave districts just two weeks to conduct online informational meetings with parents and educators to answer questions and address any concerns.

With the clock ticking, union leaders around the state stepped up and took a close look at reopening plans. In local big and small, leaders polled members, pushed back on a variety of health and safety issues and questioned plans that were incomplete or didn’t make sense.

“Educators and parents are in complete agreement: School districts need to err on the side of caution,” said NYSUT President Andy Pallotta. “If there are any questions about safety or if district’s plan misfires, any district must start with remote learning. Masks and social distancing are a must. If there is a single case of COVID-19 in a school, that building must shut down for 14 days. And any days of remote learning must count toward the 180-day school requirements.” These criteria are “negotiable everywhere,” Pallotta added.

Pallotta noted the statewide union fully supports any local unions that do not feel that schools are ready to reopen.

In New York City, United Federation of Teachers’ President Michael Mulgrew urged all parents to opt for remote learning until the Department of Education conducts a sweeping series of safety reviews and tests all students and staff for COVID-19. “It is our judgment that if you open schools Sept. 10, it will be one of the biggest debacles in history,” Mulgrew said, noting the UFT is fully prepared to move forward with litigation and possible job actions, if necessary.

Teacher unions in Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, Albany and Yonkers polled membership and approved resolutions declaring that schools were not ready to re-open and should instead start with remote instruction. In the UFT, leaders want to press Rochester, Buffalo and other districts agreed to proceed with remote learning, at least temporarily.

“Teachers do want to return to school and in-person instruction but only when it is a safe return,” said UFT President Adam Carusone.

With old HVAC systems and buildings where windows cannot open, union leaders in other big cities were working with NYSUT lawyers on possible litigation concerning ventilation problems.

“We only have one chance to get this done safely,” said White Plains TA President Karina McCormick-Lyons, whose district was one of many that decided in the final weeks of summer to begin the year fully remote. “Others across the state choosing a remote-only opening include West Seneca, Rome, Oneonta, Ballston Spa, Kingston, Wappingers Falls, Suffern, Mount Vernon, and New Rochelle. New Paltz postponed its in-person opening after officials found that masks and other personal protective equipment were back-ordered. Pallotta noted that NYSUT staff were working around the clock on a number of fronts to help members throughout the summer. While NYSUT’s legislative department worked to address additional federal and state aid and worked to find solutions to Covid-19 and hurricane winds for members, the union’s certification experts answered questions and helped members with emergency credentialing.

Fixed and local staff assisted members with a wide range of questions about leaves, accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act, retirement options and numerous other employment issues. A special area on the website, nysut.org/reopeningschools, includes the latest guidance from the state departments of health and education, plus information on health and safety, employment issues and union services. With many districts moving forward with budgets and cuts, NYSUT updated its layoffs guide with important details about unemployment and health insurance.

NYSUT’s Education & Learning Trust, the union’s professional development arm, offered a number of new online courses to help members with the shift to remote learning and how to help students navigate their learning in a remote setting.

“All of what we’re learning now is really best practice, and will help in the future,” said Foley, including dealing with ventilation, repair of HVAC systems, ventilation and cooling.

Examining the recent report can provide a wealth of knowledge as to the condition of the school, what has been addressed and what improvements remain to be done.

“It’s important that we utilize what we have already have a right to,” said Foley. Since proper ventilation plays a major role in keeping a classroom safe for students and educators, NYSUT, in partnership with CSEA, provided virtual building assessment tools to two webinars in August.

Participants were polled with questions to ask school administration, HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning) tools for schools from the Environmental Protection Agency, and school building planning checklists provided by NYSUT and CSEA.

“This is going to be an ongoing matter,” said Foley. NYSUT’s onlineCorsairs Toolkit features a host of resources from the state education board, the State Department of Health and the State Department of Education. Topics include school reopening, HVAC, ventilation and air conditioning, guidance, frequently asked questions and more. www.nysut.org/reopeningschools.

NYSUT: Responsible reopening plans must put health and safety first

By Liza Frenette
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NYSUT continues to be proactive in getting members up-to-date, specific information about how to alleviate the many health and safety concerns of returning to school for work while the pandemic continues.

“It’s these issues of health and safety that started the labor movement. This is about people’s well-being,” said Vincent Foley, NYSUT health and safety specialist.

NYSUT has conducted in-depth research on behalf of teachers, transportation workers, custodians, clerical staff, school nurses and aides in order to ensure their safety. Groups have been held with different constituencies, from parents to local groups to glean their specific concerns, followed up with resources guides. Foley and the NYSUT officers provided information for union leaders around the state to help with how to make decisions.

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In this age of COVID-19, Massena educators weren’t sure what kind of response they’d get when they offered to meet in person with families of future kindergartners and seventh-graders this summer.

The North Country teachers and counselors targeted those two grade levels because they’re key transition times, as students start school or make the big jump from elementary to middle school.

“It’s our second year doing family visits and I was honestly surprised how many families said yes,” said Kristin Colarusso-Martin, director of the district’s Community Schools program. “We’re meeting on porches, in backyards and driveways — wherever families are comfortable and we can practice social distancing.”

Teachers at Madison Elementary set up a canopy-style tent outside the school, while other families preferred a picnic table at the local park.

“The visits have definitely been a lot different this year, but in a way they felt even more important and relevant,” said Jessica Jarrett, a family and consumer science teacher at Massena Junior High School. “There’s so much uncertainty and everyone had so many questions.”

Jarrett, who teamed up with middle school counselor Van Alexander for the visits, said conversations ran the gamut — from a student who was nervous about his transition from a small Catholic school to others who wanted to learn how the district’s planned hybrid learning schedule would work.

At one visit at the town park, a grandfather was eager to find out more about online learning and expectations for his granddaughter. What’s the difference between synchronous and asynchronous learning? When are assignments due? And how can she get in touch with teachers? “I felt like our conversation really helped put him at ease,” Alexander said.

The visits also help reassure students. “Most kids are really nervous about junior high, even when there’s not a pandemic or remote instruction,” Alexander said. “We usually do orientation sessions the week before school starts, but obviously we can’t do that this year.”

Jarrett said it’s important for students to understand that middle school is a time for them to become more responsible and independent learners — and learn to speak up for themselves. “Some students really struggled with online learning, so this gave us a chance to discuss what happened and how they can get help when they need it,” she said. “It’s so important to make that personal connection, and hopefully give them an adult at school they feel like they can go to.”

Kindergarten teacher Amanda Taraska said the visits give her a powerful head start on getting to know her students and building trust with parents.

On one recent visit with five-year-old Joey Terminelli, she and school counselor Christine Winston learned about his love for Paw Patrol and Canadiens Hockey. Four-year-old Jamie Plourde proudly showed off his bike and told them he’s a big fan of Ryan’s Toys videos.

“It means a lot to them that their teacher came to their house and it helps us make connections,” Taraska said. “This year we brought them a Countdown to Kindergarten book to help them get ready for the big day.”

Taraska said the summertime visits also make parents more comfortable. “Rather than meeting the first time at school or Open House night, it’s helpful for us to meet on their ‘turf,’” she said. “It really starts the year on a positive note.”

Massena’s family visit program is one of several community engagement projects sponsored by NYSUT, with support from National Education Association. Under the grant, NYSUT provided training on best practices for home visits, with an emphasis on how to reengage with families after the school closures this spring. The visits are voluntary and educators are well-trained and compensated.

“The visits are even more important this year because the kids need to have that human contact,” Taraska said. “With so much uncertainty, I kept thinking this might be my only chance to connect with them face-to-face. I might not see them in person again.”

Nightengale Elementary teacher Amanda Taraska, right, and school counselor Christine Winston learn about his love for Paw Patrol and Canadiens Hockey. Four-year-old Jamie Plourde proudly showed off his bike and told them he’s a big fan of Ryan’s Toys videos.

Kindergarten teacher Amanda Taraska said the visits give her a powerful head start on getting to know her students and building trust with parents.

Nightengale Elementary teacher Amanda Taraska, right, and school counselor Christine Winston talk with kindergartner Joey Terminelli during a family visit this summer. Looking on from the deck are parents Jenilee and Joe Terminelli and little brother Adam.
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Students step up to save ‘race’ class

By Sylvia Saunders
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Talk about student engagement.

When Amherst English teacher Pamela Fordham learned over a Zoom faculty meeting that her “Race in America” elective was canceled for this fall, she was stunned. Yet with everything turned upside down by the pandemic, she just didn’t feel like it was the right time for her to try to fight the decision.

Instead, much to her surprise, three former students stepped up and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

As the death of George Floyd ignited nationwide protests over systemic racism, students at the suburban Buffalo school told the administration this is no time to be cutting such an important course. Fordham, who grew up in suburban Buffalo herself, started the elective course about 10 years ago to raise cultural awareness and teach students how to have productive conversations around race.

“In all honesty, the class should be mandatory because it was so educational,” said rising senior Maria Alaimo, who emailed principal Gregory Pigeon. Alaimo, who is white, credited Fordham’s course with opening her eyes and helping her realize she wants a career in criminal justice reform.

Darion Frederick, a Black student who took the class a year earlier, told a Buffalo News columnist the course “opens up conversations and dialogues that aren’t often had, but that should be.”

While Alaimo and Frederick pushed the administration to restore the class, Aden Clemente, the high school’s valedictorian, launched a change.org petition drive to reinstate the class.

The online petition noted that eliminating the class taught by the school’s only African-American teacher “would have been unacceptable before, but considering the recent episode of police brutality and the subsequent rise in profile of the Black Lives Matter movement, there is more of a need for this kind of course than ever before.”

Within a few hours of posting the petition, Clemente was on the phone with the principal, who noticed how quickly the petition was gaining signatures. Several of those signing the petition added pointed comments: “By canceling this class (and while you had it, not promoting it very well), you are siding with racism. Do better,” wrote one. “What message does this send to Amherst’s POC (specifically Black) students when Amherst chooses to remove such an important class,” wrote an Amherst alum.

Within five days, the petition gathered nearly 1,300 signatures — and the administration agreed to reinstate the course. Instead of offering it one semester a year, the principal said the course will now be offered twice a year. He emailed parents and students with a list of available electives for the 2020–21 school year, including “Race in America.”

Clemente, who is starting at Duke University this fall, posted an update with a “Victory” headline and called it a great first step. Next, he said, the district should focus on hiring a more diverse workforce of educators, especially since students of color comprise more than 30 percent of the school’s enrollment.

Fordham, whose father taught African-American studies at Buffalo State and whose mom was a long-time fourth-grade teacher in Buffalo City Schools, was overwhelmed by the students’ courage and how they handled themselves.

“As a teacher, you always wonder just how much the kids are absorbing and whether you’re getting through to them,” she said. “Honestly, I couldn’t be prouder.”
Teens continue work for a better future

By Liza Frenette
liza.frenette@nysut.org

Since participating in her first human rights symposium two years ago, Bethlehem student Zoe Thomas has become involved with several activism groups at school and in her community.

She’s raised funds to help victims of human trafficking and worked to bring attention to the lack of diversity in her school’s curriculum.

This summer, she met with the head of her high school English department to discuss why only one Black author has been assigned in her school’s curriculum.

The 13th Summer Symposium held in Western New York and the Capital Region Institute for Human Rights event were held online via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. They focus on education, historical perspective and resources to help foster change.

In the Capital Region, 105 students — a record number — swapped summer sunshine for laptops to study the poems of different social movements, and learned about young people at the forefront of social justice and how to reverse runaway inequality.

Kelly Wetherbee, who organizes the summit along with fellow North Colonie Teachers Association member Thea MacFawn, told students they make a difference by what they post on social media. She urged students to “think about what we amplify” and to evaluate news sources for reliability.

“Misinformation is designed to manipulate emotions,” she cautioned. “Emotional responses override rational thought.” She advised students not to simply retweet or repost, but to investigate the source of information.

All participants also received Education of an Idealist, written by keynote speaker Samantha Powers, former ambassador to the U.N.

“You are social justice warriors,” NYSUT Secretary-Treasurer Philippe Abraham told the group. “We’re not free unless we’re all free.”

Abraham urged the young activists to visit NYSUT’s virtual vigil (nysut.org/vigilaction) for justice, peace and action to learn specific steps they can take to get involved.

The Western New York program — under the theme “Women’s Rights Are Human Rights” — commemorated the centennial passage of the 19th Amendment. Students from six states and five different countries explored pressing issues facing women.

Whether via making art or making a documentary, students learned from women of change about how to get active.

“What is the point of exploring history except to change the future,” said speaker Nada Odeh, a Syrian-born artist and activist.

The Buffalo-based Summer Symposium is sponsored by the Academy for Human Rights, led by Springville TA member Andrew Beiter and co-sponsored by Erie 1 BOCES.

In addition to the student symposium, the Academy offers professional development programs for educators throughout the year.
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The power of sneakers will prevail again this year as NYSUT members venture out to take part in novel fundraising events for the American Cancer Society’s annual Making Strides Against Breast Cancer campaign.

ACS staff and communities are exploring everything from road rallies to scavenger hunts, from tribute gardens to socially distant walks, reported Amy Delia, director of marketing for the Northeast region. “Being mindful of the health and well-being of all, Making Strides will look different in each market, but what will remain the same is our shared passion for ending this disease,” she said.

The key to keeping the pink-powered program thriving is to sign up at nysut.org/MakingStrides to stay informed about what is being planned in each region.

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“Although COVID-19 prevents us from walking in solidarity with cancer survivors, supporters and family members this year, NYSUT remains vigilant in our efforts to raise monies and awareness to find a cure for cancer,” said Philippe Abraham, NYSUT secretary-treasurer.

NYSUT members have raised more than $15 million since NYSUT became a flagship sponsor of the statewide event.

“Every family, my own included, has been impacted by cancer. During the past year, the passing of Sheila Goldberg, a social justice warrior, NYSUT retiree and activist, has affected our own NYSUT family,” Abraham said.

“For decades, Sheila led the fight on Long Island and across the state to urge NYSUT members and labor to organize in the fight against cancer. So, this year we dedicate our NYSUT efforts in Sheila’s memory, and to not forget those other heroes we have lost to cancer, including Sandy Feldman, former United Federation of Teachers and American Federation of Teachers president, and Sonia Basko, a former teacher and NYSUT staff member.”

Last year, 282,690 NYSUT members raised $728,000 in 19 different walks all over the state.

Money raised is spent on research, including grants to SUNY and CUNY faculty; lodging for patients and family; rides to treatment; and education.

Several years ago, the American Cancer Society included a Real Men Wear Pink campaign to help give men a leadership role in the fight against breast cancer, which affects men as well.

NYSUT’s 2020 ambassador for the campaign is Greece Teachers Association President Brian Ebertz. He earned the title of #1 NYSUT Real Man for his 2019 fundraising efforts. Men participating in the campaign pledge to wear pink throughout the month of October, use social media to raise awareness of the cause and raise at least $2,500 to help ACS fight breast cancer.


“For all the changes our communities have faced during this pandemic, the impact on our educational system has been one of the greatest. We thank NYSUT members for all their efforts,” said Jeff Winters, ACS director of community development.

Be sure to check out nysut.org/MakingStrides for updates this fall. Also, to order a union-made, American-made T-shirt, check out NYSUT’s online store at strides2020.weebly.com. All proceeds go to the American Cancer Society.
Kara Smith always thought she would retire with much fanfare. Instead, thanks to COVID-19, the Hempstead Classroom Teachers Association member ended 37 years with barely a whisper, like thousands of other NYSUT members statewide.

“It’s not how I expected to leave,” said Drummond, whose home and careers classroom was a popular gathering spot. Although her district organized a retirement parade with flowers and well wishes, and co-workers threw a surprise, socially distanced party at a local park, it just wasn’t the same. “I missed the interaction with my coworkers and students.”

It’s a familiar story for 2020 retirees. Gone were the retirement parties, “last lunches” with long-time friends and colleagues and tearful hugs and well wishes from students. Few could have predicted their in-school duties would end in March.

Susan Primicias, Indian River Educators Association, was initially too busy to think about retirement. “Once we knew we weren’t going back, I was up to my ears in teaching,” she said explaining that she and fellow first-grade teachers divided up the remaining units, restructured them for remote learning and distributed the revised materials to parents.

Reality hit after a June retirement party in a parking lot. “I realized it was the first time we’d all been together since Christmas,” and for her, it would probably be the last.

Payroll clerk Laura Haas, president of the Frontier Central Employees Association, is one of 22 retirees in her local, a number boosted by the pandemic.

“The average age of my members is 57 and some have health problems,” said Haas noting that since SRPs handle many of the safety and cleaning protocols, they potentially face a greater infection risk. It’s difficult to “socially distance from the kids and many were afraid that schools aren’t safe places to be.”

Since her members prefer bulletin boards and fliers over emails and Zoom calls, quarantine has made keeping in touch challenging. “We didn’t hold elections and haven’t had a membership meeting,” she said admitting that she worries how her fellow union members will fare after she retires.

Although Walter Robertson, Dunkirk TA, had retirement plans before quarantine, he’s concerned with how reopening will work. “I had classes with 24 students, and everything was cooperative learning. With students six feet apart, you can only fit 12 or 15 students and they’re not hiring extra staff and teachers.”

As the only male classroom teacher of color, he also worries how Dunkirk’s majority-minority students will navigate the racial and political upheaval without him as a sounding board. He advises in-service colleagues to stay strong and follow union guidance. “If you feel unsafe, put your life and family (first),” he said. “As much as we love this career, it’s not worth your life.”

NYSUT would like to recognize, honor and celebrate your retirement. To request your “Welcome to Retirement Packet,” email geralyn.oreilly@nysut.org

DID YOU KNOW?

NYSUT Retiree Services consultants are resources for retired members, retiree councils and in-service locals on NYSUT retiree matters.

Tracy Beatty, RC 1, 2, 3, 44
716-834-7132
Louise Ortman, RC 4, 46
716-664-7425
Peter Randazzo, RC 5, 6
585-454-5550
Anne Marie Voutsinas, RC 7, 8
315-431-4040
Ruth Shippee, RC 9, 10
518-783-7977
Mark Padgett, RC 11, 45
607-786-5742
Jennifer Shaad-Derby, RC 12, 13
518-783-7977
Ellen Pincus, RC 14, 15–16
914-692-4411
Claire Zatorski, RC 17, 18, 19
516-496-2035
Joan Perrini, RC 20, 21, 22, 23
631-273-8822
Judy D. Kalb, RC 43
561-994-4029, ext. 129

In March, before COVID-19 made social distancing the rule of the day, Mel Stern, RC 20 president and Half Hollow Hills Retiree Chapter co-president, second from right, is one of many retirees advocating as part of NYSUT’s annual Committee of 100 lobby day at the State capitol.

ED 51-53 At-Large Director Florence McCue, second from right, joins Yonkers Federation of Teachers President Samantha Rosado-Ciriello and other activists seeking support for the federal HEROES Act, a COVID-19 fiscal relief bill currently in limbo in the U.S. Senate. Yonkers city schools face nearly 170 job cuts.

Regional Conferences

Regional Conferences

| RC 12, TBD | RC 1-3 & 44, TBD |
| RSC Jennifer Shaad-Derby | RSC Tracy Beatty |
| RC 9, TBD | RC 11 & 45, TBD |
| RSC Ruth Shippee | RSC Mark Padgett |
| RC 4, 46, TBD | RC 10, TBD |
| RSC Louise Ortman | RSC Ruth Shippee |
| RC 7 & 8, TBD | RC 7 & 8, TBD |
| RSC Anne Marie Voutsinas | |
1. You’ve spent more than a decade in the classroom. How has that experience influenced your career?

As a 15-year veteran of New York City Public Schools, I’ve learned the importance of pedagogy when advocating for students, especially when it comes to race and social justice. That’s why one of the goals of EduColor, an organization I co-founded to highlight race and social justice issues in education, curates and creates resources that educators can use with their students.

We’ve helped them get big ideas out, including columns in Education Week and appearances on PBS NewsHour. We also work with organizations to help them improve policy.

2. How did EduColor get started?

I’ve always had a sense of activism and social awakening, but it really came out around the time of the Trayvon Martin case, when the outcome didn’t go the way it should have. We started EduColor because there was no organization exploring racial and social justice issues in education at the national level.

Our 26-member team has experience across the field, including pedagogy, practice, curriculum, policy, labor and communications. The work isn’t new, but we bring activism to a new generation of younger teachers.

With more than 21,000 followers on Twitter and more than half a million #EduColor views, we’ve mobilized the digital community toward concrete action on equity, justice and anti-racism and allowed hundreds of participants to ask questions, provide resources and answer questions.

3. EduColor released a petition, “NYC Schools for Transformative Change.” What is the goal?

The petition calls on the governor, mayor and other school leaders to reimagine NYC public schools in 17 specific ways. My top three are giving students a voice, rethinking standardized testing and changing how students are disciplined and classrooms are managed.

Kids don’t have the same filters adults do. They’re quick to say “this is wrong,” “this is right” and “we should do better.” My son’s class had a great conversation right after George Floyd was murdered. They wondered why our justice system didn’t handle it appropriately. One student even asked why, when there’s a pandemic going on, we still have to protest to make things work.

We also need to rethink standardized testing. We’ve spent years testing students (often at the expense of arts and physical education), but we still haven’t made gains in the achievement gap or closed the opportunity gap.

Student discipline and classroom management need less policing of kids, and more relationship building.

4. You’re a sought-after speaker and a published author. What inspired your book?

My book, This is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class and Education is an ode to the teacher who stays in the classroom. I’ve been blogging since I started teaching and I’ve seen lots of books by teachers who left the classroom, or by celebrities or politicos. My book is personal stories and essays about race, gentrification, LGBTQ issues and the teaching profession through the eyes of a Black-Latino educator — things that went well, the lessons I learned and the teacher I want to be.

5. How important is the union to your work?

Back in 2014, when the UFT was in contract talks, Michael Mulgrew [UFT president] and Janella Hines [UFT vice president of academic high schools] hosted a book talk for me downtown. The next morning, Mulgrew read from the chapter in my book titled “Why Teach?” as he announced that we had a new contract.

Although I’m not a union rep, I couldn’t do the work I do without the union.

Jose Vilson
Math teacher, United Federation of Teachers
FREE NYSUT poster celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month

NYSUT celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month (celebrated Sept. 15–Oct. 15) with a new poster honoring Jennifer “J-Lo” Lopez and Alex “A-Rod” Rodriguez, a classic power couple with achievements spanning film, music, sports, fashion and business. They also have teamed up to help people in need. Days after Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, Lopez’s ancestral homeland, the couple solicited $26 million in corporate donations; personally donated $1.5 million; and raised an additional $9 million through One Voice: Somos Live! A Concert for Disaster Relief, organized in partnership with singer Marc Anthony.

Lopez has sold more than 70 million records worldwide, her films have grossed more than $3.1 billion, and she is the only female entertainer to simultaneously have a number one album and a number one film in the United States. She earned a Golden Globe nomination for her leading role in the 1997 biopic “Selena.” A child of Dominican immigrants, Rodriguez became Major League Baseball’s youngest player in his 1994 debut with the Seattle Mariners at 18. He later signed a record-breaking, 10-year, $252 million contract with the Texas Rangers, and is the youngest player to hit 600 home runs. Rodriguez heads A-Rod Corp, an investment firm focused on real estate, sports and wellness, media, entertainment and other industries.

The poster is available for download in English-language and Spanish-language versions; limited quantities are free for NYSUT members and leaders via the statewide union’s online Publications Ordering Catalog at nysut.org/publications.

Catastrophe Major Medical Plan Open Enrollment

The Trustees of the NYSUT Member Benefits Catastrophe Major Medical Insurance Trust are pleased to offer the opportunity to enroll in the CMM Plan during September 2020, with an effective date of Jan. 1, 2021.

The CMM Plan offers supplemental coverage that you and your eligible family members may need. Once the out-of-pocket deductible has been satisfied, this plan provides benefits for eligible expenses that your basic plan may not fully cover, including prescription drugs. NYSUT members who are in-service and reside in New York State (along with their eligible family members) can enroll along with current CMM Plan participants who would like to add eligible family members.

Visit memberbenefits.nysut.org or call Mercer Consumer toll-free at 888-386-9788 to learn more.
Explore all the benefits available to you

NYSUT Member Benefits provides an annual update each September to the readers of NYSUT United, including information about our role in the NYSUT organization, how our endorsement process works and our efforts in providing value to the NYSUT membership.

The NYSUT Member Benefits Trust was created as a separate insurance benefit trust in 1983 by NYSUT to leverage the united buying power of its membership and be able to offer quality benefit programs to members. Since that time, the Trust has grown to include the Member Benefits Corporation and the Catastrophe Major Medical Insurance Trust, allowing it to greatly expand the programs and services available to NYSUT members.

These entities are overseen by a board of appointed trustees and directors to ensure the best interests of NYSUT members are being met. The Member Benefits department falls under the leadership of NYSUT Secretary-Treasurer J. Philippe Abraham, Chairperson of the NYSUT Member Benefits Trust, and is directed by Jeffrey Hartnett.

How can NYSUT Member Benefits assist me at this time?

NYSUT Member Benefits understands the many struggles and challenges that NYSUT members and their families have faced this year. As we all continue to navigate through these unprecedented times, we want to assure you that we remain ready to assist and support you as we have for almost 40 years.

Now, more than ever, we are committed to helping NYSUT members make prudent decisions when it comes to their financial and essential needs. We understand that every dollar counts and want to do all we can to help in that regard.

What types of programs and services does Member Benefits offer?

Your NYSUT membership gives you the opportunity to participate in dozens of endorsed programs and services offered by NYSUT Member Benefits, including student loan and financial counseling; legal services; insurance programs; and shopping, travel and personal programs.

Member Benefits endorses crucial insurance programs to protect your family members along with unbiased and sound financial services that offer the convenience of paying through payroll or pension deduction. Members who utilize these payment options to purchase our endorsed programs can save up to 15 percent on annual premiums along with the waiving of service fees in many instances.

We also offer a variety of educational opportunities to the NYSUT membership, including financial counseling, legal education and home buying workshops/webinars.

How can I save money utilizing your endorsed programs?

Our newest endorsed program — Member Benefits Discounts & Deals provided by Access Development — offers NYSUT members the opportunity to save up to 50 percent at more than 700,000 locations on restaurants, groceries and food delivery, hotels and flights, oil changes and vehicle maintenance, and more.

These deals can be utilized either online or from the palm of your hand through Access Development’s MB Deals mobile app. This program also provides the ability to recommend that your favorite local business, restaurant, coffee shop, etc. join the network. To get started, register your account with your NYSUT ID number by visiting mbdeals.enjoymydeals.com.

Meanwhile, NYSUT members can enjoy an average of 30 percent off school and printing needs, household essentials and cleaning supplies with our endorsed Office Depot/OfficeMax program — with up to 75 percent off preferred products, free delivery on qualifying orders over $50 and discounted printing prices.

We also offer many other endorsed programs that can provide savings to NYSUT members and their families.

Are there other benefits to participating in your programs?

Unlike when purchasing products available to the general public, participation in Member Benefits-endorsed programs gives you a strong advocate ready to quickly assist you with any issues or concerns that may arise. Our dedicated and knowledgeable staff take great pride in assisting NYSUT members and their families in any way possible.

Is Member Benefits funded through my NYSUT dues?

NYSUT dues dollars are never used to support us. Member Benefits receives funds to cover expenses from negotiated endorsement arrangements with many of the providers of our endorsed programs (including, in some cases, a percentage of premium paid).

These funds are used solely to defray the costs of operating Member Benefits, including staff compensation; rent; office expenses; and the cost of retaining consultants, auditors and attorneys to advise the trustees, directors and their staff. Member Benefits revenue is also used where appropriate to enhance our programs and to help develop new offerings for the NYSUT membership.

No monies are paid to NYSUT except reimbursement for the use of facilities, and for services and personnel provided by NYSUT to Member Benefits (the reasonableness of which amounts are certified annually to the trustees and directors by independent auditors). We encourage you to visit memberbenefits.nysut.org or call 800-626-8101 to learn more about our endorsed programs and services.

Although some NYSUT Member Benefits-endorsed programs may provide legal or financial advice, Member Benefits itself does not offer investment, legal or tax advice. Participants should consult their own investment, financial, tax and legal advisors to help them with an evaluation of these benefit programs.
Retirement Online adds new features

Retirement Online gives you an easy and secure way to review your New York State Employees’ Retirement System benefit information and conduct transactions in real time. In many cases, you can use Retirement Online instead of sending forms through the mail or calling ERS. When Retirement Online was first launched, the system allowed you to apply for a loan and manage your beneficiary and contact information. Earlier this year, new features were added that will help you do even more online, including:

- Estimate your pension using our new online calculator.
- Apply for previous service credit, including military service.
- Apply for a service retirement.
- Manage your loan and service credit purchase payments.
- Update your last name.
- Apply to reinstate an earlier membership date or tier.
- Transfer your membership to another public retirement system within New York State.
- Change your correspondence preference.
- Choose to receive your Member Annual Statement electronically through Retirement Online.

Withdraw your membership.
Upload most of the documentation needed to complete a transaction.

In the three years since we launched Retirement Online, more than a quarter-million members, retirees and beneficiaries have discovered that it’s a safe, convenient way to do business with ERS. In the current crisis, that convenience has turned out to be more important than ever. If you haven’t tried it yet, signing up is easy. Visit our Retirement Online page at web.osc.state.ny.us/retire/retirement_online/customers.php and click “Sign In.” You can be sure that your account information is safe. We use several security safeguards to protect your online information.

If you need help, visit the “Tools & Tips” section of the Retirement Online page. You’ll find step-by-step guides for registering, signing in for the first time, adding trusted devices, resetting your password, and more. If you have trouble signing up for Retirement Online, call our Contact Center at 866-805-0990 (518-474-7736 in the Albany, NY, area).

Retirement prep info available online

Q: I was looking forward to attending a PREP seminar to plan for my retirement, but the COVID-19 pandemic has made that impossible. What other options do I have?

A: Like many organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way the New York State Teachers’ Retirement System conducts business. To provide members with the information they need to plan for retirement, NYSTRS produced video versions of their PREP seminar modules and posted them on the PREP page of their website. The page also features the PREP workbook, broken into chapters to correspond with the video modules.

Other online resources include a “Ready to Retire” page with links to retirement-planning publications, videos and forms. If you have a MyNYSTRS account, you can also run projected benefit estimates and securely contact system representatives with specific questions. For general questions, email the system’s Information & Communication Center at communit@nystrs.org or call 800-348-7298, ext. 6250.

Q: Will I get the same information in a telephone consultation that I would have received at an in-person or video consultation?

A: Yes, you will. However, in a telephone consultation, the estimates you would have received during an in-person or video consultation will instead be uploaded to your MyNYSTRS account. A NYSTRS representative will review that information with you over the phone and answer all questions. Documents can also be mailed to you after the call.

If you don’t have a MyNYSTRS account, we encourage you to register for one prior to your telephone consultation. You’ll need to enter the last four digits of your Social Security Number and your NYSTRS EmpID, so have those handy. Find your EmpID in either your Benefit Profile, sent to you each fall, or in any personal correspondence you’ve received from NYSTRS. Call NYSTRS at 800-348-7298, ext. 6100, to book a consultation, or book online via your MyNYSTRS account.

NYSUT ERS consultants

Most NYSUT School-Related Professionals* belong to the New York State and Local Employees’ Retirement System (ERS). NYSUT ERS consultants are available to help SRP members navigate the retirement system. Consultants can answer questions, provide forms and help members contact the ERS. Contact any one of our consultants for assistance.

Trudi Davis • 914-592-4411
troers@nysutmail.org
Patti Lennon • 516-496-2035, ext. 324
nroers@nysutmail.org

*Note: Certified teaching assistants belong to the state Teachers’ Retirement System (TRS).

NYSUT TRS consultants

TRS members with questions may call their teacher-members on the New York State Teachers’ Retirement System Board of Directors:
David Keefe • 516-741-1241
(Retiree Representative)
Sheila Sullivan Buck • 585-454-5550
sbuck@nysutmail.org
Beth Chetney • 315-431-4040
bchetney@nysutmail.org
Ronald Gross • 631-273-8822
rgross@nysutmail.org

Did you know?

As of NYSUT United’s publication date, NYSTRS canceled all in-person PREP seminars, large meetings and events. Benefit consultations are available only via telephone.

In every issue, State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli, administrative head of the State and Local Employees’ Retirement Fund (ERS) and trustee of the Common Retirement Fund, provides information on the System, which delivers retirement benefits to many NYSUT School-Related Professionals and other support staff. If you are an ERS member with a question of general interest, email united@nysut.org.

For immediate assistance, call the ERS Contact Center toll-free at 866-805-0990 or 518-474-7736 in the Capital District.
Every Kid Outdoors

The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor helps your class experience the National Parks in your backyard!

Take your class on a first rate educational field trip within the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. Choose from one of four National Parks: Fort Stanwix (Rome), Saratoga (Stillwater), Theodore Roosevelt (Buffalo), or Women’s Rights (Seneca Falls).

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Oswego Classroom Teachers Association

From left, OCTA President Carrie Patane; Joy Bifera, EVS Manager for Oswego Health; and OCTA Secretary Michelle McManus. The union donated gift cards for a local business to 62 Oswego Health employees.

Led by President Carrie Patane, members of the Oswego Classroom Teachers Association supported local businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and showed support for workers on the front lines.

Each week for more than three months the union adopted a local business to spotlight for the week. Next, OCTA members donated money via PayPal. Funds were collected Monday through Thursday of each week, with Patane sharing live totals with the membership daily. When all the numbers were tallied, teachers in the Oswego City School District raised $13,687.50. All of the money went back to local businesses and essential workers throughout the community. The OCTA was also able to buy books for their local bookmobile and purchase ice cream gift cards for all 250 graduating seniors. In the final week of the fundraiser, OCTA held a virtual T-shirt fundraiser, donating all proceeds to the NYSUT Disaster Relief Fund to purchase personal protective equipment for front-line workers.

“ Besides creating an entirely NEW online school, this is how we supported our community during our ‘shut down,’” Patane said. “Together, we are unstoppable.”

Ithaca educators united

The Ithaca Substitutes Association, led by Jane Atkin, and the Education Support Professionals/Ithaca, led by Carla Strong, joined forces to donate cotton material, cut, assemble and sew non-surgical masks for Tompkins County in April and May. The effort by the teachers and SRPs netted more than 100 colorful masks in different sizes for delivery to local businesses, agencies and individuals.

Pine Plains Federation of Educators

When the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to cancel the Pine Plains Federation of Educators’ annual family literacy night, members rallied with just a week’s notice and transformed the one-night event into a full virtual Family Literacy Week. Activities were posted daily on individual elementary school’s Facebook pages for students and their families.

Activities included readalouds, virtual field trips, secret messages, a virtual obstacle course, photos, dances and more. The PPFE is led by Josefne Wilber.

Wappingers Congress of Teachers

Members of the Wappingers Congress of Teachers came together while staying apart these past few months to support families, community members and those on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March, the local purchased 100 meals for health care workers at Mid-Hudson Regional Hospital. Throughout the month of April, the WCT donated money to support the efforts of several food banks and suppliers in the area.

In May, the local hosted its annual food drive — with a twist. “I didn’t want to give up the food drive just because our school buildings could not be open for members to bring in their non-perishable food items,” said Kate DeGroat, chairperson of the annual event. Instead, a GoFundMe page was set up so WCT members could make a monetary contribution. Through the page, the WCT collected more than $10,000 in donations for the Zion Food Pantry in Wappingers Falls.

The WCT is led by President Pasquale Delli Carpini.

Kingston educators inspire community-wide conversations on race

Sometimes a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single book.

In Kingston, that book is So You Want To Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo. City residents are reading it as a group called Kingston Reads. A hundred readers attended the first virtual meeting July 2. Sessions continued throughout the month.

Social worker Amy Kapes and librarian Charlotte Adamis — members of the Kingston Federation of Teachers — joined assistant principal Kathy Sellitti to launch the group. In recent years they have worked with colleagues to study racism and have read several books, along with attending workshops and professional development programs.

Kapes decided to bring in the community on this shared journey. “This is the critical piece of doing the work. You can’t do it alone,” said Adamis. “We emphasize that we want it to be a dialogue,” Kapes said.

The district’s students are about 50 percent white, and 50 percent Black and brown. The faculty is not diverse, and the district has been working to change that.

Reading books allows people to privately wrestle with issues and reflect, and then to engage with others, Kapes said. So You Want To Talk About Race discusses the history and context of racism, and the guilt, fear and defensiveness that white people can harbor, she said.

The district offers studies of racial issues for faculty and staff. And a NYSUT program for educators on racial equity, which Kingston has participated in for three years as part of an NEA grant, has been “another layer peeled back,” Adamis said.

For more about Kingston Reads, visit nysut.org/itswhatwedo.

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