



# THE UNION SOUND

THE VOICE OF A SOUND UNION



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*Rondout Valley Federation of Teachers and School-Related Professionals*

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# SCHOOL NURSES ROCK

## SCHOOL NURSING IN THE AGE OF COVID

by Lucy Van Sickle

When we went fully remote last March 13, I don't think any of us could have imagined that we would not return to school until six months later. It's never happened in our lifetimes, and up until now, viruses did no more than make our lives miserable for three to five days, and then life went on. Cue the COVID-19 virus. This microscopic organism has caused more fear, pain, and loss of life than we could ever have predicted. Whether one wants to believe it was manufactured or was derived from exposure to a bat, it doesn't really matter because so many of us have had to change the way we live our lives. As the death toll now exceeds 300,000, I feel I must speak out to my fellow brothers and sisters in the RVF as to how this pandemic has totally changed school nursing.

We've all heard the clichés "new normal" and "We're all in this together," and I am sure there are many more as well. At first it was a good rallying cry, bringing people together and making everyone feel like "We can do it." Nurses were portrayed as the new-age Rosie

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## President's Message

by Robert McDonough

Don't give up, RVF. I know it's been such a long journey, and we are all mentally and physically exhausted. But we've come this far, and we can't turn around and give up now. Now is not the time for apathy or surrender. The fact is the next several months will test the limits of our strength and resilience and will be some of the darkest days in our country's history. But I can see the light on the horizon. I truly believe that this spring will be the start of America's comeback. With the winter behind us and the vaccine starting to make its impact on society, better days are coming this spring and summer. I know none of us got into education for this. These last ten months have been grueling and brutally hard for our profession. The trials and

tribulations of trying to keep safe while simultaneously teaching in-person and remote students have changed our careers. However, the courage and character we have all shown throughout this crisis will be noted in the history books someday. The way we have all risen to the challenge is reminiscent of the "Greatest Generation," as some have called the survivors of the Great Depression and WWII. Let's all promise each other we will get through these winter months together. Let's help each other and be there for one another when needed. Together, we will get through this crisis. As our second US President John Adams once said, "Yet through all the gloom I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory." The end is in sight, RVF. Let's continue to be frontline heroes and finish the fight against this pandemic. A new hope is coming. Enjoy the holidays, however you celebrate. Spend time with family and rest up. Stay safe, follow CDC guidelines, and have a very happy new year.

## Opinion

by Rebecca Litchfield

### MEASURE LIFE IN LOVE

How do you measure the life of a woman or a man? It is a question Jonathan Larson posed to musical theater audiences during the 1990s, when another plague ravaged a marginalized community within our country. After not thinking about *Rent* for a good twenty years, I once again find myself consumed with some of its themes.

Now that we are over a half a year into a pandemic that has taken the lives of the equivalent of 100 September 11ths, teachers in the Rondout Valley continue to be forced into situations that are unsafe with no accommodations given from the district, regardless of our doctors' requests. As surrounding districts switch to remote learning and numbers of positive cases rise, Rondout has forced teachers and staff to make unfair choices that compromise our safety, our health, and our overall well being. The hybrid model is unsustainable; our own Board of Education has even opted out of a hybrid model for their own meetings. The irony and hypocrisy of this decision is not lost on this writer.

We cannot trust that administration is acting in our best interest: they have already stated that they are not. At this point, they are only focused on what (they believe) is best for the students, which, ironically, is not necessarily what is best for the students. If these decisions were made with

compassion and concern for all involved, we would not be in the school buildings at this time. Instead, we are pawns for optics and politics. Apparently, the loud minority of community voices trump the legitimate and valid concerns of veteran staff. Our leaders are not leading with compassion; instead they are focused on how they look to the community at their staff's expense.

If you have ever flown, you know that if the plane is going down, you must put your oxygen mask on before you can help others. A friend of mine often reminds me, "You can only give from your overflow." If you are emotionally drained and physically spent, you may have nothing left to give, and that is when you need to recharge. This is different for everyone. For some, it might mean alone time with quiet contemplative walks in the woods. For others, it might mean Zooming with your a cappella group for holiday carols. Baking, exercise, writing, talking, music, movies . . . all ways to recharge for some. So remember, we are all living through a traumatic event, and if you are going to be able to help others, you must save yourself first. You are worth it.

Measure life in love . . . that is Larson's response. Ultimately, if you measure life in love, you will never be wrong. As teachers, most of us love scores to hundreds of students. It is through this love and connection that the stage to learn is set. To quote the famous author Maya Angelou, ". . . people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." This applies to students of life as well as to students in a classroom. We deserve to live another day and to love more fiercely than ever before. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

## School Nurses, cont.

the Riveter. Nurses and other frontline workers were revered and still are in most ways today. However, there is that school-nurse aspect that has been changing that feeling. Your school nurses are *your* frontline people:

Amy Istad  
Krista Kelly  
Lauri Mulholland  
Joann Redmond  
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Lucy Van Sickle

During the summer, countless hours were spent in god knows how many Zoom meetings, discussing every topic from handwashing, to signage, to current public health mandates, to how we place students safely in classrooms. That's only the tip of the iceberg. Every time we worked to develop a policy, the state changed the game rules (and still does), and we had to regroup and schedule another meeting. Who knew Zooming would be the in thing to do?

When it came time to return to school, there were several factors your nurses had to deal with: fear, misinformation, difficulty finding supplies needed for a safe opening, and a huge education and information project to help our staff, parents, and students feel safer about reentering our buildings. The buildings were also in need of updating in order to be aligned with new safety standards. It all is still a work in progress. No one knew if and when students would be back in the buildings. To their credit, our wonderful colleagues, teachers, paras, and aides had worked tirelessly to perfect online learning. As school nurses, we switched gears and went into battle mode, ready to protect our staff and student "family." Tons of PPE was ordered, and plans were made to distribute it to at-risk staff. Daily, we monitor and assess students and staff with any medical complaints. Anyone experiencing any of the COVID symptoms are sent home and are referred to their family physician for possible testing. Thank heavens for the staff who volunteered to be trained to take temperatures and screen incoming staff and students. The health offices are not managed like they used to be. Visits are only for those truly ill or with chronic medical conditions needing daily management. No more coming in to rest or visit and chat. Each nurse has developed a room for holding students who are ill and waiting to go home. No one wanted to call it the COVID room, so some buildings call this space the CARE room (Covid Assessment Response Evaluation) room. At the high school, we call it "The

Nest" because we are Ganders, after all. It is a bit daunting to enter one of these rooms, as they are pretty stark. Plastic curtains separate each cot or chair. Full PPE is worn by staff supervising the room. Every time one of us enters, it just hits home again how abnormal this is.

Please know that each nurse in your building is struggling, to some extent, to maintain an increasingly overwhelming situation. COVID is such a fluid thing that every day the rules and policies change. What was yesterday, probably isn't today. When we answer your questions, we are going on information valid for that day. We are dealing with a population of parents, students, and staff who are increasingly worn down by this pandemic. Just notifying a parent that their child has to go home can initiate tense conversation. We hate having to send students home for what may simply be "just a headache." Today, no one can say for sure that one headache isn't the one symptom that might be COVID-related. Every time a student goes home ill or we hear of an illness, it opens up a 48-hour window for the person to either see his/her MD or get a COVID test to rule out infection. We all are in daily contact (including weekends) with the UC Health Department checking on test results and asking for advice about different situations. We're now all on a first name basis with each other. Daily paperwork and reporting has increased tenfold. Even this seasoned school nurse of almost 30 years has started to feel the daily stress and tension. Thankfully here at the high school, our principal, Ms. Torok, has been an awesome advocate in our task to protect our school. I have thanked her every day for her assistance. Our union leadership has also been a big advocate for our safety. Thank you to Rob McDonough and the Executive Committee.

Take one thing away from this article—a small glimpse into the life of a school nurse and fellow union member. We will always be there for you. We will work as hard as we can to protect you—our school family. Our doors will always be open for you. We strive to advise our administration the best we can in how to navigate this "new normal." Please continue to reach out to us and know that we are human too; we share your fears, and we worry as well, but we are working as hard as we can to get through this. Together we will win this battle. Stay safe, stay positive, and keep doing the good things you do. Say a kind word, give a smile—it is infectious (pun intended). Now that's a pandemic I can get behind!



## Guest Opinion

by Retiree Thomas Muollo

### SOLIDARITY WITH OUR UNION

My wife and I are devoted union members. Lorraine is a registered nurse and member of SEIU and the Teamsters Union. She became a union representative because her hospital did not offer benefits that she felt the nurses deserved. When I began my teaching career, I became a member of NYSUT and a union representative. We weren't always devoted to our unions. Over time, however, we began to appreciate the value of working together with our colleagues to achieve more equitable benefits befitting our skills and education.

I write this now because I feel that it is important to show solidarity in a crisis. The pandemic has overrun our country and changed our way of living more than any other factor in recent memory. It is, and remains, a major health threat, despite the advances being made in prevention and treatment. Complicating treatment is significant public denial of recommended CDC guidelines and inadequate leadership from our federal government.

Two recent articles in the *Blue Stone Press* written by Amanda Kelly illustrate the frustration and anxiety of many staff members of our RVF community. One of them refers to the difficulty teachers face in trying to simultaneously teach students in class and online in the "hybrid" model currently used by the district. The restrictive conditions of inadequate technological support keep teachers confined to their desks and unable to individually monitor their students. Another teacher writes about the various systems which require multiple entries into data systems, tripling the amount of time she has to input notes and grades.

The second article notes concerns about inadequate ventilation systems and staff accommodations for personal protective equipment. Strangely, staff has to request protective equipment, which may be limited in its application, and wait for approval by administrative staff before being allowed to use it. Not all accommodations are granted. All staff, in a closed environment, need to feel protected in their environment. Many people have asthma and other respiratory conditions or just want to know that the air that they breathe is safe and free from pathogens. It would seem logical that CDC recommendations would be followed for all staff and students in a time of crisis. Students and staff alike leave the school every day to

return to the outside environment where they may become exposed to pathogens. If only one staff member or child sneezes in a classroom, the whole room could be shut down, and if that person is allowed passage in the hallways during class changes, the school population could become quickly infected. Research has shown that six-foot social distancing is only a minimal guideline and assumes that all parties are properly masked.

Several of these issues were addressed at recent BOE meetings. The presenters showed great courage in venting their concerns because, in a school system, true free speech is not looked upon favorably, casting aspersions on the presenter. Schools like to keep their problems quiet so as to not concern the community at large. So, how did the district respond? With more transparency or with genuine concern for the issues raised? Were any committees formed to address the problems? Not publicly. Further, it was decided that future public comments to the BOE would require notification in advance of a BOE meeting by email, submitted for pre-approval, and, if approved, would be read aloud by a BOE staff member instead of by the complainant. This is clearly a violation of free speech in order to limit the amount of information received by the public. Lack of transparency only creates confusion and anxiety when people are not allowed to express their concerns in an open forum.

There are ways to monitor the quality of air in a closed environment, resolve technological issues, and allow free access to PPE regardless of why a person feels like they need it. To deny assistance only foments distrust within the system and leads to a breakdown of services. We are in perilous times, likely to stay with us for months, if not years. Solidarity with our union is imperative and a necessary counterbalance to those who inhibit free speech and fail to provide adequate safeguards for staff and students. Transparency is needed more now than ever before.



## TRS Updates

by Tara Thibault-Edmonds

As RVF's Teacher Retirement System Delegate, I was able to participate in informational programming on November 9 that included updates on the state of our retirement funds. I am happy to report that our financial affairs are in good order: as of June 30, 2020, the market value of TRS assets was \$120.5 billion.

At present, Tier 4 members make up the largest percentage (65.2%) of the system, with 170,306 dues-paying future retirees out of a total active workforce

of 261,232. Let's send a huge shout-out to the 531 Tier 1 and 2 workers who were still hanging in there through June, as well! For retirees who are interested in working while collecting on their pensions, new legislation in January 2020 has increased the earnings limit for those under age 65 from \$30k to \$35k.

Here in Ulster County, we just miss the top 10 for statewide benefits payouts, with \$126.66 million paid in pensions for the 2019-20 fiscal year. With 84% of those pension funds coming through investment income, 14% from employer contributions, and 2% from member contributions, we are in excellent shape. Retirees and working members can view the annual report at the [nysttrs.org](http://nysttrs.org) site or at [this link](#).

## Family Events

by Robyn McDonough

### HOLIDAY BALLET PERFORMANCES

Bardavon Presents! invites you to view two free holiday shows courtesy of the Bardavon in Poughkeepsie, NY. The first show is *A Christmas Carol* presented by the Ulster Ballet Company. Click [here](#) to watch this beautiful

performance now through New Year's Day. You may even catch sight of a Rondout student or our very own RVF member Kevin Tuttle, whose on-stage antics during the party scene will be sure to bring a smile to your face. *The Nutcracker*, performed by the New Paltz Ballet Theatre, will be available to view [here](#) Christmas Eve at 7pm and will run continuously through New Year's Day. Although these shows are provided free of charge, the Bardavon has been hit particularly hard due to the pandemic and is seeking donations through [this link](#) if you feel so inclined. Your support would mean the world to them.

The mission of the *New York Times* is "to seek the truth and help people understand the world." In order for educators and students to stay abreast of what is happening globally, the *New York Times* is providing free digital access for both high school teachers and students through September 2021. Click [here](#) to start your subscription today.

*The best support you can give to anyone you love is your wellness. When you are well, joyful, fun, and happy, you are the greatest gift to everyone around you. That's when you inspire wellness, joy, and fun within them. When you take care of yourself, you are in a much better position to take care of others...*

*...Words don't teach as well as example. Support others through your thriving. Lift others by lifting yourself.*

~ Emily Maroutian,  
Award-winning writer, poet, and philosopher

*We're Still Open HV* is still going strong! This service has proved invaluable to local establishments who have been trying to stay afloat during the pandemic. Click on the image to search by keyword, town, category, or county to see who is listed and what safety protocols they may have in place. Now more than ever, these establishments and businesses need our help. If you are able, shop locally.



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