Teacher Morale: Time to Wise Up

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GRINS

“I wanted to speak to Jennifer’s parents about her absenteeism, but they never showed up.”

“I’m running for student council president, so can you keep quiet about the time I kissed you last year?”
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A VCU study offers some wise ideas for boosting teacher morale.

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Help and hope for young people struggling with substance abuse.

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Cover illustration: Ben Cornatzer
In each of the last two years, a desk has broken beneath one of my students as they sat in my classroom. Thankfully, neither young woman was hurt. Sadly, however, as I talked to my colleagues, my class is not the only one in which this has occurred. This is my nineteenth year in Henry County Public Schools.

We have a good school board, a good superintendent, and a good board of supervisors who all do the best they can. However, this area was hard hit during the economic downswing of the last decade and it hasn’t fully recovered.

In early January, several teachers from across the county gathered to discuss the Every Student Succeeds Act. They noted that our furniture is, for the most part, over 30 years old. Not only is it deteriorating, but it isn’t always comfortable or large enough for our kids, and in the case of the elementary cafeteria furniture, it is too large. Our locality cannot afford to update its furniture, and teacher salaries are not to blame, as educators have not seen step raises for five years.

Attracting good teachers is difficult when salaries are low, and Henry County is fortunate not to be as lowly paid as some of the surrounding localities. Some of those schools pay so little they’ve been forced to hire substitutes in the same field for up to three years in some subject areas. We are in the midst of a serious teacher shortage. (Even as this went to press, Henry County was holding a job fair, looking to fill 50 positions expected to be open this fall.)

Just recently, a young man who wanted to teach wrote me and said, “I hope you won’t be disappointed, but I am no longer on the education track.” He went on to say he knew he couldn’t afford to teach if he pursued a master’s and Ph.D. degree, as he wants to. I am disappointed, of course, but I won’t tell him that. He has to follow his own dreams. And he has to provide for a future family.

I plan to teach until I’m 70, but many of my colleagues will not teach that long. I wonder what changes the next few years will bring. Right now, they look dismal as we see class sizes rise and it has become harder to give each student the individual attention he or she deserves.

I invite anyone who thinks schools are adequately funded to visit, examine our budgets and talk to teachers. Look difficult as we see class sizes rise and it has become harder to give each student the individual attention he or she deserves.

I invite anyone who thinks schools are adequately funded to visit, examine our budgets, talk to teachers, learn honestly how much they spend out of pocket each year, many times at a personal sacrifice, and then ask teachers what they wish their schools could provide. Ask them how often they do art projects for which they have to provide materials in order for the students to do them. Ask teachers how often they are buying basic classroom supplies for students of all ages. Ask them how long it has been since the white wall has been painted, and if they had a choice, what color(s) they would prefer to brighten their classrooms. Ask teachers how many packs of paper they purchase every year from their own funds because some schools limit them to two packs per month.

Those who think we have enough should ask parents and students what they wish their child’s classroom provided for them. Ask them if there are enough art supplies, science projects, maps, technology and/or age-appropriate technology, math manipulatives, music opportunities, and the list goes on. If parents and students say that they do have these items, then the interviewer should go back to the teachers to find out who funded them because many times teachers buy what is needed.

Field trips are an important part of a child’s learning, so those who think schools have enough should ask teachers and students how often they get to take a field trip. For many of us, the answer is “never.” With the wealth of historical sites for Virginia students to visit to visually learn about art, history and science, I find it sad that many of our students have never been to Mabry Mill, the Booker T. Washington National Monument, the Taubman Museum, or the National D-Day Memorial. These are places close to our area, yet students have not seen them, and of course, very few have been to Monticello or Williamsburg, Jamestown and Yorktown. If those who think we have enough would take the time to truly investigate, they would be appalled at what we really have.

Carter, president of the Henry County Education Association and a member of the VEA Board of Directors, is an English teacher at Magna Vista High School.
“Now, more than ever, if we want to fight global warming, racism, illiteracy, poverty, sexism and homophobia, we need to elevate the teaching profession to the financially viable and prestigious one it deserves to be. Elevating teachers is our chance to show what our values truly are. Let’s pay teachers what we think our students, democracy and future are worth.”
— Ninive Calegari, founder of The Teacher Salary Project

“It’s so important for people to understand that counselors are needed at every single level, kindergarten through 12th grade. Elementary students have just as many needs, so it’s just as important to establish early what a school counselor can do for students.”
— Terri Tchorzynski of the Calhoun Area Career Center in Battle Creek, MI, the current National School Counselor of the Year

“Diversity, of background and opinion, is what makes America great. In classrooms, just as in business, young people encounter individuals from all walks of life. It’s in these interactions that students develop the communication, collaboration and joint problem-solving skills fundamental for success.”
— Matt Gandal, president and founder, Education Strategy Group

“Has anyone asked educators and not billionaires what really makes a difference in schooling?”
— Jack Jennings, former CEO of the Center on Education Policy

“When the times of Socrates and Confucius, it has been obvious that what makes people successful in life is not only what they know and how skillfully they use their knowledge, but also how they behave and engage in the world. In other words, their character.”
— Charles Fadel, author, Four-Dimensional Education: The Competencies Learners Need to Succeed

“If the city is concerned about money, then as painful as it is, I’d suggest they look at other departments to trim back. If we believe the future of the city depends on education, then we need to make sure the district has the tools needed for the task. Sure, that includes books and laptops, pencils and paper. But that also includes enough funding.”
— Brian Carlton, editor of the Martinsville (Va.) Bulletin
Teacher Appreciation Week

The Virginia Lottery is inviting Virginians to send thank-you notes to as many Virginia teachers as possible!

Visit valottery.com/thankateacher starting April 3rd to send a thank-you note and learn how one lucky teacher will win a Virginia vacation!
What's your typical school day like?
A typical day for me starts at 6:15 a.m.—I know, I'm lucky compared to many teachers who are up before 5 every day. I live five minutes from my school, so have the luxury of sleeping in. JMHS has switched to an A/B schedule this year, with the exception of our Algebra Immersions course, so I start and end each day with this class. Because many of the Immersions students, who include English language learners, have failed math in middle school and are missing the basics needed to do well in Algebra 1, this is a challenging class. However, getting to be with these students every day all year is allowing me a better opportunity to get to know them.

On days I work at my second job, at Petsmart, I actually leave school by 3:30. On days I'm off at Petsmart, I'm usually at school late to tutor or for a club meeting. I'm the faculty advisor of JMHS's Leadership Council, and a co-sponsor of the Friends of Rachel Club and the Cyber Club.

What do you like about your job?
I really feel like part of a family. We have an amazing staff who go above and beyond to help our students succeed. James Monroe is such a diverse school; we have students who apply and get accepted to Ivy League schools, and students who will be the first in their family to graduate from high school.

What is hard about your job?
The focus on standardized tests in education today is very tough. For my Algebra 1 students who have failed math in middle school, scoring a 399 on the SOL test is a huge accomplishment. But in the eyes of the state they're failures, and so am I because I couldn't teach them to pass a test. It's a huge setback for the confidence of students who may be amazingly smart, but who are learning English along with algebra, to fail an SOL test or not score as well as they know they can because of the wording of some questions.

What are some of the most fun and unusual things that have happened on the job?
Last year JMHS was lucky enough to get a state grant to host a summer Cyber Camp, and I was the camp's math teacher. We had such a diverse group of students, from honor roll kids who knew more than we did about programming to a student from an alternative education program. We had the students from 8-4 every day for two weeks. We programmed robots to travel through a maze, exploded watermelons with rubber bands, made rollercoasters out of card stock, and went on field trips. It was an amazing experience for the students and for us. We are continuing the program as a club this year.

How has being an Association member been helpful to you?
I got involved with the Association at a time in my career when I really wasn't sure I wanted to keep teaching. I was starting my sixth year in the classroom, my first year at JMHS, and I went to an Association meeting and heard all about SPARKS! I figured why not—if nothing else, it's a free weekend at Wintergreen. I went to SPARKS in 2013, and learned about all the things VEA actually does for educators and students. I was amazed. I'd paid my dues for five years because joining the Association was something I knew I had to do, but I never really thought about what I got out of it. I went to the VEA convention that year and it just took off from there. I've met some amazing educators around the state. I've been lucky enough to serve on a statewide committee and attend a conference in New Orleans. Being a classroom teacher can be very isolating, but getting involved in VEA allowed me to see that we are not in this alone.

FAST FACTS
Position: Mathematics Teacher, James Monroe High School
Local Assn.: Fredericksburg Education Association
Years Worked in Education: 10

My second block class rotates between Trigonometry and Algebra 1, depending on the day. I’ve taught many of the trig students algebra as freshmen, so it’s very rewarding to see how they’ve changed and grown up as upperclassmen.

Ten Minutes With. . .
Fredericksburg’s Emily Freed

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If you’re in public education, you don’t have to be told that teacher morale is a problem. You know because you see it, and maybe even live it. We could rattle off a few, likely familiar, reasons for low teacher morale: the lack of time to teach; the encroachment of outside influence and constraints on the classroom; initiative overload. And yet we also know the morale boost that comes from individual teachable moments with students. Those moments provide the joy and perspective that keep us going in our profession.

The evidence of struggles with teacher morale is far from anecdotal. Recent results from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher and other sources show teacher satisfaction at its lowest level in 25 years, and more than half feeling “under great stress several days a week.” Social media has also become a common forum for teachers to speak out publicly about their struggles with the profession.

To learn more, a group of Richmond-area school divisions, all part of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC), commissioned a study aimed at developing practical recommendations for addressing teacher morale. The goal was not to quantify how low morale had gotten, or to identify where it was low, but rather to understand the issue and seek ways to improve morale through policy and practice.

If you’re a classroom teacher, you may be voicing a few of your own ideas out loud right now. We understand: At least one of the authors, a veteran teacher advocate with battle scars from failed attempts to use research to move policy, admittedly approached the study with a bit of skepticism. Don’t we already have solutions for improving teacher morale? Haven’t teachers been voicing these same concerns for years to decision-makers? However, if we’re looking to raise the visibility of the issue of teacher morale, what better tool than research sponsored by school divisions concerned with improving it?

And, about 18 months into the two-year study, that “bit of skepticism” was sharply challenged. On a cold February afternoon members of our research team were leaving a middle school where we had been shadowing and interviewing teachers. As we discussed our week, several of us were awed by what we had experienced. We were in a school where a lot of things were (and still are) working, and there was clearly a relationship between the specific, building-level leadership style and relatively high teacher morale. This wasn’t about staff members getting to do everything exactly as they pleased. On the contrary, they faced high demands and expectations. The key was that they had a voice in decision-making, including in how to implement policies mandated by central office; they were treated as professionals; and leadership was attentive to issues.

A VCU study offers some wise ideas for boosting teacher morale, a key factor in student achievement.

By Tamara Sober and Jesse Senechal
such as fairness and consistency, factors we repeatedly found in this study to be tied to teacher morale.

**What We Learned About Teacher Morale**

**Importance of roles and relationships.** Teachers said the ability to fulfill their teaching roles and the quality of their relationships while doing so were the keys to their job satisfaction and morale. They identified their primary role/relationship dynamic as the one with students; they find satisfaction in fulfilling the formal roles of teaching (e.g., planning lessons, delivering instruction, assessing student growth), but also emphasized the importance of personal relationships with students, both as a foundation for successful role fulfillment and as a valued outcome in itself. A similar dynamic existed between the teacher and her/his colleagues: they find satisfaction through engagement with colleagues in formal role relationships (e.g., participation on grade-level teams) and in interpersonal relationships.

**Policy effects on teacher work.** Most, if not all, teacher work roles are defined, to varying degrees, by division- and school-level policies. For example, lesson planning often involves adherence to lesson plan formats; many assessments are standardized; and professional collaboration may require structured protocols and reporting mechanisms. Because these policies can both support or hinder a teacher's ability to fulfill roles, they were a major point of discussion in our interviews. We found that teachers' policy discussions focused on five qualities:

1. **Coherence.** Does this policy make sense to me?
2. **Autonomy.** How much freedom does this policy allow for my professional judgment?
3. **Burden.** How much work is this?
4. **Fairness.** Is this policy designed to treat all teachers in a fair way?
5. **Compensation.** Am I being appropriately compensated for my work?

When policies effectively supported a teacher's ability to fulfill role responsibilities and develop strong relationships, job satisfaction and morale went up. When policies interfered, satisfaction and morale suffered.

**The importance of leadership.** The principal plays a critical role in establishing the professional culture of the school. As with teachers, the work of the principal was discussed in terms of roles and relationships. Principals are responsible not only for implementing policies structuring the work of teachers, they also need to build trusting relationships and communicate in ways that lead to understanding and support for those policies. Teachers experienced higher job satisfaction when principals involved them in the decision-making process for implementing policies, and when they built trusting relationships and communicated positively with teachers.

**Specific Steps to Improve Teacher Morale**

The study's report, titled “Understanding Teacher Morale,” contains strategies for improving morale, identifies levers of change, and offers specific recommendations for next steps. Among the recommendations:

**Rethinking the design and implementation of policy**

- **Review existing and new policies that affect teacher work.** One of the key findings of our study was that teachers' frustrations were often connected to policies originating from the state and division level. School division personnel and building-level leaders should incorporate a process for examining how current and future policy impacts teachers' work.

- **Rethink the models of accountability and the role of data.** Our findings reveal teachers are frustrated with systems of accountability primarily based on reporting mecha-
nisms instead of authentic forms of observation by administrators and peers and dialogue that promotes professional reflection and learning. Teachers must exercise professional judgment in their practice over the issues of teaching, curriculum and student care. For this reason, school leaders should balance the need for accountability with increased autonomy. Absent these opportunities, expertise suffers.

- **Address the issue of load.** One of the ideas expressed by study participants was the desire for more time to “just teach.” Most felt overloaded by the number of students, number of course preparations, paperwork and the constant requirements of new initiatives. Overload has a number of negative effects, including compromising the quality of teaching, increasing stress, and upsetting work-life balance. Careful consideration should be given to anything that adds to a teacher’s workload.

- **Address issues of fairness.** Teachers’ perceptions of inequity are a common source of frustration. Division and school leaders should seek ways to address teachers’ concerns about inequities.

- **Address the issue of teacher compensation.** Teachers have realistic expectations regarding their salary limitations; however, compensation surfaced as an issue in relation to the changing nature of the profession. Division leaders and school principals should take public stands to raise awareness of the need for increased school funding and should publicly stand with teachers in their efforts to improve salaries.

- **Communicate policy rationale with clarity, consistency and transparency.** Morale improves when principals and school division leaders are intentional about sharing the rationale for their decisions. When teachers do not understand or fail to see value in policy mandates, and when required tasks divert time and attention from what their professional expertise suggests, they may resort to strategic compliance.

Promoting school and division cultures that support teacher professionalism and leadership

- **Be attentive to relational dynamics in schools.** Our study underscores the importance of relationships to the work of teachers. Policies should support creating time and space for teachers to forge authentic relationships.

What They Said

“Teachers are frequently bombarded with negative messages about their profession. They are often also bombarded with unachievable expectations.

_I hope our communities will recognize the importance of working towards building positive morale in our schools. Good morale benefits the entire educational system. I hope this study will help more schools assess morale while inspiring them to take action to improve it._”

— Debbie Gilfillan, a Henrico Education Association member who was on the study’s research team

“Teachers are feeling more and more disconnected from the building and from society, so let’s go in and look at some of the reasons they feel this disconnect, and let’s adjust this, because teachers change every other profession.

_The number one thing I would suggest is to survey teachers to find out the individual problems with morale...If it’s a serious issue of leadership, look at a change of leadership. Look at restructuring the organization. There is always something you can do to improve morale._”

— Rodney Robinson, a Richmond Education Association member also on the study’s research team
• **Create structures to promote professional growth.** Teachers need more opportunities to develop their professional practice and engage with their professional community. While most schools have systems in place for professional development, often these systems do not effectively serve teachers’ needs. Professional development systems should be designed with the model of professionalism in mind.

• **Institutionalize opportunities for teacher voice and leadership at both the school and division level.** Our findings revealed higher morale among teachers who felt their school principals fostered open and honest communication. Inviting teacher voice through both formal and informal structures leads to relational trust and creates alignment in expectations for teacher work and student outcomes. Soliciting teacher voice should not just be about allowing teachers to be heard.

• **Support principals.** As our findings show, principals play a critical role in teacher morale. Like teachers, principals are professionals. This means they must be able to use theories of leadership, adapt policies, and structure the complex systems that exist within schools in a way that is responsive to ever-changing and uncertain context. In this regard, school systems need not only to develop professional expertise among school leaders, but also be attentive to policies that may affect their ability to lead.

Specific recommendations for next steps also include developing a model for school-level teacher morale teams to address the issue within buildings. The teams could include teachers, non-instructional staff and school administrators, and could potentially use 11 teacher profiles developed in our report as exemplars of the findings. These profiles are ideally suited for small group discussions to encourage discussion and analysis of school-level policies and practices that support or hinder morale. Findings from those discussions could lead to a list of school-specific recommendations.

**Teacher Morale Matters**

Teacher morale’s effects extend way beyond individual teachers. Morale is directly related to teacher retention and student achievement, and has significant human and financial costs. Retention of new teachers is of special concern, with over half of new teachers choosing to leave their school placements within the first five years. As teachers exit the profession, relying on new teachers to fill vacancies will become more difficult as fewer people choose a teaching career. Nationwide enrollments in traditional and alternative preparation dropped by 20 percent in 2013-2014 alone. It is noteworthy that the negative effects of teacher dissatisfaction are more frequent and intense in schools with the most academic and socioeconomic challenges. Teacher dissatisfaction, teacher absenteeism and teacher turnover are all higher in these schools, exacerbating the achievement gap and sustaining patterns of inequality. These are high stakes our schools and school divisions can’t afford to ignore.

We encourage educators to check out the full report of the study at [www.merc.soe.vcu.edu](http://www.merc.soe.vcu.edu). Share it with local leaders and use it to begin conversations on improving teacher morale. Do it for your students!

Sober, a doctoral candidate in the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Education’s Curriculum, Culture and Change program, is the Teacher Leader Coordinator at the VCU’s Center for Teacher Leadership. Dr. Senechal is the Interim Director of VCU’s Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium.

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**VCU’s Study By the Numbers**

Over a two-year period, a 14-member research team, all current and former teachers, developed a framework for understanding teacher morale and designed the study to include observing and interviewing 44 teachers in three middle schools. The schools were specifically chosen and varied in accreditation status, student demographics and school-level leadership style.
A Way Out of Addiction

Gloucester County website offers help and hope for young people struggling with substance abuse.

By Tom Allen

It seemed to happen when most of us weren’t looking: Heroin use crept from the streets into our schools, even ones in neighborhoods where many wouldn’t ordinarily suspect it. Prescription drugs made the trip, too, entering school hallways from medicine cabinets—again, from homes and families from across all economic, ethnic and racial groups.

While rates of teen drug use are trending downward overall, the use of opioids (controlled prescription drugs, fentanyl and heroin) has “risen to epidemic levels,” according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. Its report also goes on to say, “In 2014, 10,574 Americans died from heroin-related overdoses, more than triple the number in 2010.”

Largely-rural Gloucester County hasn’t been immune from the effects of our changing drug culture, either, and after a conversation with the county’s Commonwealth’s Attorney one day, Jane Wenner decided to do something to actively tackle the problem. Wenner, the public awareness and outreach coordinator for the county’s Emergency Management office, starting picking the brains of substance abuse experts, law enforcement officials and educators, and the result is a website, www.drugfreeva.org, designed to be an essential resource reaching well beyond Gloucester’s borders.

“When we talked with teachers and school counselors,” Wenner says, “they wanted to know about the types of drugs that are out there and some of the things they should be looking for.”

Wenner and others began gathering that kind of information and drugfreeva.org has now launched the “Sink or Swim” program, which offers extensive information on over-the-counter drugs (such as pain relievers, inhalants and alcohol); prescription drugs (such as Adderall, hydrocodone and ketamine); and street drugs (such as marijuana, meth and heroin). There’s also information on substances that usually get less focus but are still finding their way into schools, such as bath salts, energy drinks, diet pills and synthetic drugs.

In addition, the site offers personal stories on video from people who either struggled with substance abuse themselves or have a family member who has; a helpline at 1-855-DRUG-FREE; an interactive map to help find treatment in your area; information on what’s involved in the recovery process; and printed program materials, including some in development that will be tied to Virginia’s Standards of Learning.

Drugfreeva.org, designed by DL Media, has caught the eye of others involved in the battle against youth substance abuse and is now linked to from the state’s drug prevention website, www.AwareVA.com.

Wenner has seen, firsthand, how prevalent the issue of substance abuse has become. “Just about everyone I’ve talked to has been affected in some way,” she says, one reason she’s made herself available to speak about “Sink or Swim” and substance abuse prevention to school and community groups across the state. Contact her at jwenner@gloucesterva.info.

Allen is editor of the Virginia Journal of Education.
Just Breathe: Mind over matter in the classroom

Educators are adding mindfulness to reading, writing and arithmetic.

By Maria Fleshood

Last year, Mary, a fourth grade teacher in a public school, approached me to learn mindfulness skills she could use with students to address classroom distraction and defiant and often hostile behavior.

She’s far from alone in considering mindfulness as a classroom tool: “Mindfulness is branching out from clinical and therapeutic settings and entering classrooms and boardrooms, congressional offices and military bases…scientific research confirms the physical, cognitive and emotional benefits of a mindfulness practice,” said a 2014 Huffington Post article.

Fast-forward to the present, and we find an explosion of interest in school-based mindfulness programs. Such programs can offer a positive response to the enormous pressure students and educators face today, and research is demonstrating benefits from these calming techniques on children. Work at the Inner Resilience Program in New York and the Mindsight Institute in Santa Monica, California are two examples of how teaching mindfulness techniques to youth is profoundly beneficial to their development, enhancing their emotional and academic intelligence.
Why Mindfulness?
Good question. One answer is that 40 percent of students report feeling anxious and stressed on a daily basis. Severe, unmanaged stress in the lives of today’s children and adolescents is a problem that crosses socioeconomic levels and shows in the rise of mental health issues, adjustment difficulties among students, and the frequent derailing of learning and teaching in classrooms.

As a former public school teacher and administrator, and now a clinical psychotherapist who incorporates MBSR (Mindful Based Stress Reduction) into my practice, I believe mindfulness is a valid tool to help schools better understand and deal with the complex interplay going on in school environments.

Research shows that integrating mindfulness into the classroom has been associated with many positive outcomes, including:

1. Less aggression and opposition toward teachers; students are more attentive in class and display more positive emotions and optimism.
2. Reduced anxiety and increased ability to focus; greater attention in class for students with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD).
3. Less stress, allowing more concentration when taking tests, presenting to groups and responding when called upon in class.
4. Increased ability to cope with impulse control and practice emotional regulation.
5. Development of social-emotional skills.
6. Activation of empathy and compassion.
7. Less burnout among teachers.

A Win-Win
Incorporating mindfulness into your curriculum does not have to be difficult, and can be done with limited resources. Planning five to 10 minutes at the beginning or midway through the day can foster qualities of resilience, curiosity, reflection and focus in students. Those qualities can strengthen developmental achievement in the classroom, reduce stress and increase instructional time for teachers. Before you sigh and think, “Is she kidding? One more task to check off?”, I’d encourage you to take a deep breath, pause and consider the possibilities.

Getting Started
The first step is to establish your own personal practice. Build-
our day with mindful breathing has helped create an inner sense of calm, curiosity and reflection among my students, which helps both myself and my students start the day on good footing. Now, when a student becomes distracted or rowdy, I say, ‘Just breathe,’ and most of the time, that seems to redirect their energy and get them back on track.”

Some Simple Mindfulness Strategies
Here are some easy-to-implement activities you may find helpful in your classroom and throughout your school:

De-stress Solution: Coherent Breathing
Students who practice coherent breathing can balance a high-stress response within a few minutes—without anyone knowing what they are doing. This is a powerful discipline that adolescents report to be helpful in class when taking tests, doing homework and when navigating peer pressure situations.

Step 1: Pause for a few moments, quiet the mind and the body.
Step 2: Take two deep breaths inhaling and exhaling…slowly.
Step 3: Breath in through the nose while slowly counting to four.
Step 4: Exhale through the nose slowly, counting to four.
Repeat this five times or until the anxiety relaxes, allowing more thoughtful decisions and a calmer demeanor.

Release and Refocus
This simple tension release practice is highly effective in the middle of the day when students are tired, restless and losing focus.

Step 1: Students stand at their desks.
Step 2: Pull shoulders up to the ears, breathing in on the inhale.
Step 3: Release shoulders, breathing out on the exhale.
Step 4: Rotate shoulders forward, breathing in on the inhale.
Step 5: Rotate shoulders backward, breathing out on the exhale.

Brain Break
This is a practice that reminds students to slow down to activate rational thinking.

Step 1: The teacher can tap a bell softly. Students should use this as a cue to set down their work and be silent and still.
Step 2: Breathe in the nose on the inhale.
Step 3: Breathe out of the nose on the exhale.
Step 4: Pause. Repeat four or five times.
Step 5: Now focus on your body, scanning it with your mind.
See if you notice any tightness, stress or discomfort—or are you relaxed? Don’t judge yourself—just notice. See if you can focus on relaxing your body or mind for this moment and be right where you are now—with what you are doing in this moment.

Immediately following this practice, teachers can read a poem, exhibit a piece of art, introduce a historical event or present a cultural conflict or social concern. Students then take 5 to 10 minutes to write their reaction to what has been shared. With their rational brains activated and relaxed, their quiet minds and calm bodies have greater accessibility to their creative thinking and also to empathy.

Simple Self Check-in

Step 1: Students should sit at their desks with their eyes closed, focusing on their breathing.
Step 2: As they take a deep inhale, they should focus on filling up their lungs with air; as they exhale, they should focus on letting go of anything that is bothering them. This is about feeling the breath entering and leaving the body.
Step 3: If students find it hard to concentrate, have them count their breaths, silently, as they inhale and exhale.

Let students know that these activities can be difficult—it isn’t about “getting it right or perfect.” Taking a moment to just breathe sometimes makes the mind wander. This is normal. When it happens, you just redirect your mind back to your first intention, which is to focus on the breath. It may be necessary to help students understand that this may be simple for some and difficult for others.

Some teachers may find it useful to experiment with listening to music or if you have room, place yoga mats on the floor and have your students lay down, close their eyes and practice breathing.

Incorporating mindful techniques into your curriculum can be a critical practice for stabilizing a classroom environment and providing a more effective educational climate. Teaching students positive ways to respond to stress and pay attention is a significant addition to instruction, well worth the time and effort.

Dr. Fleshood is a Licensed Professional Counselor practicing in Ashland, Virginia, and the author of From Tweens to Teens: The Parents’ Guide To Preparing Girls For Adolescence.
Real Students, Real Success Stories

Here are two examples of how mindfulness practice can help students, both taken from my book, *From Tweens to Teens: The Parents’ Guide To Preparing Girls For Adolescence.*

**Elizabeth’s Story: Conquering the test**

Elizabeth (all names in this article are fictitious) performed well throughout her young academic career and had kept a 4.3-weighted GPA throughout high school. Feeling frustrated, angry and pressured to attend an Ivy League college, Elizabeth came to me to discuss her anxiety about taking the SATs. She had frozen each time she took them and couldn’t complete the test. After four tries, she was desperate. After several sessions of learning mindful breathing techniques, Elizabeth went into her fifth try at taking the exam and nailed it! She reported that every time she felt her body getting anxious, she picked up her pencil, pretending to read the exam, and practiced the techniques of mindful breathing. Focusing on her breath rather than her fear enabled Elizabeth to move forward with the questions, completing the exam. The panic didn’t disappear, but Elizabeth finally had the tools to not let the panic take control.

**Betsy’s Story: Dealing with bullies**

Several years ago, a 12-year old client named Betsy, who attended middle school, told me that she had been skipping a class she dreaded. Throughout the semester, several students in the class had bullied her to the extent that she was fearful of speaking when called on, even if she knew the answer. Her anxiety grew until she felt panic when she walked into the class. Betsy began to cut class and forge notes from her parents explaining her absences. I was asked to facilitate an intervention by her parents and guidance counselor.

Betsy and I began working to build a repertoire of breathing exercises she could use when she started to feel panic. By becoming aware of her anxiety and having a new response to it, Betsy was able to manage the overwhelming urge to run and hide when it hit.

With the bullies reprimanded and Betsy’s growing ability to calm the panic when triggered, she was able to think and respond more rationally. Betsy maintained a B average and successfully checked the class off her list. Her guidance counselor asked if I could teach her how to help students with breathing techniques when they became anxious, and later developed a “Brain Break” space in her office where she offered simple breathing techniques and practice skills. Students and teachers were receptive to this offering and the following year, this middle school organized a 15-minute mindfulness practice session before school, which was attended by various teachers, administrators, staff and students.

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**To Learn More**

- Jennings, Patricia. *Mindfulness for Teachers: Peace and Productivity in the Classroom.* Dr. Jennings is an Associate Professor of Education at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia.
- The Inner Resilience Program, New York. (http://innerresilience-tidescenter.org/), Dr. Linda Lantieri, director.
- Fleshood, Maria. *From Tweens to Teens: The Parents’ Guide To Preparing Girls For Adolescence.* Familius Publisher @ families.com, 2016. (mariaclarkfleshood.com).
- Apps students can download: Stop, Breathe and Think; Smiling Mind; Take a Break; Insight Meditation Timer; Headspace; Calm
On the Water

Virginia’s rivers and the Chesapeake Bay provide the professional development experience of a lifetime.

By Heather Ashley

It can be hard for teachers to find a really enjoyable summer professional development experience. Some of us take college classes; others give up summer days and evenings to attend seminars, all in the quest for relicensure points.

Last summer, I learned there are other options, including ones that are both professionally enlightening and fun. They’re not always easy to find, but worth the search.

The one I found was really an “out of the box” PD experience. It was called North Fork to the Bay, and it’s something I’ll remember for a lifetime. It was a week-long program to learn more about our local watershed, which is actually part of the larger Chesapeake Bay watershed, though I live in the Shenandoah Valley.

Because North Fork to the Bay is funded by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), it was free: All that was required was a deposit to ensure I showed up and completed the week-long adventure. I got the deposit back at the end of the week.

The educators in my group were from different localities in the watershed area, so we spent the first few days traveling in our own communities to see how each one deals with water treatment and pollution. Our group toured a sewer treatment plant in Broadway to learn the importance of such work, which we normally taken for granted. Workers there ensure the water they treat and output is naturally cleaned and replaced into our waterways. At times, in fact, it’s too clean and has to be help temporarily in ponds until it mimics the water found in our rivers and streams.

We also spoke with several local farmers, who discussed taking or not taking government money to redirect cattle from waterways. Keeping the animals from having river access, where they deposit nitrates in excrement, and instead drilling wells while fencing off the river, is greatly helping reduce pollution in the Shenandoah River. However, not all farmers are participating.

Talking about the leisure use of local waterways also rekindled in us a love for our own river. We were able to canoe through it the way our ancestors did, strengthening our connection to our waterways and things that endanger them. We noticed cattle in or along the river, the health of the fish, and the types of macroinvertebrates that call our water home, and each day we did testing to compare water health in various locations.

At midweek, it was time to join with other teachers in a group of about 20 in Reedville, Virginia, near the Chesapeake
Bay. We knew very little about what would happen the rest of the week, but quickly learned that it was both intentional and dependent on weather conditions.

In Reedville, we toured the local museum and a historic home, and learned how life along the water was still, in some ways, like it was in the past. Off the coast of the bay, menhaden fish are still heavily harvested, and we learned of the fish’s importance to the community and its use in many products we use today. Later, we gathered at a local marina to board the ferry to the Fox Island Environmental Research Center, where we’d spend the last several days of the week.

Two homes have been donated to CBF for educational use; the oldest one is a fishing lodge on what is known as Fox Island. It’s the most rustic of the two, with no air conditioning other than nature’s breeze. Accessible only by boat, the lodge is on a marshy region of the bay that’s not an island by normal definition: At low tide you can see and study the marsh, but most of the time, it looks like a camp house on stilts in the middle of the deep bay.

It was a long boat ride after leaving the Reedville area before we spotted our destination off in the distance. Think back to any childhood camp experiences and you might begin to imagine the scene. Everyone totes their things in and makes their way to one of the many bunk rooms to lay claim to a bed. You bring your own sheets, pillow and a towel, although there are no showers. We had a nice window with a portable screen you had to position without losing into the bay. Looking outside, I never saw land but I did get wonderful sunrise and sunset pictures from that window.

We were definitely off the grid, but we expected that and were prepared. Our energy and enthusiasm levels were high, so we weren’t concerned. There were solar panels, connected to golf cart batteries, on the roof, and some in our group enjoyed climbing up there, as access was made easy for maintenance purposes. Electricity was used just for important things, such as communications, a weather radio, some charging of cell phones (which were used only for picture taking as there was no phone service) and a two-way radio system linked to the nearest big island.

It was definitely rustic: Nearly nonexistent plumbing with two self-composting, waterless toilets and no sinks. The only issues were hiking the stairs at night to get to the toilets and the fear of dropping something in them, like a cell phone. (I’m pretty sure you’d never get it back—or want it.)

The dining room table was not a table at all (imagine having to haul a table to seat 20 on a boat), but a couple of sawhorses and some boards. It was a perfect solution to common big family problems, and was put up and taken down between meals. Everyone brought their own refillable water bottle, and there were plastic tumblers and bandanas to use as napkins. A 90-foot well has been drilled for fresh water and to pump it, you had to pedal a stationary bike.

Every moment we were encouraged to think scientifically. We waded in a tidal saltmarsh to identify native plants. We did water testing and species identification. We dredged the bay for oysters and baited crab traps. I learned how to determine the sex of a crab and how to determine if the crab had eggs. We learned the legal size needed to keep a crab and I know never to eat she-crab soup...ask me why...ewww. We went to Tangier and Smith islands and talked to the locals about their way of life. They truly live differently, as they depend on the bay, and they even have a different dialect. It was like a step back in time.

I sat on the large screened porch at night feeling the intense breeze from all sides, hearing a soft whistle, and trying to absorb that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience which before now, I’d never known existed. It was truly a life-changing and nature-connecting experience.

You can recreate some of this experience by visiting Reedville’s Fishermen’s Museum, and you can also catch a ferry to Smith Island (call ahead). Plan to spend most of your day there, but you can also catch a ferry to Tangier Island.

For information on the experience I had, visit the Chesapeake Bay Foundation website at www.cbf.org and search for the “Chesapeake Classrooms” program.

Ashley, a member of the Shenandoah County Education Association and former SCEA President, is the technology instructor at Sandy Hook Elementary School.
VEA Summit Tackles Shortage of Minority Teachers

Blankenship Joins VEA Staff

**Travis Blankenship** started February 1 as VEA’s new government relations specialist in the Office of Government Relations and Research. He will oversee the VEA’s work in campaigns and elections and serve as the staff liaison to the Virginia Fund for Children and Public Education, VEA’s political action committee (PAC). Before coming to the Association, Travis led the Virginia League of Conservation Voters’ candidate recommendation process and worked with that group’s PAC, and he also brings valuable General Assembly lobbying experience.
VEA Workshops: Better Training Than You'll Find Anywhere

There is no better source of professional development for Virginia's educators than the workshops offered by VEA's Office of Teaching and Learning. Our programs are designed and delivered by teachers and education support professionals who work in our schools every day.

Here is just a sampling of the Association's offerings:

- The Classroom Management Series: Effective Classroom Management, Dealing with Difficult Behaviors, and Communicating with Parents
- MODEL Teacher: Practical instructional strategies.
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Teacher Evaluation
- Bullying/Sexual Harassment Prevention
- Cultural Competence
- Conflict Resolution
- Diversity Training

VEA workshops can come to your school division. To learn more, and to request a workshop, visit www.veanea.org/workshops or call Association headquarters at 800-552-9554.

A MESSAGE FROM THE VEA PRESIDENT

We Need Help From the Bullpen

Everyone recognizes this familiar scene on baseball diamonds across America: When the situation begins to look threatening, the manager makes an appearance on the mound and replaces the pitcher, knowing that a lineup change will help get things moving forward again.

Friends, public education's situation is threatened, and we need a lineup change.

It's time—past time, really—to shuffle our lineup of elected policymakers. If we really want to see positive change for our schools, students and educators, we need to make some key changes in the people currently calling the shots in our General Assembly. This fall, in addition, we will have to change who occupies our governor's mansion, as Governor McAuliffe cannot, by state law, succeed himself.

We spent too much of our precious time and energy playing defense in this year's General Assembly session. With the legislators currently holding most of the seats in the House and Senate, we know we'll be forced to fight off proposals almost every year that are harmful to public education, such as voucher plans and state control of charter schools. When we're able to work with legislators who are truly friends of education, we can spend our time initiating and supporting proposals that actually move our schools and students forward, such as Delegate Roslyn Tyler's bill calling for Virginia to make reaching the national average salary for teachers a state goal, which passed both houses this year and was signed by the governor.

I'm tired of wasting time and resources fighting off dangerous ideas. I want to spend time working with real education supporters instead.

It's in our power to make that happen. Our collective experience, voice and influence position us to help make some critical lineup changes. Our recommendation is sought after by political candidates, and we should only extend it to those who will really stand up for public schools and educators.

Check with your local arm of the VEA's Fund for Children and Public Education to find out who those candidates are. Association members (including you, if you want to step up and take part) interview local candidates and ask probing questions about their aspirations for education, and how willing they are to see that the checks get written that will make those plans reality.

Once you're equipped with that information, don't keep it to yourself! Share it with colleagues, family members, friends, neighbors and whoever else you can. Make sure people around you know that you've chosen education as a career because you understand its importance to our future, and that elections make a critical difference in education in our state.

People in our communities need to hear this from us—who else is better qualified to tell them? No one! We're the ones building our communities and our future every day when the school bells ring.

Check in with your local Association leaders and UniServ office, and get involved!

It's time to change the lineup.
1. Download this free app at either the App Store or Google Play.
2. Log in using these codes: 100891- Your VEA member I.D.*
3. For help call (877) 489-4703

* Located on your VEA membership card or on the back cover of this journal. Look at mailing label, number starts with 000 and is just above your name.
Reaching Out to Future Teachers

College students preparing to be teachers are not only going to be your colleagues soon, they also represent the future of the profession. If there’s a chapter of the Student VEA at a college or university near you, here are some ways you can connect with your almost-colleagues:

- Offer them a workshop on a topic they either haven’t learned about in their studies, or something you know they’ll need to know more about.
- See if any of your local association’s more experienced teachers would be interested in an informal mentoring relationship with student teachers.
- Invite students to a local event. Have dinner and get to know them.
- Hold a panel discussion, along with local administrators, on how to approach the teaching job hunt.

For information on SVEA chapters in your area, contact Donna Hamilton in VEA’s Office of Teaching and Learning at DHamilton@veanea.org.

Two Charter Amendments to be Voted on at Convention

Two charter amendments are proposed for approval at this year’s VEA Delegate Assembly, and have been received the unanimous support of the VEA Board of Directors. The amendments will have the effect of creating a separate local association for VEA members at Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School in Richmond. Here are the proposals:

**CHARTER AMENDMENT # 1**
To amend Charter Article C.1. by adding “Maggie L. Walker Education Association” as a new local association.

**ARTICLE C.1.**
1. The local governance affiliates of the Association are as follows: Accomack Education Association; ... Maggie L. Walker Education Association ...

**CHARTER AMENDMENT # 2 – Companion to Charter Amendment # 1**
To amend Charter Article D.1. by adding “Maggie L. Walker Education Association” as a new local association within District M.

**ARTICLE D. 1.**
1. Active Members in the District shall elect Directors to the Board of Directors of the Association. The Districts are as follows:

   - **District M** composed of the following affiliate affiliates: Maggie L. Walker Education Association, and Richmond City Education Association of Richmond, Inc.
Angry Words and Actions: Turning Down the Heat

One of the best things educators get to do is to reassure vulnerable children that the classroom is a safe haven from bigotry and bullying. That kind of reassurance can set a student free to learn and to be him or herself. To help you do that, here are some ways you can respond to incidents of hateful words, actions and images in school, suggested by the National Education Association:

1. Be present and available. Bullying can occur anywhere in the school building or on the grounds. Be present during school transitions. Tell your students they can come to you.

2. Intervene! If you witness bullying, racist slurs or name-calling, stop the incident immediately. Separate the students. Get help from other staff if needed. Ask targeted students if they’re OK.

3. Give clear messages. Students who bully or commit acts of hate must hear the message that their behavior is wrong and harms others. Targeted students must hear the message that caring adults will protect them.

4. Be calm. Don’t require students to apologize or make amends right after you stop the incident. You may not know the full story. Keep everyone calm as you first focus on safety.

5. Support the targeted students. Make eye contact with the targeted students, demonstrate empathy, and reassure them that what happened was not their fault.

6. Tell students never to ignore bullying or hateful actions. Let bystanders who stood up for targeted students know that you admire their courage and thank them. Give other bystanders examples of how to intervene appropriately the next time (such as getting help from an adult, telling the person to stop).

7. Investigate, document, follow up. After the incident, question all involved individually. If appropriate, impose immediate consequences on students who bullied; provide them necessary support, such as counseling. Work with colleagues to improve your school climate to build a culture that prevents bullying.

8. Be a caring advocate. Make sure students are supported and have the resources they need well beyond the incident. Involve other staff who can provide guidance and emotional support.

Hincher, a member of the Fairfax Education Association, teaches at Hybla Valley Elementary School.

Hunger Pains: They Really Hurt

A child who comes to school hungry will probably suffer more harmful effects than just the distraction of a rumbling stomach. According to studies published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Pediatrics and the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, children dealing with hunger issues:

- Have lower test scores in math and are more likely to have to repeat a grade.
- Are more likely to be hyperactive, absent and tardy, in addition to having more behavioral and attention problems than other children.
- Are more likely to have received special education services or mental health counseling than children who do not experience hunger.

One of the most effective programs schools have to help hungry students is Breakfast in the Classroom. To learn more, visit www.breakfastintheclassroom.org.
Help for Overcoming Eating Disorders

As the Coordinator for one of Chesterfield County’s Intensive Day Programs, Beth Ayn Stansfield has no shortage of experience in dealing with young people in crisis. But several years ago when her daughter, then 13, was diagnosed with an eating disorder, even Beth Ayn didn’t really understand what she and her daughter were up against.

Not only did she discover how life-changing and even life-threatening eating disorders are, and how grueling the recovery process is, Beth Ayn also confronted a lack of resources to help both families and professional caregivers.

In response, she created Stay Strong Virginia, a nonprofit dedicated to steering hurting individuals, families, caregivers, health professionals and schools to the eating disorder resources they need. Stay Strong offers a lineup of services, including e-newsletters, support groups, a lending library, videos, links and educational programs for school staff and community members.

To learn more about eating disorders and to begin helping a colleague, student and family along on the journey to recovery, visit www.staystrongvirginia.org.

Straight Talk

“Public education funding from our state is still less than it was in FY 2009, not even factoring in inflation…Other areas of state funding have been restored to pre-2009 levels, but public education has not. That is unacceptable, and very honestly, it will take years for schools to recover financially even though pressures from the state to meet instructional goals demand more resources.”

— James T. Roberts, superintendent of Chesapeake Public Schools

KUDOS KOLUMN

Roanoke County’s Murray Earns Milken Award

Roanoke County Education Association member Lindsay Murray, a fourth grade teacher at W.E. Cundiff Elementary School, has received one of 2016-17’s Milken Educator Awards, a national honor that comes with $25,000 in cash. She was recognized, in part, for her work in STEM education and for encouraging her students in engineering.

Milken honorees are chosen in early to mid-career for what they have achieved and for the promise of what they will accomplish. Both VEA and NEA encourage members to make their voices heard by emailing members of Congress as education issues are being debated. Among the 50 members who responded and sent the most messages nationwide in 2016 are four from VEA: They are Annabel Gunsalus of VEA-Retired, Joy Kirk of the Frederick County Education Association, Tina Theuerkauf of the Gloucester Education Association, and Rosemary Walker of the Lee County Education Association.

More than 223,000 emails were sent to Congress by VEA/NEA members last year.

James Madison University has named Chesterfield Education Association member Tara Brunyansky, a chemistry teacher at James River High School, its 2016 High School Teacher of the Year. Each year, a university committee chooses a high school chemistry teacher based on information gathered from JMU chemistry department students.

Arlington Education Association member Melanie McCabe, an English teacher at Yorktown High School, has been named the winner of the 2016 University of New Orleans Publishing Lab Prize for her work, “His Other Life: Searching for My Father, His First Wife and Tennessee Williams.”

Many years after her father’s death, McCabe discovered that Tennessee Williams had written her father into one of his plays, and her award is in recognition of her research and writing on her father’s life.

www.veanea.org | APRIL 2017
NEA Grants: Footing the Bill?

If you’ve been looking for a way to get a classroom project or a professional development activity up and running, the NEA Foundation offers a variety of grants that could be the perfect solution. Here are a couple ways the Foundation can help:

**Learning and Leadership Grants** provide opportunities for teachers and education support professionals to engage in high-quality professional development and to lead their colleagues in professional growth. Grant amounts are $2,000 for individuals and $5,000 for groups studying together.

**Student Achievement Grants** also provide $2,000 or $5,000 to improve the academic achievement of students by engaging in critical thinking and problem-solving activities that deepen knowledge of standards-based subject matter. The work should also improve students’ habits of inquiry, self-directed learning and critical reflection.

All applicants must be Association members, and each program has its own application guidelines and deadlines, which can be found at the NEA Foundation’s website, www.NEA-Foundation.org.

This Form of VHS is Definitely Not Old-Fashioned

Who better to help you teach your students about Virginia’s history and significance than the Virginia Historical Society (VHS), a Richmond-based organization whose very mission is “connecting people to America’s past through the unparalleled story of Virginia”?

VHS has a wealth of resources for you and your students, including:

- Field trips, both physical and virtual
- A digital timeline of Virginia history
- A collection of historical photographs
- Videos developed to match up with Virginia’s history SOLs
- A history competition for students in grades 6-12
- Professional development opportunities for teachers

To see how VHS can help in your instruction, visit www.vahistorical.org.

What Keeps Us Going

The most rewarding aspects of being a teacher, from a national survey conducted in 2016 by the nonpartisan Center on Education Policy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Rewarding Aspect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>82%</td>
<td>Making a difference in students’ lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69%</td>
<td>Seeing my students succeed academically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>Never a boring day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26%</td>
<td>Making a difference in my school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Making a difference in the larger community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Collaborating with other teachers and administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Nontraditional work schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Competitive benefits (pension, health insurance, tuition subsidies) for my region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Competitive salary for my region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers could choose up to three responses. From the report, *Listen to Us: Teacher Voices and Views*. 
Encouraging and Effective Feedback

Feedback to students works best when it’s specific. A general compliment will make a student feel good, but may not offer information on just what went right. Try to choose words that show respect for your students’ hard work and effort and, when possible, offer help as they move forward. Here are a few examples of statements that will not only lift a student’s spirits, but offer some solid information for future use, too:

- “I can tell you put a lot of thought into that answer because ____________.”
- “I’m proud of the way you did that work. I like how you ____________.”
- “You were well prepared, and it sure paid off.”
- “Great solution. How did you come to that understanding?”
- “I can tell you’ve been working on this by ____________.”
- “You’re really making good progress. Perhaps you could try ____________.”
- “Your topic sentence is clear and attention-getting. Use it as a model for your other paragraphs.”
- “You’re on the right track—have you reviewed ____________?”

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nea Member Benefits
In the shadow of a seven-foot tall bronze statue of visionary Martin Luther King, Jr., teachers, public officials and other education stakeholders gathered in downtown Roanoke to share dreams of their own. At the top of the list: Higher wages for teachers, more financial support from state lawmakers, and putting kids first.

The “Bridge the Gap” rally, one of several VEA organized across Virginia in February, attracted about 100 participants on an unseasonably warm winter afternoon.

Collective voices sought adequate funding for state-mandated programs and additional funding to make teachers’ salaries in Virginia commensurate with those in other states. Franklin County School Board Chairman G.B. Washburn, Jr. described our broken state funding model, which directs each locality to fund 40 percent of its school system budget. The remainder, in theory, should come from state and federal contributions.

“It is a cookie-cutter, bare minimum formula,” Washburn said.

In the case of Franklin County, Washburn said the county provides 60 percent of the school division’s budget. The extra 20 percent the county must come up with costs about $11 million, Washburn said.

Voices akin to Washburn’s sought funding for state-mandated programs and made pleas to lift the burden of funding from localities. One speaker was Delegate Sam Rasoul, D-Roanoke, a high school graduating classmate of mine. He and I attended the same schools from seventh grade through graduation.

He shared a story at the rally about how the teachers he remembers most are the ones who provided more to him than lessons in areas such as language arts or math. Sam said his third grade teacher taught him how to cure his hiccups. His fifth grade teacher inspired a lifelong love of running. In 11th grade, an English teacher, who also taught me, schooled Sam on the finer points of public speaking.

Sam could not remember the topic of the talk he gave to our teacher, Dee Sheffer. But he did remember painstakingly practicing for the five-minute speech.

“I remember her saying I did such a great job, but it was only three minutes,” Sam recounted with a wide grin.

He didn’t recall feeling defeated or deflated by the experience. Instead, he remembered working closely with our teacher to improve his speech.

I don’t remember the same assignment, though I may be subconsciously blocking it because public speaking is not my forte. What I do remember about Mrs. Sheffer’s class was that it was an encouraging, comfortable environment in which we read classic literature, such as To Kill a Mockingbird and The Crucible. I remember her taking the junior class to see The Crucible when the movie hit theaters in 1996.

I bumped into Mrs. Sheffer a few years ago and she reminded me of something I had forgotten about her class. She had taken points off a paper because I misspelled judgment, adding an extra e. I argued for the points back by producing a dictionary entry that showed an Old English version spelled my way. Thankfully a couple decades later, Mrs. Sheffer and I can laugh about my tenacity.

I remember her as the kind of teacher who really cared about her students. Her job was not over when she finished a lesson or when the last bell of the day rang. She cared about each one of us and wanted to instill life skills that would stick with us beyond the walls of our school.

Mrs. Sheffer is the kind of teacher who probably worked for “free,” as Roanoke County School Board representative Don Butzer said. He was referring to the teachers who put in time before school hours, dip into their own pockets to purchase classroom supplies, and stay up late grading papers and planning lessons—only to do it again the next day.

It seems like a no-brainer to me. A state like Virginia, which ranks in the top 10 wealthiest states in the country, should also rank in the top 10 when it comes to funds invested per student. Yet, data indicates Virginia ranks in the bottom half of states in per-pupil spending.

It is time for all who hold an interest in public education to call on our delegates and senators to “bridge the gap.” Put our kids first. Our future depends on it.

Cutright (courtcut@gmail.com), a member of the Roanoke County Education Association, teaches English at Northside Middle School.
1. Download this free app at either the App Store or Google Play.
2. Log in using these codes: 100891 - Your VEA member I.D.*
3. For help call (877) 489-4703

POETRY OUT LOUD encourages youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and performance. This exciting program helps students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage.

Watch the state finals on WCVE PBS Thursday, APRIL 6 at 9 PM.

A production of community idea stations® WCVE

In partnership with VEA VIRGINIA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION Virginia Commission for the Arts
Break free from student loan debt

Get on the road to financial success
Horace Mann offers a suite of solutions to help manage student loan debt.

We can help you explore ways to remove or reduce monthly payments and redirect any savings to retirement to help you get on the road to financial success.

**Remove**
Forgiveness programs may remove some or all of student loan debt.

**Reduce**
Repayment and refinance options may reduce monthly payments.

**Redirect**
Redirect any savings to help you achieve financial goals.

For more information, contact your local agent or visit horsemann.com/workshops

Student loan refinancing is provided through an unaffiliated third-party financial services firm. Refinancing a federal student loan will make the borrower ineligible for loan forgiveness programs and could lengthen the repayment period of the loan. The borrower’s overall repayment amount may be higher than the loans they are refinancing even if their monthly payments are lower.