

# NORTANews

April 2007

## NRTA Looks to Federal, State Leaders for Help



NRTA President Robin Brennan with Congressman John Hall (center) and NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi

I had the honor to meet on April 12 with New York Congressman John Hall and Dick Iannuzzi, President of the New York State United Teachers to seek help in tax relief for the North Rockland community. Both New York State leaders pledged their assistance, attention and voice to the North Rockland community, the District, teachers and students.

According to the New York State BEDS data, approximately 43% of our teachers, 90% of our teaching assistants and support staff live in the North Rockland school district. Several of our North Rockland graduates return to teach and work in our District. Not only do we share the tax burden here and in other parts of the county, we are now experiencing the impact of the Mirant decision

on the quality of education for our students.

Retirees are not being replaced nor are new positions being added. Our class sizes are increasing and our supplies are limited. Courses and programs we have worked hard to develop are being cut due to the austerity budget. Our salaries and benefits are in line with, and in some cases less than, surrounding districts. We are standing equally committed to our students and the North Rockland community along with our need and right to provide for our own families and loved ones.

A more subtle development may ultimately cause the rapid decline of the District we have worked so hard to build. The inability to attract and maintain the best (please see page 6)

# Life (Science)...After The Layoffs

**By Edward K. Hurley, Ed. D**

Ah, the 1990-1991 school year. I had been teaching physical education in North Rockland for seven years, having been hired in the fall of 1984. I had earned my tenure in 1987, and even in the mid-1980s I received, as so many of us did in those days, the proverbial "excess letter". When the big lay-offs finally came, I was teaching physical education at Farley Middle School. I remember the rumor mill had been running rampant for nearly a year within the district.

Budget cuts, austerity budget, job cuts! Nearly everyone talked of the "seniority list" and their position on the "totem pole". Many senior staff-members counted their blessings. For me, and many other junior-staff members, the bottom was pretty easy to touch. We were essentially standing at the base of the "totem pole", and sure to be gone the following year. Many non-teaching friends suggested I was safe from the lay-offs because I was tenured. It is unfortunate, however, that the common misconception of the teacher tenure system is that it prevents job loss. While this is partially true, what remains consistently misunderstood is that tenure protects a teacher's right of due process. Tenure does not prevent a job loss in the wake of budget cuts. For those of us faced with the loss of our teaching jobs it was a simple fact of life...no money for salaries...no jobs.

The "excess letters" of the 1980s were routinely given out at the end of each school year. Those of us who received the letters sweated it out over the summer with the usual result of being called back to our teaching positions by August. Well, this time, many of us were not so lucky. Nearly 70 teachers received excess letters by the end of the spring of 1991. Approximately half were never called back. My phone never rang.

I distinctly remember blaming then Governor Mario Cuomo for his ineptitude in passing a budget and distributing the school funds in a timely fashion to the district. Whether I was on or off base in my blame didn't matter. After seven years in the North Rockland Central School District, I was without a job.

There were no immediate plans for what I was going to do. The summer of 1991 came and went with me spending my time looking for a teaching job. I interviewed for teaching jobs in districts in upstate New York. I sent resumes across the country to districts as far



away as Seattle and Los Angeles. I seriously considered a job in educational sales. All to no avail.

I periodically kept in touch with the district's personnel department. I reaffirmed with them that my records were up-to-date and that they recognized the areas in which I held permanent New York State certification. My only real wish was to remain teaching in North Rockland and I figured that while the door had closed on my past career as a physical education teacher then perhaps a window would eventually open that would lead to a change. There were many occasions when it felt as if the window was permanently painted shut and no hope for anything in teaching.

The new school year was about to begin and the idea of being unemployed remained quite depressing. Normally, for me, each new school year began with summer volleyball practice sessions at North Rockland High School. I was coaching for many years under the tutelage of Mike Carroll, the NRHS Girls Varsity Volleyball Coach. I told Mike I would not be coaching with him in the fall. I expressed my need to find immediate employment and suggested he'd be better off finding another coach. Mr. Carroll asked that I come to the high school to talk with him. He convinced me to remain coaching and to substitute teach within the district. Mike in his wisdom believed that things would get better. I didn't think that was possible.

The 1991-1992 school year started. Within two days of the start of school I received a call from the Teacher Registry. North Rockland High School needed a Long Term Substitute (LTS) bilingual biology teacher. Having never before "subbed", I was apprehensive about taking the position. Still, I immediately accepted the job, knowing that I needed to do the best job possible under the circumstances.

My students were wonderful. They struggled to learn to speak and understand English and biology. I struggled to learn to speak and understand Spanish, teach my students biology, and...to keep my job! I began taking Spanish classes at night, thinking that perhaps bilingual science was what I would eventually be teaching, if everything worked out. Well, by the end of December 1991, I had relinquished the position. The district's federal grant, which supported the bilingual science program, required a certified bilingual teacher, which I was not. Sadly I said goodbye and good luck to my bilingual biology students.

The holiday season was now upon us and I was once again without a job wondering what would happen

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when January rolled around. One-step forward and two steps back seemed a good way to describe what I had gone through. After losing the position at the high school, Dennis Tracey, the past NRTA President, requested that I be called immediately for any daily substitute teaching positions that became available. And as promised, I was called nearly every day for the remainder of the 1991 – 1992 school year. I taught nearly every subject and grade level. I met new staff members and made new friends during that “subbing year”. I even covered for Kevin Metcalf, who at the time was an LTS in Social Studies at FMS.

With the close of the 1991-1992 school year and the summer of 1992 upon us I was back at square one once again. I had no job prospects. There were a few job interviews, but nothing promising. My continued hope was that things would turn around soon. There were rumors circulating throughout the district related to retirements and jobs openings. Mostly “rumor mill” talk. Then one day in August 1992, the HMS Principal, Ray Hagadorn, called me at my home. He asked that I come speak with him the next day about an opening.

Upon meeting with Mr. Hagadorn, he suggested the position required that I teach the primary subject of 7<sup>th</sup> grade CORE life science, 7<sup>th</sup> grade CORE math, and 6th grade health. I jokingly asked Mr. Hagadorn whether there were any additional subjects he’d like me to teach along with those three! I accepted the job, and walked away feeling both excited and cautiously optimistic. The science position was tenure tracked, and as I was already tenured in physical education, I would need to prove my competence in science over only a two-year period, as opposed to three. After two years at HMS I received tenure in science. Two years after that, in the fall of 1996, I made my way to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade life science department at FMS.

Sixteen years have come and gone since I was laid-off. It’s now 2007. I’m still happily teaching 7<sup>th</sup> grade life science at FMS. I’m 40-something and many of my friends and colleagues have retired, and those who are still teaching have “grown-up” along side of me and know what many North Rockland teachers went through almost two decades ago, which at times feels as if it was yesterday.

Sadly the budget pendulum has swung back again. What goes around always seems to come around. I’ve reminisced many times about the lay-offs of 1991, and now the district is once again faced with a budget crisis. Our NRTA President, Robin Brennan, recently expressed that “we are facing the possibility of budgetary constraints that may further decrease staff through attrition, possible transfers to other buildings, increase class size, decrease the number of formally classified

**www.nrta.net**

Check out the Website home of the North Rockland Teachers’ Association

- Upcoming Events Calendar
- Executive Council Links
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  - NORTANews

*Please e-mail any comments or suggestions to  
Reyna Texler, NRTA Webmaster*

students, decrease the presence of security and SRO officers, and eliminate the arts, music, and sports programs, summer school, educational programs, staff development and field trips” (NORTANews, January 2007).

As a building rep I’ve already been approached by some of my colleagues who are worried about seniority. Still others don’t seem to mind. Some have said that they have “nothing to worry about” because they’ve got a number of years in beyond their tenure, which strikes me as cavalier. In the teaching field there are no guarantees. We should all care about what the future holds for us, and our students, under the present circumstances. As Robin Brennan stated “it is important that you understand the extent of the crisis we are facing” (NORTANews, 2007).

Sixteen years ago I was unsure of what the future held for me. I’ve taught science longer now than I taught physical education within the district. The realization early on in my career that there were and continue to be no guarantees is a fact. Work hard to make a successful career in teaching and take nothing for granted. I returned to a new teaching career with no regrets, no remorse, and no grudges. I continue to understand how hard the NRTA and the district worked together to bring back, myself, as well as many of my colleagues who were let go almost 20 years ago.

I haven’t forgotten that year of turmoil, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown. The emotional, physical, and financial strain caused by a job loss can be devastating. Who’s to blame this time around doesn’t matter. There certainly were, and continue to be, no guarantees. One thing I did learn throughout the years, which I remind myself of often, is when a door closes a window opens. Nothing really profound. Just optimism on my part. Please get involved in the NRTA. Attend the NRTA General Membership Meetings. Do what you can when your union asks for your help. Because this time, my friends, we may all need to help raise the window together.

## The real impact of increased class size

By Richard Herrmann - Valley Stream Teachers Association

When school boards believe they must cut costs in order to hold the line on school taxes, all too often they look to reducing staff since salaries obviously are the major component in any budget for a service industry.

Thus, teachers are excised or needed additional new ones not hired — either choice usually resulting in larger class sizes.

So how does even a small increase in class size impact the workload of many teachers? To illustrate this effect, take a look at what happens in the Valley Stream Teachers Association, which has as its goal an average class size policy of 25 students. By adding three more students per section, a teacher with five classes and a total of 125 pupils last year, now has 15 more for a total of 140 this year. To an English teacher, for example, this addition becomes the equivalent of adding several work days to his or her school year. How?

If the English teacher assigns three compositions per marking period, for a total of 12 for the year, that instructor is analyzing and grading an additional 180 more papers. Yet, according to the National Council of English Teachers, it should take about 10 minutes to grade a typical essay thor-

oughly — some take more, some less.

These 180 additional papers multiplied by 10 minutes (on average) equal 30 hours or the equivalents of nearly five more work days.

This computation does not include grading student revisions, nor does it include the grading of additional tests, report card computations, parent conferences and so forth, the sum of which would further extend the work year.

Moreover, it does not include the undesirable consequences of crowded classrooms, the potential for more discipline problems, the diminishment of individualized attention and help for students who need both, nor the negative effect on staff morale. Classroom teachers in the other disciplines can make similar cases for their subject and workloads. When a school board and a superintendent make what they often characterize as the "difficult decision" to reduce staff, even though doing so leads to many larger classes and an extended school year for many teachers, we have to wonder how much they truly care about all the staff they employ or the students they represent.

**This commentary originally appeared in the VSTA Newsletter.**

## Another "Excess"-ive Story

Billy Martin, Willow Grove Physical Education teacher, was hired by the North Rockland Central School District in August, 1984 and was excused after 7 years with the district.

In May, 1991, Martin lost his position at Farley Middle due to a state budget crisis. He was one of 39 teachers that received "pink slips" that year.

Fortunately, he was one of the "lucky" ones, as he was hired by the Rye Neck School District, albeit at a cut in pay. The cut in pay and commute from his New Windsor residence forced him and his wife, Cheryl, to sell their home and move with their two children, Samantha and Danny, to his in-laws home in Westchester.

After a year of service in Rye Neck, and lots of rumors of his return to North Rockland, Coach Martin did return, as a 6th grade Language Arts teacher at Haverstraw Middle School. (*As per our contract, excused teachers must be offered the next opening in their certification areas.*)

The following year, a PE opening came up and Martin moved from the walled classroom back to the PE classroom. His spent a year at Neary Elementary, before returning to Farley Middle, where he remained until 2003.

According to Martin, it was the collective strength of the NRTA which helped him pull through. "(Former NRTA president) Dennis Tracey and the building reps made sure that those of us excused were OK and he kept us aware of any jobs coming available."

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(from cover)

teachers may turn out to be an unseen, insidious force at work. Our new teachers might be more likely to be actively looking for work elsewhere because job security is not assured. New graduates looking for work may not apply to North Rockland due to our budget crisis. A school district without competitive contracts or a passing budget degrades rapidly. It is a simple task to look to neighboring areas where this has happened to predict the property value decline to follow.

The North Rockland Central School District has power plants in both towns within the District: at Bowline in Haverstraw and at Lovett in Stony Point. While the utilities were regulated, the schools and towns enjoyed a host of benefits for the community.

The loss of assessments on the Mirant properties resulted in dramatic tax increases for homeowners last year and will cause a further increase this year. This unfortunate reality was not caused by nor should it negatively impact the education of our children.

The NRTA and the District are actively advocating for assistance with special State aid to help with North Rockland's situation. In addition, there are two bills pending, A6135 in the Assembly (introduced by the late Assemblyman Zebrowski) and S2445 in the Senate

(introduced by Senator Morahan). These are the bills that will reduce, phased in over five years, the financial setback that is the result of Mirant's actions.

North Rockland is a community of hard working people from the poorest to the wealthiest. Teachers and the school support personnel continue to be a force for improvement. Whether we live or work in North Rockland, we pride ourselves on our contribution to this small place on the Earth.

The North Rockland Teachers' Association will spend our time working towards solutions to benefit our children. As we all are aware, the rhetoric of self-promoting agents of dissension and distrust did not save anyone a dime and ultimately divided our strong community. Gaining the ear and the commitment of help from Congressman John Hall and President Dick Iannuzzi is our positive effort to heal the community. Our goal is unity and seeking real reform and monetary relief to stop the destruction of the District we have spent our passion and energy building.

In Solidarity,

Robin Brennan  
President NRTA

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Wednesday, May 30th - NRTA General Membership Meeting**

NYSUT President Dick Iannuzzi, 4 p.m.  
at North Rockland High School

**Saturday, June 2nd - North Rockland Family Fun Day, 5 p.m. at**  
Bowline Park, Haverstraw 5K Run and Concerts

**Tuesday, June 26th - 10th Annual Scholarship Golf Outing**

**Sunday, October 21st - Making Strides for Breast Cancer Walk,**  
Woodbury Commons

**Friday, March 7, 2008 - NRTA Dream Team vs.**  
Harlem Rockets, North Rockland High School Annex Gym






NRTA President Robin Brennan (fourth from left) with Sen. Hillary Clinton discussing NCLB legislation.

## Rockland Group Travels to Washington to Lobby for Reform in the No Child Left Behind Act

By Robin Brennan, NRTA President

I was honored to be one of a group of educators, led by Rockland County Legislature Chairwoman Harriet Cornell, to travel to Washington DC this month. We met with Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and other key officials to discuss the upcoming reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Members of the Rockland Education Collaborative, which is chaired by Chairwoman Cornell and Rockland Community College President Dr. Cliff Wood, presented the findings of their landmark report: *Rockland's Voices: Making the Case for Amending the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002*.

The group attended private meetings with Senator Clinton and U.S. Representative Eliot Engel, and conducted a briefing for key education staffers for New York's Congressional delegation as well as the Washington Office of Governor Eliot Spitzer and the New York State Department of Education.

In addition to Chairwoman Cornell and Dr. Wood, the group included Dr. Valencia Douglas, Superintendent of the Nyack School District; Dr. Mary Jean Marsico, Assistant Superintendent and Director of Special Education for Rockland BOCES; David Fried, former Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in the East Ramapo School District; Dr. Ed Fuhrman, Deputy Superintendent for the Nanuet School District; Robin Brennan, President of the North Rockland Teachers' Association; Donna Ramundo, President of the Nyack Teachers' Association; and Kathleen Meehan Do, Chief of Staff for the Rockland Education Collaborative.

The Collaborative includes 30 members representing administrators, parents, school board members and teachers from the county's school districts, as well as education-affiliated organizations, elected officials and others interested in the future of education in the United States. Dr. Brian Monahan, Superintendent of Haverstraw –Stony Point School District and Dr. Debi Thomas, Director of the Rockland Teachers' Center have been involved from the inception of the collaborative. Chairwoman Cornell had extended an invitation in 2005 to all interested in having Rockland's experiences and views considered in the national debate over reauthorization and how best to educate children.

To read the report, please go to [www.co.rockland.ny.us/Legislature/RockVoicesnclb.pdf](http://www.co.rockland.ny.us/Legislature/RockVoicesnclb.pdf)