

# The REPORTER

Brandon • Pittsford • Proctor •

Lake Dunmore, Leicester, Whiting, Sudbury

\*\*\*\*\*CAR-RT LOT\*\*R-004  
B000485 A 10/19/22 L 2 8 4  
RUTLAND NORTHEAST SU  
ATTN: JEANNE COLLINS  
49 COURT DR  
BRANDON VT 05733-6407

Vol. 26, No. 44

Wednesday, November 3, 2021

75c

## RNESU: Yes, schools are stressed, but they're dealing

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — To say schools across the state are stressed is an understatement. That they are in crisis is a more accurate description, and one that school officials don't shy away from. But it doing so, it's not to say that academic progress is not being made for a vast majority of the students.

In a 90-minute conversation this Monday with RNeSU Superintendent Jeanné Collins, Lothrop Elementary Principal Debbie Alexander and Lothrop Guidance counselor Jed Pauls we discussed what difficulties the schools are facing, student dysregulation, and other issues of student misbehavior — as well as student successes.

The take-away is that the Covid pandemic has amplified a lot of stresses that are typical in any year and in any school system, but it's the staff shortages that have caused the student-teacher support system to break down and cause

moments of havoc at area schools.

"Right now, we are very, very — how many very's can I say — short-staffed," said Collins. "Right now we're having problems finding substitutes. We have no back-up to come on when

teachers or support personnel are out and that has caused a great deal of stress on the faculty and administration. We have a shortage of bus drivers. Right now the system is very stressed."

On that particular Monday, 17

staff at the Otter Valley Union high school were out on various forms of leave, sickness or quarantines. What that does is limit the ability of the rest of the staff to address individual student needs when dysregulation occurs.

Collins explained schools typically identify about 5-7 % of the student body in any school that has a particular need to more fully develop at any given time. Those needs could be academic — say, a

(See *Schools' dealing*, Page 6)



### Tough defense

THE OTTER DEFENSE held Mill River in check throughout much of their quarterfinal contest, stopping the Minuteman's Ross Badgley on this run. Badgley would later break open a 44-yard-run for a touchdown, but it wasn't enough as the Otters prevailed 12-6 in a game in which the second half was played in a light rain.

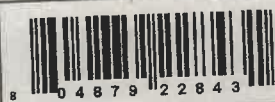
Reporter photo/Angelo Lynn

## GET READY: VT minimum wage jumps to \$12.55 in 2022

Montpelier, Vt. — The Vermont Department of Labor has announced an increase to the State's minimum wage. Beginning January 1, 2022, the State's minimum wage will become \$12.55 per hour. This is an increase of \$0.80 from the current minimum wage of \$11.75.

This annual adjustment also impacts the minimum wage for tipped employees. The Basic Tipped Wage Rate for service, or "tipped employees," equals 50% of the full minimum wage. On January 1, 2022, the tipped minimum wage will increase from \$5.88 to \$6.28 per hour.

(See *Minimum wage*, Page 16)



## 'Trash-talk' allegedly used racial slur at OV/MR game

BRANDON — RNeSU Superintendent Jeanné Collins released a statement on Monday, Nov. 1 referring to an alleged incident at the OVUHS-Mill River High School football game in which players may have used racial slurs in an escalated instance of trash-talking among the players, Collins said. In a statement posted on the school's website, Collins wrote; "On Saturday, October 30, 2021 it was reported to Otter Valley and Mill River school officials

that there were allegations of racial slurs being used by athletes during a playoff football game. Athletes reported escalating "trash talk" during the game, and the allegations of racial slurs were brought to school leaders' attention after the game was completed.

"The Vermont Principals' Association's Third Party Investigative resources will be utilized immediately and an investigation will commence as quickly as possible to determine if there

were any violations of school district Hazing, Harassment, and

Bullying policies. (See *'Trash-talk'*, Page 16)

## Statewide policy to address sports incidents

Editor's note: This story was filed in mid-October, establishing a school policy to address verbal abuse during athletic events.

BY PETER D'AURIA, VTDIGGER

Vermont school officials are strengthening procedures for reporting and investigating racist and sexist abuse during sporting events after a series of incidents around the state caused alarm.

In early October, allegations of hate speech at high school sports games have shed light on the widespread harassment that Vermont student-athletes face during games. (See *Statewide policy*, Page 16)



# Schools' dealing

(Continued from Page 1)

little extra help in math, reading or writing — or it could be development in an emotional context.

"We work with kids ages 3 and up," Alexander said. "And part of our job is to teach kids academics and part of it is to teach kids how to cope with various situations and emotions." Teachers can't get to the academics, she said, "if the kids don't know how to cope with their emotions and stressful situations."

It's typical, Alexander and Pauls said, especially for younger kids in elementary schools, to act out their emotions and not yet have the skills to articulate their feelings or to control their emotions in a satisfactory way. To address those inevitable situations, schools develop work plans for each student with their teachers — most of which are successful at

preventing outbreaks or what Collins said used to be called "temper tantrums."

"These are often kids that just need a break before something escalates into a problem," Collins explained, noting that teachers are trained to notice when a student might be getting agitated and to shift their focus in a different direction to defuse the problem. Sometimes a teacher might ask that student to take a break by doing an errand to get them out of the classroom, or a member of the support staff may come in to engage one-on-one with the student, or in rarer cases, the classroom might adjourn to a different area of the school for a task or different focus to let that student chill and regroup.

Support staff is also critical in keeping a check on students, particularly para-educators and spe-

cial needs educators, and when that support staff is short-handed, it means teachers (or their substitutes) have that much more to handle.

When schools are fully staffed, substitutes are lined up, and support staff are able to address student needs throughout the week, student behavior is typically not an issue. That's not to say, students don't misbehave or are, in today's parlance, dysregulated, but that it is handled quickly by support staff and others.

But when the back-up system is broken, it does present substantial problems.

Today, Collins said, "that back-up system is broken."

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHALLENGES

At Lothrop Elementary School rumors of a recent incident has spread throughout the community that a dysregulated student "trashed a classroom" and struck out at a teacher or administrator.

In today's climate, it's the type of incident that is likely to make headlines as an example of the dire state of affairs facing the state's schools.

But talk to the teachers, principals and administrators involved and the outlook is completely different.

"Every kid that we serve is going through a developmental change," said Pauls, Lothrop's guidance counselor. "Add those normal stresses of change onto staff shortages, changes at home with parents who may not be at work or working remotely from home, and the stress is magnified. Then add a global pandemic on top of that and it amplifies everything."

"Tantrums are a good description of what we're seeing right now," Pauls said. "Everything is just a little shakier, right now. (The pandemic) adds to the uncertainty and the instability."

That said, Pauls added, "...most kids are doing a good job" of handling those stresses. "They're developing resilience, they're help-

ing each other, they're learning new skills, developing patience and understanding of each other."

Alexander made a slightly different observation.

"A small number of kids come to us with emotional issues to resolve," Alexander said, "as well as reading and writing challenges. And with all kids their skills develop at different speeds." Some kids pick it right up, she said, while "others take a few years to overcome what could be lagging emotional skills." But such dysregulation, she said, usually resolves itself by the middle grades, which is 5th and 6th grade students.

The key to such development among students is the work plan developed by administrators, the teacher and the support staff. The students are gauged by how much progress they are making, and how well they are learning to channel their emotions in productive ways. Teachers and support staff meet as much as weekly to make sure students are progressing, and if not, they might need to adjust their work plans.

In today's schooling, it's one of the three pillars of a school's educational plan for each student: that is, measuring academic performance, engagement, and social-emotional assessment.

That's why, as Collins noted, school budgets have been on the increase throughout the past decade. Not only are schools being asked to provide more social-emotional support for reasons outside the school, but it's also because educators have discovered a child's emotional stability and strength is a key part of insuring students are prepared to learn. And that was years prior to the pandemic.

In the pandemic, that need has only become more apparent.

## SOLUTIONS?

Despite the fact that the fatigue from the pandemic is higher even than last year, the RNeSU school administrators we talked with aren't pessimistic looking forward. That's for two reasons: staffing problems will eventually be resolved, and the community support, they say, has been gratifying.

"I have to say that our families in Pittsford have been incredibly supportive, compassionate and understanding that we all have to tackle these issues and challenges together," Alexander said. "I feel very fortunate to be able to say that."

Added Collins: "We're asking way more of our parents than they are asking of us."

Collins and Alexander also praised the role school nurses

have played during the pandemic.

"Our school nurses have really stepped up," Collins said. "They've been these hubs of creativity and clarity." That's important when determining whether students or staff are sick, or contagious, and what that might mean for quarantining an individual, class or entire school. Recently, for example, Neshobe Elementary had to close for three days because of a Covid outbreak, a decision that was made in concert with the school nurse, principal and superintendent. Such Covid outbreaks also consume added hours in the day. Each instance, Alexander said, requires an additional 4-7 hours to work through.

And those incidents have happened more frequently than most of us know.

"I'd say, on average, we have one or more incidents of Covid every day within the district," Collins said, adding that the schools are determined to keep students in class as much as they can, while also being safe.

Throughout all the challenges, the practice of restorative work is the principle that seems to keep teachers, counselors and administrators hopeful. The principle is simple enough: if a student acts out, the solution is not punitive, but to work with that student so he or she learns from that behavior.

That very practice often takes one-on-one work with support staff and/or the teacher. But it's also the difference between developing a student's emotional growth or perhaps stunting it. In the old days, Collins said, students were disciplined in ways that more recent research suggests was more harmful than helpful. But it's also why when the support system breaks down, havoc can spike.

The question, Collins said, is to ask what is discipline. Today, she said, discipline means holding students accountable and teaching them how to learn from incidents in which they didn't behave well.

With that acknowledged, Collins, Alexander and Pauls all emphasized that the majority of students in the school district were doing well. The occasional incident will continue to happen, they acknowledged, and will be magnified because the student support system is understaffed. And while beefing up staff is a straightforward solution, it's still not easily resolved.

"For the first time in my professional career as a school administrator," Collins said, "having money to hire people is not the problem. We have the money. We just can't find the people. That's our biggest challenge."

**SHOP EARLY**  
**NOVEMBER IS THE NEW DECEMBER**  
**BE-LEAF IT!**

You're never too old to play in the leaves

Adding pumpkin usually makes everything taste better

It's never too early to knock out your holiday shopping

Shop early this season — in-person, over the phone, online — we've got you covered!

**THE BOOKSTORE**

802.465.8009 • 8 CONANT SQUARE • BRANDON, VERMONT

Reap the rewards of membership for just \$20 today!

**Take Good Care of Yourself**

fresh local and organic produce

hormone free dairy products

no artificial colors or preservatives — ever!

lots of great tasting food that's good for you

WASHINGTON STREET / MIDDLEBURY  
OPEN DAILY 8-7  
388-7276 / MIDDLEBURY.COOP

MIDDLEBURY NATURAL FOODS CO-OP

## Birth Announcement

**BRANDON** — A baby girl, Hazel June Casey-Martin, was born Oct. 28, 2021, to parents Emily Casey and Joshua Martin, residents of Brandon. The baby was born at Porter Medical Center.