

Vocational Instructor

Local 4200A ~ AFT, AFTCT, & AFL-CIO



**"It Pays
To Be Taught
By a Vo-Tech
Teacher"**

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Problem or Symptom?

By Ed Leavy, SVFT President

During the Superintendent's school tour last month, Jeff Wihbey had conversations with our building reps. First, it must be noted that no previous Superintendent in my memory has made it a point to visit each school and talk to the reps, and I became a building rep in 1993. The reps did a terrific job laying out clearly, firmly, and respectfully the issues our teachers face in their schools. Some issues were unique to their school, such as the transition to a change in administration, while others were more global. Superintendent Wihbey had his own issues to discuss, particularly teacher attendance.

All school districts in Connecticut must report their teacher attendance data to the State Department of Education, who then issue a report called ED 165. Information in the report includes the total number of substitute days for a district, the number of days missed per teacher (it is not clear to me if this is the average number of days or the median, which is a significant difference), and the number of teachers who have hit a threshold mark of (I believe) fifteen days absent. The CTECS did not fare well on these metrics. Obviously, the total number of substitute days includes those positions which went unfilled for a long period of time, so that number was treated as irrelevant to the problem of teacher attendance. From what we were told, however, the CTECS had much higher teacher absenteeism than did most districts. The Superintendent understandably expressed concern about this issue.

There are some things it's hard to defend. We're occasionally shocked to discover a teacher who has been with the system 20 years, who has never had long-term or significant health issues that required weeks or months out of work, and who have nine total sick days left. That means the person has used 291 sick days – nearly 15 a year – without having a significant illness. Perhaps those absences were justifiable, but certainly the optics are bad. Additionally, those absences affect not just the students, but other teachers as well. We understand the concept of a "mental health day," but those should be a rare exception, not a regular part of someone's work life. We do get the concern.

On the other hand, acting as though a wide-spread problem is somehow the "fault" of a minority – but still significant number – of teachers isn't right either. During a recent conference on Career Technical Education, I attended a session on school culture. The presenter, a former teacher and principal, discussed how an administration's treatment of staff plays a dramatic role in many types of outcomes. Employees who identify themselves as happy at their job are 50% more productive than those who are unhappy. "Productivity" in education is hard to quantify, but the general idea applies. More to the point, employees who identify themselves as happy in their jobs take approximately 6% fewer sick days than those who identify themselves as "unhappy"; that equates to 11 days a year. Happiness and unhappiness can be dependent on personal issues, including disposition and general health, but there are external factors as well, such as how people are treated at work. Mr. Wihbey pointed out that the number of absences varied widely from school to school. Did the administrators have a conversation about teacher absenteeism in their schools that went beyond tracking and documenting incidents of absences? Was the teacher absentee rate in the school seen as perhaps a sign of a different cultural issue, or did some administrators see it as a need to crack down on the teachers and thus perpetuate the problem?

We know from scientific study that stress has a great impact on health. We know empirically that in some schools the administration seeks to decrease stress, and in others – fewer – stress is weaponized. We are currently addressing the fact that PowerSchool works sporadically at best, and teachers making a good-faith effort to get their grades recorded in a timely manner are facing constant obstacles. In some schools, the administration will understand that situation and assure teachers that if they are trying, that's enough. Some administrators will issue a blanket "all grades must be in seven days, regardless" policy. Still others will pick and choose on which teachers they will enforce the seven-day policy and with whom they will be understanding. The difference in the stress on the staff will be vast, and that stress may be reflected on teacher attendance in those schools. It is fair for the system to look at teacher data and address it, but if the context of the wider picture is ignored we will be addressing the symptom, not the problem.

Contract Process Begins

It may seem hard to believe, but we will begin preparing for contract negotiations this month. While our contract runs until August 31, 2021, our process takes two full years. Our contract team was approved in last June's Executive Council meeting, every SVFT member will have the opportunity to have his or her voice heard in the formation of our proposals.

Here is how the process works:

- October-December 2019 – the leadership team and the negotiations committee will begin drafting proposals based on factors such as grievances we have filed, issues that have arisen, and problems we need to address. Additionally, we will ask for suggested language proposals from the membership; if you have something you would like to see added or changed in the contract, email us at eleavy@svft.org.
- January-February 2020 – Once we have our issues listed, the committee will write them as proposals in contract language. We will then create a survey of all the proposals asking members to rate them on a 5-point scale from not important to very important. We will also try to provide another opportunity for members to identify issues they would like to see proposed.
- February-March 2020 – Members complete the survey
- April 2020 – Results of the survey are reviewed, and a bargaining strategy is developed. Proposals are reviewed for unintended consequences and bargaining strategy is discussed.
- September 2020 – A request to bargain is sent to the State, and bargaining begins. The goal will be to have a contract ready for vote by April 2021 so that the legislature can vote on the contract. For a ratified agreement, the legislature must approve it by 50% + 1. For an arbitrated agreement, the legislature must approve it by 33.33% + 1.

We will concentrate primarily on language issues, including “pools of money” such as tuition reimbursement, when we prepare for negotiations. We must be realistic in terms of wage increases: for the past decade, wages were not negotiated by individual locals but instead through SEBAC (though individual locals approved wages and language in a separate vote. The State Police are handled differently, but that's true in every state). It is unlikely that the State will want to get into bargaining wages with 36 different locals in separate negotiations. We will of course have wage proposals ready should the old process return. Remember, this is your contract. As an SVFT member, you have a voice in your wages, benefits, and working conditions. We look forward to working with you over the next 20 months or so.

M+E

By Ed Leavy

I recently had the opportunity to take part in an organizing drive in Connecticut for M+E, a new AFT CT local that represents managers and exempt employees. By “exempt,” it means those State of CT workers who are not eligible for collective bargaining under current Connecticut law. There are over 6500 workers in the state who do not have collective bargaining rights. They have been traditionally non-union, but AFT CT has decided to form a union based on common interests and issues, not a common contract.

One of the takeaways from this mobilization is that while workers with a union often become complacent and take unionization for granted, workers without a union truly understand the importance of joining one. For Connecticut managers and exempt employees, the rationale did not need to be explained. Though the last ten years have featured three SEBAC concession agreements, each concession came with benefits: guarantees on contribution to pension and healthcare, layoff protection, and an extension of the SEBAC agreement. The employees eligible for M+E had the concessions, but none of the benefits. A promised raise was taken away days before it was to be delivered. Their healthcare costs went up 3% in one paycheck, not spread out over multiple years. Additionally, while we got to vote on the agreement, these conditions were imposed on them. They had no collective voice at the contract table, in the legislature, or in the press. M+E hopes to give them that voice.

The biggest problem M+E members face is the loss of managers state-wide. While the number of State workers is at its lowest point in decades, the problem with managers is especially acute. We feel it in the CTECS. The loss of people is noticeable. When I became Executive Union Rep in 2008, there were three HR people who handled discipline and grievances for the system. Now there is one, and no matter how hard he works there are going to be delays. Three people once handled retirement issues; now there is one, and she also is responsible for Workers' Comp, FMLA, and the sick bank. Payroll has seen similar losses. I know these people; I get their texts and emails at 8:00 at night and on Sundays dealing with issues that just couldn't be handed during the workday.

Teachers work hard, too; I certainly remember correcting stacks of papers every Sunday. We have a voice, however: during labor-management meetings, in the schools, and at the legislature we speak together. Until now, they haven't. If you are getting frustrated with delays in getting back to you or questions going unanswered, please don't yell at them. They are working people trying their best. Instead, tell them to join their union.

SEBAC and the Silver Tsunami

Regardless of whether SEBAC and the State reached an agreement in 2017, 2022 was going to be an enormously important year. The 2017 agreement lessened the impact; had we not reached an agreement, the SEBAC agreement would have expired, and we would have needed to renegotiate all our pension and healthcare benefits. Instead, we will be facing significant but clear changes to our benefits. Our members in SERS who are eligible for retirement may want to start thinking now about what 2022 will mean to them; members in TRS are not affected by the pension changes, but will be affected by the fairly minor retiree healthcare changes:

Pension – By far the biggest change is the loss of the 2% minimum cost of living adjustment. Currently, the COLA is based on Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) for the twelve-month period prior to the retiree's anniversary of retirement. If that amount is under 2% - recently, it has been more often than not – the retiree still receives a 2% “raise.” For anyone retiring after July 1, 2022 that will no longer be true; if the CPI-W rises, for example, 0.4%, the COLA will be 0.4%.

There are other changes as well. COLAs have previously been addressed in July and December; the average length of retirement for State workers to receive their COLA is 18 months. Under SEBAC 2017, everyone will receive their first COLA on their 30-month anniversary of retirement; for most of us, that means an 18-month delay for our first COLA. The other significant change is Medicare Part B. Currently, the State pays 100% of the standard Medicare Part B Premium for all Medicare-covered retirees. The State will continue reimbursing the full standard Medicare Part B Premium but will reduce its reimbursement to half of the additional charges imposed by Medicare beyond the standard premium on high earners. The “high earners” are over \$85,000. This change will affect people who retire when they are Medicare-eligible, since half a year's salary, the sick-time payout, and half a year of pension will likely be more than \$85,000; however, a person retiring under the Medicare age is not affected. It also will affect people who have a significant second income. No one in our bargaining unit will have a pension that high.

Retiree Healthcare – Currently, retirees pay 3% of their healthcare plan (as opposed to the 15%-22% active employees pay). For members retiring after July 1, 2022 that moves to 5%. For context, a “Retiree + Spouse” plan is currently about \$19,000 per year. The difference will be about \$22 per month.

Let's look at two employees who are over 60 to retire in 2022 and started in 1990. Both are top-step VS02. One retires in 2022, the other in 2024. For clarity, we will assume that the top step of VS02 doesn't change after 2021, so it constitutes best three years. “Year one” means until the one-year anniversary of retirement. Also, we'll assume 100% retirement, and a (very low) 0.4% CPI-W

	2022 retirement	2024 retirement
Year one	\$42,481	\$45,518
Year two	\$43,331	\$45,518
Year three	\$44,197	\$45,609
Year four	\$45,081	\$45,791
Year five	\$45,983	\$45,974
Year six	\$46,902	\$46,158
Year seven	\$47,840	\$46,343

This chart comes with two caveats: it assumes that the CPI-W will remain far under 2%; actuaries estimate the average difference between a pre- and post-2022 retirement will be closer to .05% than 1.6%. More importantly, in the two years between 2022 and 2024 the second person will earn over \$105,000 more than the person who retired 2022. It would take decades to make up that difference through the COLA (as Peter Falk says in *The In-Laws*, not dying is the key to the benefits program). None of this is to say people should not retire in 2022, only that no one should feel they have to retire then. Retirement is an emotional decision as well as a financial one, and that will be true in 2022 as well. There is no need to join the silver tsunami and escape from State service.



What's Happening in Wallingford

- It is already clear that the selection of Dr. Miguel Cardona of Meriden as Commissioner will have a positive impact on the CTECS. Dr. Cardona graduated from Wilcox THS in the Automotive Department. He has been to more of our schools in the weeks he has been in the position than his predecessor was in years. SVFT leadership is looking forward to meeting with Dr. Cardona, but the attitude toward our system of both the Commissioner of Education's and the Governor's office is radically different – and better- than it was at this time last year.
- The change in policy – or more accurately, the creation of a policy – on personal professional development has created a few problems. Tonya Stoute told us that the DoE was being more demanding on approvals and timeframes. Additionally, the paperwork "CT -43" currently requires multiple signatures and can take quite a while to be processed. Hopefully, the kinks are being worked out and will make the process clearer for our members.
- Last year, we added 61 new teachers during the year. We are already over 30 for this year. The new Commissioner initiated some changes that have streamlined the hiring process, which puts teachers in front of kids faster.
- A reminder: October 1 is now the start of the transfer window. Any job posted for the first time after 10/1 will be open for transfers first. Also, please remember the rules for promotion to DH differ between trade and academics. In the trades, instructors can transfer into a DH position by seniority; if a current DH with less seniority and a more senior instructor both put in for the position, it goes to interview. In academics (including guidance), all DH positions are through application; there is not transfer into the position.
- The degree scale stipend returns this December. Anyone who has a change in status or is new to receiving the stipend must have turned in the required paperwork. Members must have been working in June, 2019 to be eligible.



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SVFT Mission Statement

The SVFT is an organization of professional educators that promotes excellence through the mutual adherence to policies, documents, and procedures negotiated with the CTEC. We work to guarantee that the contract is followed and positive working conditions are maintained. This organization shall be to provide a safe and positive teaching environment for all by:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the contract, the Vocational Technical High School System, and the solidarity of the union
2. Ensuring all members are protected by the contract and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to make them successful
3. Protecting the jobs of our members and strengthening our system
4. Providing members opportunities to further their education and receive quality professional development
5. Responding quickly to the emerging changes to the workplace and technological challenges
6. Handling all interactions with fairness and integrity
7. Striving for productive, open communication between the SVFT leadership and our membership
8. Building and improving relationships with our union affiliates and local labor councils