

RBEA
Rockaway Borough Education Association
Back to School Night 2016
Memo to the Rockaway Borough Community



September 16, 2016

Dear Community Members,

The RBEA represents the teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, custodians, and bus drivers who proudly serve the students and families of the Rockaway Borough School District. We are your partners in educating your children and cherish our students.

Our membership includes many residents of Rockaway Borough and many of our members are either products of our schools, have sent or are sending their children to these fine schools, or both. We are invested in the community and supportive of it. You see us at community events, at school events, at games and performances, in Shop Rite, and around the neighborhood. We are integral members of the Rockaway Borough community and would not have it any other way. We support our neighbors, our students, our parents, our school, and our town. We help. **We show up.**

However, a situation and atmosphere has been created in our schools that is seriously and negatively impacting our members, and, by extension, our community. **Morale is at an all-time low.**

Many members report feeling disrespected by the Board of Education, with their work not being appreciated, their voices not being counted, their years of experience and training being disregarded. In the past, they have gone from feeling fully supported and encouraged to do their professional and personal bests and taking healthy risks to further the realities of what our children can achieve, to existing in a workplace where there is little support from the Board. We have gone from being a district whose employees actively promoted the possibility of employment in Rockaway Borough to our friends and family members in education, to one where we often advise those people to look elsewhere, and where many of our members are themselves looking to leave, and in fact have left. This year alone we lost 11 teachers. **This is sad. We show up, despite the disrespect.**

We have been working under an expired contract since June 2015, 443 days. For several years now, many of our members have seen their net pay DECREASE year after year. While there have been nominal “raises,” the enormous sums deducted for healthcare and for pensions has made many of our members see “negative raises” as the years have gone by. This year will be no different. When the first paychecks were distributed this week, many of our members saw their take home decrease for the third or fourth year in a row. **We show up, even when our actual pay goes down.**

It is insulting to the hard-working professionals who dedicate our lives to your children and this town. **We show up, even when we believe our bargaining “partners”, the Board, fails to move the process in a productive and equitable direction. We show up and do our jobs. We help your kids. We honor our contract. But enough is enough.**

Recently our membership has been “working the contract,” which means honoring all our contractual obligations but not volunteering for unpaid extra work assignments. Your doctor and lawyer, accountant and plumber, electrician and landscaper do not work for free. So often, because of our dedication to our students and our commitment to the community, we show up and work for free. And in normal situations, we don't think twice about doing that. It's what we do and have always done, and when this disagreement is settled, we will do once again. But these are not normal situations. **Back to School night does not exist in our contract.**

Back to School night represents our membership deciding, year after year, to volunteer to give up a night at

home with family or watching a game with our children/grandchildren, to come to work – unpaid – in order to allow parents a glimpse of our classrooms, the staff, and a hint of what the year will bring. It gives us a chance to meet and greet our most essential partners in education. We are true partners of the parents in raising our students and we fully support them.

As public employees, we do not have many forceful ways to raise awareness of the situations and to bring matters to something of a head. We cannot strike or cannot engage in serious job actions without either disrupting the educational process - which we choose not to do - or putting jobs at risk. We certainly will not be discussing this struggle with your children, as that would place them unfairly in an adult problem. **What we can do is not volunteer. For once, not show up to do what is ‘above and beyond’ our contractual obligations, yet what we do so often throughout every day and every year.**

The membership in the RBEA has in the past few days decided that staff will not be volunteering at Back to School night this year until further progress has been made towards a settlement. This was not an easy decision, but after much thought and feedback, we decided against attending. We are working under the terms of an expired contract and have not had a contract for 443 days. **We need to make a united stand now. On Back to School night, we will not show up.**

We apologize for any inconvenience this causes, as we are as unhappy about this decision as you may be. We want to see you and strengthen our bonds. We support our students and their parents and we ask, at this crucial time, that you continue to support us. Your support has been resounding over the years, and we cannot thank you enough.

We are not *refusing* to hold a BTS night, and hope that one can be scheduled where members of the RBEA can participate. However, at this time, we must take a united and principled stand and not volunteer our time to employers who appear to neither value nor respect it.

Parents, please feel free to contact your child's teacher or teachers directly. If you have particular concerns about your child or about his or her educational program, your teachers will be more than happy to speak with you on the phone, meet with you during school hours, or communicate via email.

Again, we hope to reschedule Back to School nights in both schools once the situation improves and we apologize for any inconvenience.

Sincerely,

Jerelyn Hurley & Michael Onischuk, **RBEA Co-Presidents**

Kathy Stanton, **Vice President**

Cathy Forte, **Treasurer**

Aileen Schumacher, **Corresponding Secretary**

Dodi Yobs, **Recording Secretary**

Carol Coulther, **Lincoln Association Representative**

Michael Leahey, **TJ Association Representative**