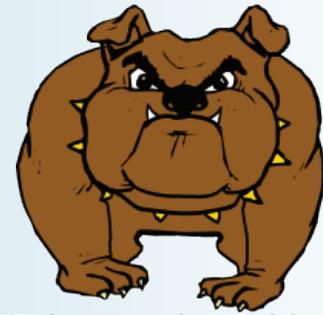




# THE WATCHDOG REPORT



**MRTA is your pension watchdog!**

May 2023

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF MISSOURI RETIRED TEACHERS ASSOCIATION AND PUBLIC SCHOOL PERSONNEL

## MRTA Unit Presidents' Summit

Jefferson City, MO – The Missouri Retired Teachers Association (MRTA) and Public School Personnel held the 2023 Unit President’s Summit March 14 and 15, 2023 at the Stoney Creek Hotel in Columbia, Missouri. This year’s event boasted a record-setting attendance of almost 170 local unit leaders from around the state. This was the event’s 48th year successfully bringing the group together for two days of education and fellowship.

The Unit President’s Summit is an annual forum for MRTA leaders to set an agenda for the upcoming year. While it started as a small conference, it has expanded every year to allow MRTA leadership from around the state to share best practices, collaborate, and get energized for upcoming initiatives.



(l-r) MRTA Executive Director, Maria Walden; MRTA Region 8 Vice President Dr. Dave Baker; MRTA Vice President, Dr. Gale "Hap" Hairston; and MRTA Past President and Region 4 Vice President Marilyn Skipper offered a panel discussion on the new MRTA Strategic Plan.

“We are so excited to see such a wonderful turnout this year,” said MRTA President Martha Schatz. “The energy and enthusiasm of our unit presidents could be felt by all in attendance.”

This year’s Summit offered two days of informational and motivational sessions designed to assist local and regional MRTA units, as well as an introduction to the group’s recently implemented strategic plan.

An inspirational keynote was delivered by 2022 National Principal of the Year Beth Houf, who shared her experiences in secondary school administration and her dedication to the Missouri public school system.

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**Give the gift of an MRTA membership to new retirees. Its the best insurance plan to protect your largest investment!**



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Other speakers included MRTA President Martha Schatz, Executive Director Maria Walden, Legislative Chair Randy McClain, Association Member Benefits Advisors (AMBA) Assistant Vice President of Association Relations Bo Carr, and Missouri Retired Teachers Foundation (MRTF) president Karen Miller.



2022 National Principal of the Year, Beth Houf of Fulton Middle School thanked attendees for supporting active teachers and public schools.

A panel discussion was held on "A Blueprint for Future Success." The panel included MRTA Board Vice President Dr. Gale "Hap" Hairston, Region 4 Vice President Marilyn Skipper, and Region 8 Vice President Dr. Dave Baker with Executive Director Maria Walden serving as moderator.

In addition, breakout sessions were presented on a variety of topics by MRTA Region 7 Vice President Georgia White, Region 5 Vice President Wendy Bernier, Membership Chair Idella Warden, Christian County Unit Leader Becky Mitchem, Webster County Unit Leader Brenda Cologna, former Senator Ted

House, and AMBA Representative Kell Smalley.



MRTA Community Service Chairman Marlin Kinman thanks attendees for their help gathering member community service hours. In 2022, MRTA members volunteered 800,866 hours, a value of \$23,985,936 to the local communities in the state of Missouri.

"The Summit is an opportunity for us to connect, recharge, and share ideas," said MRTA Executive Director Maria Walden. "We are pleased that so many of our leaders were able to join us this year. I am confident that the experience will help us strengthen our advocacy efforts at the state, regional, and local unit levels. I am so impressed with all of our leaders throughout the state."



MRTA leaders from Region 6 take a moment to take a group photo.

MRTA President Martha Schatz included Trivia Night hosted by Region 12 Vice President Mark Cook. It was a very competitive event and a fun time for all!



Trivia Night's winning team!



The MRTA Board celebrated MRTA Region 4 Vice President Marilyn Skipper's birthday at their dinner before the Unit President Summit kicked off.



## The Talent Behind the Success of MRTA

Since 1960, MRTA has successfully advocated for Missouri public school teachers and personnel since its inception. Now, with proactive leadership, the organization is giving itself a forward-looking vision to collaborate, grow and strengthen MRTA. A key part of this is the MRTA office team. These dedicated and talented individuals are passionate about their mission and uniquely suited to take the organization into the future.



## Today's Spotlight: Ryan Mankin, MRTA Legislative/Accounting Specialist

Jefferson City native Ryan Mankin joined the MRTA office team as a Legislative/Accounting Specialist on April 3 with a unique skillset and a can-do attitude. While his job primarily includes providing legislative support and accounting functions for the organization, he is ready to assist wherever and whenever he is needed.



On his first day on the job, he acknowledged the tremendous scope and volume of work done by the team in the MRTA office. "The job is accounting, but I want to learn how to do everything I can to help out," he said, "Actually, one of the things that attracted me to the job was the fact that I would have a variety of duties," he added. "I am looking forward to being a part of the team and pitching in wherever I can."

Ryan is a Mizzou graduate, with a degree in political science. He possesses a keen interest and background in legislative affairs and, in addition to his accounting responsibilities, he is particularly interested in the opportunity to assist with tracking legislation of interest to MRTA and its members and attending hearings at the Capitol. "When I saw that was part of the job description, I applied," he said.

It wasn't until after he saw the job description that Ryan found out Maria Walden had become executive director of the organization. As chance would have it, they had worked together before.

"I first met Maria at the state Capitol when I served as an intern for former state Representative Mike Lair," he recalled. Later, in 2016 he worked as Maria's legislative intern when she served as Director of Legislation and Policy for the Public School and Education Employee Retirement Systems of Missouri (PSRS/PEERS). It was during this time that he first learned about MRTA.



He is energized to work on behalf of Missouri's retired public school educators and staff and get back into legislative work. "It's been a while," he said with a smile. "I need to reacclimate to working at the Capitol."

While new to MRTA, Ryan is ready to become an integral part of the team. "I think long-term, I would like to grow into a position where I can be more help to Maria on the legislative side of things and have her be able to rely on me in that area," he said. "Down the line, it would be great to be able to transition into that type of role."

"Ryan is a great addition to our team," said Maria. "I am happy to have the chance to work with him again. He will be a great asset to the organization and the members of MRTA."

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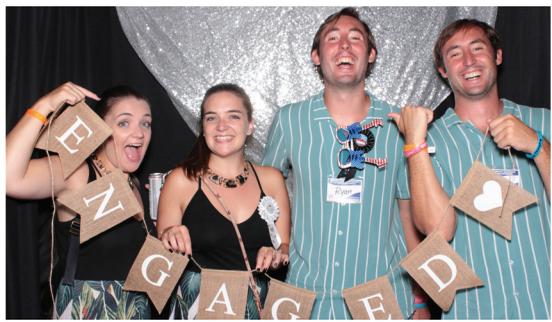


Ryan also has previous work experience in customer service, having worked for Ameren Missouri for four years in their call center. He left that position about a year ago to pursue his love of music and performing full time.

While quite modest about it, Ryan is an accomplished local musician, participating in two bands as a guitarist and singer. When asked, he downplays his musical ability with a smile saying, "Musical talent is pretty subjective, you just need to know enough to have fun!"

In addition to being a musician, another of Ryan's unique facts is that he is an identical twin. Even more interesting, Ryan's fiancée, Lauren is also an identical twin. "She is from the Philadelphia area and just moved here recently," he said. "We met at the Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio and we had a long-distance relationship for over three years." Ryan and Lauren will be making a return trip to Philadelphia on May 6th for their wedding!

Even on his very first day at MRTA, Ryan was enjoying his new role and was excited for the future. "It is a great place to work. And having



a job doing something that you can be proud of at the end of the day – that's what I have been looking for in a position. It's hard to come by."

### MRTA Unveils New Strategic Plan

#### MRTA Vision

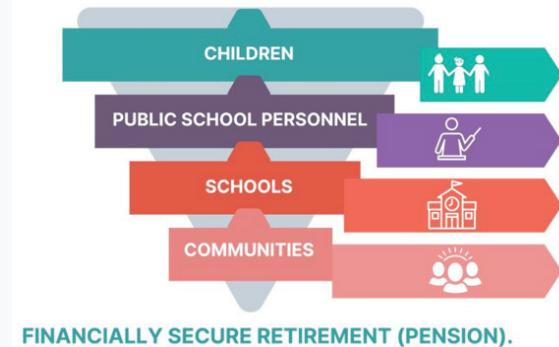
Secure Missouri education retirement systems based upon strong advocacy for public schools.

#### MRTA Core Purpose (Mission)

The core purpose (mission) of Missouri Retired Teachers Association and Public School Personnel (MRTA) is to promote and protect public education resulting in a financially secure retirement (pension). The four elements of public education: Students, Public School Personnel, Public Schools & Communities.

MRTA believes that promoting and protecting our children, public schools, public school personnel, and communities will result in a financially secure retirement (pension).

Through our advocacy, members, collaboration, philanthropy, and compassion we can elevate public education and careers in education for strong retirement and pensions.



### Making Emotional Connections Through Music

Let's get to know one of our inspiring and innovative leaders, MRTA Treasurer, Julia Platt.

From a young age, Julia Platt learned how to take care of business. The daughter of a business major turned school superintendent and a banker, she grew up learning the importance of things like correctly balancing a checkbook. Not surprisingly, her aptitude for those types of tasks makes her a perfect fit for her current role as MRTA treasurer.

But what is surprising is that Julia's true calling has nothing to do with business or math. Her vocation and life's work are instead centered around her love of music. Her talent and unique accomplishments as an educator are a lesson for all of us in how music can be used to inspire, teach and make lasting connections with students of all kinds.

Julia knew early in life that she wanted to be a teacher. As a child, she was the one helping her brother and other neighborhood kids learn to read. "I was teaching school to my little brother and to all the little boys in the neighborhood," she said.



Julia (center) with daughters Elizabeth (left) and Emily (right).

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Julia and David Platt

She was inspired as a child by her music teacher, whom she had for instruction from fourth grade band through high school choir. "I was hanging out in her room all the time," she said. "I loved how she dressed, how she played and how we sang."

Julia's parents placed great importance on higher education. Her father, who was a busy school superintendent, instilled in his daughter a love of learning as well as the importance of community service and helping others. "My educational inspiration is my father," she said. "He was very involved with my brother and me, even though he was terribly busy as a superintendent at a small school, as a church deacon and a Lions Club member. He loved kids, the school, and the community." She added, "Giving back was important to him. That's the way we were brought up. You gave back. You worked hard. That's what I still do, today."

She attended college at Missouri Southern State University in Joplin, where the counselors were a bit taken aback at her choice of major based on her high aptitude test scores in business-related areas. "By the time I graduated high school I knew I wanted to teach music," she said. "I told them, this is what I love, I want to teach and that's what I'm going to do."

Her teaching experience in Manhattan, Kansas, was where she spent a lot of time working with special needs students. The state was just starting to bring special needs students into the public school system, and she was creating curriculum for teaching them music. "I was one of the first teachers to teach classroom music to children in wheelchairs, who couldn't speak or sometimes even move, I was figuring it out as we went."

Her efforts were such that she was asked to share her experiences and accomplishments with teacher education students at nearby Kansas State University. The university students would observe Julia at work in her classroom. "I had my students dancing in wheelchairs," she said. "If I held the buttons for them, they could hit an autoharp to play a note and they would just bubble with delight," she recalled with a smile. "It was a really cool experience."



Julia and Dave with all their kids and grandchildren.

Julia taught for 10 years in Kansas public schools before moving to central Missouri in 1982 and taking a job offer from the Eldon, Missouri public school district. She initially planned to stay there for a year and move to the Jefferson City school district. But she quickly grew fond of the Eldon community and the school and decided to stay, teaching there for 25 years in both the grade school and high school, doing everything musical – both vocal and instrumental for high school, middle school, and elementary. "Eldon was where I belonged," she said.

High school choir was her first love, and during her final years of teaching she was able to focus in that area.

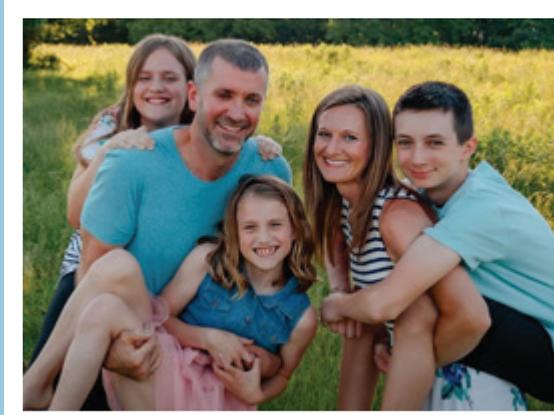
She led her students in choir, show choir and musicals and used her experiences teaching special needs students in Kansas to make sure all her Eldon area students could be a part of her shows.

"The kids are without a doubt my favorite part of teaching," she said. And her teaching philosophy is one that resonates with students of all kinds. "To do music well, you have to reach your students' emotions. Once you can touch people's emotions you can develop a strong connection. If they don't feel the music, you are not going to get the performance you want."

This thoughtful approach certainly benefitted all of her students, but it was especially meaningful for those students with special needs. She shared stories of how she was able to help a blind student, who was a talented singer, learn choreography for a show and how she was able to include a wheelchair bound student in a dance performance, Julia's ability and desire to share her love of music fully with others becomes strikingly evident. "My experience in Kansas was invaluable and helped me achieve these things," she said.

A self-described loner, Julia presents a duality that is both impressive and engaging. "I prefer to stay home with my family and just be me," she said. "But I am also a performer. It's what I do and I'm good at it." Julia is an accomplished singer and has

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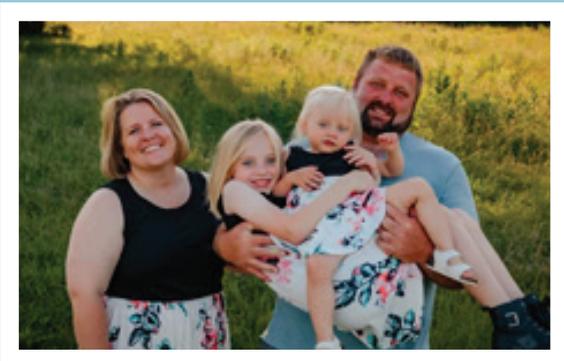
Julia's daughter Elizabeth and husband Todd with kids (l-r) Faith, Finley, and Adyn.

sung with both the Greater Lake Area Chorale and the Lake Area Community Orchestra. She even did a one-woman show as a fundraiser when the Eldon public school district built a new elementary school.

Julia retired from teaching in 2007 after 25 years with the Eldon R-I school district. She joined MRTA with encouragement from a former member, who took her to MRTA meetings and in Julia's words, "was priming me and I didn't know it" for a leadership position in the group. She became president of her local unit in Miller County, and when the MRTA treasurer position opened up, her aptitude for bookkeeping and her proximity to the state MRTA office in Jefferson City made her an ideal candidate. She still serves as the retirement education representative for her local unit, as well, and advocates for MRTA, public education and the teacher retirement system with a practical, impactful message for young educators.

"We have to help them understand the value of MRTA and the work we do to protect teacher pensions and public schools," she said.

"Our retirement system is absolutely phenomenal financially," she said. "I understand that when you start teaching you aren't thinking about retirement. It's a difficult but important message to help young teachers understand what is so important about that 14.5% being taken out of their paycheck. It's a struggle for the first few years you are teaching, because you don't make a lot of money. But even though you might wish you had that money for your car payment, the fact is that it is going toward your retirement and it will be there for you when you retire, that is important, too."



Julia's daughter Emily and husband Jake with kids (l-r) Madeline and Maya.

She added, "Our pension is one of the biggest advantages of teaching in Missouri. I tell people, you will have a retirement later. Our salaries

might be one of the lowest in the nation, but our retirement is one of the best."



As for her future with MRTA, Julia has 16 years under her belt with the group and is starting to think of passing the torch for her leadership position. "We need some younger folks to take over and lead the charge," she said.

"Julia serves as our MRTA Treasurer, which means that we meet weekly. I am so impressed with her business acumen and her desire to learn," says Maria Walden, Executive Director. "She takes her responsibilities very seriously and wants to make sure that MRTA, our pension and public education is available for our current but also our future generation of teachers."

Julia and her husband, Dave will be celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary in December. "The Ann Landers column said, we were not compatible on every important issue. My mom thought we would not make it very long," Julia recalled. They proved them all wrong. "We are extremely proud of our two daughters, Elizabeth and Emily and their families. After sacrificing many years of having to share their mom, they are now "calling in the cards" for mom and grandmom time," said Julia.

Will MRTA find another musically talented expert bookkeeper to take over as treasurer? One can only hope. One thing is certain: when the time comes to pass the torch, Julia Platt will be a hard act to follow.

### A Calling for Kindergarten

Let's get to know one of our inspiring and innovative leaders, MRTA Region 4 Vice President Jane Callis.



Kindergarten. It's a pivotal time in early childhood filled with new experiences and new people. We become "big kids," pack up our backpacks and get on the bus with our older siblings. We relish our first recess. We learn our letters. For some, it's scary; for others, it's an exciting new adventure.

If you are one of those who remembers kindergarten fondly, odds are your teacher had a lot to do with it. Kindergarten teachers shape our very first impressions of school, they set the stage for our future educational successes.

Now, imagine the kind, smiling face and gentle voice of your kindergarten teacher as she greets you at the classroom door. That teacher would be a lot like Jane Callis.

While Jane spent most of her teaching career in a kindergarten classroom, she started her teaching career in 1963, teaching fifth grade in St. Louis County. She recalls the difficulties she experienced as a new teacher. "Those first two years, they weren't good at all," she said with a laugh. "Sometimes I felt like if I could have afforded it, I should have paid the district for letting me teach, because I really didn't think I was a good teacher."

For Jane, it wasn't that she wasn't cut out for the classroom, she just hadn't found the grade level that was the right fit for her.

After teaching for six years, she left to start a family. When she returned to the classroom 17 years later, she did so at the kindergarten level in the Paris, Missouri public school district. This time around, she had found her happy place and taught kindergarten there until her retirement in 2005.

"Before I started teaching in Paris, they did not have a public school kindergarten. I was the first kindergarten teacher in the Paris public school district," she said. "When I started, it was half-day, and for three years I taught 30 kids in the morning and 30 more in the afternoon – 60 kids every day."

Despite the workload she was happy. "I really enjoyed teaching kindergarten and stayed with it for the rest of my career even though it was a lot, and it often felt as though I was married to my work."



Rick, Grace, Alec, and Colleen Callis Huffman

When asked about how she first became interested in teaching, she recalls the dedication of her mother to the vocation. "When you are the child of a teacher, it kind of rubs off on you," she said. Case in point – one of Jane's daughters is a teacher, as well. Teaching isn't just a profession, it is a calling for most.

"Teaching is a different world than most jobs. It is very hard when you start out. I was always thankful that my mother was a teacher. As a child, when our school schedules didn't match, I would spend my day in her classroom, watching her work. The experience gave me a comfort level with how teaching worked."

Jane's mother started teaching upon graduating from high school and later commuted to Kirksville to get her degree during the summers. Jane helped out by taking care of the household and cooking for her dad and brother.

"My mother loved being a teacher. She got her degree so she could continue teaching.

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It was a big incentive to me to teach, seeing how dedicated my mother was to it," Jane recalled. "Mother retired at 70, and even then, she didn't really want to." Jane's mother also influenced her initial involvement with MRTA. "My mother went to the local Unit meetings all the time, so after I retired, I started going."

"Maybe I was a little bit more active in my local Unit than I thought because the next thing I know, I was asked to serve as Unit President," she said. "I did that for a couple of years, and then the Region VP, who was getting older, told me she wanted to retire from that position and asked if I would take over the responsibility." Although at first Jane was unsure about taking on the new role, she had the opportunity to travel and help award some MRTF grants. The next year, she took over as Region 3 Vice President.

"I really have enjoyed being a part of MRTA," she said. "I have enjoyed meeting the other retired personnel because I have developed friendships with many of them and the fellowship has been wonderful." She added, "Of course, giving out the grants is still really great. It is very, very rewarding because the recipients are so appreciative. And when you award a grant, it is a perfect time to go into the school and talk to the teachers there, usually at faculty meetings at the beginning of school, and to tell them about MRTA, why it is so important to protect and advocate for our pensions and make sure they know that MRTA is there to help support our public schools."



*Chad, Madison, Emily, and Shannon Callis*



*Brooke, Bruce, Raleigh, Payton, and Bridget Callis Weimer*

"Jane was one of the first MRTA Board members I met when I started work in the pension industry," said Maria Walden, Executive Director of MRTA. "Jane brought home for me 'the why' we do what we do and the value of our pension to our teachers. She is such an amazing leader for MRTA. She has seen many changes but has been steadfast and calm through all of our changes."

The work MRTA does to advocate on behalf of Missouri public schools is a cause close to Jane's heart.

"I am concerned about what may happen to our public schools," she said. "Our public schools are critical to our state, especially in rural areas where there are often no other options."

Jane and her husband have a home with acreage on the outskirts of the town of Paris and enjoy country living as well as their seven grandchildren, three of whom live close enough for the doting grandparents to attend school activities. She remains an active person, saying she has "plenty to do." She enjoys being outdoors and doing things for herself and is involved in her church.

She encourages new teachers to stick with it, even though the first few years can be challenging. The key, she says is to take the time to appreciate and delight in the good things about it, especially the students. "Enjoy what you are doing! It is very important that no matter what you are doing in life, whether it is teaching or something else, that you enjoy it."

"Be determined and work hard to be a good teacher. Be focused on both being understanding of the children and teaching the curriculum," she advises.

Then, with a laugh, she adds, "Just survive the first year! And hopefully, you will find good mentors."

Her advice goes one step further, as she reflects upon her own experience as a young educator. "Think about your retirement. I really didn't think about retirement when I was young. It was for old people. Really old people! I didn't plan."

She continued, "Now I understand how crucial it is to make sure our young teachers understand the importance of their retirement system. Yes, you are paying a lot, but you will have a retirement that will benefit you the rest of your lifetime. And your school matches what you are contributing. I know it can be discouraging as a new teacher when you feel like you could use the money for other things, but it will be there for you when you are ready to retire."