



TOPICS & REPORT

Teachers' Retirement System of the State of Illinois | trsil.org | Over 423,500 members

TRS Responds to the Coronavirus Pandemic to Protect Members' Benefits

The year 2020 will forever be remembered as the year the coronavirus engulfed our world and didn't let go without a fight.

From the first identified Illinois COVID-19 case on Jan. 24, the virus spread rapidly. Three cases were reported at the end of February. More than 120,000 cases were reported at the end of May.

Along with most businesses and public buildings, schools were closed to in-person teaching in March.

The challenges for teachers were immense as they created makeshift "remote learning" networks with their students. Student graduations were reimagined. Interscholastic sports were canceled.

The System had to continue full operations because it was designated an essential state service by **Gov. Pritzker** due to the monthly economic impact of TRS benefits. The challenge was fulfilling the

System's mission while protecting the health of members and staff.

On March 11, TRS began encouraging telephone counseling sessions in lieu of face-to-face meetings. Only a few days later, TRS banned all visitors to its offices. Following the lead of **Gov. Pritzker**, TRS closed its offices to staff and implemented preplanned "work from home" procedures on March 16. The top TRS

Response
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Executive Director's Message: Staff Resilient in Work from Home Challenges



**Executive Director
Dick Ingram**

As Illinois begins to shake off the restrictions designed to counteract the coronavirus pandemic, I can say honestly that I was never worried during this difficult time about how TRS would perform on behalf of you, our members.

I know that's an easy thing to say with 20-20 hindsight, but it is a true statement. Between March and now, I never once doubted that my TRS colleagues would rise to the

daunting challenge of fulfilling our important mission after closing our offices and shifting our work to our homes.

**"...But the resiliency and ingenuity of the TRS staff always prevailed. Solutions were found. New ways of processing data were developed."
- Dick Ingram**

The reason I wasn't worried is that above all else, we are resilient. Teachers' Retirement System is composed of a dedicated group of professionals who are used to thriving when conditions are less than ideal. And this spring, that resiliency flourished.

We've had to be resilient for years in dealing with our chronic, unfunded liability, now at \$78 billion. For eight decades, state government has shortchanged TRS, creating a difficult, long-term hazard for the System.

As the COVID-19 virus spread its economic devastation, the resiliency of our Investment Department paid off during an economic downturn that was difficult to navigate. The investment markets went south. TRS lost money. Every public pension system and institutional investor in the United States lost money. But the TRS loss was markedly lower than 75 percent of the systems similar to us.

Executive Director's Message
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Executive Director's Message *continued from pg. 1*

Operationally, TRS has had a “business continuity plan” in place for years. We practice aspects of it annually. It was designed primarily to guide us in the event our offices were considered unsafe due to a natural disaster. We never suspected that the plan’s first-ever use would be because gathering staff in the building would be considered unsafe.

Yet the resiliency exhibited in transitioning to a remote-work mode was impressive. On Friday, March 13, we all were working in our offices in Springfield and Lisle. By Monday, March 16, 98 percent of us were working from home. Everybody stepped up and did their part.

At times, our Information Technology staff literally worked around the clock to make sure an untried work-from-home network would succeed. For months they made sure each staff member had the hardware and software they needed to continue their work uninterrupted.

Member Services fulfilled the primary purpose of TRS – to pay all benefits on time and in full. It took a little longer for our member Call Center to transition from a single location to many “satellite” sites. Once implemented though, our staff was answering approximately 3,000 telephone calls and 700 emails from members every week.

The Employer Services Department helped all 990 school districts and employers handle an unprecedented record-keeping situation where teachers were ordered to stay home and continue to do their jobs via the internet.

Of course, there were technical glitches and unforeseen problems during the transition and in the following weeks. But the resiliency and ingenuity of the TRS staff always prevailed. Solutions were found. New ways of processing data were developed. Colleagues covered for each other when family health problems or the loss of child care interrupted the business day.

Still, the most impressive aspect of this “coronavirus spring” was the resiliency of the people serving you and their ability to create a “new normal.” No problem was too big. No obstacle was too complicated. I am immensely proud of them. They always put the needs of you – our members – first.

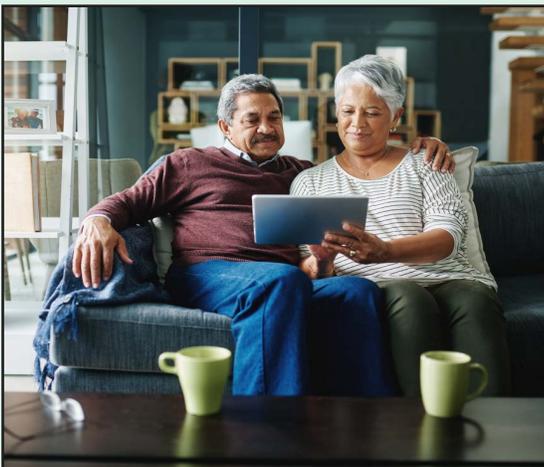
I was never worried.

Sincerely,



Dick Ingram
TRS Executive Director

Virtual Fall Member Meetings This Year Instead of On Site Locations



Due to the coronavirus pandemic, meetings will be online this year and registration will be required through the TRS website.

The meetings are designed to explain the retirement process and to provide members with information about disability, death and insurance benefits. Tier 1 and Tier 2 active and inactive members are invited.

We will have the full meeting list available on www.trsil.org/Fall_Member_Meetings in mid-August. Meetings will start in late August and continue through October. The maximum capacity for the meetings is 250 and online registration will be open until the session is full. Upon session registration, the full presentation will be available for download. We will provide

meeting instructions and access to a test site to ensure your viewing capability before the meeting date.

We appreciate your understanding for our change to “e-learning” this year. We hope to see you in person again next year.

The High Cost of the Pandemic

Beyond the closing of Illinois schools in March and the cancellation of celebrations marking the traditional end of the school year, the coronavirus has inflicted significant tragedy on education and the TRS membership.

At press time, 56 TRS members have died because of COVID-19 or complications related to the virus. So far, the youngest died in March at age 50. The oldest died at age 99 on April 8.

The vast majority of these deceased members were retired. But each of them represents the loss of a

bright and shining light to their families, friends and communities, as well as their profession.

As we do with all TRS members who pass on, we honor their lives and careers knowing that their talent and dedication helped mold a bright future for Illinois.



Response *continued from pg. 1*

priority was to continue paying all benefits as usual to retired members and beneficiaries.

The successful transition of TRS to a work-from-home status in a few days was the result of years of planning and foresight.

For instance, TRS had just completed a multi-year project to digitize all paper member records. Shelves of records were replaced with a “cloud”-based digital system with 12 million images. Staff working from home have access to the records just as if they were in the office. As a result, member benefits were paid on time and in full. Retirement claims were processed. The TRS Call Center handled an average of 3,000 telephone calls and approximately 700 emails every week.

Along with digitizing records, over the last 10 years, TRS prepared numerous contingencies for an emergency that might require the TRS offices to be closed. Before COVID-19, TRS had invested in technology to enable all staff to work remotely, developed an external email system to contact close to 300,000 members quickly, created a “Business Continuity Plan” which imagined the closure of offices, moved all information technology functions to “the cloud,” and ran annual tests of TRS computer systems to confirm that critical functions could be accomplished from remote locations. Consequently, TRS was able to accomplish a swifter transition to work-from-home than other Illinois public pension systems.

Defensive Investment Strategy

The economic shock did not catch TRS Investment staff off guard. For years, economists have predicted that a downturn eventually would disrupt a record-breaking “bull” market. Heeding those words, TRS employed a

defensive investment strategy to guard against unforeseen downturns and has routinely run stress tests on the portfolio to determine the best way to protect assets.

All public pension systems and institutional investors around the world lost money because of the COVID-19 virus. But compared to public pension systems similar to TRS, the System ranked among the nation’s leaders in its ability to preserve assets.

At the end of May, TRS held \$50.6 billion in investment assets, a 4.1 percent increase in assets compared to the \$48.9 billion reported at the end of March. TRS began the January-March quarter of 2020 with \$54.2 billion in assets.

During the January-March quarter, the TRS investment return was -9.95 percent, net of fees. This rate, however, stands favorably compared to other measurements. The Northern Trust Corporation’s analysis of the 300 largest U.S. institutional investors indicated that the median return for public pension plans was -12.6 percent.

TRS projects that its long-term investment returns will continue to exceed the System’s long-term assumed investment return of 7 percent. The 40-year return for TRS at the end of calendar year 2019 was 9.1 percent.

TRS’s strategic focus remained a prudent, long-term allocation of assets designed to keep investment risk as low as possible, protect assets during the economic downturn and be nimbly poised to take advantage of economic growth possibilities.

Because of advance planning, TRS and its members met the challenge and will overcome the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

Sharing Your Story About Teaching During the Coronavirus Pandemic

As part of our effort to chronicle the response to the coronavirus by our members and their families, we invited members during National Teacher Appreciation Week in May to submit stories, anecdotes and images to TRS that told the story of how Illinois educators met the challenges created by school closings and shelter-in-place requirements. The following are some of the responses we received.

Robin Riggs

2nd Grade Teacher at Raymond Grade School

A first for me in my last year of teaching – a Zoom pajama party! We met in the evening in pjs and with pillows or stuffed animals. I read a bedtime story and another student read one, too.



Robin (top/middle photo) with her students during a Zoom pajama party.

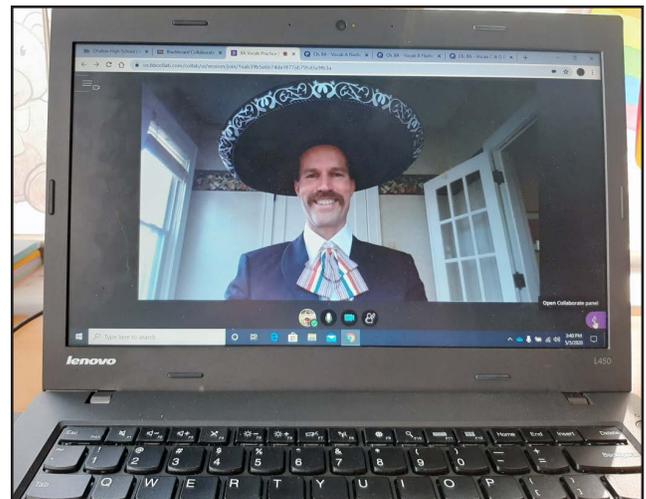
"We keep learning even though we are stuck at home."
- Scott M. Smith

Alan Elfrink

Spanish Teacher at O'Fallon Township High School

I am wearing a traditional charro suit commonly worn by mariachis as I teach my Spanish 1 students on Cinco de Mayo from my home in Belleville. I bought the suit in Cuernavaca, Mexico when studying abroad with SIUE.

When remote learning began, I taught the first week and a half using my phone and laptop. That was quite challenging! Then, I was able to borrow a laptop from school and preparing and presenting materials became much easier instantly!

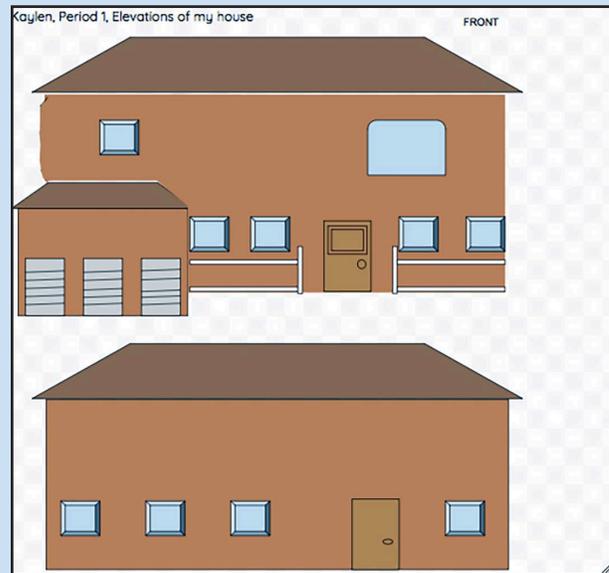


Alan teaching on Cinco De Mayo.

Scott M. Smith

Teacher at John Deere Middle School, Moline

In my 8th grade Industrial Technology class, students are exploring blueprints and learning about elevation drawings. Here a student has used a Google program called "Google Drawings" to illustrate the front and rear elevation of her house. Not bad for a 14-year-old. We keep learning even though we are stuck at home.



Teaching During Pandemic continued on pg. 5

Angelic B. Berry

Speech Pathologist at Scott Elementary, Mascoutah CUSD 19

My transition from direct speech therapy to indirect speech therapy brought me back to my first love, singing and acting! One of the instructional options I suggested to my parents was viewing therapy sessions via video as often as they choose.

This school year was my 30th year serving students in the school setting as a speech-language pathologist. I have experienced this “new normal” school closure before overseas when Desert Storm started and when swine flu exposure was a crisis in Japan many years ago because my husband is a retired soldier. I was reminded again through this current school closure that teachers and staff DO RISE to the occasion and will continue to love our students to life just through the “virtual” world.

What started as a few videos of speech therapy activities so my students would see another familiar face to keep them connected to “school” has evolved into a YouTube channel, SLP Berry! I’ve uploaded 11 videos and try to upload a new video once a week. Parents share their students’ experience as they view me, Mrs. Berry, having fun with her “Berry Bunch”!



Angelic having fun with her "Berry Bunch."

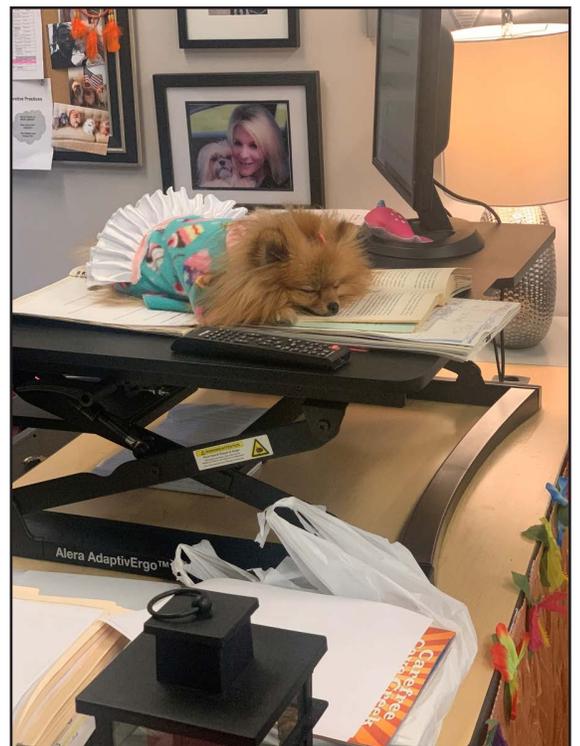
“...to know that 3.5 lb. Petula has made a difference in each student's life melts my heart.”
- April Whitney

April Whitney and Petula

READY Teacher at Champaign-Ford County School District

I teach at READY in Champaign, Illinois and Petula is our service dog. During this most unprecedented time, so many students have reached out to check on Petula. While this may not seem to be a big deal to most, it is to me. READY is a regional safe school and most of my students have been suspended or expelled and many are affiliated with gangs and other activities that lead to not-a-good place. With that being said, to know that 3.5 lb. Petula has made a difference in each student’s life melts my heart. For them, to reach out with empathy and compassion *daily* to Petula and me is better than any lesson I could have ever “taught.” I knew Petula helped to change our school culture and yet I never realized the true depth of her being in class every day.

This is for them — the ones some dismissed to the criminal justice system, the homeless students, the students who are imperfectly perfect — they matter and they kept calm and carried on in this chaos while dealing with their own chaos. They do care and they deserve to be recognized.



Petula the service dog had students reaching out to her and April Whitney daily during the pandemic.

Katherinne B. Sardeña

3rd Grade Teacher at Community Consolidated School Dist. 59, Elk Grove Village

I began balancing my own journey in teaching remotely by using Google Classroom, SeeSaw and Google Meets with students and Zoom staff meetings at 8:30 am. The thing that caused me the most anxiety was not hearing from my students every day. In the first weeks, I only heard from eight out of my 24 third graders. Then, I made phone calls, wrote text messages and reached out for help from the school social worker and found out that three students' parents had opted out of remote learning in exchange for packets. As the word spread that we still had learning to do online, I convinced 14 of my students to be consistent participants. I learned that some of my students were now baby sitting, spent long hours with neighbors who did not supervise e-learning or were left with older siblings until parents came home. A few had computer troubles and others struggled with learning difficulties that required someone to sit by them to navigate this kind of learning. Some of the greatest moments include seeing students actually listening to my virtual comments on their work and then make corrections; how they grew as learners on their own and having 14 of my students join Google Meets twice a week for conversation. This is a "new normal," but because of the hard lessons we have learned, we can still make it to the next school year.



Katherinne teaches 3rd grade while her kindergartener son and 4th grade daughter participate in e-learning.

TRS Staff Adjust to Working from Home During the Pandemic

TRS has just under 200 employees who began working from home in mid-March. This extraordinary effort that occurred in a few days was led by the Technical Systems Department who set up the computer equipment and connections for staff working from home. We made the best of the temporary situation knowing we were working for you and also slowing the spread of the virus.

Casey Binkley

Employer Services Auditor

While I'm busy assisting school districts, I always find something creative for my 18-month-old son Brady to do so we can work together.

Anthony Bollero

Senior Member Services Representative

Since we started working from home, our cat Tini fancies herself as my "assistant," which really doesn't consist of much more than her laying on top of my calculator, snuggling in my lap or napping on the bed. These pics on the right are of the day I finally decided to "throw in the towel" and allowed my wife Angie to cut my hair during this whole pandemic craziness. I think I was really starting to resemble a dandelion here. Yikes! And yes, I let her give me a mohawk. Our daughter Francesca thinks it's awesome!



Casey works while Brady is safely entertained.



Anthony before

Anthony after

Angie Langfelder

Medical Advisor, Member Services Department

Work from home has been different and it changes every day. There are days I feel like I'm working for TRS and running a day care. My oldest daughter is a nanny and the girl she watches has been with us since the beginning of this chaos. My nephew has spent several days with us as well. My three daughters have been here the entire time, so there is constantly something happening.

My "office" is set up in our dining room on the dining room table. The biggest issue with this is that there are no doors and it opens into the hall and the kitchen. My husband did work from home one day (in the dining room with me), and thank goodness that was it because it would not have ended well, ha ha! He has gone to work the rest of time with slightly reduced hours, which has been nice.

We have all adjusted now and I know my 10-year-old is going to miss me when I return to the office. She asks every night, "Mom, are you going to work in the dining room tomorrow?"

Christi McCormick

Benefits Supervisor - Optional Service & Refunds

Working from home has been interesting to say the least. Before I got additional monitors, I only had my laptop, so I used our 75" TV as a second monitor. It was awesome – I could see everything without needing my glasses! Now I have a set-up in my actual home office. It's not as much fun but is working out quite nicely.

There are several reasons I enjoy working from home including not having to commute. I wake up, throw on clothes, brush my teeth and I'm ready for work – all in about five minutes. I also feel more relaxed and productive, probably due to less interruptions. And I love that Remmy (my six-year-old Golden Doodle) sits next to me the entire day. The down side of working from home is working while at home. By that I mean, I forget what time of day it is and before you know it, it's 6 p.m. I'll shut everything down only to log back in a few minutes later because I thought of one other thing I wanted to do. It's both a blessing and a curse... but I do love it!

Lisa Hunt

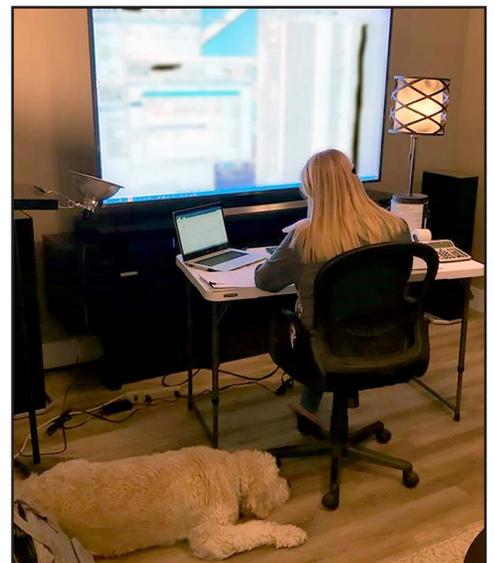
Information Technology Business Analyst

Everyday working from home has been an opportunity to grow, to adjust, to become more flexible and to become more patient. Some days I do it well. Some days I don't. Some days, I have to start my morning asking my family for forgiveness for my attitude the day before.

It has been interesting to learn how tied my attitude, mindset and emotions are to the routines of life I have created. Within the same week, I began working from home, the kids began doing school from home, and we moved our life and business into a new house. Everything familiar and routine was uprooted all at once. Most days, I am proud of how we have grown. The other days, I am proud we made it through the day without wounding each other. We have learned to be smart and not just afraid, adjusted our expectations, learned to finish well even when the start was rocky, and created new ways to celebrate birthdays, graduations and friendships. We have learned... and it's been exhausting, and hard and good.



Angie and her daughters in her "office."



Christi and her "coworker" Remmy



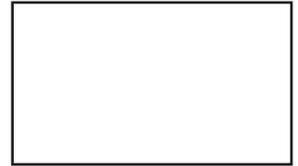
Lisa with "coworker" and son Benjamin.



TEACHERS' RETIREMENT SYSTEM OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS

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Special Edition Summer 2020



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Topics & Report Newsletter

Summer 2020 Special Edition

Published by the
Teachers' Retirement System
of the State of Illinois

Editor: Kathy Boehme

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Layout: Michael Kane

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