



The Advocate

April 2013

Rallying for Responsible Revenues AFT members lobby to support education budget

As Governor Deval Patrick's budget proposal continues to be considered, lines are being drawn between supporters and detractors and many people are confused as to which side to join. While it is clear that vital elements of daily life such as transportation, infrastructure and, of course, education need financial support, not everyone who agrees in principle with such ideas are willing to put their money where their mouths are.

On Tuesday, March 12, over 500 union members from across the Commonwealth (including nearly 100 from AFT local organizations) gathered at the State House to put their mouths, feet, minds, and hearts to work to support each other and their state.

"It is wonderful to see so many of our teachers, librarians, higher ed members and paraprofessionals come out...to rally at our state's capitol and to advocate for our children, our libraries and our profession," said AFT MA Political Organizer Brian LaPierre as he surveyed the crowd that had assembled in Gardner Auditorium, which is the largest public area in the State House. LaPierre also noted that, in addition to the one-day mass lobbying event at the State House, AF TMA had been organizing and participating in smaller, more focused visits to individual districts and legislators to make sure that our leaders were hearing our voices and supporting us on the issues that matter most.

them push through this new legislation. Governor Patrick received several standing ovations when he reminded the crowd that it was the investments of our ancestors that allow us to live the lives that we do today and encouraging today's generation to think long-term and invest for the sake of themselves and their descendants.

"What we have proposed is a fraction

originally filed the Act to Invest in Our Communities (which is similar to the Governor's proposed plan). "For too long, our local aide budgets have been slashed and vital and necessary programs have gone unfunded or underfunded. [This legislation] provides legislators with an option on how to raise necessary revenue while holding down increases for low- and middle-income families."

After the leaders and legislators had spoken, it was time for the citizens to do their part by taking their case and their ideas to their respective representatives in what was a very well-attended and well-organized day of lobbying.

"I feel like public education is really underfunded," said Patrick Alexis, a

speech therapist at the King K-8 School who had heard of the event through the BTU. "We need to make it a priority and make it one of the last things that receives cuts instead of one of the first."

In addition to scores of teachers, many paraprofessionals and other AFT members came to Boston from all over the Commonwealth to make sure that their voices were heard and their opinions considered.

"I came to the State House to represent over 783 Special Educational Paraprofessionals and Medical Staff in the Springfield Public Schools," explained Springfield Federation of Paraprofessionals President Suzanne De Franco, who drove nearly two hours with her Vice President Nancy Kirkpatrick and other members to participate in the lobbying event. "Paraprofessionals work side by side in the classroom with teachers and understand it is vital to provide students with the best education," DeFranco said, noting the necessity of maintaining and not decreasing the number of paraprofessional support staff in classrooms and of continuing to provide the materials necessary to children to succeed and become productive citizens.

In order to allow members who were unable to make it to the State House to participate in the effort, AFT MA has also distributed over 20,000 mailers to members so they can contact their legislators and have their voices be heard. Each mailer is marked with a tracking code so that the legislators and the AFT will be able to tell how many members from each district participated. While many members have already sent in their mailers (and others are still encouraged to do so), those who came to lobby felt an extra sense of purpose and pride.

"It's easy to be discouraged when you are just observing," suggested David Russell, an award-winning teacher at McKinley South End Academy in Boston. "Getting out and doing gets you

of the ideas that we could have done," Patrick explained, responding to those who contend that his bill is too ambitious and asks for too much, "but it is enough to make things work."

While problems related to education may be long-standing and, for some, overwhelming, the Governor suggested that "we know what strategies work," and cited the proven success of early childhood education, longer school days and years, and affordable higher education, all of which are included in the proposal. "That is why there should be no surprises in how



AFT SUPPORTS MEMBERS AFT MA President Tom Gosnell (right) and other AFT representatives gather at the State House to rally for more revenue and support for educators and other workers

KEY ELEMENTS OF GOVERNOR PATRICK'S TAX REFORM PROPOSAL:

The Governor's tax reform proposal ensures that everyone pays their fair share to support government services and investments we need to support growth and opportunity that benefits everyone. We will achieve this by:

- Cutting the sales tax from 6.25% to 4.5% and dedicating all proceeds to support transportation, school buildings and other infrastructure
- Increasing the income tax rate by 1% to 6.25%
- Doubling personal exemptions
- Eliminating complicated tax deductions that only benefit select taxpayers

"We need to maintain smaller class size," LaPierre suggested, "provide materials and supplies for our students and make sure library services are kept intact."

Among the many leaders who spoke at the State House was Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, who is helping to lead the charge for new revenue in Massachusetts.

"We love our state and need to invest in it," said Chang-Diaz, co-chair of the Commonwealth's Education Committee (see page 3) and a driving force behind the educators, workers, politicians and concerned community members who have come together under the ever-expanding umbrella of Campaign for Our Communities (www.ourcommunities.org).

Spurred on by Chang-Diaz and other stirring speakers, the standing-room-only crowd chanted and sang and applauded with vigor for those who are helping

much consensus we have."

From educators to pipe-fitters, union members from over 120 locals came together to rally and lobby for support. And all of them had one aim in mind.

"We need to raise revenues," Chang-Diaz suggested, echoing the intentions of the crowd, "but we have to raise them in a way that is just and fair."

While infrastructure, transportation, and other elements of the plan are important, it was clear where the passions of the former teacher lay. "We need...to make sure that Massachusetts has the best schools in the country," Chang-Diaz said.

"We need an education system that works for every child," Patrick agreed, noting how many children are still "trapped in achievement gaps."

"I am hopeful that my colleagues will recognize the need for a serious revenue bill," said Representative Jim O'Day, who

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energized...and it doesn't take a lot to make a difference!"

Making a difference was what this day and this legislation is all about. Even though it may be difficult to accept, revenues are necessary to achieve our goals and help our students and future generations achieve theirs as well.

"It's important to have revenues," suggested BTU Political Director Angela Cristiani, "so that we can fund our schools and fund our future. Everything we do in public education is based on revenue and our voice in this discussion is important for teachers and for children." ■

Watch for updated revenue information at www.aftma.net.

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THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Thomas J. Gosnell
President, AFT Massachusetts

AFT MA Endorses Ed Markey for U.S. Senate

We seem to be the state of endless elections. When the 2014 elections have come and gone, we shall have had four U.S. Senate elections in four years. Since Massachusetts was the birthplace of the American Revolution, one might say that democracy is really humming in the Commonwealth.

AFT Massachusetts is proud to have endorsed U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren in 2012. Already she is showing the spark and commitment that enabled U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy to become a champion of all working people.

Now we have an opportunity to elect U.S. Representative Ed Markey to the U.S. Senate. His record during his tenure in Congress has been exceptional. He has stood for public education, fair taxation, labor unions, programs to alleviate poverty, comprehensive healthcare, and preservation of the Medicare and Social Security programs.

Look at his record over the years:

- Support for the funding of public education
- Opposition to private school voucher programs which would drain resources from public school
- Advocacy for affordable, high-quality healthcare for all Americans
- Opposition to wage

discrimination by voting to overturn a Supreme Court decision limiting workers' ability to sue.

- Support for the economic stimulus package which provided much funding for education programs and produced jobs in public education
- Support for the expansion of public employee collective bargaining and the elimination of impediments to holding fair union elections
- Opposition to an increase in the Medicare eligibility age
- Advocacy for keeping the federal student loan interest rate at a low level.

Year after year, Ed Markey has had a record which supports teachers, paraprofessionals, all educational workers, and those engaged in public service.

AFT MA always works very hard to elect women and men whom we believe will support our values. Sometimes we succeed; sometimes we don't. Sometimes those whom we support disappoint us. However, in a democracy our involvement is essential because it is a guarantee that those who oppose our values will be full participants in the electoral process. We need only look to Wisconsin where a determined opposition dismantled what took years

to build.

AFT MA will keep everyone informed about the issues during the campaign over the next three months. Our hope is that you will appreciate why the Executive Board of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts voted to endorse Ed Markey for the U.S. Senate and that you will consider voting for him in the Democratic primary on Tuesday, April 30th

If you have any questions or comments, you can email me at tgosnell@aftma.net. ■

For more on the Markey endorsement, please see story on page 7.



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Whether you are new to teaching or new to a union, there are certain terms that are helpful to know. In fact, there are many! In the educational spirit, we at *The Advocate* present this collection of definitions and explanations that we hope will make your life in AFT as easy as ABC.

Contract (n.) - A contract is a consensual agreement entered into voluntarily by two parties or more with the intention of creating a legal obligation. It is a legally enforceable promise or undertaking that something will or will not occur. Though contracts may be made orally, most enforceable contracts are written. If a contract is breached by either party, the offended party may seek compensation, specific performance of the contract, an injunction or other damages.

Contract law varies greatly from one jurisdiction to another, but is most often based upon the principle expressed in the Latin phrase *pacta sunt servanda*, which is usually translated "agreements must be kept". Contract law can be classified as part of a general law of obligations, along with tort, unjust enrichment, and restitution.

Contracts may be bilateral or unilateral. A bilateral contract is an agreement in which each of the parties to the contract makes a promise or set of promises to the other party or parties. In a unilateral contract, only one party to the contract makes a promise.

The most important feature of a contract is that one party makes an offer for an arrangement that another accepts. Contracts must be agreed to by all parties involved. Such mutual assent (*consensus ad idem*; "meeting of the minds") is typically reached through offer and acceptance. If a purported acceptance does vary the terms of an offer, it is not considered an acceptance but rather a counteroffer and, therefore, a rejection

In most systems of law, parties have freedom to choose whether or not they wish to enter into a contract.

In the United States, in order to obtain damages for breach of contract, the aggrieved party may file a civil lawsuit. If the contract contains a valid arbitration clause, the aggrieved party must submit an arbitration claim in accordance with the procedures set forth in the clause. Many contracts provide that all disputes be resolved by arbitration, rather than litigated in courts.

Have a question? Want a term defined? Write to advocate@aftma.net.

BOLD PRINT

Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) has been awarded a Teacher Incentive Fund Grant. As part of this grant, LPS will be offering the Sontag Prize in Urban Education to recognize outstanding teaching. Educators chosen for the Prize will participate in the LPS Acceleration Academy and a weekend of professional development at Harvard.

Information is available at www.sontagprize.com

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On Friday, April 5, at 6, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Diaz will read from his bestselling book, *This is How You Lose Her*, at Merengue Restaurant in Roxbury. The event is a fundraiser for the Jeremiah E. Burke High School's Team DR to help sponsor their latest service learning trip to the Dominican Republic. Tickets are \$50 per person and include dinner.

For information, contact Maria Depina at mdepina3@boston.k12.ma.us.

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On Sunday, April 7, at 2:00, 180 talented young musicians from Conservatory Lab Charter School will perform at the historic Strand Theatre in Dorchester as part of their annual Spring Fling. At this celebration of the power of music to strengthen community, the students will perform symphonic, percussion, and choral pieces by such masters as Mahler, Brahms, and Sibelius. Radio host Jose Masso of WBUR's *Con Salsa* will act as master of ceremonies.

For more information, visit <http://springfling2013.brownpapertickets.com>

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The award-winning education documentary "TEACH" will be screened as part of a Community Meeting at the First Church in Jamaica Plain on Friday, April 26, at 7.

For information, contact filminfo@teachdocumentary.com.

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Got good news to share? Send it to advocate@aftma.net

5 + 1 = A LOT More!

Lynn students benefit from Saturday math classes

For most students, the weekend means one thing- Sleep!

Very few of us can recall setting our alarms for a sixth day each week and bounding off to school with all the vim and vigor we had the other five days (if we even had it then).

In Lynn, however, that has been changing.

Thanks to the mother and son teaching team of Gayle and Michael Bastarache, students have been coming for special Saturday math classes at the Marshall Middle School every other weekend.

"Having worked with Gayle for many years and coached Michael," says Lynn Union President Brant Duncan, "it is no surprise that [they] continue to go above and beyond for the students of Lynn."

When the elder Bastarache is asked how the idea arose, the Marshall math teacher explains that when she mentioned to her son how many of her students needed extra help with math, the Lynn Classical High School calculus teacher responded that many of the seniors in his AP class wanted to perform community service. To use a math-related phrase, they put two and two together and came up with a program that works for everyone.

"We chose Saturdays for the program because it provides a more relaxed atmosphere," Ms. Bastarache explains, noting how "receptive" the students were to the ideas, as strange as it may have sounded initially.

"Saturday is less stressful than a school day," agrees student Mabel Rosado, "and it is easier to focus on the math problems."

Even the principal is benefitting from the program!

"It is inspiring to see the dedication of everyone involved," says Dr. Richard Cowdell. "We thought we might have to have some type of external motivators for our students, but we have nothing more than math for them."

Despite the lack of pizza or payment, students come back time after time and their grades continue to rise.

"It has been relatively easy," says

Ms. Bastarache when asked what it took to convince students to come back to school every other weekend. "The students enjoy themselves because they are becoming more confident in math."

In fact, Dr. Cowdell notes, when the program was cancelled due to snow, many students still showed up, asking to be allowed in. "They were very disappointed," he says.

Not only are the students gaining confidence, but, thanks to the AP students and the Bastaraches, they also get a sense of the love that many have for math. "Our students know that we are passionate about mathematics," Ms. Bastarache suggests, noting how both she and her son were fortunate to have had great math teachers themselves. "We had teachers who instilled in us a true appreciation for the beauty of mathematics. We want to pass that

on to our own students."

While the original intent was to help student with their MCAS scores, the program has provided participants with far more. The high school students get community service credit and the good feeling that comes from sharing wisdom and the younger students get mentors whom they can look up to and confide in. "The fact that they discovered math can be fun is a wonderful byproduct of their participation," Ms.



ADDING A DAY Michael and Gayle Bastarache lead Saturday math classes in Lynn

Bastarache says. "We are hoping that the friendships that have been formed between tutor and student will have a lasting effect on

their lives."

These added benefits are among the reasons why the program continues to add people each and every session.

"We started with 18 middle school students and 9 tutors," Ms. Bastarache recalls, noting that the program is open to all Marshall eighth graders and all Classical AP math students. "At our last meeting, there were approximately 50 middle school students and 10 tutors."

The Bastaraches also volunteer their time because they find it so gratifying to see the learning and personal growth that comes from the weekend exchanges.

"My brothers and sisters did well,

and I want to as well," says program participant Andy Nguyen. "I want to keep my family tradition going...[so] I don't mind the Saturday."

As for the tutors, they see it as the best of all possible worlds. "Volunteering as a tutor is more rewarding than other community service activities," suggests tutor Fredy Hincapie, "because you get to build a connection with other students in the community."

Hincapie also adds that the experience has given him a peek into the world of teaching. "Being a tutor gives me a different perspective on learning math," he admits. "Teaching is not as easy as you think!"

Even so, many of the tutors hope to pursue education after graduation.

"I want to be a teacher," says David Medina, "because I love working with kids and it is fun to pass on my knowledge of math to them."

According to tutor Philip Chea, the teaching is actually a two-way street. "Sometimes the middle school students teach me something that I forgot," he says, "so it's beneficial to both of us."

"I would have loved to have had this opportunity when I was in eighth grade," Hincapie says.

"If we were in their position," agrees tutor Ashley Ellis, "we would want someone to help us."

As a principal who is always trying to be innovative, Dr. Cowdell sees the Saturday tutoring program as a "hit" for everyone involved.

"The students want to be successful and we are just showing them one way to achieve that goal," Ms. Bastarache suggests. "This opportunity is a win-win for all the students!"

"It [is] a wonderful idea that no one should pass up," agrees student Stephanie Colclough. ■

Help from The Hill

Joint Education Committee keeps an eye on learning-linked legislation

The Massachusetts Joint Education Committee (www.malegislature.gov/Committees/Joint/J14) is a bi-partisan committee within the state legislature the purpose of which is to review legislation related to K-12 education in the Commonwealth. It is currently being chaired by Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz (D Boston) and Representative Alice Hanlon Peisch (D Wellesley). There are also three other senators and 10 more representatives on the committee, including Senator Sal N. DiDomenico who, along with Chang-Diaz, is backing the education funding bill that is also supported by Campaign for Our Communities (see front page story and February issue).

This being Peisch's second term serving as House Chair of Education, she is familiar with many of the issues with which she and her colleagues will grapple this session and is eager to continue her work. "I have always been a supporter of strong public education," says the former chair of the Wellesley School Committee.

As education remains such a priority in the Commonwealth, this Committee is one of the busiest in the State House. So far this session, they have already had nearly 300 pieces of legislation referred to them for review (out

of the over 5,000 bills filed overall). During their hearings, the Committee hears testimony from interested parties, including government officials and office holders as well as citizens. This testimony will help the Committee decide which pieces of legislation to continue through the approval process.

"The Committee's work is driven by the legislation filed," Peisch explains. "In addition to reviewing the bills, we are also have oversight responsibilities and often hold hearings to obtain information on various aspects of public education."

Despite all the work involved, Peisch has been able to keep her main goals in mind.

"My primary objective is to ensure that every child in Massachusetts has access to a high quality public education regardless of where that child lives or his/her economic circumstances," Peisch assures, "and to ensure that every child succeeds so that the achievement gap is closed."

As she is already involved in so many other committees (including those dealing with children and families, public safety and homeland security and tourism, arts and cultural development), Senator Chang-Diaz

is already quite busy with her legislative endeavors. However, as a former educator for whom education is such a priority (as evidenced by her support of the CFOC bill and other actions), she not only wanted to join this committee but co-chair it as well.

"I got involved in education issues through my time teaching in the Lynn and Boston Public School systems," Chang-Diaz explains, suggesting that education is not only important in Massachusetts but, "part of who we are."

As Massachusetts is the birthplace of public schools and as education remains one of the Commonwealth's key economic drivers, Chang-Diaz suggests that our commitment to it must remain strong; stronger, in fact, than in any other state. Even in tougher times when it may be more challenging to raise the appropriate and necessary funds, Chang-Diaz stresses the importance of finding a way to keep our educational capital in good shape for the future. "Employers come to Massachusetts because of our educated workforce," she observes, "and they depend on our public schools to prepare students for a global economy."

Among the particular issues Chang-

Diaz and Peisch hope to deal with this session are education financing, English language education, and what Chang-Diaz terms "the ongoing debate over how to best support and remediate struggling schools."

Another key issue for Chang-Diaz is the achievement gap. As the first Latina elected to the Massachusetts State Senate, Chang-Diaz has always championed ethnic groups, many of which often end up at the bottom end of such gaps. "Massachusetts has the best public schools in the nation," Chang-Diaz says, "but our highs and our successes are not reaching every community in the state." Despite recent improvements, the annual drop-out rate in Massachusetts high schools remains at around 8,000 students. According to Chang-Diaz, this creates

"far-reaching consequences for our Commonwealth." Fortunately, the issue has proponents like Chang-Diaz and Peisch to help continue the positive trend and keep tomorrow's potential leaders in school today. "I've filed a dropout prevention and recovery bill, S. 208, that tackles this very serious problem," Chang-Diaz notes, "and I'll be working hard to get the bill across the finish line." ■



Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz



Representative Alice Hanlon Peisch

Diary

of a New Teacher

Bill Madden-Fuoco

Humanities teacher,
Urban Science Academy, West Roxbury

Meet the 2012-2013 New Teacher Diarists

The following new teachers will be contributing to the New Teacher Diary during the 2012-2013 school year. The *Advocate* thanks all of these fine teachers for sharing their experiences.

Chaya Harris

Fifth grade teacher, Mather School, Boston

Eliana Martinez

Social studies teacher,
Lawrence High School, Lawrence

Bradford Green

English Teacher
Pickering Middle School, Lynn, MA

Himilcon Inciarte

Fourth grade Spanish teacher,
Dever-McCormack, Elementary, Boston

Amanda Perez

Middle school teacher,
Sarah Greenwood School, Dorchester.

Karina Dise

Paraprofessional,
Zanetti Montessori School, Springfield

Robert Tobio

Math and special education teacher,
Mary Lyon Pilot School, Brighton

Kirk Ahrens

Ninth grade ELA teacher
Mary Lyon Pilot School, Brighton

The letter of recommendation request first presents itself as a problem; a sudden task to wedge into the impossibly busy week. But I have come to recognize that writing letters of recommendation can bring unexpected rewards and revelations.

It is a daunting job to get to the pith of what makes a young person special, and to do that stuff literary justice. I file through forgotten days, hunting for the moments that revealed to me an important dimension of that student. I look through the student's major work for clues to their story. I note topic choices, positions, and progress. I teach about a hundred students a year, and the hour (minimum) of contemplation about one particular student would never happen otherwise.

There are teachers who have no problem refusing a letter of recommendation request, and I suspect that some get satisfaction from turning down a "difficult" student. As a teacher in an urban school, I know that my students have been leveled myriad educational disadvantages that include chains of inexperienced and/or ineffective teachers and scant access to rigorous curriculum. Therefore, it seems like an extension of inequality to deny a student's request. I also take joy in throwing stones at the narrative that says urban high school students are wildly disruptive and come from families and communities contaminated with a culture of low-achievement – folk wisdom that conveniently lets the rest of society off the hook.

This is not to say that the letters I write are flimsy or counterfeit. I believe that letters of recommendation can be a small leveler in a world of inequitably distributed opportunity, I would not cheapen the whole enterprise with inflated claims that



IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE...

Humanities teacher **Bill Madden-Fuoco** hopes that his students would recommend him as he would them.

render such letters unreliable. I believe that most of the students I teach, if given the opportunities they seek, are ready to flourish. When approached by a student whose development, in my opinion, lags behind her or his peers, I articulate both the student's strengths and "growth areas."

When students who have demonstrated questionable effort or judgment request a letter, I offer to write it with the caveat that the student may ultimately choose not to share it. Regardless of content, the occasion generates an opportunity to talk about the student's academic present and future, to affirm the student's strengths, and to brighten the connection between what students put into school and real world opportunities. Adolescents need thoughtful, holistic recognition from adults, but high schools are rarely organized to meet this need.

Stock phrases crowded my early attempts, but now, each of the letters I write is unique. They typically begin with a dive into narrative: shy Nathalie approaching me after class to ask if I had books about writing that she could borrow; Zazil giving impassioned testimony at a school

committee meeting; Freurys' memoir about the time he and his friend snuck into their apartment building's basement in search of spray paint.

In the end, however, the assessment reverses from the student's performance to my own. The question becomes: How well have I prepared this student?

Students do not relish asking adults to write them letters of recommendation. They do it only because we require it of them. While their requests initially land like an unexpected piece of bad news – the thud of a flat tire, the first sign of a bad cold – the process can lead to rewarding and useful reflection. The letters I write seek to portray my students' gifts, hard work, ability, and potential. When their academic deficits are noteworthy, I share ownership. I may never meet the rate of success for all students that I set each September. But another axiom balances this truth and guides me: I know it is always possible to adjust my practice to yield better results. So I stay up too late to honor every request for a letter of recommendation, and teach with the hope that in the end my students will recommend me. ■

Put Children First

Educator's Opinion

By Erik Berg

Those of us who teach know that children are many things: curious, inspiring, exasperating, wise, foolish; but one thing that children are not is easily quantifiable. In our country's quest to put a number on children's achievement to make policy goals easier to measure, we reduce the wonder of learning and the art of teaching to mere numbers. This serves the needs not of children, schools, parents or teachers who understand the complexity of their children, but of those adults who want to simplify the messy world of kids in schools. It has not been effective, and it is time to put the needs of children in schools ahead of the needs of adults.

Since the 1990s, the main prescription for improving K-12 education has been "accountability," which in practice has meant adding more layers of tests to our children's school lives. In my own classroom, my students are (thankfully) deemed too young to be forced to take many of the tests, but they do take a battery of standardized reading tests and district-designed math tests, and my English Language Learners take still other tests. I am required to devote approximately 20 hours of instructional time to each of three reading tests in September, January, and June. While some results

are admittedly useful and help me decide on instructional strategies, the amount of time devoted to these assessments is excessive and would be better devoted to actual instruction.

The deluge of testing has not worked. The consequences have been stagnant student achievement, a narrowing of the curriculum, and a marked increase in cheating. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), achievement growth has actually slowed since the federal No Child Left Behind law mandated more testing in 2003.

There has been much debate about the role of testing in teacher evaluations, and influential people, including Bill Gates, have asserted that we should judge teachers by their students' scores. At first blush, this policy seems sensible, as it purports to es-

tablish an objective measure by which to evaluate teachers. However, a 2010 report by the Economic Policy Institute provides a devastating critique of this idea, highlighting the inherent inaccuracy and unfairness of so-called "value-added" evaluation. The report also warns of unintended consequences, such as student tracking, a further narrowing of the curriculum, and incentives for teachers to avoid at-risk students. Furthermore, only

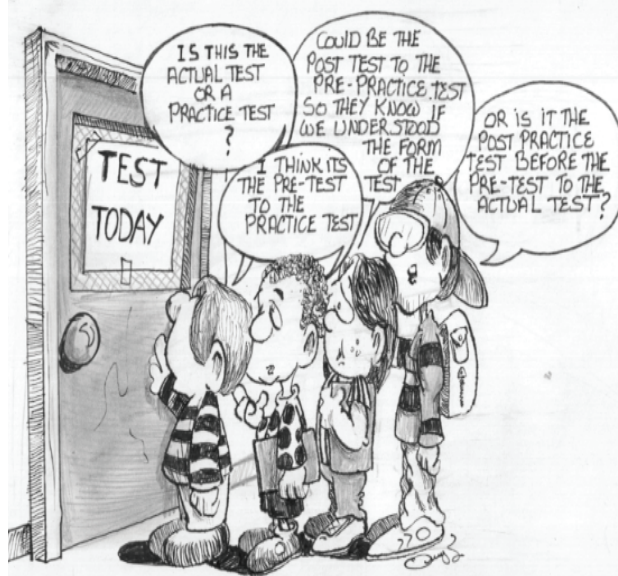


Illustration by Joe Quigley

about 17% of teachers teach a subject for which state tests are applicable, so what do we do with the other 83%? The answer seems to be more tests. This is surely a case of the tail wagging the dog. The test-first mania has been a boon

to private companies who design tests, but not to children. Children deserve schools and teachers who are meeting their needs, and helping them to learn and achieve at high levels. To that end, accountability is necessary. Teachers should be accountable for doing a good job, and evaluation systems based on

observations of a teacher's practice have proven effective. They strengthen the profession and ensure quality educators without falling prey to the easy but flawed solution of using static numbers to measure the complex human interaction that is teaching.

After decades of reforms based on testing, it is time to rethink our notion of how to improve schools. Budgets for field trips, athletics, the arts, and professional development have been cut as more resources are devoted to mandated testing. In Boston alone, 11 schools have been closed and two others converted to charter schools even as \$7.3 million of federal money from the Race To The Top program was awarded to implement a new teacher evaluation system based in part on test scores. Imagine how our children and teachers could soar if the resources invested in testing were invested in a strong and coherent curriculum that includes the arts, physical education, social studies, and foreign languages. Imagine how our schools could be improved if teachers had access to high-quality professional development that went beyond raising test scores. Imagine how much stronger our nation could be if we had the common sense and courage to invest in our children, not tests. ■

Erik Berg is a second grade teacher at the John D. Philbrick Elementary School in Boston.

Summa Cum Laude: Nina Blackwood

As one of the first video jockeys (“VJs”) on the music television channel MTV, Nina Blackwood clearly has a pioneering spirit. This spirit was bred in her early on as a student at Glickman Elementary in Springfield.

“The fondest memory I have of attending Glickman,” Blackwood recalls, “was walking down the road to wait for the school bus...ready to take me on a new adventure every day!”

Ushered into learning by her beloved (and, to have Blackwood tell it, appropriately named) kindergarten teacher Miss Little, Blackwood made the most of her years in Springfield and never forget her early lessons.

“I only lived in Springfield until...second grade,” says Blackwood, who is most often cited as a Cleveland native. “However, those few brief years cemented a deep love of the learning experience and a desire to succeed ...[and] to be a good student.”

Among the other “deep loves” that Blackwood developed at Glickman

were those of reading and music. “To this day, my passion is reading,” she says, noting a preference for non-fiction because, she says,

“There is so much knowledge to be had in this world...a lifetime is not enough to absorb it all!”

Before landing at MTV, Blackwood’s musical proclivities put her in front of scores of fellow music lovers in another way. “As I was starting out, I taught piano and harp,” the accomplished musician explains. “I tried to instill the love and enjoyment of music in my students.” Her lessons also taught Blackwood about what it means to be a teacher. “Teachers often need a high degree of patience,”



THE FACE OF A GENERATION Nina Blackwood (second from left) and the rest of MTV’s original “VJs”

she smiles, “especially when their students hadn’t practiced their lessons!”

Her passions for words and music dovetailed perfectly in her career as a broadcaster, one that continues to this day through her daily Sirius XM Radio program, her weekly broadcast from San Diego station 94.9 FM, and the show “Absolutely 80s” which can be accessed through her website, www.ninablackwood.net. It has also helped her put together contributions to the forthcoming book, *VJ: The Unplugged Adventures of MTV’s First Wave*, which is due out in May.

“As a broadcaster,” Blackwood

says, “the love of music and dissemination of information are two of the main things I share every day.”

After leaving MTV in 1986, Blackwood launched a popular music segment on Entertainment Tonight and hosted the TV music show Solid Gold for two years. She has also served as an expert music commentator on Access Hollywood, The Discovery Channel, and MSNBC. Blackwood is also an actress who studied at the world-famous Strasberg Institute and who has appeared in a wide array of films and plays.

While her musical-minded broadcasting and entertainment career continues, Blackwood often looks back with appreciation to the people who helped get her started in life.

“The Springfield school system planted the seed of what would become an eternal search for intellectual truth and growth,” Blackwood says, quite eloquently. “For that, I am most thankful.” ■

For the full interview, go to www.aftma.net.

A Tip of the Hat: Jenna Fitzgerald feted at conference

On Saturday, March 9, over 200 paraprofessionals from across the Commonwealth gathered at the Boston Teachers Union Hall for the 27th annual BTU-AFT Paraprofessional Conference.

“This was spectacular,” AFT MA President Tom Gosnell beamed, noting that the Conference was the best attended ever.

Conference participants were presented with manuals that included everything from venues at which AFT membership grants special privileges to recipes and other helpful hints. As it was prepared by BTU Paraprofessional Council President Jenna Fitzgerald, who is famous for her headwear, the manual also included tips on how to properly wear a hat.

“Jenna has done wondrous things for paraprofessionals,” said Gosnell, “and the hat industry!”

“Jenna knows that paraprofessionals are very important to education and the classroom,” said Fitzgerald’s secretary Patty O’Donnell, who notes that Fitzgerald will be retiring

in June, “and seeks to acknowledge their contributions each year along with AFTMA with this wonderful conference.”

Before participants gathered for a garden party-themed luncheon, they were also treated to the comedy of Tom Gilmore and a presentation by AFT MA Representative Andrew Powell, who has been keeping a close eye on proposed changes in retirement policy.

“This issue continues to play a major role in our discussions,” Powell said, noting the many questions that were asked after his presentation.

Among the paraprofessionals who came together was BTU Paraprofessional Council member Christine



Para Pros Jenna Fitzgerald (center) and members of the BTU Paraprofessional Council

Buttiglieri. “It has been a rewarding experience for me,” Buttiglieri said of her tenure on the Council. “It has been a very educational

for me to be able to learn the true meaning of paraprofessional.”

Citing Fitzgerald as her “mentor,” Buttiglieri added that she is “honored” to know her Council head.

“Jenna has always been a strong supporter of paras and substitutes,” she observed. “What we have learned from her has been a great help.”

Buttiglieri went so far as to suggest that it was Fitzgerald who helped introduce the term “paraprofessional” to the educational vernacular. “If it wasn’t for her, we would still be called aids,” she said. “She has

opened doors for us which would have been closed.”

“Jenna has been an inspiration,” O’Donnell added, “because she has lead the way for paraprofessionals to have a voice in collective bargaining and has always represented them through the union in a most proficient, skilled and compassionate manner.”

While the presence of paraprofessionals from across the state was testament to Fitzgerald’s legacy and the importance of her work (and that of her colleagues), Buttiglieri suggested that “the best tribute we can give would be that this council will continue with all the devotion and heart that Jenna has given.”

Buttiglieri also expressed her wishes to build on the camaraderie and collaboration established at the Conference. “We often hear from the paras only when they have problems,” she observed. “With a little more communication, maybe we can help before issues become problems.” ■

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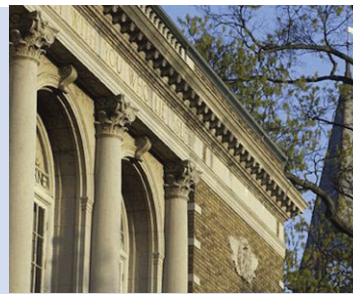
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On Campus

Dan Georgianna, Political Director
UMass Faculty Federation, Local 1895



MOOC-ing Into the Future?

Less than one year after start-up, edX, an open-access on-line venture of Harvard and MIT, has enrolled 600,000 people. This new program produces packaged on-line courses composed of lectures by world-renowned experts, tutorials by graduate students, discussions with other students, and exams, all at no cost to students. Anyone who completes a course and pass the tests receives a certificate, but not college credit.

Harvard and MIT have each promised to raise \$30 million to fund edX. The 27 courses currently offered include a course called Introduction to Biology: the Meaning of Life, which I started a few days ago but probably won't finish. Apparently, I am not alone. Lurking, dropping in and out (mostly out) is common in many edX courses.

edX recently signed agreements with Bunker Hill and MassBay community colleges to offer courses for credit that combine edX on-line lectures with classroom tutorials by community college faculty. It is being funded by a \$1 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are the latest development in on-line education. The leaders in the field - Coursera and Udacity - have enrolled several million students in the two years since their launches. MOOCs are logical extensions of smaller class on-line education, which continues to grow on college campuses (although its rate of growth has slowed) even as the number of students enrolled in college has remained constant or declined over the past few years.

According to a survey of chief academic officers (CAOs) called "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States" that was conducted by Babson College and the College Board, about one-third of all college students took an online course in Fall, 2011. The survey did not ask about profitability of online courses (which has been reported as questionable), but about two-thirds of CAOs reported that, "online learning is critical to their long-term strategy."

Almost 80% of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as "the same or superior to those in face-to-face" but only 30% of

CAOs believed that their faculty "accept the value and legitimacy of online education." Academic leaders reported, however, that low retention rates are a major problem for on-line courses. Dropouts like me are common.

According to the survey, only 3% of colleges and universities offer MOOCs with another 10% looking to add them. These low numbers are not surprising, considering that Harvard, MIT, and Stanford are offering such courses for free. There is some movement for college credit for MOOCs but this is not likely until the suppliers can figure a way to charge for them.

Profits from MOOCs are unlikely at present, but not impossible. Foundation funds are flooding into them, and some have unbundled educational services, such as licensing instruction to other colleges. Some sell names of good students to employers.

From my limited experience, edX and other MOOCs are little more than large lecture classes, but more entertaining. On the computer screen, they show very good views of expert lectures using the best learning technology. They use graduate students (or com-

munity college faculty) to tutor students and give multiple-choice exams that sap the life out of knowledge.

MOOCs suffer the same faults as all video education. They educate the most motivated students but do not reach students that need human contact with an instructor. Asking a question on-line with voting to determine which questions are answered (the edX process) does not match an engaged teacher in the room.

A good teacher can reach students in online courses, just as she or he can reach them in a classroom; it just takes more effort on-line. The most promising feature of online education is connecting students with each other and their instructor outside the classroom, critiquing each other's essays on-line in a writing class, for example.

In their announcement of edX, the presidents of Harvard and MIT predicted that data collected from MOOCs would be used for innovation in classroom teaching. In my building, we show PowerPoint presentations on a white board that we can write on with erasable pens. It is a simple technology, perhaps, but one that brings life to the deadly dullness of most presentations. I was pleased to see my MIT biology teacher do the same in edX. ■

Rising Organizing

Young union members come into their own

The idea of labor unions is not a new thing. Unfortunately, that fact may lead some to consider it old fashioned. As we all know, however, our union is vital to our lives every day. From maintaining fair labor practices to establishing new securities for working and retired members, unions continue to serve those who serve our communities.

Fortunately, there are many younger members who take the union seriously and who look to its future.

On February 23, over 90 dedicated young members from nearly 30 Commonwealth locals gathered at the Boston Teachers Union hall to participate in the Greater Boston Labor Council Futures Committee Young Worker Conference.

"We want to educate younger members on the importance of unions," explains Committee Chair Alison Doherty, "and empower them to use their voices...now so that they have a future to look forward to."

In addition to rallying young members, the Futures Committee (www.bostonfutures.org) also helps with rallies, phone banks, and other labor-supportive actions. During the 2012 Verizon strike, Committee members organized a flash mob to show their support. They have also taken tours of important sites in the Commonwealth's union history and studied union heritage so they can learn from the past while moving into the future.

According to the Committee (which meets the first Tuesday of each month at 5 PM in the Local 103 IBEW Hall), a "young" union member is anyone under 35. That leaves a lot of room for

participation, especially as so many students are entering unionized workforces after graduation.

At the February event, members broke into groups to discuss what they perceived as the current world of work and how they wanted to see it in the future. They then made action plans to try to turn labor problems into issues and labor dreams into realities.



THE NEXT GENERATION GBLC Futures Committee Members celebrate "being union"

"What can we do as young workers?" Doherty inquires. "This was the question we asked."

While Doherty is very grateful to the many local presidents (including our own Tom Gosnell) who have offered support to the organization, she is hoping to see more support rise from the ranks of the members themselves, especially among unions that serve students and other young people, such as AFT.

"I think that the push to engage, motivate, educate and empower younger educators needs to be a top priority," Doherty says.

Unfortunately, when Doherty ap-

proaches new members, she is often rebuffed by misunderstandings.

"If you don't come from a union household," she reasons, "you don't know what union is."

Such was the case with BTU member Darcel Hunt, a physics teacher at Urban Science Academy.

"I'm still learning what it means to be part of a union," Hunt explains.

"No one ever taught me what it meant to be affiliated with a union. I have my fellow colleagues to thank for teaching me the importance of being active in a union, especially as a newer younger member."

Hunt goes on to say that the historical information she receives during meetings and activities with the Committee helps her understand not only where the union has come from but also where it is headed. "I understand that through my involvement the union will continue to be strong in the future," she says.

As many misperceptions and stereotypes about unions exist, Doherty

emphasizes the importance of educating members so that they can then teach others what unions stand for, what rights they have fought for and, Doherty adds, "how easy it is to lose those rights if we do not remain vigilant and engaged."

"Young workers need to be organized and empowered in order to ensure not only the survival, but the future prosperity of labor," suggests BTU member Colum Whyte.

"It is important for all teachers to be active in their unions," Hunt agrees, "but I especially feel this way about new teachers. A union can make newer members feel less isolated. Members can draw from a wealth of knowledge to serve as their support system."

Doherty also suggests that her organization must connect new teachers with more experienced educators. "We must mentor newer members in order to maintain the gains we have secured," she advises, "and in order to have the strength to combat all of the top down, anti-union, anti-student propaganda that stares us in the face on a daily basis."

While many union members apparently prefer to grumble, Doherty and her colleagues are more interested in positive actions than negative words. "We do not want to sit idly by and complain," she says. "We want to take charge and do something to change our future...If we do not get involved, we will just [continue to] take the... abuse and continue to complain in the teachers' room during our 25-minute lunch."

The time is now, Doherty suggests, and the opportunity is here.

"We hope that we will get new, eager, motivated young workers who will join our charge and grow our committee," Doherty says. ■



Retiree Corner

Marie Ardito, Co-founder
Massachusetts Retirees United
www.retireesunited.org

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to the pensions of those who retired prior to July, 2004 and took the above-mentioned options. Any of the other 104 retirement systems that elect to accept the provisions of this act will use the figures of the State.

Work Bill - S1273

Those retired from a public sector job may return to work for a public employer in Massachusetts for a maximum of 960 hours in a calendar year. The salary that the person receives from this position, when added to his or her retirement allowance, cannot exceed the salary that is being paid for the position from which he or she retired.

In the last session, solely at the request of MRU, Senator Michael J. Rodrigues filed a bill that would increase by \$15,000 the amount that a retiree could earn in a calendar year. It was included in the Senate version of the Pension Reform Bill and became law on April 2, 2012

We asked Senator Rodrigues to look at either eliminating the 960 hours or increasing them. S1273 asks to increase the 960 hours to 1500 hours. The financial element of the bill has been signed by the Governor. ■

Watch for retiree news at www.aftma.net.

Support MRU-Backed Bills

There are many ways Massachusetts Retirees United demonstrates its commitment to retirees; most notably through legislative action. The following bills have been either filed or re-filed on our behalf. In most instances, our organization stands alone in seeking justice for retirees through this process.

Veterans' Bill - H2296 and S1249

It is our intent to get the Veterans' Bill passed in this session. We have asked Representative Paul Donato to re-file it, and have asked Senator Tom McGee to file the Senate Version of the bill. H2296 and S1249 will allow those who retired prior to July 24, 1996 and were veterans to receive up to 4 years toward their creditable service providing they do not exceed 80%. The original bill acknowledged the service rendered for our country. Though some veterans were already retired, this should not have made them ineligible. There are a over 650 living men and women classified as veterans according to the MTRS. These veterans were forgotten when this bill was passed. The best way for each of us to show our appreciation for the service they gave is to call our Representatives and Senators and ask them to support H2296 and S1249 all the way to the Governor's desk. Also call your local Veterans' Agency and ask them to support this measure. Please do not put off making these calls, as

they did not put off their call to serve.

Option B and Option C Penalty Reduction - H2354

There are over 9,000 teachers who retired prior to July, 2004 who took Option B/C or are beneficiaries of those who took Option C. The penalty for those who took Option B at that time was 3-5%; those who took Option B after July, 2004 have a penalty of 1-2%.

Those who took Option C before July, 2004 have a penalty that is two to three times greater than those who took it afterwards. Yet the average pension of those who retired prior to is \$15,000 less than those who retired after, and the discrepancy is increasing yearly.

Those who retired prior to January, 1988 and took either option had gender factored into the amount of their penalty. The average pension is under \$19,000 for teachers (MTRS and Boston) and \$15,000 for state employees.

The source for the average pensions is the 2004 PERAC Actuarial Valuation Report. This guided us in determining the flat rate. It is more generous to older retirees who have borne the penalty for too long. To ask the 106 retirement systems to recalculate all pensions for those who took these options would take years and require a great expenditure in hiring additional personnel.

H2354 makes the yearly increases

AFT Endorses Markey

On Saturday, March 16, the elected officials of the Executive Board of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts announced their endorsement of Congressman Edward J. Markey in the ongoing race for the U.S. Senate.

"Throughout his career, Ed Markey has been an advocate for students and

has pushed for reforms that strengthen our public education system and reward effective teaching methods," said AFT MA President Tom Gosnell.

"We know Ed will continue working hard in the Senate on behalf of students, educators, and families."

"I am so proud to have the support of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts," Markey said, "whose members are some of the most dedicated individuals I know. More than simply educators, our teachers are role models - for our children and for the communities they serve every day. I've spent my time in Congress fighting to provide the best education possible for our children, and I'll continue the fight in the Senate for more teachers, better schools and

smaller class sizes."

As the author of the recent bill to increase digital literacy, Markey has been a staunch supporter of education and educators throughout his career.

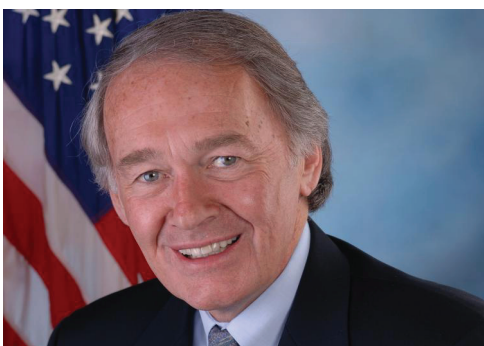
"The original E-Rate legislation I authored has linked up nearly all schools and libraries to the Web," Markey said in a comment about the filing. "Now is

the time to expand connections at home and ensure that all Americans - both young and old - have the digital skills they need to compete in the 21st century economy."

AFT MA represents more than 25,000 public

school employees and higher education faculty and staff throughout the Commonwealth. Markey has also received endorsements from a number of other unions, including Service Employees International Union (SEIU), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 93, and the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA).

All members are encouraged to support Markey at the first debate on April 27 at WCVB TV in Needham. ■



Congressman Edward J. Markey



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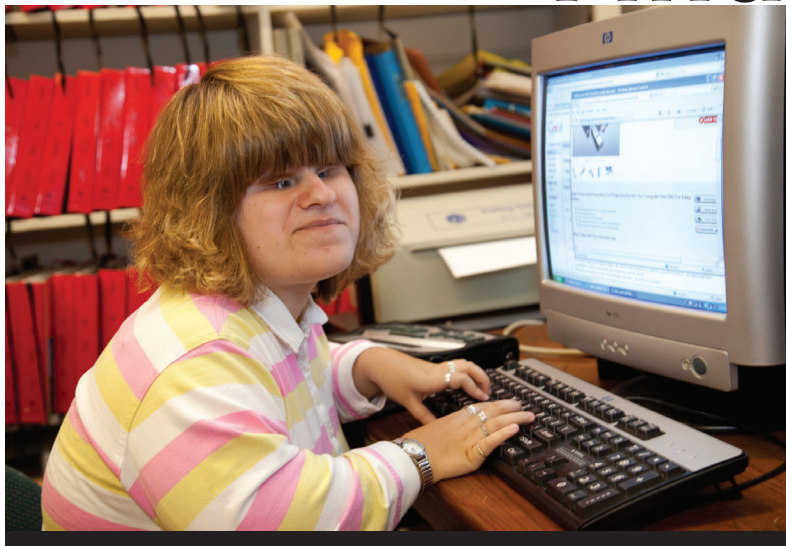
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