



The Advocate



AFT Massachusetts
38 Chauncy Street
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Boston, MA 02111

October 2013

Leading the Leaders

AFT MA presents special seminar for union administrators

On September 28, over 40 leaders from across the Commonwealth gathered for a leadership training workshop hosted by AFT MA. While many in attendance were experienced officers, most were new to union leadership and some even new to union life. Together, the members learned how to solidify their understandings of what the union asks of them and how they can use their talents to support the union and its members.

In his introductory address, AFT MA President Tom Gosnell spoke of his beloved Red Sox, subtly suggesting that their ability to pull together in times of trial could be a metaphor for the assembled audience.

"We are not silos," Gosnell suggested. "We want you to understand all positions and the connections between them."

Quoting AFT President Randi Weingarten, Gosnell cited as the state federation's goals to encourage and engage "what's best for kids and what's best and fair for teachers...paraprofessionals and librarians...and collaboratively done."

"We want to serve the kids," he asserted, "no matter what role we play."

Gosnell also emphasized that another vital goal is supporting the teachers, paras and librarians in their efforts to garner fair wages and other benefits

"That is traditional unionism that we are all behind," he explained.

In arguing for the importance of unions, Gosnell noted how every public school teacher in Massachusetts works under a collective bargaining agreement and connected this fact to the fact that our state has the highest test scores in the nation and among the best in the world!

"Do you know how many teachers in Alabama and Mississippi work under an agreement," he asked, citing two of the nation's lowest-performing states. "Zero."

When asked what he hoped would come of the day's proceedings and of further participation in AFT MA's many events, Gosnell replied, "We want you to say that AFT MA is a wonderful organization and that you are really proud to be part of it. Most of all, we want you to say that what you learned today made you a better union

official and will enable all of us to give better service to the kids."

"The most important thing that you leave this workshop with is the sense of what a union is in terms of how officers function and the way they are expected to operate," suggested AFT MA Director of Organization Annmarie DuBois. "Because it is a business," she pointed out, citing the Landrum-Griffin Act that regulates union operations, "it must follow certain statutes when it operates in certain ways."

DuBois then went on to explain how each local is part of the state union which is part of AFT national which is also part of a larger affiliation of unions, the AFL-CIO.

"A local is the smallest of the units," she said, being sure to suggest that it is far from the least significant, especially to its members and officers. "We have a whole family of unions to which we belong, but we all value the same things."

Among these shared values, DuBois cited the right of workers to have some say



LEADING THE WAY Susan Sooars and Annmarie Marchand are co-leaders of AFT MA's newest local in Masconomet

over their working conditions. "The say that you have is clearly defined in that thing that you call a contract," DuBois explained.

In offering a brief history of AFT and how Local 1 was formed in Chicago in 1916, DuBois welcomed one of the most recent chapters, AFT MA's newest member Masconomet, which was represented at the event by officers Annmarie Marchand and Susan Sooars.

Before he began his presentation, former local president and AFT MA representative Mike Regan also mentioned how important not only the local leaders are to AFT's success, but also every member in every role in every district.

"Thank you for doing what you are doing," Regan said. "You are doing something so important- Not only for yourselves...but for your colleagues and for your profession."

And while he realized that many people expect teachers, paras and librarians to do what they do day in and day out, Regan was keen to emphasize what extraordinary services they provide and how more appreciation and reward is always appropriate, even when it is not given.

"It takes a special person to do what you are doing," he observed. "You have put yourselves in a position where you want to do something."

In an effort to get to know his colleagues so that he and his team at AFT MA could serve them better, Regan then asked the assembled why they had come to teaching, why they had come to the union, and why they had come to the event. Among the responses were "to gain experience," "to have a voice," to support colleagues," and "to strengthen the union."

"There are a number of different reasons why you took the job," Regan summarized, "but you are all in the same boat."

As everyone in AFT has similar understandings and goals, Regan suggested that they all see each other as resources on whom each of them could rely for support, ideas, or just some appreciation and collegiality.

"There is no reason why you cannot reach out," he said, making sure everyone

knew that AFT MA and AFT national are also available for them.

Once introductions and ideas had been shared, Regan offered advice based on his own 14 years as a teacher and his years spent serving from AFT MA's Boston office.

"The first thing I would say is know your contract," he said. "You will solve so many issues if you know your

contract."

Regan also recommended that every member develop a sense of what is going on with every other member, at least and especially in their local.

"Know the climate in every building," he suggested. "Know the trouble spots and try to get your best people in the trouble spots."

Regan also emphasized the importance of working together.

"Try to surround yourself with people that can help you out and inform you," he suggested. "Know your managers and who you can rely on in your own local. Know your officers. Work with your officers. You're a team!"

In addition to using the AFT MA website (www.aftma.net), Regan also advised members to check on AFT's Leadernet service for resources, ideas, and support. He also mentioned to local leaders that they should be familiar with Robert's Rules of Order and pick up a gavel (or "anything that makes noise") so they can run efficient meetings. The most important advice he offered, however, was in many ways the simplest, though not always the most followed.

"Ask questions," Regan said. "No one expects you to know everything from day one. You are going to learn [and] you will get satisfaction from what you do because you are in this position because you care."

With the "why" of leadership established, it was time for the officers to discuss more of the "how." Guiding them

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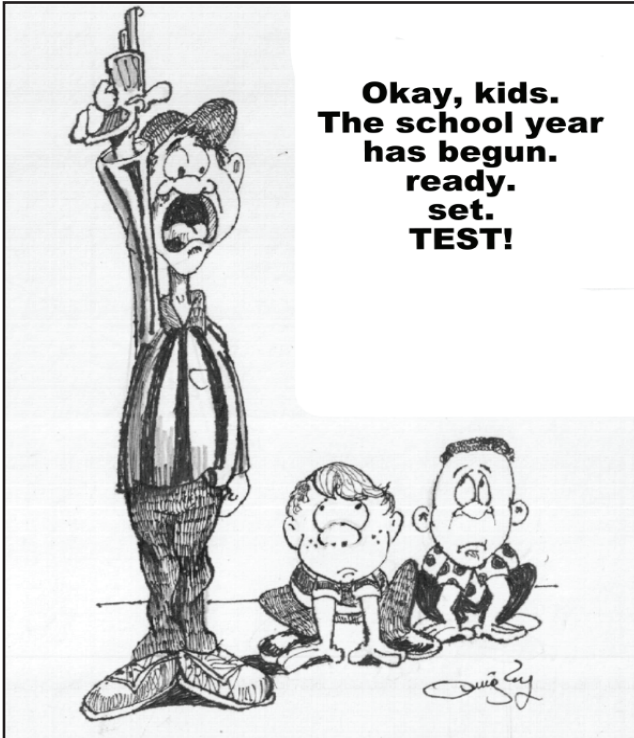
**State of the Stacks:
Burke Book Clubs**

through this section was AFT MA Secretary-Treasurer Mark Allred who reiterated that, as a union is a business, it is the president who acts as the CEO and is ultimately responsible for all decisions and actions.

"You have to...spend that money in a way that is responsible," Allred advised. "You are responsible to the membership as to where that money goes. The membership needs to know where the money is coming from and how the Union is planning to spend it."

Allred also strongly advised each local to hire an independent auditor who is familiar with unions to perform their annual audit. "You need an audit to make sure that everything you are doing complies with Federal and State laws," he explained. "If you have an audit done and have your receipts for every single expense and your taxes have been filed on time, you are in better shape."

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Read about Diane Ravitch's speech in Cambridge (see p. 3)



THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Thomas J. Gosnell
President, AFT Massachusetts

Health Care for Retirees

Affordable health care is a very important issue receiving much attention from elected and appointed officials and from the press. Unfortunately, the cost of health care in the United States of America outstrips its cost in practically all, if not all, developed nations. In the USA the cost in Massachusetts is higher than in most states. Since not many are willing to tackle high costs by challenging the manner in which hospitals and insurance companies operate, there are some who wish to require employees to assume more of the cost by raising copays and deductibles and by reducing the breadth of coverage.

A bill now in the Massachusetts legislature, House 59, contains many provisions which would affect both current and future retirees. Some are good; some are bad.

Currently cities and towns are free to determine what percentage of the health insurance premium a retiree has to pay. Recently, one of the towns in the state increased premiums for its retirees from 25% to 50% of the total cost of the premium. The proposed legislation would prevent cities and towns from increasing retiree contributions until January 1, 2016 and from applying the increases to those already retired

before that date. This is certainly an improvement.

Currently cities and towns can decide what percentage of the premium surviving spouses pay for their health insurance coverage. Some cities and towns in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts require surviving spouses to pay 100% of the cost of the premium. In fact, some states provide no coverage. The proposed legislation would require cities and towns to pay a minimum of 50% of the cost of the premium. This is certainly an improvement.

Another section of the bill would require the employer to base the retiree's percentage of the contribution on how many years of employment have been completed at the time of retirement. For example, an employee who retired with twenty years of service would pay a higher percentage of the premium than an employee who retired with thirty years of employment. In addition, a minimum age of sixty would be required for health insurance coverage. Although the proposed bill would exempt very many current employees, the idea is a significant change for current employees who started their public careers in mid-life and for future employees. This is certainly a drawback.

There are many other aspects of the bill but the mentioned items are some of the highlights.

Of course, beginning in 1986, public employees were required to contribute to Medicare. Any retiree who is Medicare eligible will be required to enroll in it upon turning sixty-five years of age.

The Committee on Public Service of the Massachusetts Legislature has held a hearing at which AFT MA testified for the good sections of the bill and testified against the bad sections of the bill.

As of the date of this article the general consensus is that the legislature will take no action in 2013. What happens in 2014 remains to be seen. AFT MA will keep you fully informed.

Health insurance coverage is an extraordinarily important issue. In an age of tremendous medical advancement we expect to receive first rate medical care without being financially devastated. In an age when we live longer we know that more medical care is needed to have a good quality of life. These considerations are important for all people.

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



Go to www.aftma.net and send a letter to your representatives to tell them you want the charter school cap kept on in Massachusetts

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Thank you!



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Speaking Out

Diane Ravitch champions public education

As a former Assistant Secretary of Education and counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander under President George H.W. Bush who now serves as one of the most ardent critics of what she terms the “hoaxes” of public education, Diane Ravitch has a unique perspective on the state of our schools and the people who want to run them. On October 24, Citizens for Public Schools (CPS) brought Ravitch to speak at Harvard’s Memorial Chapel.

The packed house of students, educators, administrators, government and union officials was called to order by CPS President Ann O’Halloran who noted how many of the people in attendance had “happy faces” and how “rare” that was for such a “big group” of teachers.

Setting the mood for the evening’s discussion, O’Halloran began by suggesting that “public schools are a pillar of our democracy” and that “policies are getting in the way.” After proposing that all those in attendance become involved with her organization (www.citizensforpublicschools.org), O’Halloran expressed hope that the numbers and energy in the room might help turn the tide in the ongoing education debate.

“The fact that so many people are here gives us hope that we can improve our schools,” O’Halloran said. “I hope that Governor Patrick and others on Beacon Hill take a few pages from Diane’s book and abandon policies that have failed.”

Presenting Ravitch’s official introduction, AFT MA President Tom Gosnell mentioned some of Ravitch’s many accolades and achievements, including her studies at Wellesley College and the fact that her books have been translated into many languages around the world.

“Here in Boston,” Gosnell concluded, “which I would submit is the capital of public education, it is wonderful to have this champion of public education speaking to us!”

In her comments, many of which are discussed further in her latest book, [The Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools](#) (Knopf), Ravitch raised issues ranging from the achievement gap to poverty (which, she claims, is one of the real roots of all other issues, despite the fact that many so-called reformers deny it).

“We are now supposedly engaged in an era called school reform,” Ravitch explained, observing, “the word ‘reform’ has been tainted.”

Among the “taints” she noted were the budget cuts and school closings, the involvement of private entrepre-

neurs who have no experience in education, and the widespread belief that tests are the “outcome” of education.

“It sometimes seems that eliminating public education is the goal,” she said, citing recent issues in such major metropolitan areas as Milwaukee, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and Indianapolis.

Among the “hoaxes” that Ravitch spent significant time on were the failed policies of No Child Left Behind.

“No country in the world has...100% proficiency,” she said.

Unfortunately, Ravitch suggested, education policy has not improved since the previous administration and may in fact be getting worse.

“The hoax of our day is called Race to the Top,” she suggested, noting flatly that, “It is not working anywhere” and that “there is no evidence or research behind it.”

In fact, Ravitch said, the main results of this new policy have been the demoralizing of teachers and principals and the closing of more schools.

“Why are we racing,” she asked, “and where is the top? It suggests a market-based system with a few winners and a lot of losers.”

As a PhD in history, Ravitch regales in researching the real stories behind the so-called facts and figures that others tout in their arguments against public education and offered a few to the crowd.

“Test scores are not flat,” she insisted. “They’re highest in history.... And graduation rates are not a scandal. They are [also] the highest in history!”

The real facts, Ravitch assured, are that early childhood education, smaller class size and “other things that are being abandoned” are the real keys to minimizing any gaps and maximizing student potential. Therefore, she suggested that we abandon the “test-taking culture” of other nations and embrace what makes our nation great.

“We are America,” she cheered, “and the reason that we have succeeded is not because of test scores, but because of creativity and non confor-

mity- Thinking not in the bubble but outside the box.”

Unfortunately, one ranking that still holds true is that the United States is leader when it comes to childhood poverty.

“That is a crisis,” Ravitch said, noting that most of those who claim education is in “crisis” never address this most profound and problematic underpinning. “Kids who do not eat cannot learn,” she observed. “Kids who do not feel safe cannot learn.”

While Ravitch admitted that the private sector does do some things well, she assured the assembled that public service was not one of them.

“We have seem this with the charter schools,” she observed. “They have higher scores because they kick out the kids with low scores. That is called risk management and that is what the private sector does.”

While the charter schools are duplicitous and dividing, Ravitch said

it was the growing crop of online virtual schools that are the most pernicious.

“Virtual charter schools are the single biggest scam in education today,” she said. “They spread because they are profitable.” However, Ravitch pointed out, these schools also have low scores and a high dropout rate because they are “boring” and lack

the human connection that is so vital to a meaningful education.

While many so-called reformers suggest a variety of unsupported and patently bad ideas, the worst, according to Ravitch, is firing teachers who do not produce sufficient rises in test scores.

“That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard!” she said, suggesting that if a teacher’s students have learning difficulties, do not speak English or (on the other side of the spectrum) are gifted and already do very well on tests, chances for increases in scores are minimal at best for even the most practiced and involved teachers.

“Either way,” she observed, “you are considered an ineffective teacher.”

Weighing in on the new Common Core standards, Ravitch suggested that it is too soon to call as the quickly rolled-out system is greatly untested.

“Standards are words on paper until you try them with children in classrooms,” the former policy advisor suggested. “I recommend they field test it, but they said they were in a hurry.”

Fortunately, she noted, the uproar

over Common Core is fueling the anti-testing movement of which Ravitch is now a leader.

“So it’s not all bad,” she smiled.

One new issue that has not had much upside is the growing groups of undertrained teachers from programs like Teach for America.

“If you hire someone who has only a five-week training,” Ravitch suggested, “you say that anyone can teach and you destroy teaching.”

Ravitch also observed that the “new” idea of merit pay is actually not new and, research would attest, does not work.

“Teachers do the best they know how,” she said. “They are not hiding their best lessons waiting for a bonus.”

Citing recent stories in other local publications, Ravitch mentioned the “hoax” suggestion that charters and vouchers can “save the day.”

“The thing that you should know about charters,” she explained, “is that they like to call themselves public when it comes time to get the money, but if they get in any kind of trouble, they are not public anymore.”

As a result, many charters have been able to prevent teacher organization by claiming that they are not subject to state employment standards.

“That is [also] why they can accept who they want and keep out those they do not want,” Ravitch noted, alluding to the fact that Massachusetts has a cap currently and that teachers may want to do what they can (such as going to the AFT MA website and sending a letter to their legislators) to keep it that way.

“Where we are headed is towards a dual system,” Ravitch concluded, referring to charter and public schools. “One system can choose the students it wants and the other system accepts everyone and is considered a dumping ground.... That is wrong and we can’t go that way!”

Among the suggested solutions, Ravitch mentioned smaller class sizes, larger arts and physical education programs and more parental engagement and involvement.

“Teachers can help,” she said, “but they cannot do it alone.”

Looking around the sacred space, Ravitch echoed Gosnell in noting how special this place was in the history of education.

“Massachusetts is where public education began,” she noted. “The founders were not thinking of test scores. They were thinking of how to maintain this fragile democracy.” Therefore, she suggested, we need schools that teach students not how to fill in bubbles but how to treat others with respect and how to make our society more just and civil and, she said, “to bring us to that day when there truly is liberty and justice for all.” ■

Leaders

Continued from page 1

Allred also warned local leaders to keep complete records and “receipts for everything” and that all checks must be co-signed by two people. He also emphasized the importance of keeping union business and political dealings separate.

“Dues do not fund political candidates,” he noted, quelling concerns of members who are wary to pay into a system that may not serve their political interests. “That is what the COPE fund is for and members can donate voluntarily.”

DuBois then returned to discuss proper

election procedure, explaining the secret ballot system and appropriate methods of counting and recording votes in accordance with Federal election law.

After lunch, AFT MA Representative Walter Armstrong talked about how to improve communications within the local. He recommended face-to-face meetings whenever possible but also suggested myriad other forms of contact, including the use of e-mail (though not on an employer’s system), social networking, letter writing, and newsletters.

“AFT has tools to help you,” he suggested, “but to reach our people, we need accurate member information.”

Among the newest and most effective

methods that AFT provides are the SALSA email distribution system and the Staweb system, which offers locals a website that is connected to AFT and provides them with news and information on a regular basis.

“Any one of our locals can have a Staweb site built for them,” Armstrong advised. “Content is pushed down from AFT based on what type of members you represent.” And while these sites allow AFT helping RaiseUp MA raise the minimum wage and support paid sick time, offering our colleagues in early childhood education more rights and privileges, and restoring collective bargaining to Level 4 and 5 schools.

“No matter what you do, we need

your help on all of these issues,” LaPierre emphasized. “It only takes a minute, but it makes a big difference!”

Regardless of how members choose to support each other, however, LaPierre suggested they all work together and strive to support their union brothers and sisters. In fact, one of the final pieces of advice LaPierre shared was to “always use a union print shop for any political materials that a local may be producing for its membership or the community at large....That’s important!” ■

Responding to RETELL:

A Letter to AFT MA President Tom Gosnell from Commissioner Mitchell Chester

In an earlier edition, *The Advocate* printed a letter AFT MA President Tom Gosnell sent to Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester expressing the AFT MA’s concerns about implementation of the RETELL program. Here is the Commissioner’s response.

Mr. Thomas Gosnell, President
AFT Massachusetts
38 Chauncy Street, Suite 402
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Dear Tom:

I write in response to your July 18, 2013 letter, in which you expressed concerns about the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (ESE) implementation of its Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL) initiative. We appreciate your steadfast support for this pivotal initiative, are aware of the issues you identified, and are working hard to address them. I want to assure you that your feedback, throughout the development of this initiative and in your most recent correspondence, has truly helped ESE improve its planning and implementation of RETELL.

I will respond directly to your concerns, as follows:

AFT MA Concern: The amount of reading and homework for the course was immense.
ESE Response: We acknowledge that through both participant and instructor feedback, we have heard that the course workload during spring 2013 was heavy. As we revise the full-length course and develop three other Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) Endorsement courses, we are systematically analyzing the workload in each course to ensure it conforms to a more typical workload in a graduate-level course. Moving forward, the courses will contain a lighter, but still demanding workload.

AFT MA has suggested offering educators who took the course during the spring 2013 the opportunity to earn more than the three graduate credits for the course. We are not able to revise the number of course credits awarded by multiple graduate school programs. However, we are able to acknowledge the significant work demands for the spring 2013 course by increasing the number of Professional Development Points (PDPs) awarded to each participating educator. ESE already issued PDP certificates that grant each educator 67.5 PDPs for the course. We will grant an additional 22.5 PDPs, for a total of 90. We arrived at that figure based on the estimation that educators who participated took part in 180 hours (45 contact hours plus 135 homework hours).

AFT: Districts pressured educators into course selections.
ESE: We have invested considerable time and resources to address this issue through the establishment of an enterprise-level, web-based self-enrollment system. We notified educators in June about this system, and they were provided access starting on August 5. As courses will begin on October 1, we have rectified this matter. Please note, however, that ESE will assign educators to a cohort year when a district has not met its target enrollment.

AFT: ESE should remove educators from the cohort year records if they were pressured into courses and subsequently had to withdraw.
ESE: We have removed all such teachers from the cohort year. ESE will afford those teachers with an additional opportunity to enroll in a free SEI Endorsement course section, subject to appropriation.

AFT: The tardiness policy is unnecessarily punitive.
ESE: ESE rescinded this policy within weeks of the start of the course after we heard strong objections to this policy. Instructors will now address attendance and tardiness issues, as appropriate, through the participation grade. We have also worked with districts to schedule courses at times in the afternoon that account for travel times to course sites.

AFT: ESE’s June 12 letter to core academic teachers was unclear and confusing with respect to enrollment.
ESE: We did not want to give teachers the false impression that they are under no pressure to enroll when the opportunity is presented. To make a “no cost” opportunity available to the 26,000 educators required to complete the SEI Endorsement course by 2016, ESE needs to distribute the numbers of educators within the district cohort years in a manner consistent with instructor and classroom capacity. For licensure and employability reasons, it is important that educators enroll in SEI Endorsement courses when those courses are available to them at no cost.

We do not agree that the June 12 letter (see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=7597>) created any false impressions. Further, leading up to the last year of each district’s training window, ESE will need to assign to the last cohort year those educators who require the endorsement but have yet to obtain it. There are many compelling reasons why ESE will make every effort not to compel the (involuntary) assignment of a large number of teachers.

Nevertheless, ESE’s August 1 letter (see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=7612>), states more explicitly the time window for teachers as it relates to their district’s cohort training window.

You also expressed a concern that the June 12 letter downplayed and provided insufficient explanation that we could assign teachers to a cohort year if their district falls short of its pre- determined target. The following text is excerpted verbatim from the June 12 letter, including the original heading in bold:

Assignment to the Cohort Year by the Department of Education

In order to ensure that the Department can enroll all core academic teachers of ELLs across all districts over the time frame of this initiative, we have set a target enrollment number for your district for SY 2014. If an insufficient number of teachers from your district enroll for SEI Teacher Endorsement Courses, the Department will assign enough additional core academic teachers of ELLs to the 2013-2014 cohort year to meet the district’s target. This assignment process will take place, where necessary, in early September. Should you be assigned to the cohort year under these circumstances, the Department will provide you additional information.

By placing this explanation in a text box, as it appeared in the June 12 letter, we intended to highlight this point, rather than downplay it. We provided no further details in the June letter because we hoped and expected to assign relatively few teachers during the 2013-2014 school year.

AFT: ESE’s June 12 letter provided insufficient guidance regarding one of the alternative pathways to SEI Endorsement.
ESE: We agree that providing additional information about all pathways is important and helpful to educators. ESE had not yet set up the SEI Endorsement application module in the Educator Licensing and Recruitment (ELAR) System at the time of the June communication. We have provided more information about applying for the SEI Endorsement in the August 1 letter.

We anticipate that the SEI Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) exam will be ready in spring 2014.

ESE recently identified funding to hire an SEI Specialist who, once hired, will help to develop criteria for evaluating the transcripts of individuals who seek to earn the SEI Endorsement on the basis of their prior education and training. We will keep you posted on further developments as more information is available.

AFT: : There is a risk in sending communications to teachers in August, when many administrators and teachers are away.
ESE: We share your concern. We have impressed upon district leaders that they have an important responsibility to communicate this information to the appropriate staff in a timely manner. We have found that many educators have received the information and have already self-enrolled.

You should also know that the electronic registration system will direct educators who do not need the SEI Endorsement out of the system. It will also guide individuals who need the endorsement to the appropriate courses while informing them of alternative pathways to eligibility for meeting the endorsement.

Should a situation occur where a district does not communicate the information, or there is a miscommunication related to which teachers are required to take the course, ESE will take appropriate steps to ensure that educators are not harmed as a result of any district errors. Districts are responsible for determining teacher availability. If the district is aware that an SEI teacher is not available to participate in training, it can exclude that teacher from the August 1 mailing. By “not available,” we mean that the district is aware the educator is on leave or has a profession-related education commitment. However, a teacher has the discretion not to

enroll in the 2013-2014 school year. Teachers who postpone earning the SEI Endorsement are still responsible to meet the requirement before the conclusion of the district’s training window.

With AFT MA’s assistance, we incorporated into the August 1 letter language that makes it clear that English as a Second Language (ESL)-licensed staff do not need SEI Endorsement training. The August 1 letter also lays out what educators should do to apply for the endorsement. Finally, during the enrollment process, we inform teachers with a valid ESL license that they do not need to take the SEI Endorsement course, are eligible to apply for the SEI Endorsement, and how to do so.

As of August 5, ESE has launched its professional development customer service line. There are three available numbers to call: 781-338-6994, 617-994-6994, and 413-314-6739. Staff are available to assist callers during the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. with access to both technical support and expert assistance regarding how the SEI Endorsement applies to them, what type of training is required, and what the timelines are, among other issues.

AFT: The fast-track timeline could result in the hasty and punitive assignment of teachers.
ESE: Teachers have known that enrollment would begin in August since receiving ESE’s letter in June. As Assistant Commissioner Jonathan Landman has previously discussed with AFT leadership, teachers should have received on August 1 enrollment and scheduling information, which gives them two months notice prior to fall courses starting on October 1. We have attempted to wait as long as possible until we have to make any involuntary assignments, while still enabling those so-assigned some time to make arrangements for participating beginning in October.

AFT: The SEI MTEL test timeline should be moved up, or another test should be used until the new MTEL test is ready.
ESE: The new MTEL test that our vendor is developing is already on the most accelerated timeline possible. We anticipate that test will be ready in spring 2014. ESE has also thoroughly investigated the possibility of employing existing examinations as a pathway to an SEI Endorsement. However, we have not identified any existing examination that meets our particular requirements.

AFT: Educators would benefit from the ability to enroll in SEI courses offered through colleges, universities, and third-party providers, but ESE must certify those courses quickly.
ESE: ESE will soon issue a Request for Responses to enable third-party providers to deliver SEI Endorsement courses for cost. A shortage of qualified instructors is an ongoing problem. So in the short term, there will be a limited number of sites available to provide such training, which affects the quantity of training available as well.

AFT: There is a discrepancy between the workload associated with the SEI Teacher Endorsement course and the workload for the SEI Administrator Endorsement course.
ESE: ESE has designed a course for administrators to prepare them appropriately to supervise and evaluate SEI instruction. Administrators must have the ability to recognize good practice, not only for SEI instruction, but instruction that is suitable for diverse populations and across a wide range of content.

AFT: There is a need to address teachers who are on the preliminary license and seeking to advance to the initial license.
ESE: At a minimum, should a core academic teacher of English language learners who holds a preliminary license fail to qualify for the SEI Endorsement through no fault of his or her own, ESE will provide the teacher with appropriate relief. This is, however, something we acknowledge will require further review and the development of suitable solutions.

AFT: There is a need to ensure adequate capacity, resources, and trainers for the initiative.
ESE: ESE shares these concerns, and has received similar feedback from superintendents and other administrators across the state. In our June 12 communication to districts, which was copied to AFT leadership, we noted that:

The Department remains committed to providing SEI Endorsement training to all core academic teachers of ELLs within the timeframe of the initiative and will be seeking additional resources to increase our training capacity as needed.

This fall, ESE will work to better ascertain the extent to which the training needs across the Commonwealth are being met. ESE will request additional funding as appropriate. If the timeframe of the initiative needs to be extended, we will bring that issue to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education for its review as well.

AFT: You ask for assurances that educators’ work in earning the SEI Endorsement will be “fully honored” and avoid the fate that befell “category trainings.”
ESE: While the Category training was not mandated, the SEI Endorsement is a regulatory requirement for certain educators. Educators who successfully complete the SEI Endorsement training are eligible to apply for the SEI Endorsement.

It is also worth noting that ESE has honored the work of educators who participated in Category trainings in that those educators may enroll in Bridge courses. Bridge courses address the knowledge and skills gaps between the Category trainings and the current full SEI Teacher Endorsement course. The Bridge courses are much shorter than the SEI Teacher Endorsement course.

We are very mindful of the challenges that the RETELL initiative imposes on the state, districts, schools, administrators, and teachers. We continue to work hard to ensure that RETELL ultimately works for both students and educators. Your thoughtful input throughout the development and implementation process of this initiative has contributed to a better product and a better process.

Please feel free to contact Assistant Commissioner Landman to further explore any of the issues identified in this letter or other issues that may arise.

Sincerely,
Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Meet Your Rep: Eric Blanchet

Eric Blanchet joined the AFT MA as a field representative in September of 2013. Born to a Union family, Blanchet has always had the labor movement in his blood. “Unions help folks advance their procession or craft while having a voice in workers respective work places,” Blanchet observes. “They advocate for standards that are not exclusive to their membership but to society as a whole.” The son of a French-speaking Canadian immigrant who moved to the Merrimack Valley to work in the shoe mills, Blanchet has always seen the value of honest work for honest pay. The fact that his parents met on the assembly line only enhances the romance of the Union for Blanchet. “My parents use to tell stories how some folks would cross the picket

lines,” he recalls. “They also remembered how the community would come together [and how] local businesses would donate food and support the workers on strike.” Union involvement must have been a major element of Blanchet’s upbringing because many of his earliest memories involve standing with his parents and brother on the picket lines. As such, Blanchet understands fully what benefits the Union has afforded him and is eager to help others achieve and maintain those same rights and privileges. A proud graduate of an AFT MA local, Eric became involved in the Union while an undergraduate at UMass

Amherst. “I earned my bachelor’s degree in music with an emphasis in Jazz and Afro-American Music Studies,” says the talented rep who is also an accomplished Jazz pianist. Starting as a steward and joining the collective bargaining committee, Blanchet was accepted into the UMass Amherst Labor Center program upon completion of his degree. While in this program, he earned a Master’s degree in sociology with a focus on labor studies. So involved and enamored with union life and philosophy was Blanchet that he simultaneously began to serve the United Auto Workers Local 2322 as a servicing representative.



BORN AND RAISED
AFT MA Rep Eric Blanchet

“I desired to work for a public sector union to help folks organize and have influence in their communities,” Blanchet explains. In 2011, Blanchet was hired as a staff representative for the Connecticut State Employees Association, Service Employees International Union Local 2001. In this role, Blanchet represented members and helped negotiate collective bargaining agreements. He also worked very closely with public school employees to help them improve their working conditions and bargain for stronger contracts. =Eventually, his union road took Blanchet back to his native Massachusetts and to the AFT. “After growing up in Massachusetts, I had a desire to move back home. Therefore, I took the experience I’ve gained working with public sector workers to come to AFT MA.” ■



On Campus

Dan Georgianna, Political Director
UMass Faculty Federation, Local 1895



Letters and Numbers

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, scientists and philosophers have considered mathematics as the way to understand reality. In modern times, mathematics has been treated as the “Queen of the Sciences.” In 1969, economics was selected for an annual Nobel Prize and was the only Social Science thus honored, because its analysis is usually written in mathematics.

For many economists of my generation, an undergraduate degree in mathematics was a prerequisite for graduate work in economics. Many of us took no economics courses in college; math was all that was needed.

Now, the primacy of math in educational policy has become a political scandal, especially when coupled with the low international ranking of U.S. students in math.

In 2012, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University analyzed student test scores from one U.S. series of tests and three series of tests administered by international organizations in order to compare student knowledge in the 49 most developed countries in math, science, and reading. Generally speaking, more than half of the 49 developed countries rank higher in math than the U.S.. More problematic, the U.S. ranking

has stayed about the same over the last 10 years. U.S. ratings for science and reading are somewhat better, ranked generally around the middle of these countries.

Within the U.S., a few states, including Massachusetts, have improved their scores two or three times faster than states with the smallest gains. The Harvard study concluded that all states making gains similar to the leading states would have brought the “U.S. reasonably close to the top-performing countries in the world.”

Immediately following the Harvard report, President Obama announced \$1 billion in funding to create a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Master Teaching Corps over the next few years. Especially after years of struggling with students who were unprepared for the most basic math and statistics, this plan appeared to make sense, until a young colleague, well versed in math, who was co-teaching an economics graduate course, said that he found economics articles written only in English more difficult to understand than those with math.

Even with my rapidly declining math skills, I had to agree with him that reading journal articles written only in English often required several read-

ings.

Like math, English or any language is often difficult to understand when reading complex arguments, and it can be just as unforgiving. Either you understand it or you do not. There’s not much middle ground.

Math and language are similar in other ways. The three R’s of reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic are based on comprehension of the language. Not comprehending one’s own writing may seem strange, but it appears to be a common obstacle among students.

While both math and English are languages that represent reality, math is a consistent system focused on ordering, while English (or any non-numerical language) focuses on nearness to reality.

The great mathematicians understood the limits of math. Einstein wrote, “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.”

With apologies to Einstein, math is consistent but not real and language is real but not consistent. For example, consider the meaning of “equal” in math and in language. Equal in math (=) means exactly equivalent. Equal in English is far more complex, as in “All men are created equal.”

Math and written language originated from the same period in human development. Our earliest records for

numbers and written language come from Sumeria (also called Mesopotamia) 6,000 to 7,000 years ago, where numbers were used for counting, and written language was used to record transactions and procedures. Numbers diverged from there to algebra, geometry and other forms of math, while written language branched off to communication, story telling and literature.

This is a roundabout way of saying what every elementary teacher knows; that math and language are both necessary for education. Each has its place. Language translates the wonders of the world, and math guards against sloppy logic.

Both require a good deal of hard work and courage. ■

GOOD NEWS

I wrote last month that the UMass Lowell administration had fired the President of the Union of Adjunct Faculty. The union recently sent the following message:

VICTORY! Your support worked! The University has agreed to reinstate Ellen Martins to her former position. THANK YOU to everyone who wrote in support of our union president! This is how we win - by standing and working together! ■

More Than a Slogan

Peabody teachers work with others to get results

A recent AFT theme holds that we are "a solution-driven union." For the past two years, the Peabody Federation of Teachers (PFT) has been putting that mantra into practice.

"When the DESE began its roll-out of the new Educator Evaluation during the 2011-2012 school year, we realized that the only viable approach was working with district administrators to implement the system," says PFT President Bruce Nelson. The PFT reached out to Peabody Public Schools administrators and formed a bipartisan committee to formulate an evaluation instrument.

"Fortunately, AFT MA had already designed a template for us to follow," Nelson explained, "and our committee adopted 95 percent of that language for our eventual contract agreement."

The agreement now provides valuable protections for PFT members throughout the entire evaluation process, and the bipartisan committee continues to serve to insure that evaluations are fair and equitable.

During this same time, the City of Peabody was about to move all of its employees into the GIC under the Massachusetts Health Insurance Reform Act. As part of a coalition of municipal unions, PFT leaders brought in AFT MA health insurance guru Andrew Powell and were able to reach an agreement under Section 19 with terms that were mutually beneficial.

The success of these two actions set the stage as the PFT began negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement. Teachers had been working without a contract since August, 2012, when their previous collective bargaining agreement expired. Among the challenges the PFT negotiation team faced was a determination by Mayor Edward Bettencourt to limit salary increases for all municipal employees to two percent.

While many other municipal unions had quickly agreed to the Mayor’s terms, Nelson noted a key difference between those workers and his colleagues.

"Teachers do not have the same opportunities for overtime pay as our sisters and brothers in other municipal unions," he observed. As a result, it became vital to find and pursue alternative revenue and reward streams for the teachers.

Among the issues under discussion were longevity increases. At first, the PFT’s proposal was rejected. Nelson suggested to the Mayor that although they may not be eligible for “overtime,” teachers should be compensated for the experience that they gain “over time” (i.e., longevity). Ultimately, the PFT succeeded in obtaining not only increases in longevity, but also in hourly rate pay and the amount of funds available for tuition reimbursement.

While traditionally Peabody mayors are often at the table for negotiations with the fire and police departments, they had rarely participated in negotiations with the PFT.

"This was the first time in the 15 years that I have been on a negotiation team that we had the Mayor at the table," notes Nelson. "We felt that we were finally getting the same respect as other unions."

Nelson also observed that there was very little progress made until they Mayor got directly involved. Once Mayor Bettencourt sat down with the teachers, he convinced them that he valued their work and was willing to do what he could to support them. While he appreciates the participation of the Mayor, the School Committee, and others, Nelson is most grateful and beholden to his colleagues on the negotiation team.

"I am very proud of the work of the team. While we ultimately had to accept the two percent salary increase that the Mayor had held fast to, we were able to convince the Committee of the importance of rewarding people for the work they do [and] the effort they put in," Nelson says. By being realistic and pragmatic instead of demanding and dogmatic, Nelson and his colleagues were able to get the most of what they wanted and the most from the negotiation process.

"That pragmatism and willing-

ness to reach common ground were very helpful," he says, suggesting that this round of talks “established a new dynamic” between the PFT and the School Committee. “I believe that if we follow that template, negotiations should be concluded in a much more timely fashion.”

About the time contract talks were concluding, some PFT members were working to find a solution to another challenge. Peabody was on the verge of implementing the Massachusetts Kindergarten Early Assessment (MKEA). Although the kindergarten teachers saw this initiative as a valuable tool, they also recognized that it would involve an immense amount of data collection.

"But rather than just going in saying that we can’t do this," Nelson observes, "my colleagues realized that it would be more productive to identify the solution." A representative committee of teachers went to the district administration with that solution - iPads! And the district, Nelson observes, to its credit, did their part by working with the Peabody Educational Foundation to provide the teachers with iPads with which to collect data for the Massachusetts Kindergarten Early Assessment (MKEA).

"In essence," Nelson suggests, "the PFT has been doing what we all do every day - helping others to find the solutions to problems." ■



Retiree Corner

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



More on Medicare

There are not a pair of topics that I have written about more often than Medicare and Social Security, yet they are topics that present so much trouble for so many people. So, I'll try one more time.

Who should apply for Medicare? Everyone should file for Medicare three months before his or her sixty-fifth birthday. Whether you think you're eligible or not, let them be the ones to tell you instead of making the decision yourself. Soon communities will require rejection letters from Medicare, and will not take your word. Also, there is confusion in many people's mind as to eligibility.

If you have forty units in Social Security, are married to someone who has forty units, or are divorced after having been married for ten years to someone who has forty units, you ARE Medicare eligible. Those who began any public sector job in Massachusetts, or changed jobs in the public sector after March 1986, may also be eligible. These people, in addition to contributing to their retirement in the public sector, contributed 1.45% into Medicare. Even though they may not be eligible for Social Security, most of them will be Medicare eligible.

Again at age sixty-five you should obtain a letter from your health insurance provider saying that you are covered under a "creditable plan" for prescriptions. This additional piece of information is important. It is proof that you are on a plan as good as or better than Medicare D. These two words, "creditable plan" must appear in the letter. Save this letter. Should your district ever stop paying for pharmaceuticals, or you are required to take Medicare D, this letter will allow you to do so without paying a penalty.

Concerning the topic of Social Security there are two points I'd like to bring to your attention.

First you should apply for Social Security three months prior to reaching your Full Retirement Age (FRA) under Social Security. To find your FRA under Social Security go to the MRU website: <http://www.retireesunited.org> click on FYI and you will see the Social Security site. Type in FRA in the search box and the chart will appear giving you this information. It is based on the year you were born. Again, let Social Security tell you that you are not eligible to collect. Save this letter. Should you later become eligible and have to go on Medicare it will save you from the

Medicare B penalty.

While you are at the Social Security site for your FRA scroll down and read the information on the pros and cons of collecting your Social Security earlier than your FRA. Note the percentage of deduction for collecting earlier. This is in addition to the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) and Government Pension Offset (GPO) penalties.

The second point I bring to your attention is important, also. If you are still working in your public sector job when you reach your FRA, you can collect your full Social Security and full salary without the GPO/WEP penalty. The penalty does not kick in until you start collecting your pension. Once you reach your FRA you can collect your Social Security and salary in any job. If you continue working and contributing to Social Security after starting to collect, pay attention, as once a year an adjustment is made to the amount of Social Security you are collecting. If this does not occur remind Social Security.

Please ask questions regarding the above issues if not clear. These are areas in which the words, "I thought" can be very expensive. ■

SENIOR SEMINARS

Preparing for Retirement

This presentation by Marie Ardito is directed to all who will be retiring within the next 10 years from public sector jobs in Massachusetts.

Chelmsford - October 17, 3:45-5:45
McCarthy Middle School

Somerville - November 7, 3-5
Capuano Early Childhood Center

Amesbury - November 14, 3:30-5
Amesbury HS Library

Lynn - November 18, 3:15-5:15
Lynn Teachers Union Office

Wilmington - December 7, 10-noon
314 Main St Unit 105

The Pitfalls of Reverse Mortgages

Wilmington - October 26, 10-noon
314 Main Street, Unit 105
Presented by Mary Cretella, former Counselor for Homeowner Options for Massachusetts Elders (H.O.M.E.).

To Move or to Stay Put

Wilmington - November 16, 10-noon
314 Main Street, Unit 105
Pros, cons, and legal considerations regarding various housing choices

How to Protect Your Nest Egg

Wilmington - November 2, 10-noon
314 Main Street, Unit 105
Presented by Elder Law Attorney Mary Howie, this seminar discusses retirement and Medicare, a legal checklist, tips for protecting assets, and more.

To register for any seminar, email mardito@retireesunited.org or call 781-365-0205. Please give the name of the seminar, your name, phone number and the number attending.

Summa Cum Laude: Dr. Mel Yoken

It is said that the French have a certain *joie de vivre* that inspires them to create and to appreciate that which has been created. The same can be said of University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth (UMD) French Professor Dr. Mel Yoken. Though Yoken has officially retired after 50 years of teaching, he remains a life-long student who continues to inspire with his wisdom and his outlook on life.

"I always liked languages," says the devoted Francophile who started his own studies of the language while a student at the B.M.C. Durfee School in Fall River. "One day, during my junior year, I sat down with my father and asked him his opinion about a fifth subject to take. He strongly suggested I take French."

Living in the Fall River area, Yoken was surrounded by French language and culture. Clearly, this cultural submersion had an impact upon him, as did his family upbringing.

"Although my father worked with his father in the family store," Yoken explains, "his true passion was teaching. His happiest moments were in the classroom the last 20 years (or so) in his life. I guess...I inherited this love of teaching from him!"

While a sophomore at the Durfee, Yoken started a weekly radio show called "Teen Party" that soon became the most popular show on WALE. Years later, Yoken was asked to come back to the station by long-time friend Jean Caya Bancroft. "She invited me to speak mainly about my literary activities," Yoken explains. "I soon became her co-host, and appeared on over 450 shows."

Yoken came to UMD after teaching high school French in Newton and two years teaching as a graduate student at UMass-Amherst. Since joining the faculty at UMD in 1966, Yoken has also served as faculty advisor to the French Club and the Canadian Studies Program. Named a Chancellor Professor in 2000 and Chancellor Professor Emeritus of French Language in 2008, Yoken takes comfort and pride in the fact that so many of his students have gone on to teach and love French.

"I truly love being at UMD," Yoken says, "and am so proud of what it has become!"

Having visited France more than 150 times, Yoken brings an intimate understanding of the home of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* to Massachusetts and beyond. Yoken has also served as the director of UMD's Boivin Center for French Language and Culture and as Chair of Programs for the Claire T. Carney Library Associates. He and his wife Cindy are also life members of the French National Society.

"I plan manifold programs for so many groups that I can't keep track," Yoken smiles, admitting that he has become "ubiquitous" on campus.

Despite his packed passport and many demands on his time, Yoken firmly believes that there is no place

like home.

"Fall River means the world to me," says the ardent and appreciated supporter. In 1988, The Richelieu Club of Fall River began presenting an annual scholarship to worthy French students in Yoken's honor. In 2008, Yoken served his beloved high school as keynote speaker at the induction for the National Honor Society. He has also been named a Distinguished Alumnus at the Durfee.

"Of all my honors," he says, "that was one of the best!"

Apparently, many of his colleagues think Yoken is also one of the best.

"Mel Yoken is extremely beloved," notes Dr. Joseph Vinci, founder of UMD's Language Department. "He is just a wonderful, caring and devoted colleague who can be depended on for absolutely everything. His compassion for his students and for everyone is truly unique."

"Professor Yoken is a man of integrity," adds former colleague Dr. William Harris. "[He] infuses every endeavor he undertakes with determination, devotion and energy. He continually gives back to the community, and his best days are spent helping others."

"My friend, Mel Yoken...is one of our leading spokesmen for French language study in the United States," notes Yale Professor Dr. Nelson Brooks, adding that Yoken is also "extremely modest about everything

he does."

When not teaching or serving his students in other capacities, Yoken lectures internationally on all things French and has also written and translated numerous literary works.

"I have always loved and been fascinated by literature," says Yoken, who was a member of the nominating committee for the Nobel Prize for Literature from 1971-2011, "and still read voraciously."

A collection of over 330,000 pages of Yoken's own written materials is held at the John Hay Library at Brown University, where Yoken received his Masters degree. As a token of appreciation for what has been cited "amongst the most important private collections in the world," Brown presents an annual lecture in Yoken's honor that has featured such internationally-known fellow Francophiles as legendary actor Marcel Marceau and lauded Holocaust artist Samuel Bak.

"Life gets better and better," says the famed optimist who seems to do everything with verve, passion and, yes, *joie de vivre*.

"He finds life so interesting," says Yoken's eldest son. "He appreciates everything in life....He always has a smile on his face, and people are always drawn towards him."

To what does Yoken attribute his attitude?

"I love life and I love living," he says. "My philosophy has always been *Carpe Diem*, and with my wonderful wife and family, I live every day to the fullest!" ■



LE PROFESSEUR PARFAIT
Dr. Mel Yoken

Teaching for the Future

AFT and BTU introduce 21st Century Lessons

As online education continues to grow in scope, reach, and popularity, it is reassuring to know that many of the pioneers of this burgeoning and liberating field are right here in Boston. In addition to the work being done at Harvard and MIT, many other Boston-area educators have been working hard to offer Common Core-aligned lessons to their colleagues and other educators and students across the country and around the world.

Working together with AFT and with the support of AFT’s National Innovation Fund, a group of pioneering and practical Boston teachers has assembled a collection of lessons that is inspiring and supporting their colleagues in Boston and far beyond. 21st Century Lessons (www.21stcenturylessons.org) is a web-based lesson sharing platform very much like AFT’s own ShareMyLesson.org. In fact, the lessons that were created for 21st Century are hosted on Share My Lesson so that the teachers behind 21st Century can focus on content and not on web hosting.

“We do not have or manage our own platform” explains 21st Century Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director Ted Chambers, a teacher at Boston’s Edwards Middle School, who notes that his group does maintain a front page (www.21stCenturyLessons.org) that links to their content. “The reason for this is simple. Creating really great content takes a lot of work. And so does running a website.... As teachers, we want to make sure that these websites that offer free content have lots of great content that is created by expert teachers.

According to Chambers, the 21st Century program was first conceived of by a team of teachers at the Edwards while at an offsite professional development session.

“The idea was the brainchild of Kevin Qazilbash and me back around

2005-6,” Chambers recalls. Their original intent was to develop a set of PowerPoint-based lessons in mathematics and social studies.

“We wanted to develop a system that would allow teachers to go online and download amazing free lessons,” Chambers explains. “We looked all over the Internet and could not find one, so we made one!”

Sean Moran is a seventh grade pre-algebra teacher at Boston Latin Academy who was contacted by Chambers and Qazilbash to help design early lessons. “I added scaffolding to lessons and accommodation that I thought my students needed to access the curriculum in Boston,” Moran recalls. “I [also] designed homework for the initial six lessons.”

When he was asked to contribute, Moran says that Qazilbash encouraged him to “think more outside the box” with his curriculum designs.

“He wanted the work to be an experience where students were excited about finding out what was going to be on the homework,” Moran explains. “He wanted to be more than just skill practice.”

In addition to designing lessons, Moran also helped the rest of the 21st Century team with collecting and incorporating feedback. “The feedback would always make the lesson better,” he suggests, “and add more depth to the lesson.”

As he had spent so many years working on lessons by himself, Moran found the collaboration with the 21st Century team to be refreshing and rewarding.

“This was different,” he says, “because we could meet as many times as we wanted to make the lesson. We would work independently then meet and combine our work. It was amazing to work with someone on a lesson.... Together we made lessons far better than we could have made alone.”

Putting in hundreds of hours of collaborative work, the 21st Century team

continued to build and soon caught the attention of the AFT’s national office. In 2010, AFT’s Innovation Fund funded a proposal by Chambers and his colleagues to help grow the program.

“We were really not able to get it off the ground until the AFT Innovation Fund came along,” Chambers says, appreciatively. “They have been terrific partners in this work!”

The lessons that resulted were first posted on www.BetterLesson.com, an online lesson site that is not affiliated with AFT. Early research showed that the lessons were popular and productive not only for the creators and their colleagues, but for teachers in other districts and regions as well. As their popularity and scope continued to grow, the creators began to look for new, larger platforms through which to offer them. When AFT launched ShareMyLesson in 2012, the 21st Century team posted all of their lessons there as well.

“We don’t compete with ShareMyLesson,” Chambers maintains, noting that other Innovation Fund grant recipients in places like Chicago and Cleveland also contribute lessons to the AFT site. “We build content for them.”

Even so, Chambers adds proudly, the lessons that he and his 21st Century colleagues have created are among the most popular on the AFT site.

“To date we have had over 80,000 downloads from approximately 11,000 teachers in all 50 states,” Chamber says. “The 100 lessons that we have built are being downloaded at a rate of about 500 a day.

Both the BPS teachers and AFT representatives involved see this partnership not only as a great way to disseminate and share valuable resources, but also as a means of supporting teacher collaboration.

In addition to having their lessons used by teachers across the country, the 21st Century team recently had

their mathematics curricula approved by the Boston Public Schools as part of the middle school curriculum. Plans are also in the works to expand the offerings to other grade levels and subjects.

“If we take this idea to scale,” Chambers suggests, “it will help hundreds of thousands of teachers and millions of children around the country!”

Among the local teachers who have already benefitted from using 21st Century Lessons is Noah Patel, a middle school math teacher leader at the Franklin D. Roosevelt K-8 who became involved with the program about three years ago because, he says, “it was a perfect marriage of my curricular standards and my desire to utilize technology in my classroom.”

As an early adopter, Patel was looked to for feedback and ideas.

“My kids were hooked,” Patel recalls of the first trial, “They loved the lessons and found them very engaging!”

Washington Irving Middle School special education math teacher Jean Dodd was another early adopter and quickly came to embrace and encourage the 21st Century curricula.

“The Surface area lesson each year has been a favorite of my students,” she says, noting the creativity involved with a lesson that features Godzilla wrapping the Empire State Building to give as a present to his wife. “The 3-D presentation engages the students and helps with the retention of the formula needed each time they have to calculate surface area.”

As budget restraints have sometimes left her with less than optimal resources, Dodd has also used 21st Century to supplement and support her established curricula. “The supplemental booklet we received...for the new Common Core standards was not enough,” she recalls. “I worked with a team of teachers to add the 21st Century Lessons to our Scope And Sequence and Pacing Guide to give teachers richer lessons that can be adapted to the needs of their students.” ■

State of the Stacks

Burke offers new book clubs

By Rebekah Tierney

An article from a Librarian about book clubs? It’s almost too stereotypical, but book clubs can be so vital and help foster a more successful library program. Hence, I find myself compelled to write about them.

Book clubs are fun, inclusive and often student driven. They can take on many forms and operate in a variety of ways. Those who wish to introduce them may have to try different formulas for a while before they find the perfect fit, but it will happen!

At the Jeremiah E. Burke High School in Dorchester, we discovered that a lunchtime student book club was the way to go. Given that many of our students have obligations after school, this time proved to be the most efficient and effective. We had initially considered a morning book club, but even with the incentive of food, it was not a popular option. There are three lunches scheduled at our school, so it took some finagling, but we finally came up with a workable plan.

In addition to our great students, we are also fortunate to have the Grove Hall Branch of the Boston Public Library as a downstairs neighbor.

Their support in this new endeavor has been invaluable and they have been so easy to collaborate with.

At our inaugural book club meeting, over 20 students showed interest and signed up. One student even asked if we had to wait a whole month for another meeting and suggested we meet weekly instead.

Our first meeting for this year was held on October 4. The book we discussed was The Book Thief by Markus Zusak. Alisa Rodny, art teacher extraordinaire, designed and created special bookmarks for the group.

So far, the response has been positive. Students have observed how reading strengthens vocabulary and encourages creativity and critical thinking skills and how it can serve

as an “escape” from the challenges of school and life. One student went so far as to say that they would not want to read anything other than the books we are reading together, but we hope to encourage a larger love of literature through this forum.

While the club has proven popular with the students, it is important to note that book clubs are not for



BURKE BOOKWORMS Librarian Rebekah Tierney (third from right) and Burke students engage literature together

helped build a sense of camaraderie and communication between students and staff. Faculty and staff are always welcome to join the student book club discussion, but for the 2013-14 year, we have also started a separate book club specifically for faculty and staff and that has also proven popular, despite our busy schedules.

In addition, we are currently working on instituting a book club for Boston high school librarians. The plan is to create an environment in which we

can read and discuss literature with an eye towards making effective reading recommendations for our students and colleagues. It is also hoped that, in addition to encouraging librarians to hone their craft, this gathering will also foster collegiality among the library staff while building a stronger and more diverse knowledge base of Young Adult Literature.

Reading and discussions around and about reading and books are just as relevant today as they’ve ever been. Sharing a reading experience can be the best and quickest way to connect to another person, whether that be a student, colleague or even someone you have not yet gotten to know. Some of my best conversations about literature have come about when I engage in a conversation with a stranger about what they are reading. Reading has made me a stronger and better person and any time I can share that world with others, I consider it a good day! ■

Are YOU a librarian with a story or observation to share?

Please contribute to State of the Stacks.

Send ideas and suggestions to advocate@aftma.net.