



AMERICAN Teacher

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We have a proud history—but there is much more to do

EDWARD J. McELROY, AFT President

UNIMAGINABLE. THAT'S HOW a lot of people viewed collective bargaining for public employees in an era when many teachers thought union membership was somehow unprofessional and those who did join a union faced possible termination. Of course, gaining bargaining rights wasn't an unimaginable goal for the early leaders of the American Federation of Teachers—it was an imperative.

In this column, my last as president of the American Federation of Teachers before I retire in July, I want to reflect on our union's proud history of pursuing worthy goals, no matter how seemingly out of reach. And I want to lay out some of the unattained goals we still must achieve.

Consider the kinds of changes that have come about as a result of collective bargaining. We have gone from what the late AFT president Al Shanker called "collective begging" to bargaining with school boards as equals. We have achieved great improvements in pay and working conditions for public school employees. And we have done so much more. We have used this process to give educators a say in how schools function, by making improvements in class size, teacher induction and evaluation, professional development, and curriculum and testing. We have been able to take chances and test possible improvements, because collective bargaining provides a safe framework for innovation.

While collective bargaining has provided a way to shape our profession, collective action has provided a way to shape our world. The AFT has used political action and member mobilization to challenge the notion that

it is too expensive to provide healthcare to children from low-income families—by arguing that it is too costly not to. The union successfully lobbied for the first increase in the federal minimum wage in more than a decade. We helped thwart plans to privatize Social Security that would have jeopardized

I will watch with great interest, and participate as a retiree and activist, these determinations will be made by new national AFT leaders and by members like you.

I cannot leave this post without thanking and expressing admiration for my fellow national officers, Nat LaCour and Antonia Cor-

Collective **bargaining** has provided a way to shape our profession, and collective **action** has provided a way to shape our world.

the financial security of many of our most vulnerable citizens. The AFT has challenged entrenched regimes across the globe by actively supporting pro-democracy movements like Solidarnosc, and vigorously opposing malevolent systems like apartheid.

There is much more to do, of course; change is not easy. If it were, collective bargaining would be the law in all 50 states, and the situation of workers here and abroad would be much improved. But collective action has allowed us to do what some never could have imagined. We must press for collective bargaining rights in states where they are denied, and we must tap the full potential of those rights where they do exist.

What are the equivalent challenges of our day—goals that are vitally important but currently out of reach? Widespread access to high-quality healthcare? Universal early childhood education, regardless of family income? An alternative to the federal law that has ignored the wisdom of education professionals and left common sense behind? While

these. It has been my honor to have worked alongside and shared many great experiences with Nat for more than 30 years. I remain inspired by his dedication to our members and to our cause. Nat also provides some of the best company I could ever hope for. He too will retire in July, and I wish him abundant happiness in his retirement. I am grateful that Toni, with whom I have been proud to serve these last four years, will stand for re-election as a national officer. She is a thoughtful, talented and devoted champion of public schools and a visionary when it comes to helping them reach their full potential.

AFT members will elect a new president at our convention in July. I have every confidence that my successor will lead our union to take on the challenges ahead—no matter how intractable they seem—to bring about a better reality for our members and the people you serve. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as a vice president, as secretary-treasurer for 12 years and as your president for the past four years. It has been an honor.



A Union of Professionals

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Ready for a new look

Members are selected to get classroom makeovers

TWO SPECIAL EDUCATION teachers in New Orleans and a chemistry instructor in Rochester, N. Y., will receive classroom makeovers this spring through a program tied to the AFT's "Building Minds, Minding Buildings" campaign.

The United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) members are Clark High School teachers Jasper Baena and Bernadette Henderson. The pair, who teach together at Clark (along with four paraprofessionals), applied jointly. "The children that we work with could really benefit from improved facilities," Baena says. "Hopefully, this makeover can make that a reality."

UTNO president Brenda Mitchell says she is particularly pleased that the local is offering the makeover to special education teachers. "My hat is off to all the professional edu-

cators," Mitchell says, "and particularly to those who work with our special needs students. Theirs is not an easy job, and too often their contributions are forgotten."



CHRISTIAN ROSELUND/UTNO

Top photo, Rochester, N.Y., teacher Wendy Wurz's classroom will receive a makeover this spring. Left, United Teachers of New Orleans president Brenda Mitchell, at left, with teachers Bernadette Henderson and Jasper Baena.

Rochester's winner, one of 54 applicants, is Wendy Wurz who teaches chemistry at Wilson Commencement Academy. Her classroom is located in the basement of a building that is more than 100 years old. It previously had been used as a gymnasium and for shop classes.

The Rochester school system recently received \$325 million for the first phase of a school building modernization/renovation project, says Rochester Teachers Association (RTA) secretary Margaret Sergent, who coordinated the contest for the union. "We thought this would be a great opportunity to again raise awareness of school conditions and possibly create a classroom that could be a model for the modernization project."

The "extreme classroom makeover" contest is an outgrowth of grants and technical assistance that the AFT awarded last December to UTNO and the RTA. As part of the grant, both winning locals sought applications from educators to create modern, new classroom environments. In each location, the local union had to secure a commitment from the school district to help with the project, and the unions also were encouraged to contact their local central labor councils.

Both locals ended up reaching out even beyond the district to partner with elected officials, community leaders and businesses.

For more information on "Building Minds, Minding Buildings" visit www.aft.org/top-ics/building-conditions/index.htm.

City kids show they have the write stuff

Urban schools set the pace for 2007 NAEP gains in writing

HARD WORK IN THE NATION'S public schools paid off when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in April announced across-the-board gains in student writing scores for 2007.

The average writing scores for eighth-graders were three points higher than in 2002, continuing the uptrend from 1998 scores. The five-point increase in average scores for 12th-graders reflected a strong rebound from 2002, when scores dipped slightly, and a three-point increase from 1998 levels. Fourth-graders were not included in the 2007 study due to financial constraints.

"This is a testament to educators,

who are keeping a focus on higher-order thinking, despite pressures to devote time and attention to drill-and-kill preparation for standardized tests," says AFT executive vice president Antonia Cortese. "Educators, students and parents deserve praise for the hard work that has led to these encouraging gains."

Particularly noteworthy is the healthy improvement of schools serving large central cities, which overall increased eighth-grade writing scores at a faster pace than the national average. NAEP's breakout study of eighth-grade achievement in urban areas revealed significant gains in Atlanta (15

points), Chicago (10 points) and Los Angeles (nine points). Houston, the only other city that participated in the urban study in both 2002 and 2007, showed a five-point increase, although researchers deemed that rise not statistically significant based on sample size. Boston and New York City, which did not participate in 2002, had impressive results, with lower-income students doing better than their peers in other large cities.

"We must keep investing in urban schools so they have the resources and support to build on these results, to narrow achievement gaps further, and to take student learning to even higher levels," Cortese says.

Should school rules extend to student online networking?

**NO**

What part of 'MySpace' don't you understand?

BY SARAH BLOOM

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE between love notes, late-night phone calls and MySpace posts? The first two are deemed innocent forms of communication. Yet whenever the words "MySpace," "Facebook" or "social networking" get thrown into the mix, many authority figures feel they have a green light to throw the book at students for violating school policy—transgressions that may ultimately prove to be real or imagined.

Forget the hype you may have heard: MySpace and Facebook are not "virtual jungles." They are simply more technologically advanced versions of staying in touch. In reality, students can say the same things on these Web sites that they might write in a journal, e-mail or letter. But do schools have a right to break into students' rooms and go through their personal mail? Do teachers have the authority to unlock students' diaries and rifle through their personal thoughts to see if they're "following school rules"?

It's important that students have a way to express themselves without feeling like they have to censor their thoughts. If you take away Facebook and MySpace, kids aren't going to have an outlet for their built-up emotions. Of course, young adults are going to have mildly inappropriate things to say online. They may describe (or concoct) online stories about risky sexual behavior, underage drinking, eating disorders, cutting, street racing—you name it.

And sometimes their friends will see one of these stories online, step in and encourage the poster to ease up and act more responsibly. That's unlikely to happen with the "MySpace police" breathing down kids' necks—and if they can't say it on MySpace, they're going to find another, possibly worse, way to express themselves.

Parents are the ones who should monitor what their children are doing online, and schools should encourage families to talk about social networking. Most of these Web sites (including the immensely popular MySpace and Facebook social networking sites) have a variety of privacy settings that can prevent strangers from looking at their pages.

No one is saying that a shooting threat posted on MySpace should be ignored. Absent a clear and present danger of that magnitude, however, schools should stay out of social networking and leave their policies to in-school activities.

Sarah Bloom, a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, plans to major in communications.

**YES**

This ACLU member says it's necessary

BY DAVID KIRSNER

AS A CARD-CARRYING, dues-paying member of the American Civil Liberties Union, my first instinct, of course, is to take the position that public schools should leave the role of parenting to the parents, and schools have no legal or ethical authority to concern themselves with students' off-campus activities—legal or not. But I am also an educator; and if the public schools are concerned with the whole child, and it is brought to the attention of the principal that a student can be seen breaking the law in a public arena, including the Internet, it is indeed in the purview of the school morally and ethically to intercede in the best interest of the individual student and the entire student population.

Consider, for example, a school that has taken disciplinary action against students after receiving information through social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook that the students may have engaged in underage drinking. In the Code of Student Conduct of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the district where I work, a student is subject to disciplinary action for off-campus activities only if he has been arrested for having committed a felony, or if the delinquent act for which the student has been taken into custody would be a felony if it were committed by an adult. Underage drinking is a misdemeanor, not a felony, so what concern is it of the school, then, if a student has consumed alcohol off-campus and the nefarious act has been recorded for public viewing on MySpace or Facebook?

The important consideration here is not the limits of the code of student conduct or the fact that "it was only an off-campus Facebook moment." These distract from a much more fundamental concern: Schools have a responsibility to teach morality. Some kind of disciplinary action would therefore be in order in the above example, keeping in mind that discipline need not be punitive in nature. Constructive discipline could include group counseling, community service, attendance at Al-Anon/Alateen meetings and peer education.

Involving the student and the parents in such endeavors, and allowing families to make choices regarding the specific disciplinary measures taken, would be in the best interest of both the school and the family. It's a policy that's tried-and-true and "Internet ready," one we all should be able to support.

David Kirsner has been an educator for more than 30 years. He teaches Spanish at Coral Gables (Fla.) Senior High School, where he is also a steward for the United Teachers of Dade.

WEIGH IN!

We want to hear your thoughts on the current "Speak Out" question. Go to www.aft.org/speakout to cast your vote.



In the last issue of *American Teacher*, our "Speak Out" question was:

Should schools promote 'Captain Underpants' books?

ONLINE POLL RESULTS

63% YES**37%** NO

"Anything that draws kids into reading is a plus. Sure, it's not great literature and it shouldn't be the only thing that kids read, but if it introduces kids to fun reading, it can open the door to many more hours of reading."

—KATHLEEN ANDERSON
Chicago Teachers Union

"Yes, the humor is not the type an adult would enjoy, but for a boy between the ages of 10 and 13 who can't and doesn't want to read they are exactly what the doctor ordered."

—BLANCHE LASSEN
Newark (N.J.) Teachers Union

"As a school librarian, I always discouraged students from purchasing these books from the book fair. They do not have any literary value."

—PATRICIA HENSON
Corpus Christi (Texas) AFT

"Are parents and teachers that ignorant of what is available for children to read? If you think we should allow Captain Underpants, then we should allow Beavis and Butthead books."

—DAN GARZA
San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel

Limit summer learning loss

EVERY STUDENT'S READING comprehension slips over the summer, but disadvantaged students fall behind on all of their reading skills, losing roughly two months of grade-level equivalency by fall.

Worse, students from low-income families lose three months when reading and math performances are combined, according to the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University.

Here are some ideas to help students keep their reading skills sharp over the summer:



Make books available. Have your school set up an "honor library" of new or gently used books donated by parents, school staff and the community. Display books near the school entrance so that anyone can drop by and pick up, return or contribute a book.

Encourage families to visit the public library. Most libraries have free summer programs for young children, preteens and

teenagers. Consider e-mailing or sending handouts home reminding parents of these opportunities. Include links to other libraries that might be more convenient to daycare, relatives or parents' work sites.

Prepare a summer reading list. There are scads of summer reading lists to help you. Your state or school district may list recommended, grade-appropriate books. The American Library Association (www.ilovelibraries.org/booklovers/recreading/default.cfm) and Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org/books) are two more resources. Vary your topics so that all children get hooked.

"I liked the book better." How many times have you said this to your friends after seeing a movie? Or maybe a film adaptation inspired you to pick up the book. Consider listing books and their corresponding DVDs, requiring students to read a book, watch a movie and talk to friends and family about which version they like better and why. Coordinating with teachers in the next grade, have students write a review that's due at the start of the new school year. The best reviewer might get to host an after-school screening, introducing the movie and handing out popcorn.



Let the games begin. Challenge students to read at least 30 minutes a day in a mildly competitive format. Let them know their progress will be tracked individually, in teams and schoolwide. Have students log their minutes, preferably online, and post a large display on school grounds to update the community on progress toward the school's goal. Figure out a minimum goal by multiplying 30 minutes times the number of students in your school by the number of days on break.

To ensure success, ask the parent-teacher association for help with tabulating results, updating the outdoors display, e-mailing progress and providing small prizes. Plan a celebration at the start of school for achieving the school goal. Be sure to recognize teams that meet or exceed their goals.

Start a book club. Encourage students to start a club they can carry over into the school year.

Help them name it, set rules and generate a list of books the participants will complete by year's end. Honor your readers by providing "free reading" time, beanbag chairs or other ways to lounge in their "clubhouse." Give them recognition on the school Web page, and in the newsletter and yearbook.

Adopt a reader. Many students spend time with grandparents or other relatives during the summer. Older students may be responsible for younger siblings. Encourage students to "adopt" a pal to read with for at least 30 minutes at a time. Have students explain why they picked their pal, what books they especially liked and whether they did anything with what they learned.

Activities like these will help curb summer learning loss. Do you have other tips? We'd love to add them to our Web site: www.aft.org/tools4teachers. Send your ideas to hglidden@aft.org.



ILLUSTRATED BY DAN SHERBO

Asian heritage from the transcontinental railroad to Yahoo!

MOST TEACHERS KNOW that in the 1880s, Chinese-Americans provided most of the manpower to build the western half of the transcontinental railroad, blasting rock and laying ties over the high Sierras eastward. Their work made the United States the first continent with a coast-to-coast railroad.

What you may not know is that a little over a century later, an Asian-American college student named Jerry Yang and one of his classmates created the Web portal Yahoo! Born in Taiwan in 1968, Yang arrived in Cali-

fornia at age 10 with his mom, brother and one word of English: "shoe." As an engineering student at Stanford University, Yang developed a list of links, "Jerry's Guide to the World Wide Web," which he renamed Yahoo! in 1995 and built into the most highly trafficked network in the world.

Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month celebrates these achievements and more. Begun in 1978 as a weeklong event celebrating the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants on May 7, 1843, and the completion of the

transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869, the week was expanded in 1992 to include the entire month of May.

Today, more than 13 million Asian-Americans make up 5 percent of the U.S. population. Since the 2000 Census, the Asian population has experienced the fastest growth of any racial group in the United States.

To help teachers celebrate, the AFT has developed a Web page highlighting key events, influential figures and the contributions of Asian/Pacific Americans.

A healthcare system in need of fundamental changes

Americans are concerned about rising costs and declining quality

THE NATION'S HEALTHCARE system needs to be completely overhauled. That's the view of an astounding 95 percent of those who responded to the AFL-CIO's 2008 Healthcare for America survey. Nearly 27,000 people—including 1,600 AFT members—completed the online survey, and more than 7,000 submitted personal stories about their own healthcare woes.

There is widespread agreement that the nation's healthcare system is ailing, but the prescription for healing it has led to an ongoing—and often highly charged—debate throughout the presidential primary campaign season. The responses to the AFL-CIO survey tell a sobering story about the breadth of the problem.

"I'm now more than \$5,000 in debt due to an overnight hospital stay in November 2007," wrote Melissa, an AFT member from Oregon. "My doctor sent me to the emergency room due to tachycardia, and the resulting tests and observation put me in a deep financial hole. Ironically, my employer of 17 years finally started offering its employees insurance, six weeks after my hospital stay." In her view, health coverage shouldn't "have anything to do with employment status, as that is unfair to employers and those unable to work."

The survey, which was completed by union and nonunion members alike, shows that Melissa is far from alone in coping with



"Those of us with good healthcare coverage and pensions will not remain as islands of privilege."

—EDWARD J. McELROY, AFT President

the hardships of being uninsured. Among the survey findings:

- In the past year, 76 percent of people who lack insurance themselves, and 71 percent of people with uninsured children, say someone in their family who was sick did not visit a doctor because of the cost.

- Sixty-seven percent of the uninsured and 66 percent of those whose children are uninsured report skipping medical treatment or follow-up care recommended by a doctor.

- Fifty-seven percent of the uninsured and 61 percent of people with uninsured children had to choose between paying for medical care or prescriptions and other essential needs (such as rent, mortgage or utilities).

- Even those with health insurance (about three-quarters of all respondents) are deeply concerned about rising costs and declining quality of healthcare.

- About 96 percent of insured respondents say they worry about being able to afford coverage during the next few years.

- Ninety-four percent say they are dissatisfied with the cost of their current coverage, and 62 percent say they are dissatisfied with their healthcare quality.

- More than half of those with coverage say it does not provide vital health services, such as prescription drugs, preventive care and check-ups, or it makes those services unaffordable.

Judith, an AFT member in Missouri, worries about retiree coverage: "While I currently have health insurance through my employer, it seems that if I retire in a timely fashion, I will either be dependent upon Medicare or have to pay out a large sum of money to have full health coverage. The cost for my insurance would be about half of what my retirement income would be. That won't work."

The AFL-CIO plans to present the results of the survey to candidates for public office at every level, and increase its mobilization to help ensure that candidates who win in November have a mandate for real healthcare reform. Almost 80 percent of those surveyed say healthcare will be a major issue in the 2008 presidential and congressional campaigns; and 97 percent say they plan to vote this fall.

"We have to help candidates who support real reform become active champions for healthcare," says AFL-CIO president John Sweetney. "And we have to expose and hold accountable candidates at all levels who oppose real reform and propose false solutions."

Healthcare poses increasing challenge for unions

HEALTHCARE HAS BEEN A MAJOR ISSUE in contract negotiations for AFT locals in recent years. Add to this the current economic problems that are squeezing school district budgets, and union negotiators are under even more pressure to protect members' health coverage. While health insurance premiums have increased at a slower rate over the past year or so, they still are rising at about double the rate of inflation.

One concept that is starting to be explored at the bargaining table involves a change in how employees' share of health insurance premiums is calculated. Rather than the traditional approach, in which employees pay a percent of the premium, some recent contracts include a provision that calls for the employee to pay a percent of his or her salary toward health insurance. This approach has a couple of advantages: It protects employees from huge increases in premiums, and it makes coverage more affordable for those at the low end of the pay scale.

The AFT is doing something to help demystify the complicated and technical healthcare terrain for negotiators in state and local affiliates. In conjunction with the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, the union is sponsoring two-day advanced healthcare bargaining training.

A little help on the road to repair

AFT Disaster Relief Fund aids efforts to put a family's life back together

LAST SUMMER, rising floodwater forced hundreds of people to flee their homes in several northern Ohio towns. AFT member George Billerman and his family were among them.

"Everything happened so fast," says Billerman, who lives in Findlay and teaches science at neighboring Arcadia High School.

Billerman's house is near a creek, so he had experienced minor flooding before—but nothing like that day in August 2007. Billerman sent his wife and children to his parents while he stayed behind to salvage what he could. When water began to overflow from his basement into the main floor of the house,

he grabbed some clothes and money, and left. The floodwaters almost washed Billerman away but he managed to get his feet on solid ground and make his way to a car he had parked down the road. He and his family stayed with his parents

for nearly two months. Back home now, he says the rebuilding process has been slow.

"Things are not back to normal, and they may never be," says Billerman, who estimates his property loss at nearly \$80,000. So he was pleasantly surprised to receive a \$500 check from the AFT Disaster Relief Fund.

The president of the Arcadia Teachers Organization, Billerman's local union, encouraged him to apply for a grant from the relief fund at the beginning of the school year, Billerman recalls. The money "came at a time when we were trying to put our lives back together. It was certainly wonderful to be able to replace some things that we needed."

Your donations to the AFT Disaster Relief Fund provide direct assistance to AFT members, like George Billerman, who are victims of natural disasters. For more information or to contribute to the fund, write: AFT Disaster Relief Fund, Attn: Connie Cordovilla, 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20001.



Donations from the AFT Disaster Relief Fund helped member George Billerman after his home in Findlay, Ohio, was flooded last summer.

LORI KING

TEACHERS' LOUNGE

STICK 'EM UP Keeping track of many students and classes, and reassigning seats at the end of a grading period, can be quick and easy if you use sticky notes on your class seating charts, says **Cecile Canales**, a middle school French teacher from **Pittsburgh**. She arranges the small-size repositionable notes on a blank chart, which she puts in a clear plastic sleeve held together by a single ring (or they can be put into a notebook). In addition to the students' names, she includes their birthdays, French names, and any other reference information that might come in handy. "They're a great help to substitute teachers," Canales says.

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING One way to include students in classroom management, and help them make connections to the world of work, is to use a "classroom helpers" system, reports sixth-grade teacher **Billie Rainey** of **Winter Park, Fla.** At the beginning of the school year, and each quarter thereafter, students are asked to volunteer for one of a variety of classroom jobs—materials handler, timekeeper, supply person, technology assistant, for example. Job assignments are posted on a large display board and a

number of large plastic zippered bags are kept near the board. Every other Friday, the children find a "payday treat" in their bags. "Students not only learn the benefits of a job well done, but they also learn to share," Rainey notes. The students with jobs quickly realize that if they don't share their payday treats with "unemployed" classmates, they'll be treated the same way later when they're out of work. "Students take great pride in their jobs, and they provide valuable assistance in helping the classroom run smoothly," Rainey says.

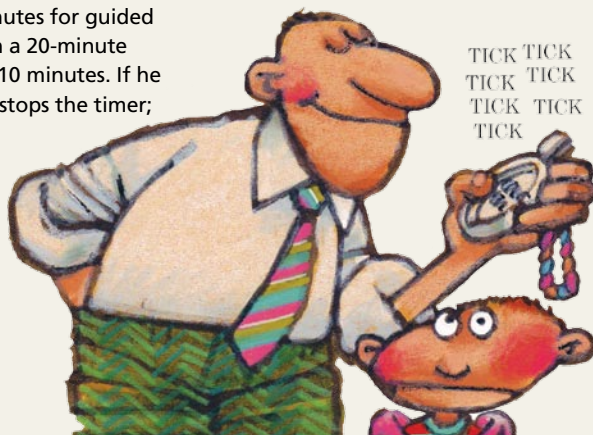
TIME TO SPARE Even for young people, time is precious these days, says **John Watkins**, a high school math teacher in **Columbiana, Ala.** So, he negotiates time with his students. For example, he allots 10 minutes for guided practice on math problems in a 20-minute segment. He sets a timer for 10 minutes. If he sees a student "off task," he stops the timer; Watkins doesn't identify the student but simply points out that someone isn't working. He restarts the timer when all students are back on task. The

HAVE A TIP TO SHARE?

Submissions to "Teachers' Lounge" can be made online at www.aft.org/teacherslounge or sent in care of *American Teacher*. We will pay \$40 for each idea published.



remaining minutes (if all goes well, that would be the other 10 minutes of the segment) is their time to work on other assignments and on some days is social time. "The results are amazing," Watkins says, noting that the technique works especially well in small groups and with students who have difficulty paying attention. "Students who had trouble in the beginning learn to focus much better," he explains, especially when they're rewarded with a little extra free time.



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International studies add to body of class-size research

Smaller classes have benefits, but what goes on in those classrooms also is important

WE KNOW THAT small class sizes alone won't automatically produce higher-achieving students, even though there's strong evidence that smaller classes do make a difference. It's what happens in those smaller classes between teachers and students and among the students themselves that can bring big benefits.

A set of new studies on class-size reduction from the United States and three other countries, which were discussed at the recent American Educational Research Association's annual meeting in New York City, show some of the mixed results that are emerging on class sizes.

One of the most important findings is that students tend to be on task more of the time in smaller classes. Researchers at the University of London Institute of Education, in fact, were able to quantify the relationship between class size and off-task behavior by looking at behavior in 10-second intervals. Adding five students to a class, they found, decreases the odds that students will remain on task by almost 25 percent. Low-achieving students were almost twice as likely to be disengaged from the instruction if there were 30 students in the room compared with a class half that size.

The British study also found that students at both the elementary and secondary levels benefit from smaller class sizes, and the results were especially positive for low-achieving secondary students. That's an important finding because much of the research on class-size reduction—as well as many of the state initiatives—has focused on the early grades.

A different finding appears in research on schools in Hong Kong, where class sizes are typically larger than they are in the United States. One study found that in Hong Kong the level of student engagement didn't change when class sizes are reduced. Researcher Maurice Galton of the University of Cambridge said more students in Hong Kong are already on task much of the time, and teachers there also make concerted efforts to interact individually with every student.

For U.S. students, by contrast, the smaller classes allow more time for individual interactions with teachers as well as small-group work with classmates. "Small classes are more

"Small classes are more **engaging** places for students because they are able to have a more **personal connection** with teachers."

—ADAM GAMORAN
University of Wisconsin

engaging places for students because they are able to have a more personal connection with teachers," said University of Wisconsin researcher Adam Gamoran, "simply by virtue of the fact that there are fewer kids in the classroom competing for the teacher's attention."

Another recent study that came out shortly after the education research meeting reinforces some of the same fundamental points. "Class-size reduction is not a silver bullet," says Douglas Ready from Columbia University's Teachers College. Maximizing the impact, he notes, depends on factors such as the

quality of the teaching, what schools and students are targeted, and whether unintended negative consequences can be avoided.

In that last category Ready includes the example of how the issue has played out in California, which undertook a huge statewide class-size reduction effort in 1996. When California reduced class sizes in grades K-3, the number of uncertified teachers in the state rose from 2 percent to more than 12 percent in the second year of the program. For low-income students, the number of uncertified teachers was even higher—20 percent.

Another point that Ready makes is that class-size reduction, while costly, is easier to do politically than many other reforms, and it's popular among the public as well as educators.

"Meaningful education reform requires much deeper transformations than class-size reductions alone can provide," Ready notes. His reasoning echoes what the AFT has long said about improving schools: A comprehensive approach needs to include a whole set of reforms based on solid research about what works, including high-quality curriculum, intensive assistance to high-poverty schools, a focus on teacher quality, strong early reading instruction and intervention, and safe and orderly schools. Smaller class sizes are one strategy that can make some of the other reforms more effective.



JEREMY HARMON

Given a fresh start, staff and schools are renewed

Partnership between Chicago union and school system pays dividends

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE to transform Wells High School from a low-performing school that Chicago school officials wanted to shut down to an institution where students and staff now are thriving?

That's the question staff at Wells were hoping to get answered when they applied to become a Fresh Start School, a distinction the school on the city's north side was granted in 2005.

As a Fresh Start School, Wells has been given increased autonomy and additional resources, and the school's faculty more access to professional development opportunities. But

what teachers and other staff at Wells say they like most about the Fresh Start Program is the opportunity to be more involved in the school's decision-making process.

Two years after the implementation of Fresh Start, the school's principal and its Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) delegate agree that the partnership between Wells' faculty and administration is what's paying the biggest dividend for students and staff.

Teachers at Wells "feel they are being listened to and that their ideas are being taken seriously, and that's made a huge difference," explains CTU delegate Josh Strand. "It's not perfect. But it's better than it was before."

Wells' principal, Nichole Jackson, is a proponent of shared leadership. "Teachers on our leadership team have shared ideas that their colleagues have, and those ideas have often led to strategies for improvement that we've implemented," says Jackson, who arrived at the school the same year the Fresh Start Program was being introduced.

Launched in 2005, the Fresh Start Program is a partnership between CTU and the Chicago Public Schools. The program's goals include improving academic achievement in low-performing schools, increasing staff participation in school management and planning, and implementing a peer mentoring

Above, Attucks teacher Christian Nze, middle, and the school's principal Carol Perry. Fresh Start has put the administration and staff at Wells on the same page, the school's principal Nichole Jackson, right, and its union representative Josh Strand, far right, say.

and evaluation program. Schools are selected to participate by a panel of representatives from CTU and the school system. There are currently eight Fresh Start Schools—six elementary and two high schools—all of which had been underperforming schools located in low-income communities.

Under Fresh Start, schools set up an Instructional Leadership Team that meets to discuss topics such as curriculum, budgeting, staffing and the professional development needs of the school's staff. The team consists of the principal, several teachers, a parent or community member, and a facilitator from the CTU Quest Center. (The Quest Center designs and implements professional development programs for Chicago educators.)

The essence of the program is "an enhanced partnership between the school's administration and staff, and increased accountability," says Marc Wigler, Fresh Start's program manager and a former Chicago teacher.

Improved learning and discipline

The dismal achievement levels of Wells students landed the school on both the No Child Left Behind Act's "needs improvement" list and the Chicago school system's probationary list. As a result, the high school was in jeopardy of being closed or reconstituted, recalls Strand, an English teacher who has

been at Wells for seven years.

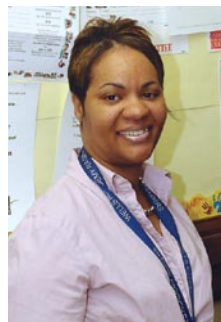
Fresh Start has given the school new life and jump-started improvements in both student learning and discipline, says Strand, who credits the adoption of Talent Development, a school reform model developed by Johns Hopkins University, and the creation of small learning communities—with smaller class sizes—within Wells.

"We now have a freshman seminar that helps kids adjust to high school," Strand says. The seminar focuses on strengthening the students' reading skills. It also helps them develop better study habits and note-taking skills, and provides guidance in navigating the new and different social environment they will encounter in high school.

Of course, all of this matters very little if the result isn't improved student achievement. Thus far, the news on that front is good. Four of the eight Fresh Start Schools came off the school district's probation list in 2007.

Attucks Elementary School was also on

Continued on page 19



**City
Lights**

Education
In Urban
Schools

A not so ordinary man

Retired teacher continues to make his mark

CHARLES NOLLEY HAS MADE the most of life. It's hard to believe that one man could accomplish everything he has. In his 90 years, Nolley has covered a lot of professional ground—he's flown planes, he's acted, he's taught. And although he has retired, Nolley's as busy as ever. He is especially active in the retiree chapter of the Newark (N.J.) Teachers Union.

When Nolley began teaching art to junior high school students in the early 1950s, he realized solidarity among his fellow teachers was the only way to achieve what they wanted and needed. "Some of today's teachers don't understand what it took to build the union," and give teachers a voice in decisions concerning their work, he recalls. "The union has been helpful to so many."

Nolley learned how important unions could be when he became a shop steward while working at a foundry. "In my younger days, I felt the ordinary man was not represented well enough." Unions helped balance the scales, he says. That's one of the reasons Nolley continues to stay involved in union work.

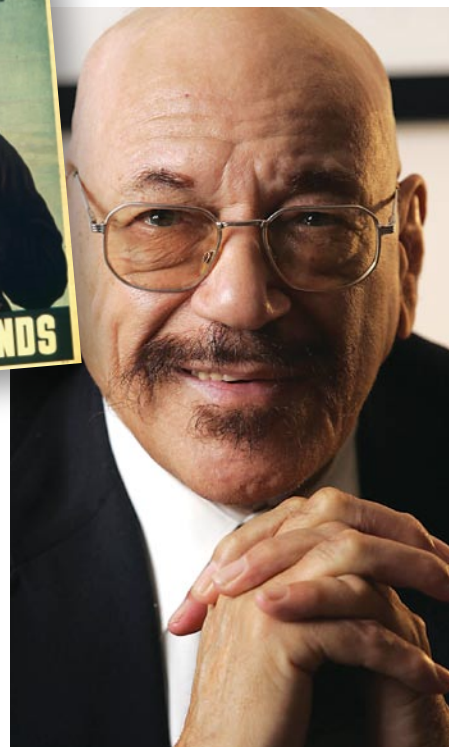
"He and his wife, Martha, are dedicated people," says Rita Messing, president of the retiree chapter of the NTU.

Before becoming a teacher and union activist, Charles Nolley was a Tuskegee Airman in the U.S. Army. A World War II poster, inset, features one of the first black military airmen.



Nolley always has had an interest in helping children, especially those who are disadvantaged but he came to teaching in a roundabout way. He traded in a budding acting career to teach; before that, he spent three years in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Nolley was a Tuskegee Airman—a member of the 99th Pursuit Squadron that protected American bombers from enemy attack during World War II. At that time, the military, like the rest of the country, was still segregated; the Tuskegee Airmen faced bigotry and discrimination every day. Nolley was infuriated to see that German and Italian prisoners of war were allowed to go places that he and others black soldiers were not. "We took our anger and frustration out on the enemy," he explains.

After leaving the Army, Nolley went to New York City. There he got into theater—acting, writing and set design. "I just went from one thing to another," he remembers. Eventu-



BRUCE GILBERT

ally, he settled in with a group of actors in Harlem, all of whom were trying to "make it big." Nolley landed a number of roles in Broadway shows, including "Carmen Jones," a musical based on Bizet's opera "Carmen," which featured an African-American cast.

He didn't think he ever would find anything that could compete with the excitement of show business, but he did. Teaching.

IF THE END of this school year spells retirement for you, then welcome to the ranks of AFT retirees. Your membership in the AFT while you were working has secured you a lifelong retiree membership in the national union. (Just make certain that your local union updates your status from "working" to "retired, active" in its membership report to the AFT.)

While there are definite benefits to being a lifelong national AFT member, you can get even more out of your membership by becoming involved in your local, regional or state chapter's retiree activities. First, find out if your local already has a retiree chapter or a specific retirement program—there are more than 100 chartered AFT retiree chapters. If not, why not start a retiree chapter?

The national AFT can help, and will provide you with a booklet entitled "Building to Last: A Practical Guide To Forming and Strengthening Retiree Chapters." If you're interested in starting a retiree chapter, ask your local or state federation president to contact the AFT retirement program for more information. Once you're a part of a retiree chapter, you'll find you're in good company with more than 200,000 AFT retirees nationwide.

There's much all of us can do as retirees. Our issues are crucial: We must guarantee that retirees can get a real Medicare prescription drug benefit, not the confusing and costly labyrinth the Bush administration has foisted off on seniors. We also must continue to protect Social Security against privatization, which, in spite of its rejection by the American people, remains a high

You've earned your retirement

BY KATHLEEN DONAHUE



priority for the White House and its allies in Congress. We must resist growing efforts to undermine pensions, and work to strengthen public education and preserve it from the threat of vouchers and other forms of privatization. AFT retirees will be front and center in our union's involvement in both national and state legislative efforts to secure healthy and productive retirements.

The AFL-CIO's Alliance for Retired Americans also offers membership opportunities. All AFT retirees are automatically members of the national alliance and not required to pay dues. The alliance already has chartered 23 state affiliates and plans to charter more. The group has been in the forefront of the battle for an affordable and comprehensive Medicare prescription drug law that truly protects retirees and controls costs. The pre-eminent grass-roots organization for older Americans, the alliance has been a leader in the recent Medicare and Social Security battles, and will play a key role in the fall elections. The adage that there's strength in numbers still applies as you make the transition to a more comfortable, but no less active, time in your life.

For more information, e-mail the AFT retirement program at retirees@aft.org or call AFT retirement program director Frank Stella at 202/879-4526.

Kathleen Donahue, an AFT vice president and vice president of the New York State United Teachers, is chair of the AFT retirement committee.



Workshops for parents and teachers, and good books for children, were in abundance at the "Together We Can/Juntos Podemos" conference.

Making literacy a family affair

Conference targets English language learners

HOW DO YOU TEACH English language learners? "You have to practice and then apply," says Susan Lafond, an English as a Second Language teacher and AFT member from upstate New York. "That's what you do with any student, in most cases—regardless of subject area."

Lafond, was one of the AFT's ELL (English language learner) Educator Cadre

members in Austin March 29 for Education Austin's "Together We Can/Juntos Podemos" bilingual literacy conference for teachers, educational assistants and parents of English language learners. Education Austin is a merged local union of the AFT and the NEA.

Altogether 250 parents, teachers and children attended the event, which spotlighted Colorín Colorado, a free Web-based service for educators and parents of ELLs—and the result of a collaboration between the AFT and PBS affiliate WETA in Washington, D.C.

Travis Donoho, Education Austin's organizing director, says the local accomplished its goal: sharing resources with teachers as well as with district parents, especially Spanish-speaking parents, on how to teach their children to read—and putting good children's books in the hands of district children. According to the Austin Independent School District, more than 58 percent of the district's students are Hispanic; and 22 percent of students are not proficient in English.

It's Education Austin's mission to close the achievement gap.

So, what is the secret to teaching the ELL student population? There is no different way to teach these children. It's all about quality teaching, says Lafond, who teaches at Guilderland High School in Guilderland, N.Y. "People think you have to do something different."

What one has to do, however, is accommodate the ELL students. "You have to prime the pump, check their knowledge background," she explains. "If you are reading a novel about the Great Depression and they don't know anything about it, you need to give information—show pictures or video—you give them that knowledge, that picture, that understanding."

Having high expectations of the students also is important, Lafond continues. "But you have to help the students meet those expectations," she says, and that's done by building motivation and self-esteem, and making the environment one in which they feel comfortable to take risks.

Workshops for parents were geared at providing the tools and information they need to help their kids succeed. And the children were entertained with a bilingual storytelling.



PHOTOS BY MARJORIE COTERA/DAEMMIRICH PHOTOGRAPHY

A star is born

Teacher is featured in MTV series on student newspaper

RHONDA WEISS DID NOT BECOME A TEACHER to be in the spotlight, but that's exactly where she's been since early April when MTV began airing "The Paper," a new show that features the journalism teacher and seven of her students.

Weiss' class was selected after her students responded to an online MTV casting call a year ago. Then there were 2,000 hours of taping. Fast forward to Monday nights through June 2. The show gives viewers an inside look at Weiss' life as a teacher and the lives of her students as they publish their award-winning newspaper, *The Circuit*.

As to having camera crews in her classroom, Weiss says that "it was very different at first and certainly raised the students' energy level." The production crew "dressed to fit in, and after a while the students relaxed."

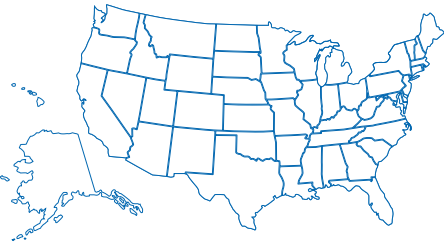
Weiss, a member of the Broward Teachers Union in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., started the school newspaper at Cypress Bay High School in Weston, Fla., two years ago. Viewers will see students choosing stories and managing deadlines, but they will also see how students' lives play out in high school.

"We have been struck by the passion, intensity and expertise of the staff of *The Circuit*. They work incredibly hard, care deeply about their work and are very good at what they do," says Marshall Eisen, a senior vice president at MTV.

AFT member Rhonda Weiss, seated at left, with students in her journalism class.



JUSTIN BORUCKI



CA Teachers throughout California have received layoff notices as a result of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal to make steep cuts in the state's education budget in anticipation of a state budget deficit of more than \$16 billion in fiscal 2009.

The California Federation of Teachers has responded forcefully to the governor's proposal to suspend Proposition 98 (which has guaranteed a minimum level of education funding since its enactment) and slash the education budget. The CFT has proposed that new progressive tax revenues be enacted in the face of the proposed cuts to next school year's budget. "We will continue to fight against any move to suspend Proposition 98's minimum funding guarantee," CFT president Marty Hittelman says. At last count, more than 20,000 teachers had received layoff notices.

IL Adjunct faculty at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield are among the most recent educators to vote for AFT representation. When the votes were counted in February, the adjuncts had decided to join the Lincoln Land Community College Faculty Association (LLCCFA), which already represents full-time faculty at the community college.

Adjunct faculty member Bob Fletcher has been teaching at LLCC for 24 years. He describes the uncertainty that punctuates adjuncts' lives: "Every semester is a brand-new experience for discovering whether or not you will receive a class. You have no standing or seniority; class assignments are made arbitrarily. You're not assured from semester to semester how much you'll teach, where or whether you'll have a more, or less, desirable class."

The campaign crystallized some important values in the minds of full-time and adjunct faculty alike. The full-time faculty recognized "that one unified group strengthens our mission of providing quality education to students," says local union president Dick Rogers.

NH After working for nearly two years without a contract, members of the Nashua Teachers Union have a new five-year agreement. The union and the school board had agreed to three previous tentative agreements, two of which were voted down by the city's board of aldermen. The third agreement died when the mayor of Nashua refused to fund it.

Salary and healthcare costs were key issues throughout the intense contract negotiations. A tentative agreement was reached one day before a strike by NTU members was scheduled to begin.

"Nashua teachers and school nurses are anxious to move on to the business of teaching and caring for our students," says Robert Sherman, president of the Nashua Teachers Union.

NM After five years of battling the school board, the superintendent and an anti-union law firm, more than 1,500 teachers and PSRPs in the Gallup-McKinley County School District have won back collective bargaining rights. Workers there had collective bargaining rights but lost them when the state bargaining law expired under a Republican governor in 1999. Current Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat, signed a new bargaining law in 2003, but it has required a new effort in many districts to rebuild the union.

The Gallup-McKinley victory was as much political as anything. The school board, the local labor board and the superintendent were all major obstacles to the union. So, working in coalition with the Navajo Nation, the union helped elect three new school board members (on a five-member board). In addition, the former superintendent's contract was not renewed, and jurisdiction for the case was taken away from an unpredictable local labor board and returned to the state board.

OK AFT members in Oklahoma are fighting state legislation that would allow a number of school systems to become charter school districts, opening the door for them to decertify their unions. The bill has passed the state Senate and is

expected to move in the state House.

Members of AFT Local 6049 Oklahoma in Tulsa and the Oklahoma City Federation of Classified Employees have mounted a vigorous online campaign to write letters to their governor and legislators. So far, the locals and their allies in the community have sent hundreds of letters.

The AFT affiliates also are distributing fliers showing U.S. government data on how much better union jobs pay than nonunion jobs. In addition, AFT-Oklahoma has met one-on-one with legislators and formed a coalition with several groups, including school counselors.

The legislation "really has nothing to do with education," says David Gray, president of the Oklahoma City classified federation and an AFT vice president. "It's just an attempt to dismantle the unions."

80th AFT convention

chicago, IL
july 10-14

MAKE PLANS NOW to attend the 2008 AFT biennial convention in Chicago. The convention will feature the introduction of policy resolutions, action on constitutional amendments, and divisional meetings at which delegates from the five AFT divisions will discuss issues of interest to their constituencies. Pre-convention meetings include the AFT Communicators Network conference, the Retiree conference and the AFT Educational Research and Dissemination program conference. Visit www.aft.org/convention for more information and important deadlines.

Reading through the ages

The AFT's proven approaches to reading and writing instruction extend their reach in K-12 schools.

BY MIKE ROSE

Great Falls, Mont., teachers Brenda Landsiedel and Amber Rausch (foreground) use ER&D techniques to give young students a great start in literacy skills.

THE TASK before the class was an essay about computer-aided design. But industrial technology teacher Sean Doyle feared that completing the assignment would be a sketchy proposition for one particular student. That's because many of the terms that came into play for the writing task—"blueprint," "technical drawing" and "mechanical drawing"—clearly were not in the student's vocabulary.

To make the assignment more than just an exercise in frustration, the West Warwick, R.I., teacher took the student aside and worked back until he found the term (in this instance, "sketch") that was solidly within the student's grasp. It was the springboard and the frame of reference that allowed the teacher to guide this student toward understanding more-advanced terms and, ultimately, to successful completion of the assignment.

That vocabulary-building technique is one of the many strategies for dealing with adolescent literacy issues that Doyle has added to his repertoire in recent weeks. They came courtesy of two full days of professional development training and follow-up support that the entire school staff at West Warwick High School has shared. The training, based on the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) courses in beginning reading and comprehension, has been adapted by the AFT's state affiliate, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Pro-

professionals, for specific use with middle and high school teachers across all content areas.

"You try to build context in the student's mind instead of just saying, 'this is what a technical drawing is—memorize it until you know it,'" explains Doyle, who ticks off a list of strategies, including small-group activities, graphic organizers and "questioning the author" approaches that he's gleaned from the training and used in the classroom. Many approaches are things he has tried in one form or another over the course of a career. "I've always tried to get kids to work together in small groups but the [ER&D] techniques are more refined. It's based on research, so you're not as hesitant to try it in the classroom."

That reaction is not uncommon for those who have taken the training, says Judy Ouelette, a reading facilitator at West Warwick and one of the two literacy trainers who guide the instruction. For content-area teachers, this professional development gives them a chance to recognize and fine-tune things that have worked in the past—and thoughtful application of those approaches in future lessons. For the trainers, a major goal is to make the literacy training flow as seamlessly as possible into the professional repertoire of these teachers. "Whenever we make it meaningful in their content area, it's been most beneficial," explains Ouelette, who is also a national ER&D trainer.



LARRY BECKNER





A longer reach

Stories like West Warwick are becoming more common, thanks to aggressive AFT efforts to bring proven literacy approaches to educators in all grades. The need was underscored in 2006, when the AFT adopted a national resolution that pointed to troubling indicators about the state of adolescent literacy: More than 8 million students in grades 4-12 (nearly 10 percent of that population) are struggling readers who cannot navigate and master middle and high school content; more than 3,000 students drop out of high school each day, in large part because they lack the necessary literacy skills.

Resolving the literacy problems of adolescents, the resolution stresses, “requires a simultaneous two-prong approach: delivery of rich content knowledge and literacy skills in the elementary grades and intervention and support for older students who need it.” It’s a strategy that also recognizes the need to tailor literacy help to the needs and demands already placed on teachers in public education. “Content teachers should not be expected to be reading teachers,” the resolution stresses. “Instead, [content teachers] must be able to support students’ efforts to access content through reading and to emphasize and reinforce the reading and writing skills specific to each content area.”

You can see that approach at work in Pitts-

burgh public schools, where literacy specialists make a conscious effort to meet the needs of middle school students without losing the perspective of content teachers. Kellie Skweres, a middle school English/language arts curriculum coach, is also a curriculum writer for middle grades and an ER&D national trainer. “A lot of the curriculum writers are teachers and coaches,” says Skweres, a member of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers. “We’re actually on the frontlines.”

That background is indispensable, she says, when it comes to introducing proven literacy methods while working within the confines of a limited number of instructional hours. For example, effective reading approaches typically involve more than one reading of a text, along with ample discussion of the material in class. It’s a level of rigor where “pacing is an issue,” Skweres points out, and curriculum writers in Pittsburgh look for ways to keep the demands manageable, perhaps by substituting an anthology for a full text, or by cutting a novel or two from the list of works a class will explore in an academic year.

On solid ground

Embedding literacy techniques within a lesson, rather than dealing with reading and writing as standalone activities, also conserves time and is a more effective approach for building these critical skills. “One of the biggest issues for teachers was addressing vocabulary and grammar,” Skweres says. “We knew they felt there wasn’t enough explicit instruction in vocabulary, [and] we are finding ways to incorporate vocabulary and grammar so that it is imbedded in the unit.”

These efforts complement the many successes that proven literacy approaches have produced for teachers in the earliest grades and the beginning readers they teach. At Sunnyside Elementary in Great Falls, Mont., first-grade teacher and ER&D national trainer Brenda Landsiedel says that there is a rich dialogue among teachers at all grade levels about proven literacy approaches. ER&D really affirms what she’s been doing, says Landsiedel, “but I got some new strategies and

“If [content] teachers see they can take it back to their classroom and put it to use, they’re willing to invest the time.”

—PATRICIA D’ALFONSO, Curriculum specialist and ER&D national trainer, West Warwick, R.I.

also was able to say *why* I was doing what I was doing—it wasn’t just another pendulum swing” in pedagogy. She says that the help ER&D provides isn’t a one-way street. Discussions with other colleagues like kindergarten teacher Amber Rausch have helped Landsiedel refine her own practice over the years.

“Being able to have Amber here to bounce things off of helps so much,” says Landsiedel, a member of the AFT-affiliated Great Falls Education Association. “I’ll say, ‘I don’t know what to do with this particular child,’ and she’ll mention something from ER&D. Just when I think I’ve tried everything, she’ll remind me of [an] approach.”

About half of the students at Sunnyside qualify for federal lunch assistance, but eco-

Continued on page 16

If you had \$50,000 to improve your school’s reading program, how would you spend it?

“I would hire aides to assist teachers in teaching reading, especially for those classes that have more than 20 students.”

—MARGARET SOSKIN

East Baton Rouge (La.) Federation of Teachers

“I would provide regular opportunities for working parents to attend classes on how to help their children at home.”

—SANDY BAKER HOOVER

United Teachers of Dade (Fla.)

“I would hire retired teachers to work with small groups of students helping them to improve their individual reading skills.”

—ERIN BENHAM

Meriden (Conn.) Federation of Teachers

“I would order every book taught in our building as a book on tape so that our auditory learners would be able to process and remember what they read.”

—PATRICIA FARRINGTON

North Syracuse (N.Y.) Education Association

“I would supply my students with books that excite them and deal with their world. I would also spend some of the money to start a book club for students and teachers to come together and share the reading experience.”

—MICHAEL BORACZEK

Yonkers (N.Y.) Federation of Teachers

“I would train artist-in-residence mentors to work with every class to develop reading-based art projects.”

—MARTHA MURPHY

Chicago Teachers Union

IT’S YOUR VOICE We want to hear from you on issues throughout the year! Visit www.aft.org/voices today where you can respond to this and other questions.

What kinds of expanded services and programs would help make your school a community hub for students, parents and families?



Continued from page 15

nomic background is not necessarily an indicator of academic success or failure, Rausch stresses. "My children from poverty are very smart, and if you give them a little exposure [to proven literacy techniques], they are sailing by the end of the year."

Rausch becomes animated when she talks about the excitement of introducing young readers to ER&D techniques such as "questioning the author," where classes are invited to actively second-guess the choices made by authors in a particular text. In the middle of a classroom reading, she'll say, "Oh, why did the author do that? It makes me so mad!" This makes the students get much more involved in the story, Rausch says.

The payoff for these strat-

egies can be enormous.

At Pleasant City Elementary in Palm Beach County, Fla., every teacher received training in ER&D's beginning reading instruction and reading comprehension courses at the beginning of the 2006-07 school year. Student reading achievement has shown remarkable improvement since then, reports reading teacher Christina Phillips, who is also a national ER&D trainer and a member of the Palm Beach County Classroom Teachers Association.

"A lot of things make it successful. Committed staff, administrative support, help from our union—all of those things are in

place," says Phillips, who emphasizes training follow-up as a key to the school's success with ER&D. If something that teachers learned through ER&D isn't working, "we're right there to analyze it and tweak it, rather than just move on to something new."

The school recently has seen not only improved achievement in content areas beyond reading but also a drop in discipline problems—trends that bode well for students as they reach higher grades, Phillips says. "ER&D continues to offer the type of strong professional development at the earliest grades that can prepare these students for academic success well into the middle and upper grades."

Curriculum specialist Patricia D'Alfonso, standing, helps present literacy strategies to high school teachers in West Warwick, R.I.



CONSTANCE BROWN

A sharp new addition to the literacy toolbox

A 2006 AFT RESOLUTION on adolescent literacy stresses collaboration with other groups, particularly when it comes to getting great resources into the hands of teachers. That work is under way at AdLit.org, an online service that aims to build reading and writing skills for students in grades 4-12.

A sister site to the popular Reading Rockets and Colorín Colorado Web offerings, AdLit.org presents another exciting opportunity for collaboration between AFT and PBS affiliate WETA. The AFT's cadre of adolescent literacy specialists, for example, will review the site with "a practitioner's eye"—suggesting ways that AdLit resources can be tailored to teachers in particular grade levels, parents of struggling readers and other key audiences, says AFT reading specialist Darion Griffin.

Launched in late 2007, AdLit.org has put together a strong lineup of resources, including tips for motivating preteens to read, online author interviews and a blog about books for teens. There's also "Word Up!" a monthly e-newsletter featuring tips for parents, news from scholarly journals and more. Check them out at www.adlit.org.



Response to Intervention: Help is at hand

AFT, others team up to provide resources to help struggling learners

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RTI) is an education program that's garnering a lot of attention these days.

Successful RTI implementation can improve education outcomes for all children—culturally and linguistically diverse students, students of low socioeconomic status, those struggling with emotional and behavioral problems, as well as gifted and talented students.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 gave states and school districts the opportunity to use a "process of responsiveness to intervention" in evaluating specific learning disabilities.

The AFT is fully aware of the opportunities, and the challenges, members face in implementing RTI. The union wants to pro-

vide you with tools and research and help make RTI implementation easier. To that end, the AFT is a founding partner of the RTI Action Network. A program of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, the network is a national collaborative effort that unites the public and private sectors with stakeholders from general education, special education and family groups. The network's goal: the responsible and effective implementation of Response to Intervention.

In April, the RTI Action Network launched its new Web site, www.RTINetwork.org, which includes grade-specific resources (prekindergarten, K-5, middle school, high school), a "parents and families" resource section, blogs, voices from the field, discussion boards and an "ask the experts" feature.

It's also the place to register for the *RTI Action Update*, the network's monthly newsletter.

WHAT IS RTI?

Response to Intervention is a multitiered approach to help struggling students. The process emphasizes how well a student responds to changes in instruction. The key components of RTI are:

- Providing scientific, research-based instruction and interventions;
- Monitoring student progress in response to the instruction and interventions; and
- Using these measures of student progress to inform instruction and make education decisions.

I'm no expert, but ...

BY DON KUEHN

THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC appear to be slow in grasping the reason behind these unbelievably high gas prices. Now, I'm no expert, but it seems fairly simple: Oil is priced on world markets in U.S. dollars, and there hasn't been a weaker dollar in recent history.

The Bush administration's monetary policies, and the tinkering of the Federal Reserve, have combined to wrench most of the buying power out of the greenback.

Oil cost about \$3 a barrel in 1970, and the dollar was strong. Then OPEC began manipulating oil prices by controlling supply. Sure, there were spikes in prices, but throughout the Bush administration oil has climbed until recently going through the roof, surpassing \$113 a barrel. And the dollar has slumped.

Been abroad lately? The British pound traded recently at \$2.03, the euro at \$1.56, and even the once-laughingstock Canadian dollar is worth more than a U.S. buck (\$1.01).

I may not be the sharpest knife in the draw-

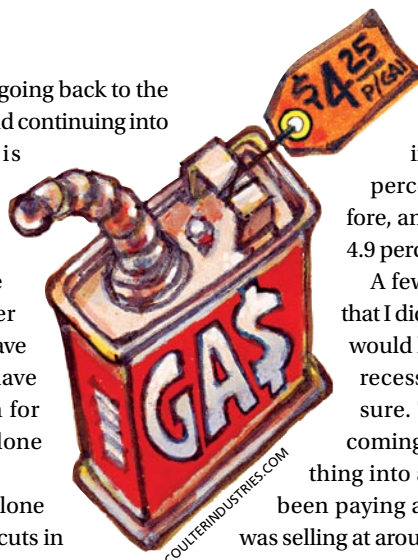
er, but the Federal Reserve, going back to the tenure of Alan Greenspan and continuing into the Ben Bernanke era, is foundering.

The Fed has taken one knee-jerk action after another in its effort to stabilize the U.S. economy. Whether the decision-makers there have zigged when they should have zagged may not be known for some time. But they have done an awful lot of zigging lately.

In the past few months alone there have been numerous cuts in the discount rate and six cuts in the federal funds rate. Every cut does a little more to undermine the value of the dollar.

The central bank also has underwritten the bailout of the big investment bank Bear Stearns and applied one Band-Aid after another to try retroactively to stabilize the failing economy.

While all of this rate cutting is going on, consumers like you and me are facing higher interest rates on credit card and other consumer accounts as lenders tighten their credit standards.



Energy prices at the consumer level in January were up 19.6 percent from the year before, and food prices were up 4.9 percent.

A few months ago, I wrote that I didn't think the economy would lapse into a full-blown recession. Now, I'm not so sure. Too many factors are coming together to drive this thing into a ditch. If you haven't been paying attention, gold, which

was selling at around \$250 an ounce pre-Bush, has recently traded above \$1,000—a sure sign that the guys wearing the smartypants believe inflation is bubbling.

If you don't think you have a horse in this race, think again. It's *your money* and it's mine, too. I want the factors that have wrecked this economy to be resolved—and “normalcy” to return—so we all can prosper.

Don Kuehn is a retired AFT senior national representative. For specific advice relative to your personal situation, consult competent legal, tax or financial counsel. Comments and questions can be sent to dkuehn60@yahoo.com.

For an expanded version of this article, go to www.aft.org/publications/your_money.

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- How satisfied are you with **conditions** in your school that may not affect teaching?
- What best describes your school's current student discipline policy?
- Would you say that the **academic standards** for students today are too high, too low or about right?
- What do you think is the best way to **evaluate** which teachers are doing a good job?
- Do you think the **No Child Left Behind** law has had a positive effect, neutral effect or a negative effect on public education?



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A fresh start

Continued from page 8

the verge of being shut down when staff there decided to apply to become a Fresh Start School. Christian Nze, who has taught at Attucks since 1990, says staff and administration saw the program as “an opportunity to turn things around.”

“The idea that we would be getting additional resources and staff development implemented by the Quest Center was very appealing,” says Nze, a special education teacher and the school’s CTU delegate.

Attucks is using data to drive instruction, and the staff is being encouraged to use creative approaches in delivering instruction, says Nze, who likes the accountability measures that Fresh Start has put in place at the school. “We’re responsible for establishing a school improvement plan and then monitoring the plan to make sure we’re meeting the goals we’ve set,” he says.

Nze believes that one of the chief reasons for the improved test scores at Attucks is the “Success for All” reform model adopted by the school, which focuses on strengthening reading skills.

In addition to the training associated with the reform model chosen by each of the Fresh Start Schools, staff at the eight schools receive extensive professional development through the CTU’s Quest Center. “We design the courses we offer based upon the needs of the individual school,” Wigler says.

Some of the courses offered by the Quest Center come from the AFT’s Educational Research and Dissemination program, including Foundations of Effective Teaching, Reading and Math Strategies that Work, and Classroom Management and Behavior Modification.

Jackson, the principal at Wells, says her school has seen an improvement in the reading scores of freshmen and sophomores, thanks in large part to its freshman seminar. And the support teachers at Wells receive from the mentor assigned to them as part of Fresh Start’s Peer Mentoring and Evaluation Program has been invaluable—especially for new teachers, she says.

“It’s been an asset having the union as an ally in working with the students,” Jackson says. “You need to have that kind of relationship among adults in a school. It shouldn’t be us against them.”

—ROGER GLASS

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Anti-tax initiatives are a cruel diversion

BY ED MUIR

IT LOOKS LIKE there will be some tough times ahead. Unemployment is up. Personal income is down. The bursting of the housing bubble has stopped Wall Street in its tracks. The federal government has authorized putting \$450 billion out on the street to buy up mortgage-backed securities, a bailout that's potentially bigger than the Savings and Loan bailout in the 1990s. The combined result? Tax collections are down. As more families need to rely on public services, the dollars to provide them are contracting.

For some of us, this is a problem. For others, it's a political opportunity. As a result, there are potential ballot initiatives to limit state and local spending or cut taxes in a dozen states. Among the backers of these initiatives are those who really do think tax cuts pay for themselves. But the people driving this bus, groups with nice-sounding names like Americans for Tax Reform and Americans for Prosperity, see this as a way to distract unions and tie down their resources as we head into a presidential election.

The Florida Education Association, the merged AFT-NEA state affiliate, already is battling inside the state's Tax and Budget Reform Commission. This is supposed to be a body of wise men and women who meet once every 20 years to decide if the Florida Constitution needs to be changed. The current commission includes a large number of colleagues of former Gov. Jeb Bush. At this writing, they are discussing placing a spending cap and a property tax cut on the ballot. The net effect would decimate funding for schools.

In Michigan, the proposal is to eliminate the income tax and the corporate tax and replace them with a sales tax. Because wealthy people don't spend all their money and poor people need to spend every penny, this means that the poor would pay a greater share of the taxes collected and the rich would pay a smaller share.

North Dakota has three proposals: One would put oil trust money in a rainy day fund. One would cut the income tax rates in half and one would institute a spending cap. Any one of these is bad enough, but taken togeth-

er, they would be extremely harmful.

In Massachusetts, the AFT is part of a coalition fighting an initiative to eliminate the state income tax, which is about one-third of the total amount raised by state and local government. There is no proposal to replace the money, and the backers believe it will force the state to become "more efficient." If you think widening the achievement gap and leaving people in need without good health-care is efficient, then there may be a point.

Most important, these proposals are an opportunity to change the subject. The economy is tanking. A political solution in Iraq seems distant. We're coming out of an economic recovery in which the rich certainly got richer, yet there are 300,000 more children without health insurance than when the recovery began. You can see why some people in Washington and on the campaign trail would love to focus on whether your property tax is too high or your teachers have overly generous healthcare benefits.

Ed Muir is AFT associate director of research.

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A central and vital part of the labor movement

Former AFT leader is new president of National Labor College

William Scheuerman, the longtime president of the United University Professions/AFT at the State University of New York, is the new president of the National Labor College in Silver Spring, Md. Scheuerman brings to his new position the labor insights of serving as an AFT vice president for 12 years (his term ends in July) and as chair of the AFT Higher Education program and policy council for seven years. AFT editor Barbara McKenna sat down with Scheuerman at the end of January to learn about his plans for the National Labor College.

What are your priorities for the Labor college?

The biggest one is fundraising and finding a way to keep the college going and make it prosper. The second one is knowing what we can do to meet the needs of the labor movement. A third is making the National Labor College a central and vital



MICHAEL CAMPBELL

part of the labor movement, so that whether it's a discussion of the issues or whether it's union training or whether it's offering degrees, this becomes the place that people turn to.

How can the college address some of the problems with the labor movement and the labor climate in the United States?

The state of the labor movement is linked to the economic problems in the United States. The increased income disparities and the decline of the middle class coincided with the decline of the labor movement. We [the college] can give working people the opportunity to advance without leaving the labor movement. For example, we have partnerships with two-year colleges all over the country—places like the City Colleges of Chicago, where we have AFT members. The partnerships let people with an associate's de-

gree transfer their credits to the NLC toward a bachelor's degree program. But we don't charge a whole lot of tuition; it's subsidized by the AFL-CIO.

You talked about providing a center for the discussion of ideas. Is there a place for average educators—American Teacher readers—in this discussion?

Oh yes. Our job as educators is not to be hucksters for the labor movement but to expose those ideas that are obfuscating the reality around us. For example, one bit of conventional wisdom that everybody buys into is the whole notion of the marketplace. When Adam Smith was talking about the marketplace, it was a very different marketplace from what exists now in the United States. We use the ideology of the marketplace to veil the growing inequalities in this society. So one of the things we need to do is find a way to use the college to have discussions about a separate view of the economy that is critical of the conventional wisdom.

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FACTS AND ARTIFACTS Be sure to surf by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. There, you'll find a collection of online materials for the K-12 educator, including contests and online exhibits. You can find it all at www.nmai.si.edu. While you're there, take a moment to participate in a teacher survey that will help the museum shape future offerings to meet the needs of the K-12 community. The survey, located at <https://survey.itec.suny.edu/opinions?5=2512>, will be active through May 31.

ABE'S BIG MAKEOVER The redesigned \$5 bill is the latest addition to the public education program offered online through the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and the Federal Reserve Board. Visit www.moneyfactory.gov/newmoney for free educational materials for parents, teachers and students. Materials, which have been designed to educate audiences

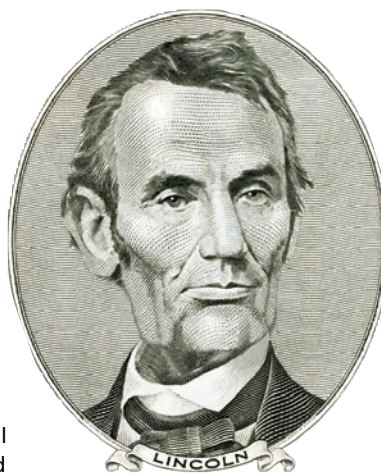
about the bills, include interactive animations of each bill and its security features as well as educational posters on the new color of money.

LA VIDA VERDE Living "green" is about to get a little easier for a few dozen educators, thanks to the Live Green Teacher Grants. The \$1,000 grants, awarded by Discovery Education and General Motors, will go to 40 middle and junior high school teachers to help them implement innovative lessons on the environment and renewable energy. Teachers must submit a 750-word essay online at www.discoveryeducation.com/livegreen explaining how they will advance their students' learning about sustaining resources through the use of new and emerging technologies. Deadline for submission is **May 15**. Grant winners also will receive a free digital camera to document their experiences in the classroom.

ISRAEL AT 60 May 14 marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel. Many of the important events in the history of the nation are presented in a fun, entertaining way at the Embassy of Israel Web site, www.israelemb.org. Click on the kid's page link for a "hopscotch through history," an interactive game highlighting notable dates and events in the nation's history. There is also an online "tour" of Israel, general information about national symbols, U.S.-Israel relations and more.

MATH AND BODYWORKS

The popular Web site www.KidsHealth.org has recently added new animations and activities to draw more learners to its "How the Body Works" feature. The section covers 19 different body parts and now includes more than 100 articles, quizzes, word searches, movies



and other activities. Using student-friendly language, the site is a popular destination for homework help and answers to kids' common questions.

THE SUBJECT WAS BULLIES The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center has compiled several online resources to help parents become strong partners in the fight against school bullying. Included on the site is information on bullying warning signs, facts about the scope of the problem, links to resources and specific tips for parents whose children are either being bullied

or are bullying others. The information is available at www.safeyouth.org. Select "Bullying" from the list of topics.

BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE ©

The Copyright Alliance offers a number of free educational resources to teachers and parents that promote the value of copyright as an agent for creativity. Visit www.copyrightalliance.org/foreducators/lessonplans for resources targeted to elementary, middle and high school students as well as parents and students in higher education. The site also is adding a series of online videos to highlight how copyright law promotes job growth and economic activity.



GREAT WORKS—IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

STUDENTS CAN SHARPEN their reading skills over the summer—while helping less fortunate children do the same—by participating in Scholastic's Summer Reading Buzz!

At the project's Web site, located at www.scholastic.com/buzz, students can sign up and start a reading log. For every four books a child reads and logs online, Scholastic will donate a book to Room to Read, a growing nonprofit organization that establishes libraries and schools in underprivileged communities in the developing world.

The site also builds summer reading motivation and interest through author Q & As, e-cards, and "buzz boards," where kids can connect and talk about their favorite (and even their not-so-favorite) books. The Scholastic Summer Reading Buzz! Web site also features extensive age- and grade-appropriate book lists in English and Spanish, expert advice on motivating kids to read, as well as downloadable bookmarks and reading certificates. Also offered is a "Read & Dream" sweepstakes, in which a lucky student-reader can win a family vacation to the Walt Disney World Resort.

