

A Harsh Season for Public Servants

Along with red ink and unemployment, the recession has also brought intense scrutiny to public sector employees, their salaries and benefits.



CHANGE PROPOSED Governor Deval Patrick joins House Speaker Robert DeLeo and other political leaders at a press conference announcing plans to reform the pension system. The changes will apply primarily to new hires.

Just how much hostility is directed towards public servants these days? For one veteran teacher, the current climate can be summed up in a single recent exchange she had with a neighbor. “We were both out shoveling our driveways and he made a snide comment about the fact that I had ‘yet another snow day,’ recalls the teacher. The conversation quickly went down hill and before long the neighbor was spouting inaccuracies about teacher pensions. “I thought about trying to change his mind but it just seemed impossible.”

Welcome to the new normal. Only yesterday the economy teetered on the brink of collapse, the result of a housing bubble, the risks of which were enormously magnified by complex Wall Street financial instruments. Fast forward three years and the origins of the recession have all but faded into oblivion, along with any ire towards the architects

of the financial collapse. Instead, public hostility is now directed at public servants. Tune into talk radio these days and you can be forgiven for coming away with the impression that the Great Recession was caused, not by bankers, but by teachers and their unions. Adam Bessie, an English professor at California’s Diablo Valley College, summed it up this way: The same people who imploded the economy, “manufacturing the recession which now enrages the public, have successfully misdirected the public’s justifiable anger away from them and towards teachers.”

While teachers seem to have been singled out for particular blame, hostility is directed towards virtually

anyone who is employed by the public sector: faculty at public colleges and universities, librarians, even police and firefighters. Coley Walsh, a lobbyist for AFT Massachusetts, has acquired a deep familiarity with the state politics in his three decades at the State House and says that the current attacks on people who serve the public are harsher than anything he’s seen before—and with further reaching implications.

“Hard-pressed tax payers resent the fact that they’re paying for benefits for public employees that they don’t have themselves. You also have a powerful anti-government lobby that is using public anger to push for tax cuts and in benefits and services.” *Continued on page 3*

After Success in Lowell, a Surprise Shakeup

Efforts to boost student achievement in the Lowell Public Schools have been remarkably successful. Student math scores have soared at two formerly underperforming schools according to the most recent MCAS data, while the district’s embrace of a collaborative approach to school improvement has garnered national acclaim. Yet last month, Chris Scott, the popular superintendent of the Lowell schools, regarded as the architect of the district’s improved performance, announced that she would leave when her contract expires in June. Scott’s decision to leave, which stunned her supporters, was prompted by the Lowell School Committee’s inability to reach an agreement about extending her contract.

While the precise details about what happened between Scott and the committee that hired her three years ago have yet to emerge, Paul Georges, the president of the United Teachers

of Lowell, says that are lessons that can be gleaned from a disappointing development. “It comes down to politics,” says Georges. “In the end it didn’t matter that we’ve established real momentum as far as strengthening our schools. It’s the school committee that calls the shots and we happen to have one that’s deeply dysfunctional.”

In recent weeks, Georges and members of the UTL have sought to pressure the committee to rethink its decision. More than 70 teachers, paraprofessionals and parents filled the local Council Chamber to convey the message that their superintendent had not just inspired positive change in the Lowell schools but had inspired them personally. Patty Shepherd, who teaches at the Morey School, told the Lowell Sun that morale at her school was the highest it has ever been. “The teachers believe that they are heard, they believe they are to think, problem solve and move forward.”



TEAMWORK Superintendent of the Lowell Public Schools Chris Scott with Paul Georges, president of the United Teachers of Lowell. The two forged a collaborative partnership that boosted morale—and student achievement—in Lowell’s schools. But increased test scores weren’t enough to overcome a more potent force: local politics.

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THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Thomas J. Gosnell
President, AFT Massachusetts

Health Insurance Coverage is Front and Center

Once again health insurance coverage for public employees occupies center stage. In general, public employee benefits, though hard earned and long negotiated, are under assault because of the collapse of benefits for the middle class in the private sector. The United States of America, though by far the richest nation on the planet refuses to remain committed to values embraced by practically all other developed nations. One of these values is a commitment to medical coverage for all.

AFT Massachusetts, in alliance with many other public sector unions, is working diligently to insure that we continue to have adequate medical coverage. I shall present some of the key issues by using a question and answer format.

Q: For municipal employees is health insurance coverage a subject of collective bargaining?

A: Yes, the local unions, representing the various employees, negotiate health insurance coverage. They can negotiate about the substance of the plans, the deductible, the co-pays

and what percentage of the premium the employee and the employer will pay.

Q: What is coalition bargaining?

A: If management and the unions agree, both sides can do coalition bargaining. This means that management, instead of negotiating separately with each union, negotiates with all the unions at the same time. Within the coalition each union has a weighted vote in accordance with the size of its membership. Retirees also have representation. In every city and town in Massachusetts the teacher's union is the biggest union.

This process produces health insurance coverage that will be the same for all employees in a particular city or town.

Q: For state employees is health insurance coverage a subject of collective bargaining?

A: No. State employees belong to the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) whose board determines what plans to offer, the deductibles and the co-pays. The legislature determines what percentage of the premium the state and the employee pay. Currently, those hired before July, 2003 pay 20% of the premium. Those hired in July, 2003 and thereafter pay 25%.

Q: For private sector employees is health insurance coverage a subject of collective bargaining?

A: Yes, if the employees are unionized. No, if the employees are not unionized. All current proposals in this state will not affect private sector

employees.

Q: Why are cities and towns trying to change health insurance coverage?

A: They maintain the cost is rising so enormously that it is reducing the services they can offer.

Q: Do they have a specific position?

A: The Massachusetts Municipal Association whose membership includes the cities and towns would like city and town management to have sole say in the design of plans offered. Collective bargaining would no longer be part of this process.

Q: Is Governor Patrick proposing legislation?

A: The Governor is proposing that health insurance plans now in effect need to be no more expensive than those offered by the Group Insurance Commission. If they are more expensive, then the cities and towns and unions need to negotiate savings. If they are unable to do so, then the cities and towns can impose whatever they wish.

Medicare eligible retirees must have health insurance coverage though Medicare.

The Governor's proposal has other items, but these would have the most profound impact on active and retired employees.

Q: What are the unions representing public employees doing?

A: They are meeting regularly to develop an action plan which will keep health insurance coverage in collective bargaining so that unions can continue to negotiate the best health insurance coverage possible. They also are meeting with state representatives and senators.

Q: Is the legislature likely to pass legislation this year?

A: Yes, but when it will act is not known. During the past three years the legislature has wrestled with this topic but has not enacted any legislation. This year is likely to be different.

AFT MA will keep you informed. For the latest information visit our website: www.aftma.net ■

A Surprise Shake Up in Lowell

Continued from cover

Continued Shepherd: "In the past we have been told to teach to the program. Chris Scott doesn't want us to teach to the program, she wants us to teach children."

So far though, school committee members have proved impervious to public pressure. They recently announced plans to commence a fast-track search for a replacement superintendent.

What does the loss of their superintendent mean for school improvement efforts in Lowell? Georges worries that the insistence of the school committee upon 'playing politics' may come at a great price. "We're losing a really motivating leader who has dedicated a lot of time and effort to boosting morale in our schools and creating a team culture. The path that the school committee is on won't help our schools and it certainly won't help our students." Concludes Georges: "This is the biggest blundering of talent since the Red Sox gave up Babe Ruth to the Yankees." ■

EVENTS

The National Writing Project's National Conference: Nurturing Student Writing

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BOLD PRINT

Emerging leader

Alison Doherty LaCasse, a teacher and building representative at the **Urban Science Academy** in West Roxbury, has been appointed by the American Federation of Teachers to the AFL-CIO's **Young Worker Advisory Council** which is charged with engaging and activating the next generation of union members. Doherty LaCasse is a member of the Boston Teachers Union Executive Board and previously served as a member of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO's Futures Councils.



Teacher Talk

Billerica teachers who tuned into one of several radio stations in recent weeks heard a familiar voice on the air: second grade teacher **Susan Leahy**, along with students Delaney and Katelynn Brown, were featured in a radio ad intended to draw some much needed attention to the contributions of public sector workers. Leahy, who teaches at Billerica's Vining Elementary School, said that while she was nervous at first, she soon forgot the microphone once she began to speak about her very topic: teaching. To hear Leahy's ad for yourself, visit www.aftma.net



Mr. Roboto

Nashoba Valley Technical High School has a new teacher of the month. **Robert Beaton**, a second year instructor in the school's electronics and robotics program, was nominated by colleague **David Carignan**, who praised Beaton for starting up Nashoba's first robotics team. Beaton's contributions are especially noteworthy, Carignan noted, given that he is new to Nashoba Tech. Congratulations Mr. Beaton and best of luck with the robotics team!



Beyond the classroom...

Helping the community seems to be in the DNA of Holliston educators who make a habit of giving back to the community. Over the holidays, Holliston teachers elected to forgo a 'Secret Santa' program, donating to the Holliston Food Pantry instead. Teachers, parents and students also worked together to assemble special holiday gift bags to local senior citizen. And don't forget Valentine's Day, when Holliston teachers and their students participated in the Honor Our Local Heroes program which donates items to Holliston residents who are serving in the military overseas. Keep up the great work!

Got good news? Send it to advocate@aftma.net or call 617-423-3342 x235.



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A Harsh Season for Public Servants

Continued from cover

The combination of these two forces, says Walsh, is pressuring elected officials to adopt changes in policy that would have been considered extreme just six months ago.

Case in point: New Hampshire, where members of the House of Representatives have just passed anti-union legislation aimed squarely at the teachers, nurses and other public sector employees in that state. The legislation, which is likely to be vetoed by New Hampshire Governor John Lynch, has been fiercely opposed by Granite State union members.

As bad as it gets

Elsewhere in the country, the policy changes that Walsh describes are being pushed through with astonishing speed. The governor of Wisconsin has introduced a far-reaching budget proposal that would effectively strip collective bargaining rights from the state's 175,000 teachers, nurses, university faculty—even prison guards. The measure would not apply to police and firefighters in that state, two groups which, as some commentators have pointed out, happened to back the new Republican governor in the last election. Opposition to the proposal, which would eliminate rights that Wisconsin workers have had since the 1930's, has been fierce enough that the governor recently announced that he had placed the state's national guard on high alert in the event of mass protests.

Wisconsin isn't the only state where measures that would strip or cut-back collective bargaining rights for public employees are under consideration. In recent weeks, Republicans in several

states have introduced new legislation intended to restrict the rights of teachers. Both Idaho and Indiana are considering passing laws that would prohibit teachers unions from being part of deliberations about education policy. The draconian proposals, which would effectively ban collaboration, fly in the face of mounting evidence that only by working together can teachers and administrators see real gains in student achievement.

Local forecast

While no such measures have been introduced in Massachusetts, hostile rhetoric towards public employees in general and teachers in particular is on the rise. And the divisive tone of the debate only serves to drive a wedge between public sector employees and their private sector counterparts, says Diane Frey, a field representative for AFT Massachusetts who researches and writes about labor law, including the freedom of association. "The economy is being used as an excuse to take rights away from people, but the irony is that the rights we have as workers were created during the Great Depression. This is being represented as a fight between one group of employees that has something and another that has less, but the battle is really about something more fundamental," says Frey. "Either we have rights or we don't."

On the air

A coalition of public sector unions, including AFT Massachusetts, recently unveiled a series of radio ads intended to remind local residents that public servants are not the enemy. "Sometimes



TALKING BACK Billerica teacher Sue Leahy and her students, Katelynn and Delaney Brown, recently recorded a radio ad meant to remind Massachusetts residents about the valuable services that teachers and other public employees provide. The spot is currently airing on radio stations across the state.

people forget amid all of the harsh rhetoric that's out there that they know us—we're their friends and neighbors—and they like what we do," says Lisa Smith, a spokesperson for Working Massachusetts.

That's the message that Billerica teacher Sue Leahy brought with her when she and two of her students, Katelynn and Delaney Brown, sat down to record one of the radio spots. Leahy talked about how much she enjoys being a public school teacher, while her students weighed in about what she meant to them. "When the debate is all about 'us vs. them,' you can lose site of the fact that these are real people we're talking about," says Smith. "Having members like Sue tell their stories is a powerful way for us to reconnect." ■

To hear the radio ad, visit www.aftma.net

Gov. Pushes Health Care, Pension Changes

While Massachusetts has yet to see the legislative attacks on public sector workers that are rife in other states, significant changes in public employee pensions and health care benefits are likely to be enacted during the coming month. Governor Patrick recently introduced a pension proposal that would apply primarily to employees hired after July 1, 2011. Among the proposed changes:

- An increased retirement age—no one, including teachers, would be eligible for retirement before the age of 60.
- Increase in years of salary average—the period used to determine the average salary earnings on which a person's retirement average is based would increase from three to five years.
- Reduced employee contributions—the amount teachers contribute to the pension system would decrease slightly from 11 percent to 10.5 percent.

Also on the agenda is health care. Governor Patrick is proposing a requirement that health insurance plans now in effect need to be no more expensive than those offered by the Group Insurance Commission. If they are more expensive, then the cities and towns and unions will be required to negotiate savings. If they are unable to do so, then the cities and towns can impose whatever they wish. ■

For the latest legislative news, visit www.aftma.net.

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Diary

of a New Teacher

By Melissa McDonald
Parthum Middle School
Lawrence, MA

My four-year-old is hot on my heels asking for cereal and if he can eat in the living room while watching his favorite Disney show. Too tired to think of a reason why not, I agree. Now that he is set up with the television, I can finally make some coffee and get the day started when I hear his five-month-old sister over the monitor asking for her breakfast. I head back upstairs to feed the baby and glance at the clock. It is 8:45 a.m. I should be teaching my first class of the day, but I'm still in my pajamas. I'm a long way away from room 331. For the last six months I have been working outside of my Parthum Middle School classroom. I'm on maternity leave.

I found out that I was expecting my second child about halfway through my second year as a middle school teacher in Lawrence. While I was excited about the news, I was a little concerned about the effect a baby would have on my career. I knew I wanted to take an extended maternity leave to be home with her, but I also knew that I would miss my classroom responsibilities. This pull between being home with my children and having a fulfilling career

in the classroom got me to thinking about how other people find a way to balance family demands with work obligations.

My grandmother raised six children during the 1950s and 1960s. She stayed at home while my grandfather was at the office Monday through Friday. That was the way of the world at that time. It's just fifty years later, and I have options my grandmother never considered. My choices, though, are paralyzing. I am filled with guilt when I think about how much I might be letting people down. I feel like I'll be disappointing my children if I am not at home with them everyday. I'll be disappointed if I put my teaching career on hold. In many ways, I feel like there isn't an option that allows me to please everyone.

The weeks after my daughter was born were a blur. I was both sleep deprived and physically recovering from the pregnancy and delivery. At that time I couldn't begin to think about the idea of returning to work. Finding the time to get dressed and eat a meal were difficult enough, I couldn't imagine trying to plan and deliver lessons every day. As we adjusted to the change a new baby brings and created a new definition of normal, I started to crave a life outside of my home. I love my children and my husband deeply, but I was starting to feel more like myself again, and the idea of having independent experiences was appealing.

I have received a lot of "help" in making my decision. Some people have encouraged my return to work



WORK LIFE
Teacher Melissa McDonald recently became a mother for the second time and now finds herself torn between the desire for a successful career and the tug and pull of motherhood. Says McDonald: "I feel like I'll be disappointing my children if I am not at home with them everyday. I'll be disappointed if I put my teaching career on hold."

and others have discouraged it. I talk with girlfriends who are stay-at-home moms and they confide that they mourn the loss of their career and long to return to work for adult interaction and socialization. I talk with girlfriends who are moms who work outside the home and they admit that they wish they could be at home with their children full-time because they fear that they are missing out on too many moments. All of this evidence will help me reach my decision.

Much like I avoid thinking about this notion of balancing my desire for a career with my family's needs, I put off writing about this because the idea of work-life balance elicits such ferociously strong opinions. I worried about offending someone. I don't have all the answers. I don't have any answers. I fear making the wrong decision. I worry about disappointing

everyone. In the end, though, I have to do what's right for every member of my family—including myself. Am I selfish for wanting a life outside of my family? Am I selfish for wanting to stay at home with my children because I don't want to miss their smiles or their tears? Is it possible to have it all?

In achieving the balance between work and family, I will have to compromise somewhere. I will either put my career on hold or I will miss some moments with my children. Finding a comfortable work-life balance is difficult. When the time comes, I'll make the decision that works best for me and for my family based on our current situation. In the meantime, I'll focus on enjoying every diaper change and every giggle. ■

Share your comments with Melissa at meljmcDonald@gmail.com

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Francis Vigeant, KnowAtom

A former math teacher draws upon a love of invention to get kids excited about science.

Francis Vigeant had only been teaching math in the Lynn Public Schools for a few months when he realized that he had a “pipeline problem.” The students who filed into his algebra and geometry classes at Lynn Classical were already juggling an unbelievable number of competing demands: family, relationships, money. “I figured that, of the pipeline of what these kids could handle, roughly 90% was already filled. The other 10% was that they needed to earn a diploma,” says Vigeant. “I could do my best to try to teach them math and assign them homework, but what was their capacity to actually complete it?”

Furthermore Vigeant, who was raised by a single mother and attended public schools in Lowell, found himself identifying with his young students. “Maybe I didn’t look or sound like them but I could very much relate to their experiences.” Vigeant says that he was particularly struck by how hard it was for many of his students to

relate the concepts they were learning in math—the Pythagorean Theorem, for example, or the difference between sine and cosine—to the challenges they faced in their daily lives. “They couldn’t see the value of what I was trying to teach them,” says Vigeant.

While the experience may have convinced Vigeant to cut short his career as a math teacher, it only deepened his commitment to rethinking the way students—particularly those in challenging urban settings—are taught basic concepts of science and mathematics. “I started with a simple question: how can I take

“By giving students the opportunity to interact with concepts at this level, they’re practicing all of the skills we’re requiring of them: self-regulation, logic, problem solving, critical thinking.”

this thing our students need to know and make it important to them?”

The answer to that question began to emerge in 2005 with Vigeant’s founding of KnowAtom, a curriculum and professional development program that tries to make state standards for science fun and exciting for students and manageable for the teachers charged with educating them. In starting the project, Vigeant drew heavily on lessons he’d learned, not



ELECTRIC CHARGE KnowAtom founder Francis Vigeant uses a ‘battery’ created from a potato and an onion to teach fifth graders at Lynn’s Lincoln-Thompson school key concepts about electricity and chemical reactions.

just as a teacher but as a student who’d struggled with learning disabilities. This unabashed fan of Mr. Wizard, a popular TV show in the 1980’s that taught kids the science behind ordinary things, understood that the key to helping young students love science was to bring it to life.

That lesson was evident during a recent visit to Lynn’s Lincoln-Thompson Elementary School. Vigeant, whose program is now offered in Lynn’s first through fifth grades and will expand into the middle schools next year, offered a mini lesson to a group of students about how a potato can generate enough electricity to power a small clock. On display were Vigeant’s trademark Socratic method, not to mention a spirit of inquisitiveness shared by the students who gazed in rapt wonder at the ‘potato battery.’ The exercise was fun and engaging, but within a half hour Vigeant had managed to get the students thinking about electricity and chemical reactions.

And while the project was designed to neatly dovetail with state science standards, Vigeant insists that his work is aimed at something more fundamental. “Life is full of hard and abstract things. Our goal is to try to create a safe environment that lets students take the concepts we’re talking about and let them experiment and bump into those hard things,” says Vigeant. “By giving students the opportunity to interact with concepts at this level, they’re practicing all of the skills we’re requiring of them: self-regulation, logic, problem solving, critical thinking.”

The KnowAtom program has already attracted wide support from teachers in Lynn, including those at so-called Level Four schools which must show improvement on student test scores within the next three years or face penalties from the state. According to state data, schools that have adapted the KnowAtom curriculum have seen student MCAS scores increase significantly. The Lynn Teachers Union is now encouraging the Lynn Public Schools to consider adapting the program district wide.

For his part, Vigeant is already looking forward to expanding KnowAtom into the city’s middle schools next year. When he’s not working with students or providing teachers with professional development, he can be found in the

warehouse he uses as a laboratory refining the experiments that are at the heart of his program. Vigeant’s eyes light up as he describes his idea for a year-long approach to middle school science standards in which students learn about electricity and propulsion by building remotely operated vehicles. “The other day I started thinking about how we could invent android applications to collect and push data around and I just thought ‘wow.’ This is really exciting.” ■

To learn more about KnowAtom go to www.knowatom.com



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APPLICATION DEADLINE IS MARCH 31, 2011



On Campus

Dan Georgianna, Political Director
UMass Faculty Federation, Local 1895



Science and Religion Remain an Uneasy Mix

In a recent article in *Science* (Defeating Creationism in the Courtroom, But Not in the Classroom, 2/8/2011), professors Michael B. Berkman and Eric Plutzer argue that despite winning every major court case, instruction in evolutionary biology “has been absent, cursory, or fraught with misinformation.” Citing evidence from the National Survey of High School Biology teachers, the authors report that 60% of U.S. high school biology teachers are neither strong advocates for evolutionary biology nor explicit endorsers of nonscientific alternatives.

The authors cite data that show

based on faith, the antithesis of reason.

This logic seems to lead to the conclusion that belief in God is not rational. But I disagree; reason and faith usually depend on context.

All of the established religions have their roots in agricultural societies, at least those established more than 200 years ago. The success of the harvest, essential to life, drew on faith and the religious belief to influence God or gods. This seems perfectly sensible to me. The time between planting and harvest is quite long, affected by hundreds of variables, almost all unknown, and affected by chance. The dangers of a bad harvest put people in

Science and religion have always co-existed uneasily in U.S. education. This is not surprising because science is based on reason and religion is based on faith, the antithesis of reason.

I don't deny the importance of religion, I'm a Red Sox fan, but I agree with Professor Paz-y-Miño C. that science is crucial to development and prosperity. I think that science also satisfies the human propensity for curiosity. Any scientific finding causes a great flurry of scientists trying to disprove it. If eventually accepted after withstanding this onslaught, the scientific finding pushes knowledge further into the unknown, which increases questions rather than diminishes them. ■

Send comments to dgeorgianna@umassd.edu

CAMPUS UPDATE

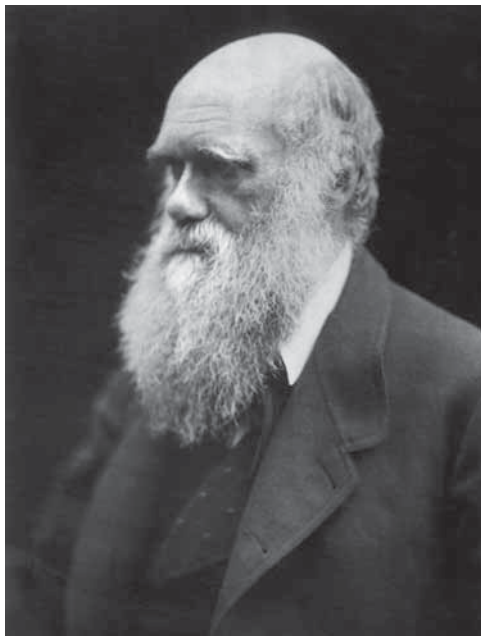
Cuts ahead

Governor Deval Patrick's proposed 2011 budget contains painful cuts for the state's public colleges and universities. Under the \$35 billion proposal, the five campus University of Massachusetts system would receive nearly 10% less in funding than last year. The university system is already facing a budget crunch due to end of stimulus funding that helped avert deep cuts during the past two years. Robert P. Connolly, a spokesman for UMass Amherst, said officials appreciate the virtual level state funding, but will face “significant challenges” with the loss of federal dollars. Connolly said it is too early to say if student charges would be increased for the next academic year. No word yet on what the budget means for staff at the schools.



Tenure threatened

While efforts to abolish tenure for public school teachers have received most of the attention, tenure for higher education faculty is also under siege. According to a new study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, states across the country are encouraging senior faculty to leave. The cost cutting measures have even hit Harvard where retirement incentives were offered to 176 professors 65 or older with at least 10 years on the job.



DARWIN DEBATE

“The wonder of sight can be attributed to God, but Charles Darwin and others have shown that sight could have been and probably was the result of thousands (or millions) of small adjustments, each the result of chance facing survival. I think that sight is wonderful but prefer that the surgeon operating on my child's eyes knows the scientific development of eyes.”

that not all of these science teachers believe in Creationism. Some do and teach the minimum about evolutionary biology when state laws force them to. Some of the other biology teachers in the ambivalent majority don't advocate for evolutionary biology because they want to avoid controversy, or they teach both (or more) sides, giving their students the choice, as if evolutionary biology was an opinion.

UMass Dartmouth Biology Professor Guillermo Paz-y-Miño C., the author of over 25 journal articles on evolutionary biology, thinks that this retreat from science is a grave mistake for education. He writes in both the popular press and academic journals on the importance of science education, and he edits a website on Evolution Literacy (<http://pazymino1evolutionliteracy.blogs.umassd.edu/>).

He argues that acceptance of evolution in U.S. schools and colleges is important to education because teaching of evolution correlates highly with other science education in public schools; and that science and its applications in technology are essential components of development and prosperity.

Science and religion have always co-existed uneasily in U.S. education. This is not surprising because science is based on reason and religion is

direct awareness of the great unknown. It seems natural to ask for help.

Now consider a pre-historic farmer who breaks a tool, say a sharp stick to poke holes in the ground to plant a seed. Rather than evoke God through some religious ceremony, she or he finds another stick and sharpens it. The unknowns are not as great, and any society that depended upon religious ceremony to repair broken sticks would not last very long. Applying the known discovered through experimentation, such as irrigation, also helps agricultural societies prosper and gain selective advantage.

Scientists now know more about the causes of successful harvests, but they don't know it all. Far from it. As a recent student of life processes, I am struck by how little scientists know, mainly because there is so much to know, and chance can't be known.

As another example, the wonder of sight can be attributed to God, but Charles Darwin and others have shown that sight could have been and probably was the result of thousands (or millions) of small adjustments, each the result of chance facing survival. I think that sight is wonderful but prefer that the surgeon operating on my child's eyes knows the scientific development of eyes. That doesn't stop me from praying for success.

CATHERINE LEAHY BRINE



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Retiree Corner

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

SENIOR SEMINARS

Preparing for Retirement

Session 1 (for paraprofessionals and support staff)
When: March 10, 3:30-5:30
Where: Billerica Memorial High School (lecture hall), 365 Boston Road, Billerica

Session 2
When: March 21, 3:30-5:30
Where: McCarthy Middle School, 250 North Road, Chelmsford

Living in Retirement as An Informed Retiree

Issues covered include Social Security, Medicare, Medicare B penalty and surcharge, working in retirement, legal checklist, pensions, taxes and much more.

When: March 26, 10-noon
Where: Presidential Park, unit 105, 314 Main Street, Wilmington, MA

How to Protect Your Nest Egg and Plan for the Right Outcome for Your Family

Given by Elder Law attorney Mary Howie

When: April 9, 10 to noon
Where: Presidential Park, unit 105, 314 Main Street, Wilmington, MA

All the above seminars are free. To register call Marie Ardito at 781-272-8073 or e-mail her at mardito@retireesunited.org. Make sure you specify the seminar you wish to attend and the number attending. You will only get a call back if the seminar is filled so your call is your verified registration unless you hear differently.

Don't Miss Out on Senior Tax Credit

When we conducted a survey of the 5,100 oldest teacher retirees several years ago, we discovered that only a small percentage made use of a tax credit just for seniors. Known as the Circuit Breaker, this state income tax credit is for eligible residents age 65 or older who paid rent or real estate taxes during the tax year. Even though the credit is based on property taxes, the state government, not the city or town, pays the credit.

The credit is for senior homeowners and renters who meet income limits and other eligibility requirements. Homeowners may claim the credit if they paid more than 10% of their total income for real estate taxes, including water and sewer debt charges. You must file a state income tax return to claim the Circuit Breaker Credit, whether or not you have to file otherwise. If your credit is greater than the amount of income taxes you owe, the state will give you a refund for the difference. The maximum credit for tax year 2010 is \$970.

Renters also get this benefit. The age and income criteria mentioned above hold true for eligibility for renters. The amount of tax credit is based on 25% of ones rent being greater than 10% of one's income. If you paid January 2011 rent in December 2010, then it counts

on your 2010 amount. A tenant should base the calculation on actual rent paid during the calendar year regardless of the year for which the payment is applied. If you live in independent living or assisted living each month's payment amount—the amount that is for rental of the space counts as rental, not the part that is for food and services. You are not eligible for this if you receive subsidies under Section 8 or any other government housing subsidies. The maximum amount of credit for renters is the same as for homeowners for 2010: \$970.

If it turns out that you are eligible but have already filed this year's return, you can amend your return. Additionally, if you were eligible in past years, you can file amended forms for up to three years. You can get this refund even if you paid no state taxes. For more information, consult with your tax preparer or call the Massachusetts Department of Revenue at 1-800-392-6089.

If you have attended one of my seminars you have heard about the Declaration of Homestead. This is for Massachusetts residents and allows them to protect their primary residence against a large number of liability lawsuits for up to \$500,000 if under 62, and up to a million dollars if over

62 years of age and if there are two names on the deed. You can do the paper work yourself by downloading the Declaration of Homestead form from the website of the Registry of Deeds where your deed is filed. You will have to answer a few questions—location of the property, deed and page number—all of which can be found on your last tax bill. Have the notary at the bank where you do business witness your signature and he/she will fill in the rest. Attach a check for \$35 and send to Registry of Deeds where your deed is located. It's that simple.

The legislature considers this protection so important that as of March 16, 2011, all those registering a deed in Massachusetts will be required to attach a minimum of \$125,000 protection to their home. All those who have the Declaration of Homestead for the million dollar protection as of that date will be grandfathered in and will keep it with no additional paperwork or cost involved. As of that date those wishing more than the \$125,000 protection will have to file additional paperwork. What the costs will be, and whether the filing can be done without a lawyer, etc. is not yet known. So please take care of this before March 16, 2011 if you want this protection! ■

The Golden Apple



By Jennifer Berkshire
Editor, the Advocate

The voice was from the past yet it arrived in a decidedly present form: via Facebook. "Remember fifth grade?" I blinked at my computer screen in astonishment. There she was: Mrs. Lape, my fifth grade teacher. And she seemed to have acquired a first name: Phyllis. Just reading her name brought back vivid memories: our classroom, a best friend as bookish as I was, even the vocabulary words we'd learned that year seemed to float before me. Within minutes I was writing her back. "Of course I remember fifth grade—it was the high point of my academic career!"

I was exaggerating only slightly. Other years loom large for me—in seventh grade, for instance, our social studies teacher imposed a dictatorship in hopes that we would rise up and overthrow him (we did)—but it was fifth that was far and away my favorite. Mrs. Lape taught reading and writing, while her 'partner in crime,' Mrs. Pringle taught science and math in the adjacent room. The two, who would teach together for twenty years, were as different as two teachers could be.

Mrs. Lape was stern and no nonsense, while Mrs. Pringle was nearly volcanic with joy.

"We complemented each other," Mrs. Lape told me during the course of our email correspondence during the past few weeks. (Even three decades after fifth grade, I still could never bring myself to use her first name). "Marla's strengths were in science, math and fun. Mine were in reading, writing and organization. The strength we had for our students was that we shared expectations."

It was in Mrs. Lape's class that I discovered my love of writing. Next door, in Mrs. Pringle's room, my disastrous relationship with math was well underway, but that is a story for a different day. While Mrs. Lape was tasked with teaching us the mechanics of writing—she began each day with something she called 'daily oral language' in which she would write an error-strewn sentence on the board and have us correct us—she did something far more transformative. She convinced us that we could be writers. Was this her memory too, I asked? "Well, we did do lots of writing, and I am impressed that it was meaningful to someone," she responded.

Fifth grade also marked the first year that busing was introduced in Springfield, IL, the city where I grew up. Whereas we'd attended neighborhood schools the previous

year, now we traveled across town in order to integrate a school that had been 90% African American.

The change brought with it none of the protest or recriminations that Boston witnessed, but I was curious about how Mrs. Lape had experienced it. Busing, she explained, meant leaving the neighborhood school where she and Mrs. Pringle had been teaching fifth grade for years. "I clearly remember the last day of school the year before," she wrote. "We were sad to leave. I think we went somewhere together and probably cried. However, in the long run, it was a most successful change."

It had not occurred to me, prior to our conversation that Mrs. Lape had a history that preceded my time in her fifth grade classroom. And in my mind, she stayed there, assigning book reports and poetry writing, daily journals and autobiographies of inanimate objects. But it turns out that Mrs. Lape had another life too. After retiring from the Springfield Public Schools in 1991 she went on to teach in the prison system, an experience she describes as one of the most rewarding in her life. "The students I taught were all men who hadn't completed high school. They didn't believe they could learn, but once they discovered that they could they changed."

Mrs. Lape and Mrs. Pringle remain a team as well. In recent years they've traveled to the southwest to teach



FORCE OF INSPIRATION Phyllis Lape has spent the past four decades conveying a love of language and learning to her students. After retiring as a fifth grade teacher she went on to teach at a correctional facility as well as at several schools on Native American reservations.

at elementary schools on Native American reservations, including a trip last year to a Navajo school in Arizona.

While Mrs. Pringle has not yet discovered the joys of Facebook, Mrs. Lape shared some of our correspondence with her. "She said to tell you hello—and to ask if your math skills ever improved." ■

AFT Innovation Fund Brings Bright Ideas to Light

Editor's note: This story originally appeared in the February issue of AFT's national publication, American Teacher. To read the entire story, go to www.aftma.net. —JCB

Ted Chambers could have been forgiven if he had interrupted his third-period social studies class and launched into a technophobe's rant, a full-blown fit that would fill the old corridors of Edwards Middle School in Charlestown, Mass.

The teacher's classroom presentation software had just crashed, putting Chambers back on the whiteboard, fighting to hold students' attention as he blocked out the essentials for an essay about the changing demographics of Mexico City. Above him, the classroom clock stubbornly refused to give up daylight saving time on this chilly December afternoon. And the building's oldest technology (radiator heat) wasn't helping matters. Students kept their winter coats wrapped tight while the overmatched cast-iron beasts behind them huffed a mere whisper of warm air.

Edwards looks "old school," an unlikely spot for creative thinking about leading-edge education technology and how it intersects with the new common standards in core academic areas. But not only are these and other trends very much on the minds of frontline faculty at Edwards and other public schools, teachers also have solid, exciting ideas about how to make these trends work for the classroom—if only someone would listen.

Thanks to the AFT Innovation Fund, someone is.

Established in 2008, the AFT Innovation Fund aims to unlock great ideas in education, proposed by classroom professionals and their unions. The Innovation Fund allows AFT members to tackle head-on the most vexing issues in school reform, such as teacher development and evaluation, through a consensus-building process with teachers, district personnel and community members.

"Our intention is to support innovations from the bottom up and move away from the top-down corporate model," AFT president Randi Weingarten explained at a Washington, D.C., press conference when she announced a \$1 million annual union contribution to the fund. In addition, the Innovation Fund has been supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Eli and Edythe Broad, Bill & Melinda Gates, Ford and Charles Stewart Mott foundations. To date, the fund has made 15 grants to local and state AFT affiliates. In January, the fund began soliciting new ideas for a third round of grantmaking this coming summer. If ears weren't burning at Edwards Middle and other Boston schools when the national announcement was made, they should have been.

Teachers at Edwards had thought long and hard about new approaches in education. It seemed logical to them that a colleague in Iowa, for

example, should be able to go online and easily find a great lesson designed by a teacher in Massachusetts, Ohio or any of the more than 40 states where educators are navigating precisely the same standards-based objectives for their students and classrooms. Instead, standards and tech still seem disconnected and unsupported—like reforms running on parallel tracks.

"It's like trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose," Chambers says of the hours he's expended trying to find just the right lesson. "No teacher has that time," says the middle school teacher, punctuating the comment by simultaneously fielding questions, administering an after-school test and calling the parent of a student who's insisting he doesn't have to get picked up by his mom after school.

Ed Reform, Version 3.1416

Given time and a little backing, faculty at Edwards and other schools wanted to pursue an idea—a prototype lesson plan for "next generation" instructional units tied to Common Core standards. These would be high-caliber materials—teacher-constructed and teacher-vetted. They would be designed using the latest software, posted online and easily accessible to any teacher, anywhere. It's an "open source" approach, technology's version of an old-fashioned barn raising—thousands of teachers from across the country coming together to contribute, polish and share tools that, for too long, standards-based reform has asked them to cobble together ... at home ... each night ... in isolation.

The idea that Edwards teachers are helping to spearhead is happening, thanks to the support of the AFT Innovation Fund.

Through its AFT affiliate, the Boston Teachers Union, a teachers-led steering committee is developing a prototype lesson on circumference and diameter, an introduction to the concept of pi. It is set to debut this winter, ahead of schedule. In December, with the launch fast approaching, Edwards faculty could be found holed up with colleagues each Saturday in a Harvard University library, working with a design team paid for through the Innovation Fund to work out the kinks.

Kevin Qazilbash, a teacher at Edwards, views technology in education as a means to an end. "I only bought a new cell phone nine months ago, when my third son was born, because my wife insisted," he says. States are moving to get on the same page when it comes to core academic standards, he acknowledges, but where are the great, tailored materials and support to make them work?

It's a concern shared by sixth-grade teacher Tracy Young, who teaches math one floor down from Chambers and Qazilbash. "You've got thousands and thousands of teachers teaching the same concept, trying to create the same lesson," with no recognition in the system of what it takes to put together those top-notch lessons, she says.

The project is also on the radar of the state Department of Education.



COVER STORY Edwards Middle School teachers Ted Chambers, Kevin Qazilbash and Tracy Young were featured on the cover of the February issue of *American Teacher* for their work on developing state-of-the-art lesson plans.

Massachusetts landed a federal Race to the Top grant last year that includes a plan to create online tools—developed by teachers and tied to Common Core standards. State officials are hopeful that the path-setting work by the BTU teachers through the Innovation Fund can enrich their efforts.

Qazilbash welcomes that type of leverage, remembering a moment a few years ago, when he was working as a teacher developer with a new group of math teachers.

"There was a fantastic lesson that this one teacher produced—great PowerPoint, everything was tied together and the kids were totally engaged," Qazilbash says. "At the end, I was complimenting him about it, and he said, 'Yeah, the only problem is I spent four hours designing it. Now, I have to teach geometry next period, and I have no idea what I'm going to do.'" ■

Interested in Being Part of 21st Century Lessons?

We are currently seeking creative and highly effective Math Teachers to design lessons for our summer session. The two week session will be held from August 8 through August 19, 2011. Participants will receive a stipend of approximately \$3200. If you are interested in being part of 21st Century Lessons, please send your resume and letter of intent to tracyannyoung@comcast.net. Resumes will be accepted through March 12, 2011.

AFT MA Member in Running for 'Everyday Hero' Award

Jerry Hopcroft already has plenty of titles: engineering professor at the Wentworth Institute of Technology, past-president of the WIT Faculty Federation, AFT MA member. But he may soon have another feather to add to his cap: the American Federation of Teachers' *Everyday Hero* Award. A total of 30 AFT members were nominated for the award, which honors an AFT member for exemplary service to his or her membership and community. Hopcroft was one of five nominees from the AFT's higher education division to make the final cut.

Hopcroft was nominated by colleague Marilyn Stern for his service learning work in the Peruvian town of Chirimoto, an ongoing project that has helped students learn to be creative engineers and provided vital services to an impoverished community in Peru. Says Stern: "Jerry was nominated for his work in Chirimoto, both as a personal volunteer and as a faculty member who has engaged his students in this very special service work."

In 2009, when Hopcroft led a

team of students to Peru, he brought with him some invaluable cargo: 400 children's books that formed the basis for a bookmobile. Today the bookmobile, which has grown to 600 books, travels between the five major villages in the area, spreading a love of reading. Last year Hopcroft returned with another group of students to do water system design planning, an architectural redesign of the community center and economic development planning. The community center is now under reconstruction based on the architectural work of one of the students, while the area has seen a \$2 million influx of funding for a new coffee marketing cooperative based on the economic development plans crafted by Hopcroft and his team.

"Jerry is an extraordinary man who is committed to our faculty federation, to our students, and to those all over the world who need his help," says Stern. "He is truly a hero." ■

To vote for Jerry, go to www.aftma.net. Voting concludes on 2/26.