

Standing Up for the Future

Nancy Sheehan's official title is head of youth services at the Wakefield Public Library. But these days Sheehan is wearing another hat as well: union coalition member. The librarians in Wakefield have joined forces with other municipal employees there, including teachers, police, firefighters and members of the local department of public works, in order to try to protect their health insurance benefits.

For the small group of librarians, the experience of working with other unions is brand new. "We've never done anything like this before," says Sheehan, who was recently elected chapter chair of the library union. And while the experience of working alongside her union brothers and sisters has taken some getting used to, Sheehan says she has high hopes that the coalition will continue to work together after the health insurance issue has been resolved. "This process has been really good for breaking new ground."

One voice

Wakefield is far from the only city or town where new partnerships are being formed. As public employees begin to deal with the implications of the health insurance law passed on Beacon Hill this summer, local unions are finding that they have no choice but to work together. "The days when each group of employees could try to strike



STRONGER TOGETHER Sergeant David Brown of the Wakefield Police Department and Wakefield librarian Nancy Sheehan. Public employees in Wakefield are working together in an effort to protect their health insurance benefits. "Working with other unions is brand new to us," says Sheehan.

a deal on their own are over," says Andrew Powell, AFT Massachusetts' specialist on municipal health care. "People are figuring out pretty quickly that if they can speak with one voice on these issues they're going to be much better off."

A new approach

But coalition building isn't the only emerging trend in this political season. In a time of heated rhetoric—not to mention budgetary austerity—teachers, librarians and other AFT MA members across the state are trying new strategies to make their voices

heard. In Lynn, the Lynn Teachers Union is preparing to host its first ever debate among school committee candidates. In Amesbury, members of AFT Amesbury are rethinking their approach to local politics, including how to have more of a say on budget debates in that town. In Boston last month, more than 2700 members of the Boston Teachers Union participated in a telephone town hall meeting. Meanwhile, from Chelmsford to Chelsea, union members are trying to do a better job of getting the word about the good work that unions do.

Continued on page 3

The "Murkland Miracle"

A school improvement model based on teacher-led reform, trust and collaboration produces huge gains for students at a Lowell elementary.

The mood at Lowell's Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School is jubilant these days. Identified as one of the state's lowest performing schools just a year ago, the Murkland has demonstrated a stunning rise in student achievement since then. In fact, the students performed so well that when Governor Deval Patrick and Mitchell Chester, the state's commissioner of education, announced the 2011 MCAS results, they did so here at this elementary school in Lowell's historic—and hard scrabble—Acre neighborhood.

Just how well did students at the Murkland fare? In a single year, the portion of students scoring proficient or advanced in English Language Arts (ELA) increased by 13 percentage points and in math by a staggering 20 percentage points. Additionally, the Murkland's so-called student growth percentile scores were 57 in English Language Arts and 80 in math, both of which are above the state norm of 50 and signal that the school's students improved their achievement at a faster pace than their peers statewide, especially in math.

Kevin Andriolo, the school's assistant principal, says that he is most proud of the surge in the students' growth scores. "All of us at the Murkland believed that we were going to see big gains this year but to reach a number like 80 percent is really pretty unbelievable. That just doesn't happen," says Andriolo. "This is a real tribute to the dedication and hard work by the faculty and staff at our school."

Continued on page 8



SUCCESS STORY Governor Deval Patrick reads to students at the Murkland School in Lowell. Students at the school made huge gains on the most recent MCAS test thanks to an approach to school improvement that stresses collaboration and team work. "We're all in this together," says Principal Jason DiCarlo.

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THE PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Thomas J. Gosnell
President, AFT Massachusetts

Another Challenging Year

The 2011-12 school year will be just as lively as last year. Up ahead: the new regulations on the performance evaluation of teachers, the new health insurance law, possible revisions in the pension law, the attempt to organize early childhood workers in the private sector, the President's attempt to pump more money into the economy, the elections in 2012, and the usual challenges for our members in all levels of education. Let's take a look at each one of these issues.

Performance evaluation

The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has adopted regulations which are a mandate for all the cities and towns. For example, all evaluation systems must include the following and only the following evaluation marks: exemplary, proficient, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. Those who receive either of the latter two marks must make rapid improvement or face termination proceedings.

The regulations do include the use of MCAS scores as a factor in the evaluation of teachers but do not mandate a particular percentage. AFT MA has steadfastly maintained that MCAS scores do not belong in any evaluation system. In addition, the use of MCAS scores applies only to those teachers who teach those subjects. Student growth, however that is defined, is also

included as a factor in the evaluation of teachers.

The collective bargaining law still applies. Consequently, many aspects of evaluations, e.g. the use of student growth, can be bargained.

The law contains much more than I have mentioned, but these few examples give a sufficient taste of the changes.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has adopted regulations for administrators but not for any other employees in public school systems.

New health insurance law

The landscape has been profoundly altered. If the city or town governing body so chooses, it can treat health insurance coverage in a manner quite different from the past.

If it goes in this new direction, all municipal unions must negotiate as one unit with the city or town. This is known as coalition bargaining.

The municipality will have much greater authority to move employees into the Group Insurance Commission or adopt a new health insurance plan. Under all circumstances the premium split is subject to traditional bargaining and some of the saved money must be the subject of negotiations. This money can be used to offset increased copays and deductibles.

The law's complexity will guarantee that both the municipalities and the unions will be trying to decipher it for quite a while.

Pensions

Although proposed legislation will not affect current employees, those hired after January 1, 2012 would see significant changes if the legislation should pass.

The minimum retirement age would be 60 and for many, many public employees 67 would be the age for benefits.

The Senate has passed the bill. The

House has yet to act. Go to our website, www.aftma.net, to send a letter to your representatives opposing this bill.

Early childhood

AFT Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Teachers Association are conducting a joint campaign to organize early childhood workers in the early childhood centers. Early childhood workers have dreadful wages. However, even in this miserable economy, early childhood education is expanding. Both organizations believe that these workers need union representation to enable them to have better salaries and a greater voice in the workplace and in the development of top flight programs for the children.

The President's proposal

The President is finally proposing a plan that asks the rich to pay a much more fair share of taxes. He is also proposing that much more money go to schools to prevent layoffs as well as to repair and build schools. Public education desperately needs more money. Most of the Massachusetts delegation supports his plan. AFT MA will work to persuade any senator or representative opposed to the plan to change his/her mind. You'll hear more from us.

2012 elections

A big year next year. Many Democrats are eager to run against Senator Scott Brown. Issues very important to AFT MA members will be front and center during the campaign. We shall carefully review the credentials, voting records, and the campaign skills of every candidate, Democrat and Republican, before any decision on an endorsement is made.

Public libraries

Our public libraries continue to suffer. Even in good times, their funding is inadequate. Some are open less hours and have fewer professional staff. Clearly more money needs to be directed to the libraries. For this to happen we need more revenue. More about more revenue in a future column.

I appreciate the wonderful service all of you give to our students and the general public. I would also appreciate an increase in the number of people praising your commitment. Too many criticize. If you have questions or comments, contact tgosnell@aftma.net

BOLD PRINT

Fond Farewell

AFT Massachusetts says farewell to two long-time staff members. **Cathy Dwyer**, AFT MA's political director, and field representative **Dianne Heeley** both retired at the end of the summer. But while they may no longer be on staff, both plan to remain active in state and national politics. Dwyer is also active in Emerge Massachusetts, which trains women to run for office. Dwyer says that she's already gearing up to get involved in the 2012 presidential contest: "As for what role I play we'll have to wait and see!"



Local Leaders

'Tis the season to welcome a new crop of leaders within the locals that make up AFT Massachusetts. A warm welcome to the following: **Catherine Simpson**, president, Holliston Federation of Teachers; **Colleen McElligott-Liporto**, first vice president, Lynn Teachers Union; **Joyce Kimani**, president, Hathorne Teachers Federation (Essex Aggie); **Debra Hindes**, chapter chair, North Reading Library Staff Association; **Linda Prescott**, chapter chair, Lawrence Teachers Union, Nurses of Lawrence Association; **Connie Motta**, president, New Bedford Federation of Paraprofessionals.



Seat at the Table

Lowell teacher **Kate McLaughlin** has been named to the AFT's program and policy council for teachers. McLaughlin, who works as a math coach at the **Bailey and Lincoln** schools in Lowell and serves as the vice president of the **United Teachers of Lowell**, is one of just 60 teacher representatives on the PPC council from across the country. The council meets throughout the year to discuss key issues aligned with the national AFT mission and to direct the work of AFT Teachers accordingly. Congratulations Kate—we know we can count on you to represent Massachusetts educators well!



Drum Beat

If you happen to catch a performance by Josh Groban this fall, keep an ear out for **Davie DiCenso**, a member of the Percussion Department at **Berklee College of Music** and a member of the **Berklee Faculty Union**. DiCenso has just joined the grammy-nominated singer's world tour as a drummer. He will be performing in the US, Canada, Europe, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand for the rest of the year.



Hero Time

The AFT is once again seeking nominations for its **Everyday Heroes** contest. Nominate an AFT member who inspires you by making a difference in their school, workplace or community and you could receive \$250. Nominate your Everyday Hero at www.aft.org/everydayheroes by Thanksgiving Day, November 24. Last year, AFT MA member **Jerry Hopcroft**, an engineering professor at the **Wentworth Institute of Technology**, made the semifinal rounds of the competition. Hopcroft was nominated by colleague **Marilyn Stern** for his service learning work in the impoverished Peruvian community of Chirimoto.

Editor's note: This month marks the debut of a new contributor, cartoonist and retired teacher Joe Quicgley (see left). Look for his humorous, timely take on issues to appear regularly in these pages.—JCB

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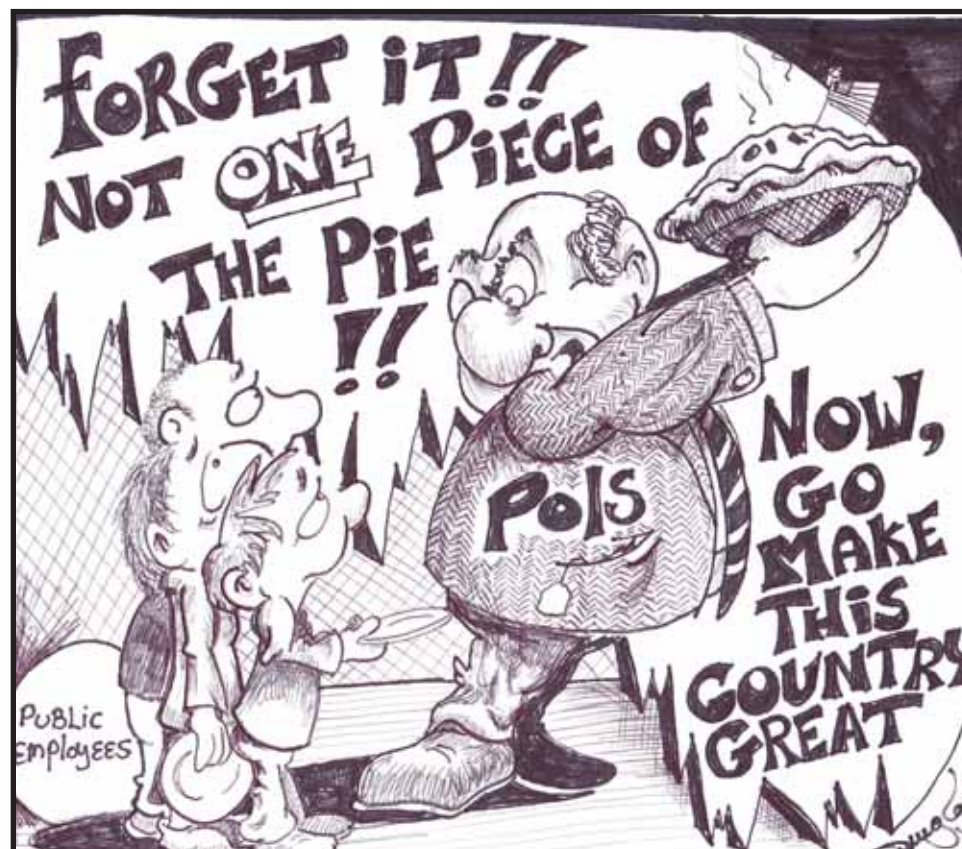
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Standing Up for the Future

Continued from cover

Politics remains a highly local affair in Massachusetts. The big question: what's the best way to make our voices heard at the local level?

There is evidence that even fledgling efforts like these can have a big impact. Last spring, members of the Holliston Federation of Teachers dramatically stepped up their presence in the local community, helping to spearhead a tax override measure—one of the few such efforts to be approved by voters anywhere in the Commonwealth. As a result of their leadership on that issue, the Holliston teachers are now perceived as the lead voice on education issues in that community.

Candidates debate

Later this month, all eight candidates for Lynn's School Committee will take the stage at the Breed Middle School for a wide-ranging debate on everything from a proposed ballot initiative that would essentially eliminate tenure for teachers to the physical condition of Lynn's aging schools. John Lauber, the moderator, is himself a retired Lynn teacher, while the audience will be filled with the teachers, paraprofessionals and therapists who make up the Lynn Teachers Union (LTU). The event will also be broadcast live on the local cable access channel. Says Brant Duncan, who serves as the president of the union: "The school committee exerts tremendous influence over the lives of the people who work in the Lynn Public Schools. Doesn't it make sense that we try to figure out where they stand?"

Duncan says that he also hopes that the debate helps to drive forward the discussion about the state of education in Lynn. "The standard response right now is that 'there isn't any money.' I think what we all want to know as educators is what is the vision of these

candidates for our public schools here in Lynn?"

But this event is about more than just the next Lynn School Committee race. The Lynn Teachers Union is one of the largest unions in this old industrial city. And with 5-6,000 total union voters in Lynn, the LTU could potentially have a much more significant voice in local politics. "This is an opportunity for us to help shape the future of the city we all care so much about," says Duncan.

Time for a change

In Amesbury, the wakeup call came last spring during a protracted fight with the school committee over the future of the paraprofessionals who work with special needs students in the schools. (See *Advocate*, September 2011). Despite being able to rally hundreds of concerned parents and local residents to their side, AFT Amesbury had little ability to affect the terms of the debate; school committee members remained steadfast in their commitment to outsourcing the paras in order to save money.

"By the time we got involved in the discussion it was really too late," says Tim Angerhofer, a seventh grade math teacher and building representative at the Amesbury Middle School. The paraprofessionals would eventually offer deep concessions in order to save their jobs but for Angerhofer and his fellow members a lesson had been learned. "If we're going to have a real say in these discussions we have to make our voices heard all along, not just at the end of budget season."

So Angerhofer and a colleague, eighth grade math teacher Mike Wesolowski, began discussing how to realize that goal. While their project is still in the planning stages—it lacks even a name at this point—they are clear on what they hope to accomplish. First on the agenda: subjecting the school committee and its finance subcommittee to a level of public scrutiny that they no longer expect. "We need a regular, strong, visible, and, if necessary, vocal presence at all school



SHOW OF STRENGTH Teachers and paraprofessionals in Lowell rally outside of city hall before a recent school committee meeting. Members of the United Teachers of Lowell (UTL) have been without a contract for more than two years. While the UTL has received national acclaim for its embrace of a collaborative school reform model, relations with the Lowell School Committee remain tense.

committee meetings," says Angerhofer.

A bigger picture

As in Lynn, the ultimate aim of AFT Amesbury goes beyond merely impacting individual local officials. Instead, notes Angerhofer, he and his colleagues want to redefine the common image of their union as one representing a narrow set of self interests: jobs, money and benefits. "When you start to think about who 'we' are, 'we' includes parents and members of the community. It includes our students too—'we' is anyone who cares about education in Amesbury," says Angerhofer. Most significantly, he notes, 'we' have the numbers. "When you consider how many people in our community support us and support the Amesbury schools, we are a force."

Community presence

When the Holliston Public Schools faced a budget crunch last year, local officials offered a draconian response. Kindergarten teaching aides, elementary learning aids, the hockey team, even the highly-regarded local drama program—all were on the chopping block. "They didn't try trimming the tree, they just wanted to start lopping off branches," says Matt McGuinness, a social studies teacher at Holliston High School and former president of the 260 member Holliston Federation of Teachers (HFT).

To counter the cuts the HFT joined forces with a group of local parents to become the leading advocates of a nearly \$1 million override in the metrowest town, most of which was earmarked for the schools. The override narrowly passed, but the experience, notes McGuinness, has served to transform the way the HFT relates to both parents and the larger Holliston community.

In the build up to the vote, parents and HFT members held joint organizing meetings, sent letters to the local newspaper and distributed informational fliers at school committee meetings. Meanwhile, the HFT made a conscious decision to step up its presence in the community, even reserving a table at the annual Celebrate Holliston event. "This was a way for people to walk by and see that the HFT is an important part of the civic life of the community," says McGuinness.

Take action

Looking for ways to step up your union's presence? Follow these tried-and-true tips:

Work together

Reach out to other unions and community groups in your area;

Form links

Form links to local parent groups. One example: the Holliston Federation of Teachers now sends a designated representative to meetings of the PTA;

Be a visible presence

Attend school committee meetings, budget hearings as well as local civic events;

Talk amongst yourselves

A regular newsletter, website or e-bulletin is key to making sure that everyone in the union is up-to-date and in the know;

Spread the word

Notify the press in your community when you're holding an event, have something important to say or have good news to share.

And while the threat of budget cuts and job losses may be off the table for now, the HFT has continued its efforts to forge links with parents and stronger ties to the community. When the American Federation of Teachers held a recent national day of action, the HFT decided to mark the occasion by sending thank you notes to parents. "Any parent who'd helped out in a classroom got a direct thank you from the Holliston Federation of Teachers," says McGuinness.

The union is also planning to put in a repeat appearance at the upcoming Celebrate Holliston event; teachers and paraprofessionals have signed up for hour shifts to hand out free HFT rulers and sell 50/50 raffle tickets, the proceeds of which go to pay for scholarships for local students. "It's so important for the local to have a direct linkage with the community," says McGuinness. "Don't leave it up to school administrators and the superintendent—you be that link." ■

Elections Matter

www.aft.org/election2012

Diary

of a New Teacher

By Melissa McDonald,
Fifth grade teacher,
Parthum Middle School,
Lawrence, MA

Meet the 2011-2012 New Teacher Diarists

Bill Madden-Fuoco

A humanities teacher at the Urban Science Academy in West Roxbury, Bill was also a semi-finalist in the state's 2012 Teacher of the Year contest.

Robert Tobio

Robert teaches math and special education at the Mary Lyon Pilot School in Brighton and previously taught at Monument High in South Boston, which closed last spring.

Melissa McDonald

A fifth grade teacher at the Parthum Elementary School in Lawrence, Melissa is returning to teaching after a year of maternity leave.

Joyce Melker

A paraprofessional at the Watson Elementary School in Fall River, Joyce is a student in the JET teacher training program at UMass Dartmouth.

Matthew Robinson

Matthew is beginning his second year teaching English and journalism at the Burke High School in Dorchester.

Riana Good

While Riana is technically no longer a new teacher, this Spanish teacher at the Boston Teachers Union School in Jamaica Plain says that she still feels like a 'newby.'

She's awake flashed silently across the screen of my cell phone.

Today was the second day in a row that I left for work while my kids, Jackson and Lucy, were still asleep. I've just returned to my fifth grade teaching position at Parthum Middle School after a year long maternity leave that began when my daughter Lucy was born last September. After being their primary caregiver for the last year, it's uncomfortable to think about someone else filling my shoes during the day while I am at school working with and caring for other people's children.

About six months ago I was paralyzed by the decision about whether or not to return to teaching. I bounced back and forth like a ball in a tennis match. If Jackson and Lucy were in good spirits and things were going well, I wanted to stay home forever. If they were cranky or overwhelming, I was suddenly eager to get back to the classroom. As I tried to sort out my feelings, I made multiple lists of pros and cons.

Through my sleepless nights and depressing indecision I ultimately realized that I would be a happier mom if I returned to work. I knew that I wanted to have a life somewhat separate from my home. But even after I committed to going back, I continued to doubt my decision and worry that I was wrong.

The end of the summer was surreal. We realized that having two kids in daycare would cost as much as hiring a full-time nanny, so that's what we did. We received dozens of applications and met with several people before we found the right fit. The kids liked Katelyn right away, and we knew that she was a good match for our family. I spent the final weeks of the summer



HEART STRINGS

Fifth grade teacher Melissa McDonald, pictured with daughter Lucy and son Jackson, has just returned to the classroom after a year of maternity leave. McDonald says that she agonized over the questions of whether to go back to teaching. "I ultimately realized that I would be a happier mom if I returned to work," writes McDonald.

essentially training her to take my place at the house during the day with the kids.

At first I didn't want to leave. I worried that the kids wouldn't bond with our nanny. Then I worried that they would bond with her. I had to find reasons to force myself to leave the house so that the three of them could fall into a routine without me. I needed to accept that someone else could care for my children adequately even if she might do things differently from me. I cried those first few times as I closed the front door.

As I expected, everyone survived. In fact, things went on just fine at home without me. I was the one who needed to adjust to the new routine of our life just as Jackson and Lucy needed to adjust to having someone new to care for them during the day.

After a month, heading out in the morning has finally gotten a bit easier. I still worry that Katelyn will hear Lucy's first word or see her walk for the first time while I miss these

milestones, but when I get to school in the morning, I find that I don't dwell on worrying about what Katelyn, Jackson and Lucy are doing. Oddly, it has begun to feel like I never left my classroom at Parthum. My days are fast-paced and I'm fully engaged with the kids in front of me.

That's not to say that Sunday nights aren't difficult. I know, though, that this is making me a happier mom. And as a happier mom, I think I'm doing a better job at being a mom. I'm also savoring all of the small moments I have with my kids. Jackson and Lucy are learning to rely on other people and to trust that I'll return to them in the afternoon. This is an important time for all of us.

She's awake, reads the message on my cell phone. I tuck my phone away and walk into school for another day. I'm already smiling as I think of the big hugs I'll get when I get home this afternoon. ■

Send your comments to meljmcDonald@gmail.com

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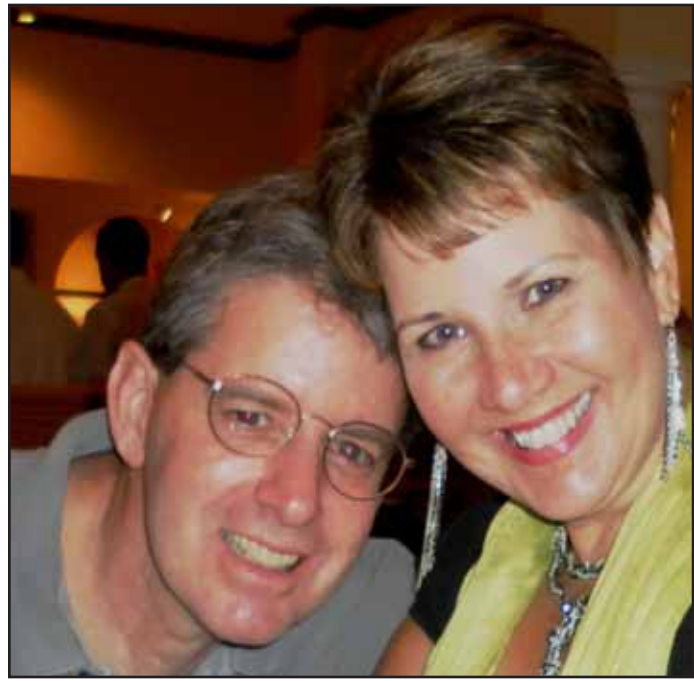
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Walter Armstrong, Field Representative

Walter Armstrong understands plenty about the economic insecurity that worries so many Americans these days. Armstrong began his career as a computer systems engineer back when e-mail was still a novelty. The world of personal computing was just beginning to take off, recalls Armstrong, and his own future seemed as bright as the booming technology sector itself. But when the company he worked for, a specialist in mini computers, suddenly collapsed in the 1990's, Armstrong found himself facing a job search—and a dilemma.

"I wanted a job that couldn't just disappear over night," says Armstrong. So he took a different path, going to work for the town of Bellingham as a public safety dispatcher, responding to emergency calls placed by local residents of the Southeastern Massachusetts community to the police and fire departments. And in addition to a new job, Armstrong quickly found himself with another brand new title: union activist.

"Up until that point I'd never been in a union," says Armstrong. "I started to understand how important a union is. As working people, it's really the only way that we can have any say in our workplace." When a co-worker encouraged him to run for vice president of the Bellingham Municipal Employees, part of the American Council of State, Federation and Municipal Employees or AFSCME, Armstrong jumped at the opportunity. He would end up serving as president of his local for nine years, representing 150 municipal employees including clerical



STEPPING UP
New AFT MA field representative Walter Armstrong, seen here with his wife Norma, transitioned from a career in technology to one in municipal public safety. Along the way he became a passionate spokesman for the importance of unions. "The union is our voice and if we don't exercise that voice we lose it."

workers, paraprofessionals, custodians and cafeteria workers. Among his proudest moments was helping to organize a group of applied behavioral assessment technicians—individuals who work with profoundly challenged youth in the school—that the town sought to reclassify as independent contractors.

For Armstrong, who grew up in Blackstone and lives there still, the transition from technology to town employee turned out to be a blessing in disguise; he discovered his true passion. In 2004 he participated in an AFSCME leadership institute where he met union leaders from across the country. "It lit a fire in me," says Armstrong. "The more I got involved, the more I wanted to learn and do." He's currently pursuing a master's degree in labor studies at UMass Amherst and is hoping to finish

next summer.

As he embarks on a new career as a field representative, Armstrong says that he's looking forward to helping the members of AFT Massachusetts much like he spent the past decade assisting Bellingham residents. "People who call 911 are usually in crisis. Union work is very similar in that it's our job to help our members at a time when they really need us. I find great satisfaction in that, and in knowing that I go to work each day to a job that allows me to try and make a difference in the lives of working people."

Armstrong says that he'll also be doing his part to convince AFT MA members to get more involved in their union—just the way his colleagues did more than a decade ago. "The union is our voice and if we don't exercise that voice we lose it." *Welcome aboard!* ■

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On Campus

Dan Georgianna, Political Director
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Hurting Future Public Employees is Bad for All

“The Commonwealth’s pension plan, hammered by anti-public worker groups as a wasteful expense, is in danger of becoming nothing more than a forced savings plan.”

It’s a sign of the times and our sensibilities that changes to the public employees retirement system recently passed by the Massachusetts State Senate don’t look too bad. The bill increases the minimum age for early retirement from 55 to 60 and the minimum age for maximum retirement benefits from 65 to 67, uses the highest five years rather than the top three years to determine pension payments, and makes a few other changes. Best of all, the changes only affect new employees, those hired after January 1, 2012, leaving retirement rules unchanged for current public employees and retirees.

After all, we’re in a recession, right? And funding the pension system for the future requires some current sacrifices, right? This may be the best we can do in an era when many private sector employees have lost their retirement benefits, right?

I felt a bit queasy with the nickel and diming, but wasn’t too upset (as one of those who are not affected by the change in the bill) until I started reading statements made by our friends, Governor Patrick and Senate President Therese Murray, in support of their bill.

On his web site, Governor Patrick had this to say about his proposal: “The provisions included in this plan ... are absolutely necessary to reinforce to the public that state government continues to be focused on their business and not on personal gain.” Is it just me or does Governor Patrick give the impression that public employees would bilk the system if it were not for his restraining hand?

Senate President Therese Murray, co-sponsor of the bill, joined Michael J. Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, in touting the importance of the Commonwealth’s bond rating over the public employees’ pension program.

Neither Governor Patrick nor Senate President Murray mentioned closing tax loopholes as a better way to balance the budget and improve the State’s bond rating.

But it’s the cost of this bill to future public employees that is the more serious problem. Pension payments by state workers have increased from



5% of annual salary in the 1970s to the current 9% with an additional 2% for annual salary over \$30,000. K-12 teachers and staff pay a full 11% of their salaries towards their pensions. Under this bill, newly hired public employees would have to pay into the system for a full five more years to receive the same benefit.

State workers’ payments to their pensions would cover an average 94% of the amount paid out to them when they retire and K-12 teachers and staff would pay over 100% of their pension costs. The Commonwealth’s pension plan, hammered by anti-public worker groups as a wasteful expense, is in danger of becoming nothing more than a forced savings plan.

The bill’s small changes in the formula make large differences in pension payout. According to the Retired State, County & Municipal Employees of Massachusetts, a new public employee who retires at age 60 with 30 years service would receive 43.5% under the new bill instead of 60% under the current formula.

Charging new public employees higher rates for the same pension benefits that all public employees receive follows the same pattern as newer public employees paying higher contributions for the same health insurance. Both are a sure way to weaken union support for the future.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Unlike Wisconsin where the assault on the rights of teachers and other public sector workers was full scale and dramatic, workers in Massachusetts are experiencing a more subtle erosion of their rights.

All for one and one for all underlies the purpose and strength of unions. It’s one of those slogans that is difficult to explain but you know it when you see it. Its opposite, all against all, is even easier to recognize as a measure of union weakness.

AFT Massachusetts is a member of the Coalition of Public Employees working to publicize the truth about public employees’ pensions and lobby against the Bill as it goes to the House of Representatives. Go to www.aftma.net for more information.

I was delighted to read Commissioner Richard Freeland of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education’s column last month on The Vision Project, an action plan to improve college attendance and completion rates. The Plan’s centerpiece is improving the readiness of high school graduates for college. We all have seen strategic plans go by the boards, but Dr. Freeland does the walk. As President of Northeastern University from 1996 to 2006, he sharply increased the number of tenure-track faculty and made Northeastern a national leader not only in cooperative education but also in integrating liberal arts studies into professional disciplines. ■

Share your comments with Dan at dgeorgianna@umassd.edu

CAMPUS UPDATE

Lucky Number

Members of the Longy Faculty Union are celebrating their lucky number—and it has nothing to do with the lottery. The union at the historic music school in Cambridge received their charter number from AFT this month. They are now officially Longy Faculty Union, Local 06484. The official designation is the latest in a momentous series of events for the new union members. Last spring they ratified their first ever collective bargaining agreement by a unanimous vote and now have a contract that provides faculty at the school with ‘just cause’ language for the first time in the school’s existence. Congratulations to the members of Local 6484!



Co-Insurance Plan Sets off Protests

A proposal to gut health insurance plans for students at UMass Amherst and UMass Dartmouth has inspired protests on both of those campuses. The plan would introduce so-called co-insurance for students who require services not available at campus health clinics. Students requiring Ob/Gyn visits, maternity services and consultations with off-campus specialists will soon be forced to pay fifteen to twenty percent of the total cost of such visits. Students at the UMass campuses argue that “co-insurance is no insurance” and that the proposal sets a dangerous precedent for all Massachusetts residents, not just students. The plan, they argue, is particularly discriminatory towards female students who could face thousands of dollars in medical bills for standard maternity services. Look for this issue to heat up on campuses across the UMass system in the coming months. For more information visit <http://massjwj.net/umass>.



Help Wanted

The search for the next UMass Amherst Chancellor is under way. The current occupant of that office, Robert C. Holub, recently announced that he will step down at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. An 18 member panel will conduct a national search for the new head. The help wanted sign is also up at UMass Dartmouth where Chancellor Jean MacCormack, who has led that school since 1999, recently announced that she plans to leave at the end of the academic year. Also stepping down: UMass Dartmouth provost, Anthony Garro. A search for replacements for both positions is expected to begin soon.

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Retiree Corner

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

Changes In Store for Savings Bonds

Most of us have purchased US Savings Bonds either to give as a gift or to use as a vehicle for savings. As of December 31, 2011 you will no longer be able to purchase these bonds from a bank or financial institution.

Beginning January 1, 2012 you will have to establish a TreasuryDirect (all one word) non-interest account. You will put whatever amount you want into this account and when you want to purchase a Savings Bond the cost of the bond will be withdrawn from your account. There are no fees to open this account nor for purchasing the bonds. The other way to pay for the purchase of bonds is through a debit from your bank account. Paper bonds will no longer be issued after that date. All new bonds will be issued electronically. It is estimated that this will result in a savings of over \$70 million in the first five years of the program between printing, mailing and processing costs. You will still be able to cash bonds at banks and other financial institutions after the January date.

The question about reissuing paper bonds that you currently own also arises. The website from which I clarified this information makes it sound as though they will only be issued in paper if they are reissued because they were lost, stolen or destroyed. Checking with the US Savings Bonds

headquarters, I was told they would be reissued in paper due to death, to change a co-owner or beneficiary, or to put a second name on the bond. They said the issuing of electronic bonds applies to initial purchases made after the January date. Do not delay, however, if you have some to reissue in case this changes in the future.

Paper bonds will be issued after January only if one purchases an inflation-protected Series I bond with a tax refund when you file your federal taxes. The amount cannot exceed \$5,000.

Remember, if you have a bond reissued and change the primary owner, except in the case of a death, taxes must be paid on the interest that the bond has accrued to that date. To change a second name on the bond or add a name, taxes on the interest is deferred until the bond is cashed and paid by the person cashing the bond. There is no Massachusetts state tax on the interest earned from US Savings Bonds.

Another change that will begin in January is the amount you can spend on bonds in a given year. You cannot purchase more than \$5,000 each in EE Bonds and I Bonds. Until November, I Bonds are paying 4.6% interest, but there is a penalty if one cashes them within five years.

Another bit of information for those of you who have bonds that you have not looked at for a while: make sure your bonds have not gone past the final maturity date that is 30 years from the date of issuance. If you have not paid the interest yearly that the bond has made (which most do not) then the interest must be paid at the time the bond is cashed but reported on the tax return no later than the year of final maturity. Thus, if you have bonds that exceed that date, not only are they not gaining interest, but may open the door for a possible tax penalty and /or fine for you. If you are within three years of when the bond reached full maturity you can amend the federal tax return for the year the interest should have been reported. If beyond three years, the sooner you cash it in and report the interest the better to avoid making the penalty more severe.

So if you are one who likes to give bonds as gifts but do not like the idea of electronic bonds and want the paper ones, then make your purchases before the end of this year. As one who grew up during World War II when we prided ourselves in helping with the war effort by purchasing Victory Bonds, as they were called then, I worry that this new move by the government may discourage people from supporting their country by buying bonds. ■

SENIOR SEMINARS

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

This popular seminar, given by elder law attorney Mary Howie, looks at many issues involving probate, trusts, Medicare Trusts, Benefits for veterans and their spouses and much more.

Offered on two dates:

Saturday October 29, 10 to noon
Saturday December 3, 10 to noon

Where Presidential Park, 314 Main Street, Unit 105, Wilmington, MA (Main St. is Rt. 38. The entrance to the park is across from the Wilmington House of Pizza sign.)

Preparing for Retirement

Currently scheduled for the following locations:

- Butler School, 1140 Gorham St., Lowell, MA Oct. 13, 4-6p.m.
- Beverly Northshore Education Consortium, 112 Sohier Road. Tuesday October 18, 3:30-5:30
- Rockport Elementary School Library, 34 Jerdens Lane, Thursday October 20, 3:15-5:15

Attention teachers: if you would like one of the above free seminars presented in your school district, ask your union president to contact Marie Ardito.

All the above seminars are free. To register call Marie Ardito at 1-617-482-1568 or e-mail mardito@retireesunited.org. Make sure to specify which seminar you plan to attend and the number of individuals who will be attending.

The Golden Apple

By Matt Robinson, English Language Arts, journalism and boxing instructor at the Jeremiah E. Burke High School, Boston, MA

I have never been particularly aggressive. Frankly, I have also never been much of a natural athlete. Even so, when I first met Ron Aurit, I was willing to put my trust and a good deal of my academic and personal life in his hands.

I first met Ron while a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania. I was taking a freshman English seminar on one end of campus. One day, one of my classmates approached me and asked if I liked boxing. "Yeah," I replied, not all that enthusiastically, as I had only tried my hands in the ring a few times at camp. Encouraged, he invited me to check out a boxing class that was held on the other end of campus on Thursday nights. So eschewing "Seinfeld" I put on my shorts and sneakers and made the trek.

As soon as I met Ron, I knew he was something special. Physically, he was a short, somewhat stocky, and apparently far from "fighting form" guy with short white hair and an easy smile. As I got to know this veteran

Following a Mentor 'Into the Ring'

teacher, mentor and coach, however, I came to see what a deep and complete person he was and all that he had to offer me and the thousands of students he taught.

From that first class, I felt completely safe taking on this activity that, admittedly, leads many to injury and even death. The way he worked with the students, pushing everyone to work harder while being sure to pair people up according to ability so nobody felt dumb or unable to keep up made me want to work for him and for the class he had been teaching as an unrecognized campus activity for 20 years. After a few months of dedicated attendance and practice, I was named captain of the team and made it my mission to get official recognition for Ron and for the club. After a year and a half that included meetings with everyone from student council to the president of the university, the goal was reached and Ron and I celebrated by getting ourselves some varsity boxing jackets. It is one of my most prized possessions and I still wear it every so often, always proudly.

Another way in which Ron has inspired me and allowed me to inspire others is as the founder of the Boxing Scholarship Foundation, Inc., for which I serve as New England chairman. As I have seen so many of the young people

around my current school fall to gangs and drugs, being able to inspire them to use their bodies and minds to get into college and make something of their lives has been a wonderful and rewarding experience. And I could not have done that without Ron either.

I will never forget Ron walking all the way across campus backwards as he filmed me marching to graduation. Every time one of the members of the security detail advised him that no guests were allowed, Ron would smile and reply "It's okay" and keep on going. With Ron, everything was "okay"—even facing the threat of facial rearrangement. He exuded and elicited a calm confidence that allowed everyone to learn, grow and have fun. It is this style of supportive instruction I have tried to emulate as a Big Brother, a mentor, a tutor and a teacher.

Now that I am teaching boxing at the Burke, I hope to realize it even more fully and authentically. We will face challenges—it is a challenging community. But, with Ron's guidance and support and that of my colleagues and the school system, I am sure that I can bring the same discipline, desire, and dedication to my students that Ron has brought to his for over 30 years.

Thanks, Ron, for getting me in the ring and ready to work 'til the bell. ■



INTO THE RING New teacher Matt Robinson with his mentor, Ron Aurit. Robinson met Aurit while a student himself and now seeks to emulate his mentor's model of supportive instruction, both as a teacher and as the boxing instructor at Boston's Burke High School.

The “Murkland Miracle”

Continued from cover

While the school’s success may make it exceptional—the Murkland was designated the top performing Level 4 school in the state—the course charted by faculty and administrators here contains important lessons for anyone seeking to turnaround a struggling school. And what faculty and staff like to call the “Murkland Miracle” also adds a significant contribution to the education reform debate. The gains realized at the school didn’t come from arbitrarily firing educators, forcing them to reapply for their jobs or work additional hours without compensation. Instead, administrators, teachers and their union worked to create a model of shared responsibility and accountability that has paid off for educators and students alike.

“This is what it looks like when a school embraces teacher-centered education reform,” says Paul Georges, president of the United Teachers of Lowell. “We had an outstanding process and it has resulted in fantastic gains in student achievement.”

Changing a culture

The surge in MCAS scores at the Murkland reflects student growth during the last year, but the turnaround process at the school actually began three years ago. Morale was low and teachers complained of a culture that undermined them as professionals. And while educators were all too aware that their students were struggling, their ability to respond to the students’

needs was often constrained by grant requirements that had little to do with what was happening in the classroom. Recalls Rachel Slipp, a mathematics coach at the Murkland: “Teachers should be able to make decisions based on what the kids in front of them need, and we weren’t able to do that.”

The Murkland also had to overcome a pervasive culture of negativity that had taken root at the school. The Acre, where the school is located, has been home to waves of newly arriving immigrants over the years with the result that more than half of the students in each grade are English language learners, while 75 percent of students at the Murkland are on free and reduced lunch. Notes Jason DiCarlo, who came on as principal at the start of the turnaround process: “There was a feeling here that ‘we’re the poorest school in the city and there’s nothing we can do about that.’ We’ve really tried to focus our energy on what we can change.” The Murkland even has a mantra to express that view: ‘look in the mirror, not out the window.’ “The first question we ask now is ‘what do we have the power to change?’” explains literacy specialist Rebecca Hyde. “If you’re only focused on what you can’t do, you just end up spinning your wheels.”

A culture of trust

In place of the former dysfunction and negativity now exists a culture of shared responsibility, say teachers at the Murkland. The redesign process included, from the very beginning, administrators, educators as well as representatives from the United Teachers of Lowell. Teachers and paraprofessionals who were involved in the process of determining the shape of new improved Murkland didn’t just submit their ideas but were given the additional responsibility of taking key information back to their colleagues. A process that originally involved a handful of educators soon doubled and has now grown to include the majority of Murkland staff. Second grade ELL teacher Kathleen Drinan wasn’t part of the initial redesign plan but has since signed on, in part because she hopes to continue the momentum that the Murkland has clearly demonstrated. “We want to see the change and be part of the change,” says Drinan.

Trust and vulnerability

What does the shift in culture mean for the women and men who work at the Murkland? Teachers here say that the change can be summed up in a single word: trust. “The staff firmly believes that we’re going to succeed,” says Rachel Slipp. “We’re all focused on the same goals and if we don’t know how to reach them right away it’s something that we can figure out together.”

For administrators at the Murkland, admitting that they don’t have all of the answers has been key to transforming the school’s culture.



TEAM CHANGE Staff at the Murkland Elementary School in Lowell, where student achievement has soared. Teachers, administrators and union representatives began working together three years ago to turn the school around. This year, the Murkland was the top Level 4 school in the state.

Principal DiCarlo makes a habit of co-teaching with his staff members as a way of determining the best way to reach the students at the Murkland—and is the first to admit when his efforts fall short. “We have the vision and we know what we want to do but putting it into action is the hardest part,” says DiCarlo. “It’s important

United Teachers of Lowell.

Collaboration works

Teachers and staff at the Murkland insist that theirs is a model that can potentially be replicated at any struggling school—if the right ingredients are in place. One essential element: strong, committed leadership

“We want to see the change and be part of the change.”
—Kathleen Drinan, second grade ELL teacher,
Charlotte M. Murkland Elementary School, Lowell

that administrators admit that they don’t know everything.”

‘Our students’

The Murkland’s redesign has also involved a deep restructuring of the way that teaching and learning take place. This too has been a team enterprise, with the emphasis at the school shifting away from individual classrooms—not to mention the test scores of individual teachers—and towards a shared responsibility for all of the Murkland’s students. “Before, we used to think in terms of ‘my students,’ but that’s really changed,” says Rebecca Hyde. “Now we talk about ‘our students’ and we’re all playing some part in helping them achieve.” Teachers now work in teams, both across and within grades, so as to better respond to the needs of their students. They start by assessing student data, everything from MCAS scores to classroom performance to anecdotal indicators like attendance, then work together to determine how best to reach the students who need additional help. The teams are backed up by literacy and math coaches who are able to provide differentiated assistance based on what students—and their teachers—need.

Professional development is also sacrosanct at the Murkland. But unlike the traditional model in which outside experts are brought in for a few hours, here the teachers themselves are encouraged to become the experts. Ask a Murkland teacher—any Murkland teacher—about his or her classroom practice and you’re likely to hear plenty about the latest research on effective teaching. “We’ve embraced a model that says that teachers are leaders but they’re also learners,” explains Kate McLaughlin, a math coach at Lowell’s Bailey and Lincoln schools as well as vice president of the

at every level. The Lowell Public Schools, under the leadership of both the former superintendent, Chris Scott, and the present chief, Jean Franco, have demonstrated a deep commitment to labor/management collaboration. At a time when the very debate about how best to improve public schools seems mired in union bashing, education leaders in Lowell have set a much different tone. Says the UTL’s Georges: “The success at the Murkland is more proof that collaboration really works. This is a different way of doing school reform that is grounded in a deep respect for the work that educators do every day in their classrooms.”

Future focused

At the Murkland these days, the focus has already shifted towards the future and how to build upon and expand the progress that was reflected in the recent MCAS scores. A new writing component has recently been added to the curriculum and teachers are also seeking to spend more time working their students on non-MCAS subjects like science and social studies. Whatever the specific focus is, though, educators here say that they’ll approach it with the same philosophy that has buoyed them through the past three years. “We’re going to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of our students,” says reading intervention specialist Kathy Beauvais. “We’ll rise to the occasion.” ■

AFT Massachusetts congratulates the staff and faculty at the Murkland—and at all of the Level 4 schools that made great gains this year. Keep up the great work!

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