

# Education Matters

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## The Hope and Promise of Charter Schools

By Tracey Bailey

A science teacher knows from firsthand experience the freedom and flexibility teachers need to help students succeed.

**A**s an A.P. physics, A.P. biology and chemistry teacher, I always wanted to bring my love of science, engineering, and construction into the classroom. This often involved laboratory projects, high-tech demonstrations, and homemade science apparatus strung throughout my classroom. It was a way for me to make the science come alive and give students a visible and tangible demonstration of the principles they were studying.

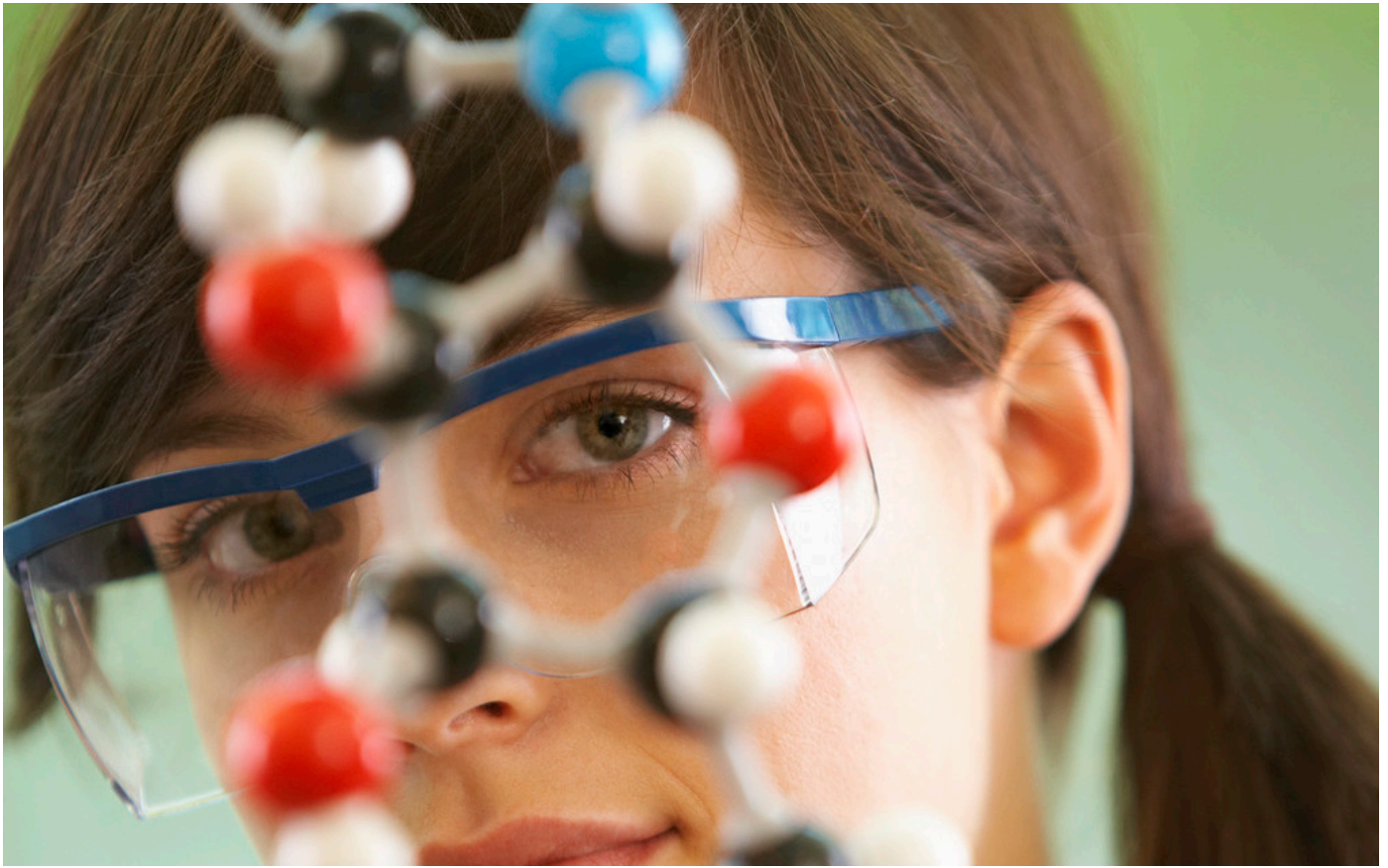
These projects and demonstrations were usually “equipment intensive,” and my classroom often resembled a mad scientist’s lab. We had so many different high-level science projects going on simultaneously, it was thrilling for both me and my students. We performed DNA fingerprinting and gel electrophoresis, at first using student-made equipment and modified power supplies. We conducted real research on amazing topics like DNA mutations, making superconductors, and even triggering real lightning strikes in a joint project with NASA. The list of projects went on and on.

For just a normal day of lectures, demonstrations, and proj-

ects, I might spend hours the night before setting up equipment or running cables from the ceiling to achieve the effect I wanted in the demonstration the following day. I will admit I often found myself making last-minute tactical decisions that I was convinced were best for the students and for teaching the concept, but I couldn’t always get the advanced permission of my administrators. After all, I certainly couldn’t call them at 11 PM when I discovered a better way to run the demonstration, could I?

For example, after several attempts at navigating the bureaucracy to simply order unusual equipment or attach lightweight cables to the ceiling to study pendulum motion, I found out that it was sometimes easier to just “ask for forgiveness, rather than permission.”





### Unsticking the Red Tape

Is it any wonder, after hearing about public charter schools and the promise of greater freedom and flexibility from red tape and bureaucracy, that I embraced that promise and those possibilities? I remember thinking, “Do you mean that I wouldn’t have to wait until next year to purchase additional textbooks that would benefit my students right now? Really? You mean, I could order and receive supplies and equipment faster and less expensively than going through the purchase order nightmare of the school district? Really?”

These issues may seem minor, but fighting through red tape, bureaucracy, and multiple levels of approval made it much more difficult to implement what I wanted to do as an instructor. It literally added hours to what should have been quick and easy decisions. Many teachers give up and simply choose to “go with the flow,” sacrificing some of their best ideas and their best teaching projects simply because it becomes too difficult to do something different or “fight the system.” The lack of support for creative ideas, delays in getting approval, purchasing issues, or other problems with logistics and operational issues can be stifling for innovative teachers.

Many educators will tell you that these issues are significant and represent a huge drain on the time and creativity of some of our most dedicated teachers. The support these teachers receive (or lack thereof) is directly related to how far they can go in creating that “magical learning environment” in the classroom.

Well, the teachers, students, and administrators I was working with must have been doing something right in my situation because during my second year of working in this collaborative

approach, my advanced placement students passed their AP exams in record numbers. We even had some classes in which 100 percent of the students earned college credit.

In Science Research classes, our students won first place in 11 out of 13 categories in our local science fair. A few years later, largely due to the innovation, creativity, and hard work of my students and the support of my administrators, I was selected as the State Teacher of the Year in Florida. A year later, I was chosen as National Teacher of the Year.

I appreciate the fact that my administrators realized we needed a little more flexibility and a little more support than the average classroom for materials, supplies, and equipment. This allowed our dreams and academic goals—both the students’ and mine—to run further than what we would have ever been able to do otherwise.

Logistical support, purchasing, and operational issues are huge areas for educators, even if most teachers don’t realize it. In some respects, teachers are just like the military. As the old saying goes: “More wars are won by supplies and logistics than have ever been won by combat strategy alone.” Anything that takes time or resources away from teaching in the classroom hurts us as educators and it hurts student achievement. Anything that helps us maximize our time, energy, resources, and efficiency in the classroom helps the students and maximizes learning. Public charter schools should be able to cultivate this environment and take advantage of it more than a traditional public school with more rigid, inflexible procedures.

Examples of the benefits of this freedom and flexibility abound in the charter school community. I remember being mesmerized

when I first heard Principal Yvonne Chen talk about the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, a previously failing traditional public school that was transformed through the financial and operational flexibility provided by its conversion to public charter school status.

In one classic example of creative problem-solving, the school actually purchased some old, run-down crack houses that were located at the end of the school property because their proximity to campus was causing safety concerns and problems for the school environment. Vaughn not only improved the school environment and the surroundings but also turned these houses into classrooms and learning centers. How cool is that? How many traditional public schools could just make that kind of decision and then immediately implement it? A large part of what makes charter schools successful is their ability to act immediately on what is best for their students, teachers, and communities.

Vaughn made many operational changes from its previous traditional public school model. These changes increased the ef-

**I am always amazed at how many public charter school successes simply involve different, more efficient, and more creative ways of doing things with money, facilities, purchasing, and other areas of operations and logistics.**

iciency of their school, fostered greater academic achievement, and made it more attractive in many ways to students and parents alike. They created partnerships with medical professionals and the Los Angeles Department of Health to offer immunizations and basic health care right on-site, in order to increase student health and family convenience. They even gave small jobs to many of the local parents to achieve greater parental involvement and increase the socioeconomic level of the community.

I am always amazed at how many public charter school successes simply involve different, more efficient, and more creative ways of doing things with money, facilities, purchasing, and other areas of operations and logistics.

Charter school principals and business administrators aren't the only ones making these decisions and innovations; teachers are often asked to contribute as well. In addition to giving their all in the classroom, charter school teachers need to know there are actions—in addition to great teaching—that they can take to help guarantee the success of their school and thereby ensure it has the resources it needs.

Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Los Angeles



In my experience, most charter school administrators are very willing to accept suggestions for improving operations or saving time or money. Money lost through inefficiency, or otherwise needlessly wasted, is funding that could instead be directed to the classroom. Charters thrive on this collaborative, problem-solving effort.

Public charter schools enable teachers to effectively take ownership in the learning program, and in the overall school itself, to a greater degree than traditional public schools. Even in the areas of community outreach, student enrollment, and teacher recruitment and retention, charter school teachers can play an important and direct role. Who better to act as an advocate and recruiter for their school than the teachers who can explain the benefits, the school climate, the innovations, and the academic success of their charter school?

This is all part of the “Hope and Promise of Charter Schools”—that charter school teachers would have greater freedom to focus on teaching and greater flexibility in the time, tools, and resources they use. ■



*Tracey Bailey is a former Florida State Teacher of the Year and the 1993 National Teacher of the Year. While working for the Florida Department of Education, he helped oversee the creation of many of Florida's first charter schools. His insight and vision for education have helped inspire teachers and education leaders across the nation. He currently serves as director of education policy for the Association of American Educators, the country's*

*fastest growing nonunion teacher association. For more information, please contact [info@aaeteachers.org](mailto:info@aaeteachers.org).*

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# natives and pioneers

By Jill Newell

## Digital Education for Students and Teachers



**I** find myself in a constant state of being a student regarding technology in education. It's exciting; it keeps me on the edge of my seat; it keeps me humble because there is much to learn. Yes, there is much that I bring to the digital education stage from my current pedagogical expertise but there is still quite a bit to learn to catch up to the iGeneration.

I want to delve into what current students seem to naturally understand and intrinsically seek. For example, a recent study by the University of Minnesota finds that technology use among students via social networking sites contains many educational elements. Christine Greenhow, the study's principal investigator, reports:

What we found was that students using social networking sites are actually practicing the kinds of twenty-first-century skills we want them to develop to be successful today.... Students are...practicing safe and responsible use of information and technology. The Web offers tremendous educational potential.

A visionary, yet practical document, "Digital Learning Now," released by the Foundation for Excellence in Education, points out how natural it should be for technology and its transformative effects to permeate schools as it has the rest of society, but clearly there is a holdup:

Technology has transformed the way we live, work, and play. We can communicate across oceans and conti-

nents within seconds.... We can work remotely, even in planes, without losing productivity and often increasing it...[Information is] accessible at a moment's notice through the Internet.

Yet, our school system remains, by and large, the same as it was fifty years ago. The overwhelming majority of students attend a brick and mortar school for a set number of hours on a set number of days based primarily on an agrarian calendar. Students sit at desks and consume content in textbooks that may already be outdated.

The necessity for a disruptive innovation in education is evident. Digital learning is proving to be a key, if not *the* key, to significantly retooling the old style of learning and individualizing students' educational playlists in order to maximize their output and learning.

Many resisting improvement have interpreted the call for digitalization of learning as an attack on educators. It is nothing of the sort. It is a call for us, as educators, to examine our own training, to desert ineffective pedagogy, and to begin the implementation of practices and tools that speak to the interests and motivations of our students; in other words, technology-driven curriculum and pedagogy. "Digital Learning Now" points out that:

Technology has the power and scalability to customize education so each and every student learns in his or her



own style at his or her own pace, which maximizes the chances for success in school. It offers teachers an effective way to overcome challenges and better educate students of all learning needs.

It is essential to embrace digital learning. Teaching will change dramatically in the next five to ten years and that change will come technologically. This move is not a fad.

We are not digital natives, but we are digital education pioneers. We are the first generation of teachers to have such an opportunity to drastically change the way the world learns. Let's be courageous in embracing the fact that we are going where most teachers have not gone. As we do, we will know that we are part of an education innovation that is bringing American education into the twenty-first century. ■



*Jill Newell is the director of professional development at the Association of American Educators. She taught English at the secondary level in suburban Utah and inner-city Southern California. Currently, she teaches Spanish at Northern Virginia Community College to fulfill her desire to be in the classroom with students.*

## Effective digital learning is student-centric

1. **Student Eligibility:** All students are digital learners.
2. **Student Access:** All students have access to high quality digital content and online courses.
3. **Personalized Learning:** All students can customize their education using digital content through an approved provider.
4. **Advancement:** Students progress based on demonstrated competency.
5. **Content:** Digital content, instructional materials and online and blending learning courses are high quality.
6. **Instruction:** Digital instruction and teachers are high quality.
7. **Providers:** All students have access to multiple high quality providers.
8. **Assessment and Accountability:** Student learning is the metric for evaluating the quality of content and instruction.
9. **Funding:** Funding creates incentives for performance, options, and innovation.
10. **Delivery:** Infrastructure supports digital learning.

*Source "10 Elements of Effective Digital Learning."*



## News from Washington, D.C. Reports from AAE's Office in the Nation's Capital

# Secretary Duncan's Call to Action on No Child Left Behind

By Alexandra Schroeck

As the Obama administration counts down toward the summer deadline to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is preparing to grant states regulatory relief from key provisions of the federal school accountability law in exchange for what he calls, "commitments to key reforms." While Duncan gave few details about what "relief" would actually entail, key congressional insiders warn that without action, Secretary Duncan could issue blanket waivers to states with no resolutions in sight.

Even though the administration has not issued exact requirements regarding the "reform for relief" trade-offs, the Department of Education has proposed options including giving states the ability to focus on student gains rather than absolute test scores via current growth models and the granting of more flexibility in the spending of Title I money designated for disadvantaged students.

### A Shift in Tone

Secretary Duncan's "relief" indicates a shift in tone. However, he claims he is not stepping away from accountability in schools. "We want to have a framework that, if we do give flexibility, [does not leave] nothing in its place," said Carmel Martin the Department's assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy development.

Senator Tom Harkin, who chairs the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, called Secretary Duncan's revised strategy "premature," saying, "The best way to fix problems in existing laws is to pass a better one. We

are making good progress toward introducing a bill...given the bipartisan commitment in Congress to fixing NCLB, it seems premature at this point to take steps outside the legislative process that would address NCLB's problems in a temporary and piecemeal way."

### Waivers or Policy Changes?

Stakeholders cite that Secretary Duncan must make a distinction between whether relief will be granted through waivers or blanket regulations.

"The U.S. Department of Education must provide clear policy decisions, not case-by-case waivers," said Mary Broderick, the president of the National School Boards Association. The Washington-based Education Trust also commented that any relief must motivate states to make progress in boosting achievement of disadvantaged students. "While we believe target waivers in exchange for real movement on those issues is a good thing, regulatory relief would fit squarely in the 'cop-out' category," said Education Trust President Kati Haycock.

AAE Executive Director Gary Beckner echoed the opinions of Education Trust and the reform-oriented organization Chiefs for Change who warn a blanket waiver will derail progress toward an ultimate solution for the nation's school children. "There is no quick fix to the problems faced by No Child Left Behind and a blanket waiver has the potential to halt meaningful progress toward creating a system that has worked in part for schools, teachers, and students. AAE supports a timely approach to reauthorization that promotes flexibility first. Clearly a one-size-fits-all system does not work. While waivers may be necessary in cer-

tain rare circumstances, blanket waivers would erode overall accountability within school systems and potentially block student opportunity and outcomes."

While experts argue the merits of blanket waivers, all parties agree that something needs to be done. In the last few months, states like Kansas and Arkansas have asked the Department of Education for formal waivers of the 2014 deadline, citing regulation struggles. While these waivers were originally denied by the Department, with no action, the original requests could certainly be revisited.

In conjunction with Secretary Duncan's reform for relief warnings and proposals, Chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce Congressman John Kline issued his ideas via a Politico opinion editorial posted yesterday calling for increased flexibility and a reduced focus on Inside the Beltway mandates.

With all sides calling for action, it will only be a matter of time before progress is made on No Child Left Behind. The question still remains whether or not it will come in a timely manner before the Obama administration takes it into their hands. ■



*Alexandra Schroeck is AAE's Manager of Communications and Legislative Affairs. She has served in a communications capacity for a Washington, D.C.-based trade association and on Capitol Hill for the then ranking member*

*of the House Congressional Committee on Education and the Workforce.*

## Winning Coach Brings His Game to KANA AE

New Kansas AAE executive director brings his championship drive to a new challenge

Garry Sigle, the new executive director of the Kansas Association of American Educators, knows what it takes to win. He comes to the Kansas Association of American Educators after a thirty-three year teaching and coaching career at Riley County High School, Riley, Kansas.

At Riley County High School, Garry was the head girls and boys cross country and track and field coach. His teams won a total of twelve state championships—seven in girls cross-country, three in boys cross-country, and one each in girls and boys track and field. In addition to coaching, Garry taught wood-working and drafting, and was awarded the 1998 Walmart Area Teacher of the Year.

“AAE represents who I am as an individual and as a teacher,” says Garry. “I look forward to sharing with more educators about the benefits of being a KANA AE member.”

He is a 1978 graduate of Fort Hays State University where he was a five-time NAIA All-American in cross-country and track and field. In 2010, Garry was inducted into the Tiger Sports Hall of Fame.

### Developing Champions

At Riley County High School, he coached seventeen individual state champions in cross-country and fifty-six individual state champions in track and field. Garry finished his track and field coaching career with a streak of seventeen consecutive years with at least one individual state champion. Garry earned Kansas Coaches Association Coach of the Year three times, twice in girls cross-country (1992 and 2009) and once in girls track and field (1998).

He was also the Midwest Region Girls Track and Field Coach of the Year in 1999, and the Girls Cross-Country Coach of the Year in 2010. Garry also served as the president of the Kansas Cross-Country and Track and Field Coaches Association from 1996 to 2004.

For twenty-nine years, Garry was the huddle coach for the Riley County Fellowship of Christian Athletes and was honored in April 2011 by being inducted into the Kansas Fellowship of Christian Athletes Coaches Hall of Fame.



### Advocating for Teachers

Garry has been a member of the Association of American Educators for fifteen years. In 2008, he was the chairperson of the Riley County Educators, a local teacher organization, which successfully voted to decertify from the Kansas NEA. The Riley County Educators then became the recognized bargaining unit for the Riley County teachers. He accepted a position on the Kansas AAE's board of directors in April 2010, and became the Executive Director of KANA AE in June 2011.

“We have to have a two-pronged approach for expansion in Kansas,”

Garry says in looking forward to his new role with KANA AE. “We must reach current teachers so they are aware of KANA AE as a much-preferred option, and we must reach out to student teachers so they see us as the preferred choice for professional liability coverage.”

Garry and his wife, Linda, have been married for thirty-four years and have three sons and three grandchildren. ■

*Garry is based in Manhattan, Kansas, and can be reached at [gsigle@kanaae.org](mailto:gsigle@kanaae.org). KANA AE's new address is P.O. Box 1433, Manhattan, KS 66505-1433.*



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www.aeteachers.org; (800) 704-7799  
E-mail: info@aeteachers.org  
Gary Beckner, Managing Editor  
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