

Education Matters

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BURNOUT

By Pam Clifton

How to prevent the career-ending epidemic many teachers face

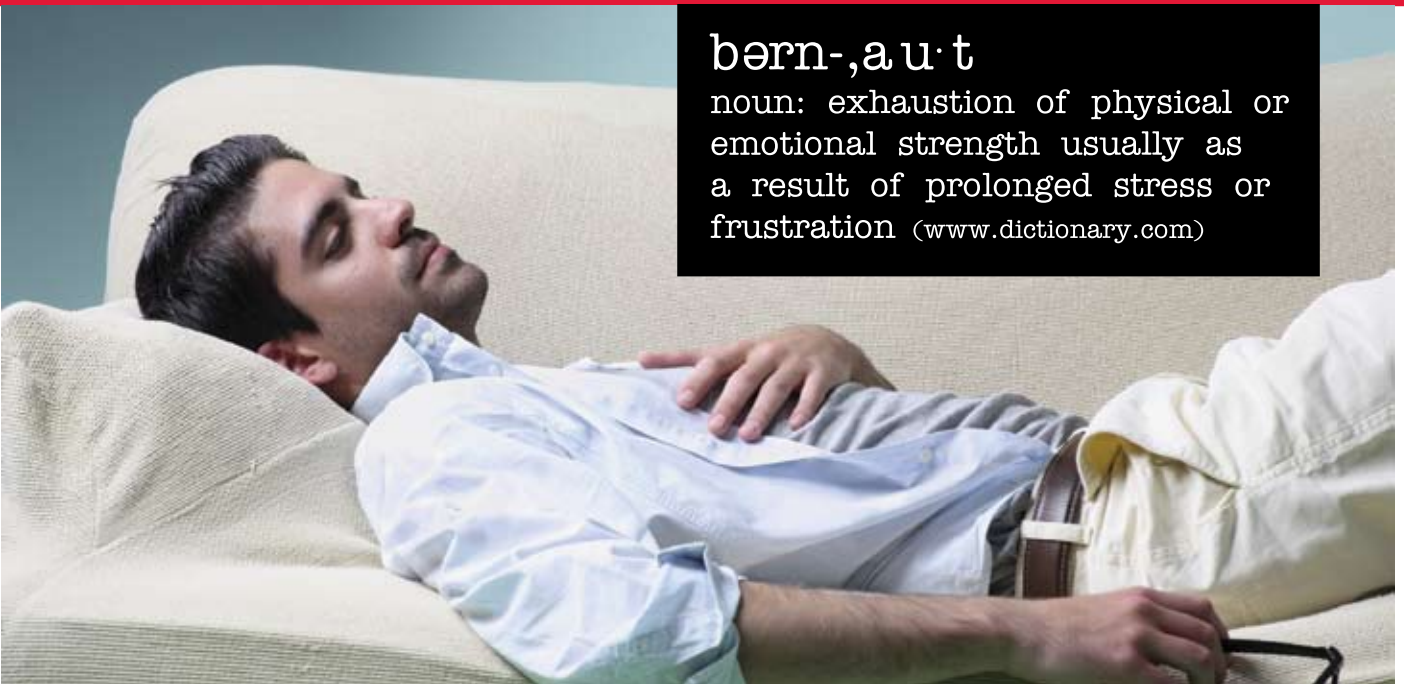
It's 7:15 in the morning when you discover one of the tires on your car is low. You meant to check that yesterday when you first spotted it, but your after-school tutoring took longer than expected. Luckily, you are able to switch vehicles with your spouse, who is leaving later, only to realize the car's fuel light is on. Fingers crossed, you rush to work, hoping not to run out of gas. Then you remember your before-school bus duty, plus the fact that you needed to make a few copies for the morning's lesson. The day is not starting out great.

Once at school and bus duty is complete, it's time to start with your students. When you try to turn on your projector for the interactive white board, you discover the bulb is out. You scramble to pull your lesson together by writing examples on the board instead — only to be interrupted by a fire drill. When you finally make it to your planning period and collapse in your chair, you receive a phone call from a student's mother who is quite upset that she hadn't been informed about the zero her student received on a recent assignment. Then you remember that you'll be at a curriculum meeting tomorrow so you need to get materials ready for your substitute. You glance at the clock. It's not even lunch time.

Avoiding teacher burnout can be a difficult task to accomplish. However, with careful attention to themselves, teachers can work to prevent this disastrous slide toward burnout.

burn-, a u · t

noun: exhaustion of physical or emotional strength usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration (www.dictionary.com)



Days Like These

This scenario is all too common for educators who are expected to juggle a mountain of tasks, from writing and executing creative and technologically laden lessons; keeping up with curriculum and grade- and course-level expectations; staying caught up with grading; maintaining a colorful and inviting classroom with ever-changing displays of students' work; communicating with parents; tutoring; sponsoring clubs, coaching, and other after-school activities; updating a Web page and newsletter; and more.

This scenario clearly explains why many teachers leave education, too burned out to even consider returning. But what can one do? It's not realistic to believe situations like these will not happen. Instead, educators can take steps to ensure survival even during the roughest times.

Putting Yourself First

West St. Francois Co. R-4 Band Director Bernard Laiben knows firsthand about surviving difficult times. In his sixteenth year as a Missouri educator, he was burned out. Although he loved music, his life was consumed by it. His passion had turned into an overwhelming workload. He was teaching band students in grades 6-12, preparing to host a band festival, serving as president of two music organizations, playing in an evening band, directing a community band, and more. He barely had time to think about anything other than music.

It all came screeching to a halt one Sunday in 2006. Laiben suffered a burst blood vessel in his head. He spent the next two weeks recovering from the stroke and the summer recuperating and taking therapy to regain the use of his right side. He missed the remainder of that school year.

"By the end of my sixteenth year, right before my stroke," Laiben admits, "I was totally and completely burned out." He liked his job, but he was ready for a change. The seven-hour routine of school had become a chore. His passion for teaching had now turned into a job. He blames the burnout primarily on his excessive band activities and lack of rest — too much of a good thing.

"I would be in the classroom and see the groundskeeper ride by on the riding mower and wish that was me!"

That stroke was the "reset" for Laiben's body and attitude. "I came out of it that summer feeling as if I needed to prove to myself and everyone else that I could still do my job." That summer he cleaned the band room from wall to wall, ceiling to floor. Afterward, he went to the principal and scheduled a fall patriotic concert, which has since become tradition. Laiben worked hard in therapy to straighten up his limp, weak right arm, and correct his crooked mouth and slur.

"I didn't want to return that fall with my students thinking I was damaged goods." Laiben says he saw his experience as a fresh start to the second half of his career as a band director. Simply put, he was alive, healthy, and had a great job that he cherished.

When Laiben now hears co-workers mention being burned out, he cheerfully replies, "Have a stroke! It worked for me!" He knows he was lucky to have fully recovered and returned to work. "I am alive to tell the story!"

Laiben, now in his twenty-second year of education, no longer juggles quite as many band activities. He takes things one at a time to avoid becoming overwhelmed when looking ahead. "Think of it as stopping at depots along the way, one step at a time." His suggestion is to become involved with activities unrelated to one's occupation. Before his stroke, Laiben was "all band, band, band." Now he studies genealogy and belongs to a Civil War group. He also cautions educators to "be good to your body ... you only have one body, so treat it well."

Keeping things in perspective is also necessary. "Yes, our job as teachers is incredibly important, but if you don't take care of yourself, who will?" He suggests that teachers only do what they can do and not to stress over uncontrollable details. "Do your best. That's all you can do."

Blue Springs R-4 first-grade teacher Allison Spencer agrees that teachers must keep things in perspective or they will quickly become overwhelmed. In her ninth year of teaching, she, too, felt the need to be rejuvenated. "It was because I felt stagnant in

my teaching and needed a change.” Spencer says she works hard to prevent this feeling by learning the latest research and best practices, and then using what she’s learned to help her students be more successful.

She admits that she has felt the need for a drastic change to be re-energized more than once. When this happens, she switches grade levels. After teaching third grade for three years, she changed to fifth grade and then later to middle school.

When Spencer feels tired and burned out, it’s often because her personal life is not balanced with her school life.

“That’s when I step back and realize there needs to be a healthy balance because I cannot spend every waking moment eating, breathing, and thinking about school.” Devoting time to her husband, family, church, friends, and exercise is important so she’s not drained. “Those things need to be present in my life to prevent burnout.” She admits that it’s easier said than done, but there will always be many things that need to be done. Prioritizing the most important things first helps.

New Faces, New Ideas

Family and Consumer Science teacher Teresa Sedgwick has also been in a rut like Laiben, Spencer, and many others. The Ste. Genevieve Co. R-2 Middle School teacher conquered her burnout by working with a younger teacher. The younger woman’s energy, new ideas, and information were infectious. “It made me feel young again.” Sedgwick tries to catch some of her co-workers’ enthusiasm and fresh approaches to teaching during lunch duty, supervising a dance, or even at the copier. “I listen to them share excitedly about all of their firsts, and I cannot help but get excited to go out and find something new or reinvent a great lesson by adding a new twist.” She also seeks ideas from the high school FACS teacher who is tech savvy, offers innovative ideas, and has “a new way to look at things.”

Sedgwick focuses much of her energy on her sixth graders, who are like little sponges and will try anything. “Their energy and excitement are contagious.” She needs to stay connected with her students, especially when she feels herself going through the everyday motions of teaching. “You have to decide whether you are having some ‘me’ time because when all you do is work, it doesn’t take long to dig yourself into a rut.”

Reviving Your Enthusiasm

Avoiding teacher burnout can be a difficult task to accomplish. However, with careful attention to themselves, teachers can work to prevent this disastrous slide toward burnout. Instead of thinking about teaching as a big, continuous track of frustration, adopt Bernard Laiben’s strategy and view the everyday difficulties as depots along the way, one step at a time. ■



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REFRESHING YOUR SPIRIT

- At least one day each week, leave after school instead of working late.
- Do something physically relaxing (massage, manicure, pedicure).
- Get some rest. Don’t feel like this is time wasted. A nap can be replenishing!
- Take care of your body. Keep healthy snacks in your classroom and car. When you feel stressed and want to eat, choose something good for you. Your body will feel the difference.
- Turn a hobby into a passion. Find something you truly love. Give yourself permission to enjoy it guilt-free.
- Surround yourself with positive, supportive people.
- Spend time with friends and family. Make time to go to dinner, talk on the phone, go on a weekend trip, or host a get-together “just because.”
- Take an online course to learn new techniques for your class. Look at something in a new and different way.
- Apply to become a STARR (Select Teachers As Regional Resources) teacher (see www.dese.mo.gov).
- Seek a fellowship or other learning opportunities.
- When you encounter gossip, don’t join in. Remove yourself from the negative situation. You’ll be less stressed and relieved because you did.
- Find solutions for your complaints. You’ll feel much more productive.
- Set a goal to complete a certain number of items on your to-do list. If you get more done, great. If not, add those things to the next day’s list.
- Celebrate your accomplishments. Find the positive in at least one thing a day.





PARENTS WHO LITIGATE

A Growing Trend

How to protect yourself against parents and administrators

By Sharon L. Nelson, Esq.

Johnny is ten years old and violent.

He picks on other students, he steals, and he hits you when you try to discipline him. You spend a good portion of each day trying to keep Johnny in line. While you have conversations with co-workers about your difficulties with Johnny, you are simply too busy to document any of his behavior and hope to simply make it through the school year knowing that next year Johnny will be someone else's problem.

One day Johnny is particularly difficult and spends a good portion of the morning out of his seat. After constant verbal directives go ignored, you employ a classroom control technique accepted across the nation: you guide Johnny to his seat. Johnny is compliant and you breathe a sigh of relief as your classroom order is restored. Johnny is on task for the remainder of the day and as students file out you feel relief that you survived the day. You think nothing more of the incident and begin to review lesson plans for the following day.

Twenty-five minutes later, your principal summons you to his office, where Johnny's mother and grandmother are present. Your principal asks you to sit and then asks Johnny's mother if she would like to address you directly. She does and you listen in disbelief as she begins to detail Johnny's allegations that you pushed him, squeezed his shoulder, and injured him so badly he won't stop crying.

You are understandably upset and explain that you simply helped guide

Johnny to his seat. Johnny's mother and grandmother explode about you "putting your hands on Johnny" and storm out of the room promising a lawsuit.

Turning to your principal you expect support and empathy. Instead you get a Notice of Investigation meeting and are asked to remain home until contacted further about the incident. You are asked to provide all documentation of Johnny's behavioral problem. When you explain that you have none, your principal refuses to discuss the matter any further with you and cares not at all that in eleven years of teaching you have absolutely no complaints on file.

A week goes by and you hear nothing from your administration. Your calls and emails about status go unanswered. A week and half later you are served with a lawsuit by Johnny's parents. Your school is also named in the litigation. This apparently jars your administration into action and you are summoned to your principal's office the next day where you are summarily dismissed.

"After all," your principal says, "given that the school has also been sued it must be made clear that inappropriate touching of students is strictly forbidden." With that, you see your long career take a tailspin. Your license is on the line.

While the situation detailed above is fictional, the increase in litigation against teachers across the country is all too real. Today's teachers are expected to perform their job duties without displeasing liti-

gious families or failing to meet performance standards that bring schools added funding. When dealing with difficult students like Johnny, this becomes an almost insurmountable task.

While there is nothing you can do to ensure that you will never be sued, there are a number of things you can do to protect yourself in a situation similar to the one detailed above.

1 Document, document, document. If a lawsuit against you proceeds to trial, judges and jurors believe evidence they can see more than things they hear. Your documentation can also go a long way towards getting rid of a lawsuit in its early stages and most certainly can help protect you in your job. While you may still be placed on leave pending investigation, it will be much harder for administration to toss you aside in favor of its own protection during litigation.

In the hypothetical situation with Johnny, the teacher failed to document anything about his performance problems despite the fact that they occurred daily. Your documentation should be dated and factual. You should refrain entirely from any personal attacks or thoughts. Simply state each incident, a summary of the incident, and any action you took. A sample of appropriate documentation could look something like:

1/15/11 — Johnny hit Susie.

During language arts today I observed Johnny become angry with Susie and

Administrators



hit her shoulder with his closed right fist. Susie began to cry. I immediately admonished Johnny and told him that we do not hit. I asked Johnny to show me a better way he could have told Susie he was angry. Johnny responded that he could have used his words. Johnny apologized to Susie. Because this incident impacted our school no-tolerance policy regarding violence, I sent Johnny to the principal's office. Johnny returned approximately 10 minutes later stating the principal said the situation was resolved.

1/17/11 — Johnny threw his work on the floor and refused to follow instruction.

During math skills Johnny took his classroom paperwork and threw it on the floor by his desk. When I instructed him to pick up his work and follow along, he refused. I stopped the class for approximately 3 minutes and waited for Johnny to comply. Finally Johnny picked up his paperwork and began to work with the class.

Keep your documentation for at least three years as most states have a 2-to-3 year statute of limitations.

2 Follow school policy always—no exceptions! Nearly 100 percent of schools now have a no-tolerance policy when it comes to violence. Most policies allow teachers to direct a student to leave the classroom. Whatever your policy states, you must become familiar with that policy and follow it exactly. This forecloses any arguments in the future that you should be found liable in a lawsuit simply because you failed to follow policy.

3 Keep your administration in the loop. Not every single piece of your documentation needs to be forwarded to your administration but definitely keep your administration apprised of major incidents. This will help empower your administration if a situation with parents escalates. It also shows your ongoing effort to work professionally and cooperatively with your administration.

4 In some instances you may also want to involve the parents but make sure you never discuss problem children with problem parents without a witness. This will often involve a judgment call on your part. Parents who are litigious are notoriously difficult to deal with, and often times your attempts to meet with those parents could backfire. Evaluate the situation in which you find yourself carefully and if you believe it would help to discuss behavioral issues with the parents, make sure you have an aide, co-worker, or member of your administration present.

5 Make sure you have the proper protection. Liability insurance is an absolute requirement today, and don't let your administration lull you into thinking you can ride on the school's insurance coat tails. You cannot place a dollar amount on peace of mind. Lawsuits are stressful enough. Imagine what you would feel like if you had no one in your corner, no insurance, and had to rely on an administration that fired you to make

it look better. As a member of AAE, you are afforded comprehensive and guaranteed personal liability insurance and legal assistance since your policy is written in your name as the insured.

While teaching presently has more litigation issues, most teachers enjoy a long and rewarding career. Although you face many challenges teachers who came before you never faced, one thing always remains a constant: your profession is the most vital to the future of our nation. As educator Ivan Welton Fitzwater aptly declared, "The future of the world is in my classroom today. I must be vigilant every day, lest I lose one fragile opportunity to improve tomorrow." ■



Sharon Nelson is the director of legal services for the Association of American Educators. The primary focus of Ms. Nelson's fifteen years of legal experience involves labor/employment law. Ms. Nelson has experience in state

court proceedings, including administrative hearings for SIIS and unemployment compensation, and has litigated numerous cases in both state and federal court.



For more information, visit
www.aateachers.org/benefits.



Action, action, we want action

A plan for technology professional development

By Dr. Janine C.M. Allen

While many of us have heard the cheerful phrase “action, action, we want action” during a sporting event, it’s not surprising that teachers share this sentiment. After all, teachers are often the biggest student advocates. As a teacher, when I set out to do my own action research, it was imperative that I find something that worked for the T.E.A.M. (Together Everyone Achieves More) that included the students, teachers, and the administration. Action research is a great way to foster a collaborative investigation of district practices while empowering teachers and identifying ways to improve academic achievement.

The need for focus

With today’s ongoing budget cuts and staffing challenges, districts must use care when looking to integrate technology into the classroom. Probably the most important aspects to consider are the climate, culture, and context of the district. In oth-

er words, what are the district’s specific needs as opposed to what may be working in other schools with different dynamics?

Filled with passion and an unwavering desire to build a stronger network of tech-savvy educators, I conducted an action-research study in a district in northern New Jersey. The study revealed that while teachers’ and principals’ attitudes toward technology integration varied, so did the level of understanding about what teachers and principals needed in order to carry out the technology vision and successfully uphold the mission of the district. The beauty of this study is that several recommended practices were already in place, as identified over the three years of working with the administration and building staff.

Strengthening the program

While the technology-related professional development (TRPD) that was taking place in the district provided benefits for some, there were areas to be addressed. The district needed to increase teacher participation in the planning process and incorporate their feedback consistently, develop and implement a needs assessment to gather data to inform and improve the program by differentiating the TRPD, and ensure that adequate follow-up and job-embedded training become part of an ongoing process that aligns with the dis-

trict technology vision statement. Most importantly, because of the audience, the district needed to be mindful of an approach that incorporated TRPD training strategies focused on adult learning styles (andragogy) for both teachers’ and principals’ needs.

Developing the plan

After looking at the current and projected progress, data, and best practices for districts with similar populations and challenges, a data-informed plan resulted from the study. The areas of concentration were planning, implementation, and follow-up support. To improve technology integration, thereby improving the quality of education and the incorporation of twenty-first century skills into classroom instruction and participation, the district would focus on the following goals over a three-year period with appropriate modifications along the way:

1. Increasing teacher involvement in the planning and evaluation process
2. Adding appropriate best recommended practices based on need
3. Differentiating the training to provide relevant content and training methods
4. Providing adequate follow-up training and support
5. Incorporating instructional training strategies to support adult learners
6. Training building principals allowing them to serve as a support system for teachers

As an educator, this experience provided a personal and heartfelt experience related to this quote, “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I may not remember. Involve me and I will understand.” ■



Dr. Janine C. M. Allen is an AAE member. She graduated from the College of Saint Elizabeth with an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Saint Peter’s College with an M.A. in Education, Administration and Supervision.

In her eight years of teaching, she has served as a technology coordinator and elementary teacher.



Find Funds for Classroom Projects

While most educators often foot the bill for classroom projects and supplies, a new blog called *Penniless Teacher* provides a one-stop-shop for classroom teachers seeking easy funding opportunities via current listings of teacher scholarships and grants, teacher contests, and teacher giveaways.

Why spend your hard-earned dollars on classroom supplies or projects when there are countless opportunities to receive the funding from educational companies, associations, and nonprofits? *Penniless Teacher* does the work for you in scouring the Web for the latest teacher offers. A few minutes on their blog could save you hundreds and give you new and exciting ideas.

Penniless Teacher recently highlighted AAE's own 2012 Spring National Scholarship and Grant contest. Don't forget to mark your calendar for the March 1, 2012, deadline. Apply online today!

Teachers Shun NEA Membership and Plan for "Local Only" Teacher Association

In December, at the invitation of local teacher union leaders in a rural Washington school district, Northwest Professional Educators (NWPE) Executive Director Cindy Omlin presented the advantages of establishing a "local only" teacher association that is not affiliated with the NEA and its state affiliate, the WEA. She also outlined the benefits of partnering with NWPE for nonbargaining support services, such as liability insurance and legal services.

The staff enthusiastically embraced the "local only" representation model with three-quarters of the staff resigning their WEA/NEA membership and joining NWPE. The teachers plan to initiate a vote to decertify the WEA/NEA as their bargaining representative and replace it with a "local only" teacher association. If they succeed, they will become the third Washington state staff, following St. John and Sprague, to implement this effective and cost-saving model of teacher representation.

"When teachers take a hard look at what affiliation with Big Labor has done for them, many are discovering pretty thin outcomes," Omlin explains. Becky Seitz, former president of one of two Racine County, Wisconsin, teacher unions to recently disband, stated, "In the thirty-some years we were part of the [American Federation of Teachers union], we never had to use their services. There were never any grievances that warranted that." Teachers found it unnecessary to keep paying monthly dues of about \$50 when they weren't using union services. "We really—and I'm going to be honest—never really got much out of it," said Seitz. "We've always had a good relationship with our administrators and our board."

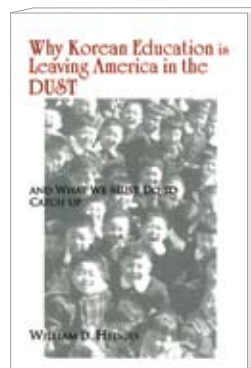
Source—www.nwpe.org



Why Korean Education is Leaving America in the Dust

Every once in a blue moon a book comes along about education reform that stands above the rest. This is one of those books!

Why Korean Education is Leaving America in the Dust...and What We Must Do to Catch Up, by William D. Hedges, sets forth a no-holds-barred plan for systemic reform of America's public elementary schools. By the author's own admission, his book is likely to offend nearly every reader in some respect. For instance, he is critical of the stranglehold unions have had on the system, the short workday and year of our teachers as compared to other



nations, the "ignorance of state and federal legislators" and their treatment of education as a political football. However, if you are a serious reform-minded leader who is searching for a forthright blueprint for improving our schools, order a copy today.

With forty-four years of experience in the field of education, Dr. Hedges is one of a handful of teachers who alternated public school teaching with university teaching in order to "stay in the real world." Recipient of a Fulbright, he has taught in elementary, middle, and senior high, and served as a high school principal and curriculum coordinator.

Dr. Hedges puts his money where his mouth is. He and his wife have donated nearly two million dollars to the University of Florida in a charitable remainder unitrust for research to help marginal children. He says their

motivation is their "concern as other nations continue to forge past us."

A retired physics and math teacher, he worked with and observed public school teachers and principals in South Korea for three years, which informed his research for this book. He states flatly that "money is not the primary criterion for school achievement." Korean schools are "superbly equipped and yet they still spend less money per child than we."

Available at www.xlibras.com.
Contact Dr. Hedges at Wmdhedges@yahoo.com.



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AAE Grant Award Recipients in Kansas

AAE's National Scholarship and Grant contest deadline is March 1, 2012.

Apply online today!

Garry Sigle, Executive Director of Kansas Association of American Educators (KANAEE), presented awards to teachers around the state.



▶ Ryan Noel, (on the left) — a 4th-grade teacher at Blue Rapids Elementary school, Blue Rapids, Kansas. He was awarded a Classroom Grant to purchase an iPad2 that students will use for research. His lesson plan includes the students using the iPad to help in constructing a simple circuit and creating a video of their work.



▶ Debbie Duncan — a special education instructor at Jefferson West Elementary School, Meridan, Kansas. She was awarded a Classroom Grant to purchase an iPad2 to be used with her Downs Syndrome and other learning disability students. She had attended a workshop on using technology for these students, had borrowed an iPad2 earlier in the year, and was amazed at how motivated the students became.



▶ Janet Kriley — an elementary school counselor at Rock Hills Elementary School, Mankato, Kansas. She was awarded a Classroom Grant to supplement her character education program at her school. She is planning to expand the school's recycling program and will also purchase small gifts for their adopt-a-grandparent program.

▶ David Rebant — a mathematics instructor at Horton High School, Horton, Kansas. He was awarded a Classroom Grant to purchase an iPad2 that he will use in conjunction with his smart board. David will allow students to use the iPad2 from their desks to work on problems that will be displayed on the smart board. Additionally, the iPad2 will allow him to teach from all points of the room without being tied to one location.

