

# EDUCATION MATTERS

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation

By Janine CM Allen, Ed.D.

## Transformations:

*The process of changing the external form or inner nature of someone or something; changing the condition, nature, function, or personality of.*

**W**hat's interesting about transformations is that they are taking place over the course of the school year, over summer vacation, and sometimes daily.

If asked to identify one student in your class who had breakthrough transformation this past school year, you could identify him or her. So I ask, what will be your steps toward a transformation over the summer that will serve as a catalyst for positive change in your approach to this upcoming school year?

Will your transformation include integrating more technology into your classroom instruction during school hours, flipping your classroom to provide a deeper understanding of core content subject material while empowering students by having them more engaged outside the classroom



via online lessons? Or, how about collaborating with your peers in your building PLCs? Maybe you'll go back to school and improve your skill set by earning your master's or doctorate degree.

Being a teacher can be like being a gardener: you are responsible for the successful growth of the seeds sown. If you've ever gardened you know that challenges arise, such as climate, soil, slow growth, weeds, healthy plants and some that don't do well as we had hoped. Now, take this lens and apply it to your classroom or school building if you are an administrator. What do you see? Where can you assist in the transformation of your "garden"?



At the AAE Leadership Conference, educators discovered new ideas, met new people, and experienced metanoias that sparked paradigm shifts amongst a group of like-minded people who came to the table with creative minds and powerful energy. Real-life scenarios were shared and discussed, and tools and strategies were presented about how to look beneath the "icebergs" in our districts.

An "iceberg," a term coined by Peter Senge in his book *Schools That Learn*, which has since been articulated by many others including John Kotter, author of *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, relates to systems thinking. When presented with events in a school district, we have to be mindful of the patterns and trends, systemic structures, and mental models that come together to create what can appear to be an insurmountable obstacle, a detriment to the very mission set forth to increase academic achievement. But with knowledge and understanding, we can change and succeed under any conditions.

One of the most powerful elements that make change or transformation so difficult is our mindset or mental models. Often, our values, beliefs, and attitudes have existed for so long that we think it is almost impossible to change. However, small changes can become big!

Try these four steps toward change (adapted from *Our Iceberg Is Melting*):

## Set the Stage

Identify the need for change and create a sense of urgency. This is the Why.

Look for PLU, People Like Us (or YOU until you find at least one more). This guiding team will be powerful in guiding the change movement. Look for leaders, strong and effective communicators, incredible individuals who possess analytical skills. This is the Who.

## Decide What to Do

Collectively, look in the rear view mirror at the past and decide how the horizon will be different in the future. Develop a vision and strategy to push forward. Strive to make the change a reality. This is the What.

## Make it Happen

Include others, especially those who seem skeptical because as you share information, you can create "buy in." Be clear in your explanation when sharing the benefits to others. When reaching out, be sure to empower others as a strategy to remove the existing barriers so the vision remains in the foreground. Never lose sight of the people, the vision, the journey, and the destination. Make it a reality!

Along the way, be sure to recognize the short-term wins. A little encouragement at a defining moment goes a very long way. Reflect upon your own journey and you will understand. Persevere even harder when you think you are losing ground. Remember, make the vision a reality. This is the When.

## Make it Stick

Nurture the new culture that you and your guiding team have created. The seeds you have sown will always need a watchful eye and a caring heart to improve the lives of others. Finally, your efforts will take root and replace old, debilitating traditions. Be proud to have succeeded.

In the words of Ghandi, "Be the change you want to see in the world." ■



**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.



## AAE Legal Services Department Receives Praise from Members

Professional members are united in praising the legal services provided by the Association of American Educators. Remember, AAE members enjoy a \$2,000,000 individual liability insurance policy and employment rights coverage with their membership. This superior coverage provides members with guaranteed access to legal counsel at the onset of workplace issues. Here's what members have to say about the AAE Legal Services Department:

"Thank you for all your help with your legal services. I am not sure how I could have survived emotionally without all your help from AAE professionals."

—Judy, Mitchell, SD

"Once again, thank you for your help. Your great service is just one more example of a very fine organization."

—Maureen, Greenleaf, ID

"Thank you for the insight, information, and counsel that you gave me. God bless you and your practice. Together you are a serious team!"

—Becky, Magnolia, OH

"Thank you. I appreciate all you do."

—Patricia, Boise, ID

"Thank you, once again, for your valuable guidance and support on this issue. I intend to re-up my AAE membership and communicate to other teachers what a great alternative it is to AFT membership."

—Scott, Dulce, NM

"Just wanted to take a moment to tell you 'Thank You' for your help with my legal situation. Since AAE has come into my world, things seem to be a great deal better."

—Patti, Cabot, AR

"Thank you, this is excellent advice. I appreciate your prompt and professional attention to this matter."

—Wendy, Glendale, AZ

"This is so awesome—thank you very much."

—Barbara, NJ

"I want to thank all of you for being so supportive and encouraging through this legal situation. I truly believe that it is because of all your wisdom, insight, and experience that I was able to make it through this challenge successfully."

—Joe, Olathe, KS

"Just spoke with Ellen Cole, Sharon Nelson's paralegal (AAE's legal services dept)—just to pass the word on what a GREAT job they are doing and how THANKFUL I am to be a member of this awesome organization!"

—Rhonda, Deltona, FL

AAE is proud to provide our members with excellent legal services during their times of need. We hope that our member benefits give educators peace of mind so that they can put their focus back on their students. For just \$15 a month, AAE provides members with monetary relief if they are found liable for damages in legal proceedings arising out of duties as an employee of an education entity. This policy also pays defense costs and the liability coverage necessary to defend members. To learn more about the legal services and other benefits that members enjoy as part of their policy, visit [aaeteachers.org/benefits](http://aaeteachers.org/benefits). ■

# Robots Rev Up Results: Gifted Programs Broaden Students' Perspective

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**O**n Jean Meyer's most recent student trip, her students were agape to find themselves standing next to Chicago skyscrapers.

"I want them to see there's more than Versailles," she says. "There's a whole world out there and you can do whatever you want and be whatever you want."

Meyer directs the gifted program at Morgan Co. R-2, in Versailles. She works with students in grades K-12, providing challenging instruction, stimulation and a supportive space where her students can flex their academic superpowers. Even though her students are intelligent, gifted students are also considered to be a high-risk category.



"They are at risk in the fact that they excel, they also become perfectionists and they don't want to ever do less than what's expected of them," Meyer says. "Their expectations are much higher because they're in gifted."

Some gifted programs focus

on accelerated curriculum, but at Versailles, it's about helping students build critical-thinking and problem-solving skills to reach their potentials. Students are selected based on teacher recommendations, Missouri Assessment Program performance, Special Approach to Gifted Education (SAGE) screening and IQ testing.

At the elementary level, Meyer provides enrichment that might not be found in regular classrooms. Her students are in constant motion as they run Lego robots around a course set up on her classroom floor. Getting the robot around the course requires continuous tweaking of various settings, making for many trips between the course and the computers. Instead of being deterred when the robots get thwarted, her students become energized as they come closer to solving the puzzle.

After the robots have been put away for the day, the class still flexes its brain muscles by playing games like Othello and other brain stimulators.

The students are engaged and upbeat, but there's another side to gifted students, though, that makes Meyer's job a pertinent one.

"Gifted students also tend to be very disorganized and they need someone to keep on top of whether or not they're turning in assignments," Meyer says. "They also put things off. They're procrastinators. That's part of their make up. I'm here to keep them on track, especially in high school."

Meyer and others in the gifted-education community are concerned

about the future of programs like hers.

In 2006, the Missouri legislature discontinued gifted funding as its own budget line item. Instead, \$24.8 million for gifted programming was incorporated into the foundation formula. Since then, 23 districts no longer report having a gifted program to the state, an 8-percent drop over five school years.

Gifted education in Missouri started in 1974, with seven school districts and 1,465 students, according to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Programs peaked in the 2001-02 school year with 333 districts reporting programs to DESE. In the 2006-07 school year, the year state funding was folded into the foundation formula, 291 districts reported programs, serving 40,670 students. The number of districts reporting programs has dropped to 268, although the number of students participating is similar to the 2006 level, with 40,931. School districts might not offer official gifted programs, but they are allowed to count students in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs as gifted, which might explain the increase in student numbers, says Michele Clark, spokeswoman for DESE.

The number of teachers working in gifted programs also began dropping steadily after 2001, from 933 to 760 in the 2008-09 school year. DESE has not tracked teachers working in gifted programs since that year.



“The challenge with gifted students is not that they have a hard time learning, it's that they have a hard time remaining stimulated.”

Support is important for gifted students as they might feel isolated in regular classrooms. Often times, gifted students think differently than their peers, says Nancy Gerardy, who coordinates gifted education for the University of Missouri College of Education. She's also a retired teacher from Columbia 93 and former president of the Gifted Association of Missouri.

“Many times their interests and passions are beyond that of their grade level peers or more intense,” Gerardy says. “Typical third-grade or fourth-grade students approach curriculum as ‘what does my teacher want me to do?’ The gifted child may question that assignment. [They'll say] ‘I can already see the answer, why do I have to do these problems?’”

The challenge with gifted students is not that they have a hard time learning, it's that they have a hard time remaining stimulated. Students who need more stimulation but don't get it are at a higher risk of dropping out, Gerardy says.

“Many people feel that if the students are bright, they don't need anything special,” Gerardy says. “If they're not challenged and appropriately taught, if the curriculum is not differentiated for them in rigor and depth and pace, they're simply not going to succeed as they should be able to succeed.”

Gerardy doesn't believe that gifted programs have decreased due to a lack of popularity, but because districts face tight budgets and have to make tough choices. Clark, of DESE, agrees.

“From our point of view it's nearly always been an economic decision, rather than an instructional one,” Clark says.

Gifted services at smaller districts, though, are thought to be more likely at risk, though, Gerardy and Meyer say. Larger districts are more likely to have parental pressure to keep gifted programs, but smaller districts are unlikely to have that level of parental support. Students in small, rural districts might also have fewer opportunities for enrichment, as their areas might lack the museums, universities or other cultural resources available to students in city or suburban school districts.

Parents in Meyer's district, where 66 percent of students are on free- and reduce-price lunch, are less likely to have gone to college themselves and might not be as aware of what it will take for their children to get into college.

“I think cutting funding for gifted education will in the long term hurt our economy,” Meyer says. “Those kids are going to go on and be the physicists and those upper level people in business in years to come, but they need our support to get there.”

With strong guidance and support from teachers like Meyer, gifted students can reach from Versailles and beyond. ■



**Rachel Webb** is a Associate Editor for the Missouri State Teachers Association in Columbia, Missouri.



## “Withitness”: Being Aware of What’s Going on in the Classroom

In the battle of classroom management versus teacher sanity, it is imperative that every teacher makes use of his inherent sense of awareness. While these self-examining “superpowers” aren’t exactly the powers of the Incredible Hulk or Spiderman, they are powerful enough to manage the classroom on the most hectic of days. This suite of abilities is what educators refer to as “withitness.”

While most teachers are excellent multi-taskers, the best teachers are “withit.” “Withitness” is the art of running a classroom while **having eyes in the back of your head**. It’s that creepy moment during the math lecture that you realize that Johnny is misbehaving, so, to let the class know that you’re aware of what’s going on, you continue writing on the chalkboard and say, “Johnny, stop blowing spit bubbles.” Much to the shock of the classroom,

your withit superpower is having eyeballs in the back of your head. Johnny stops blowing spit bubbles and everyone goes back to being attentive, well-behaved students.

The art of withitness is broader than just having eyes in the back of your head. A teacher who is withit is also able to **see into the future**. Using this superpower properly, the teacher knows when Johnny is going to start disrupting class by blowing spit bubbles. This gives the teacher the opportunity to diffuse the situation before it even happens. Prevention, after all, is better than a cure.

Remember, with great power comes great responsibility, so **withit teachers use their superpowers for good**, not evil. With-it teachers are effective because they are aware of every aspect of the classroom at all times, including the students who are being good. Withit teachers might draw attention to a student who is being good so as to create a ripple effect of good behavior in the classroom. If you catch one student being good, then other students will want to be caught being good, too.

Withit teachers are also **just** teachers. They are withit because they know who is operating as the instigator of good behavior and who is operating as the instigator of bad

behavior. Just like Batman knows who is causing trouble in Gotham City, a withit teacher who is causing trouble in the classroom because he has been observing the dynamic of the classroom. A withit teacher is just, and does not accidentally punish/reward the wrong student.

While there is justice in correcting the behavior of the appropriate student, there is also justice in correction at the appropriate **time**. For example, a student with an emotional behavioral disorder who has just had a tantrum might need to have his behavior modified after a cooldown period in private to prevent further outbursts. A withit teacher has the superpower of knowing his students well enough to know how and when particular students will respond to correction.

Finally, one of the most powerful superpowers a withit teacher has is the famous **teacher look**. Every teacher has a signature look that sends a nonverbal cue to students that they need to modify their behavior or that they are doing a good job. The teacher look isn't a regular feature in the classroom; it is used as needed so that it doesn't lose its potency. It's amazing how much power a teacher can exercise over a class by just smiling or raising an eyebrow.

All teachers have superpowers, but some teachers are more withit than others as it concerns proper application of his superpowers. Knowing yourself and your students is the best way to start being an educator who is withit. ■

## Member Mention: Wyoming Teacher Purchases Musical Instruments with AAE Foundation Grant

**M**s. Sonja Brue, an elementary music teacher at Wagonwheel Elementary School in Gillette, Wyoming, was awarded an AAE Foundation classroom grant to purchase musical instruments for her students. With the funding, Ms. Brue purchased four tenor recorders and a bass recorder so that she could start a recorder club at her elementary school.

Ms. Brue highlighted in her application to the AAE Foundation that she is excited to start a recorder club at Wagonwheel Elementary because of the unique opportunity that students have to develop their music literacy skills. Ms. Brue noted that a group like the recorder club at her school "is not offered in any other city in the state."

In addition to offering recorder activities for students, the recorder club in a "Parent University" class allows students and their parents to engage in recorder activities together. Once Ms. Brue gets the recorder club off the ground, she plans to have students in the recorder club perform in the community.

Congratulations to Ms. Brue for her excellence in teaching and for her commitment to strengthening music education in her community!

AAEF teacher scholarships and classroom grants are competitive awards available to all educators. Apply online at [aaeteachers.org/awards](http://aaeteachers.org/awards) to receive a classroom grant or scholarship for professional development or classroom materials. Be sure to mark your calendar for the fall deadline of October 1, 2012. ■





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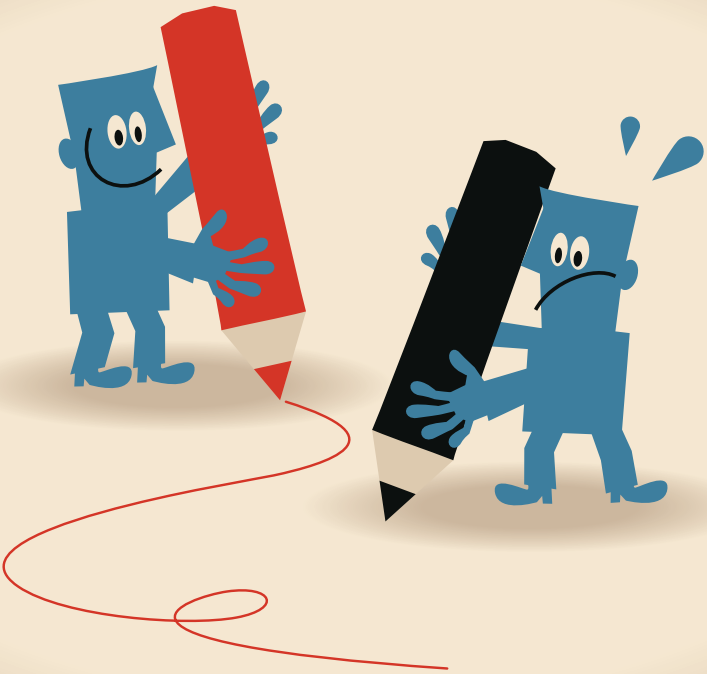
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## You Speak Out: Write for AAE!

Do you have strong opinions about an education policy issue? Are you implementing a new program in your classroom, school, or district that you would like to share with your fellow members? Write an article for the Association of American Educators!

AAE is constantly looking for new material to share in *Education Matters* or on the AAE blog. We would love to hear from real classroom teachers and members interested in sharing their experiences. Whether you are interested in class size, teacher choice, education reform, cutting-edge curriculum, or anything in between, don't hesitate to contact AAE's editorial staff. Email AAE today at [Editor@aaeteachers.org](mailto:Editor@aaeteachers.org) with your articles or ideas.

