



Thankful for the Power of All of Us

By Michele Linch

Opportunities to be thankful are often the result of action and hard work. Recently, AAE's Arkansas chapter, the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA), identified a need and took action that has ensured all Arkansas educators will be equitably represented and able to lead policy direction in their districts, regardless of their association or union membership. Arkansas educators once excluded from a district's policy table because they were not members of a union will now have a seat at the table, following changes to our state's Personnel Policy Committee (PPC) law. This is a win for all educators.

It was deeply troubling to ASTA-AAE that there were still school districts where teachers and staff who chose

"Arkansas educators once excluded from a district's policy table because they were not members of a union will now have a seat at the table, following changes to our state's Personnel Policy Committee (PPC) law."

Expanded 16-page
**SEASON OF THANKS
ISSUE**

“The power of “All of Us” is beneficial for a district in terms of culture, community, and valuing all perspectives. This rectification will empower more educator voices, provide more teacher input, promote healthier collaboration, and—as a result—produce better results for students.”



not to join the union did not have a representative voice. The Arkansas PPC law requires districts to allow 100 percent of certified staff to vote by secret ballot so that all have a say in who represents them at the district’s policy table. A PPC can require at least one or more representatives from each school, depending on the size of the district, affording a more representative set of teacher voices reflecting the needs of the entire district. By law, any policy addition or change must be reviewed and voted on by the PPC before going to a board vote, a PPC must be given a place on all school board meeting agendas, and the PPC is the only entity in addition to the superintendent and school board that can introduce new policy. However, if a district had a collective bargaining agreement with a teachers union, the district could not have a PPC, essentially marginalizing all nonunion school district employees and even some union members.

After an inquiry regarding union membership numbers, Fort Smith School District, one of the last two districts without a PPC, revealed that union membership had fallen well below fifty-percent—lower than thirty-three percent. After ASTA’s request, the district also learned previous district administration had not asked the union

for membership numbers in over ten years, union membership had been on a continuous membership decline, and the union had not held the required majority for more than a decade. Attorneys for the district determined the collective bargaining agreement to be invalid, thereby creating a liable situation for the district that quickly moved to unrecognize the collective bargaining arrangement and establish a more representative unit. For the first time since 1970, all staff at Fort Smith Public Schools will have a voice at the policy table in their district.

Most recently, teachers gained a PPC in Little Rock School District with the district being returned to local control.

To ensure no Arkansas district ever goes without a PPC, ASTA supported a proposal to require all districts to have a PPC.

ASTA member, AAE Advocacy Fellow, and LRSD teacher Lydia Dillon makes the case, “District personnel policies affect all teachers, and not having a representative or transparency has marginalized almost half of LRSD non-administrative employees. As a right to work state, employees have choices on whether to join a union or professional association. However, the association choices we make shouldn’t preclude teachers from being included in policy decisions.” We couldn’t agree more and are thankful district leadership and state policymakers realize the importance of elevating the teacher voice.

The power of “All of Us” is beneficial for a district in terms of culture, community, and valuing all perspectives. This rectification will empower more educator voices, provide more teacher input, promote healthier collaboration, and—as a result—produce better results for students. ■



Dr. Michele Ballentine-Linch served in education as a science teacher for over twenty years and is now the executive director of ASTA—the Arkansas state chapter of AAE. After her career as a teacher, Dr. Linch pursued a doctorate at the University of Arkansas where she became the director of the Arkansas Leadership Academy’s Teacher Leader Institute—a post she held for more than ten years.

Thankful for the Educators Who Shaped Us

The end of the year is a time to reflect on the many people who impact our lives. Educators are almost always at the top of that list. In the spirit of the season, we asked some of our friends to share their thoughts about a very special educator (or two or three!) in their lives. I am forever grateful to so many of my public school educators, I certainly understand why so many respondents struggled to list only one. As you'll read, each person's response is remarkably different and yet there is one important constant: a dedicated professional educator who changed a life. I would love for you to share with us the educator for whom you are most thankful.

Email us at editor@aaeteachers.org and we'll share your responses at aaeteachers.org/blog.



Colin Sharkey
Executive Director,
AAE and AAE Foundation

I am thankful for my third grade teacher, Mrs. Krueger. She was a taskmaster, no fooling around permitted. Rules were set... you followed them. She instilled in me the importance of reading, not only for class but also for pleasure. I began to read voraciously, more than 100 books that year. That love of books has stayed with me to this day. We need to read to expand our minds, learn of different points of view. We also need to learn from the past...so we don't repeat our mistakes.



Mark Janus
Plaintiff Janus v. AFSCME

It is not an overstatement to say that there might not have ever been an Association of American Educators without the encouragement and exhortation of Miss Peggy Joyce Barber. In those awkward and insecure high school days, Miss Barber always made me believe, really believe, I could do anything I envisioned.

Gary Beckner
Founder and Chairman,
AAE



The teacher who impacted me most was Mrs. Hazel Bullock, my eleventh grade English teacher at Little Rock Central High School. I was having a tough time in her class. She told me if you can't speak well or write well, it will affect how you move forward successfully in your life. She kept me after school and tutored me until I was able to do the work on my own. She's 100 years old now and I tell her all the time that every speech I give and every paper or book I write remind me of how lucky I was to have a teacher who cared so much.

Virginia Walden Ford
Member, AAE Advisory Board



► Be sure to read our interview with Virginia Walden Ford, about whom the film *Miss Virginia* is based, on page 12 of this issue.

Mrs. Anderson, knowing I loved the Army, inspired me in second grade to write a letter to a soldier in Desert Storm. To my surprise, I received a reply and eventually a visit from that soldier. This experience solidified my desire to serve, leading me to the Air Force, Colorado, and politics. Mrs. Anderson inspired me to a life of service that I wouldn't trade for the world.

Owen Hill
State Senator, Colorado 10th District



I'm so thankful for Dr. Joni Hurley, a professor at Clemson University. She went out of her way to make her Spanish class work for me to accommodate a flexible schedule when my mother was diagnosed with cancer. She met with me one-on-one over the phone so I could keep up with the class. That's meeting the needs of your learners!

Megan M. Allen, NBCT, EdD
2010 Florida Teacher of the Year



The truth is, I am who I am today not because of one person, but because of the many, many teachers who influenced me throughout my life. They may not have had flashy lessons, or had "movie-worthy" careers, but they were there, day in and day out. They came early and stayed late. They graded on weekends. They held me to account when I needed it, pushed me when I needed it, and each and every one of them opened me up to a new way of thinking. I can't remember the names of many of them, and they probably don't remember mine, but that doesn't make the relationships any less real or impactful. For the million small interactions that I've had with educators in my life, and for educators everywhere, I am thankful.

Melissa Pratt
Senior Professional Programs Manager,
AAE



I'll have to say my college cross country and track and field coach, Alex Francis (pictured), inspired me, and his leadership had a profound effect on my life. He recruited a so-so high school distance runner and guided me to heights as a runner I didn't imagine achievable. His leadership and teaching style helped me in my 33-year teaching/coaching career as well. Coach Francis led by example and had high expectations for everyone on his team.



Garry Sigle
Executive Director,
Kansas Association of
American Educators
(KANAAE)



When I think of my favorite teacher and who I am thankful for, it's Mr. Thomas! Mr. Thomas had a way of teaching that made learning easy. He helped everything make sense to me. Mr. Thomas also made each student in his class feel special and as if he or she could accomplish anything! I often think of Mr. Thomas and I feel blessed and thankful that he was my teacher!

Dana Williams
State Director, AAE Georgia



Father Tribou (1924-2001) governed Catholic High School for Boys from 1960 until his death in 2001. He was my junior and senior English teacher, but more importantly he was an inspiration to me. Not only did I learn outstanding writing and public speaking skills under his tutelage, but I also received his firm example in faith, loyalty, and civic good. I have no doubt that I'm a better man, husband, and father due to the lessons of this good priest, George Tribou.



*French Hill
State Representative,
Arkansas 2nd District*

Monday mornings during football season at Tucker High School were my time to interview the football coach for the school newspaper. Coach Jerry Stewart would carve out time in his busy schedule of coaching and teaching to tell me what the team did right and what the team could improve on to prepare them for the next big game. In addition to talk of the "Xs" and "Os," he shared brief and meaningful words of encouragement with me that had a lasting impact. Even in high school, I knew I wanted to work in the news business. Coach Stewart would always greet me with "Here comes Pam Martin." (Martin was the star news anchor in Atlanta at the time.) He would always send me off with "you know you can do anything you set your mind to, Alice." With every college and career challenge that followed, I can still hear Coach Stewart's words. When I got my first on-air television job, I wanted to change my last name to something more appealing, so I chose to take on his last name. Coach Stewart is known as a tough and strong football coach, but his kind and thoughtful words of encouragement meant the world to me. Teachers and coaches change lives every day—in the classroom and on the football field.



*Alice Stewart
CNN Political Commentator
Resident Fellow,
Harvard University
Institute of Politics*

My favorite teacher was Lyde Cullen Sizer, one of my professors at Sarah Lawrence College. She helped me learn how to think critically and write precisely, and she honored every student's intellect and potential.

*Sydney Chaffee, NBCT
2017 National Teacher of the Year*

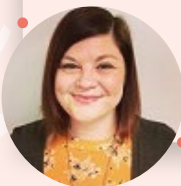


As a fourth grader, I lived with my dad. My mom and siblings lived four hours away. Mrs. Reed knew I was lonesome. Her compassion was a blessing during a challenging time. Mrs. Menard taught me biology and chemistry. Her passion for science was contagious, and the rigor of her classes made me a stronger student.



*Holly Boffy, NBCT, EdD
2010 Louisiana Teacher of the Year
Member, Louisiana State Board of
Elementary & Secondary Education (BESE)*

When I was in sixth grade, my core teacher was Mrs. Burgess. She was so colorful and vibrant, and more importantly, she truly saw our potential—beyond our shyness, home situations, or middle school social standing. One particular day, I was having the worst day and we had to read our essays in front of the class. This filled me with dread. I quietly, nervously read my essay and when I was finished, Mrs. Burgess broke into a wide smile, clapped, and lavished me with praise and I felt so special. When I left that afternoon, as I walked pass her desk, Mrs. Burgess said, “Jillian, you are an exceptional writer and I know that you are going to do big things in life.” I walked home with a newfound confidence and stood a little taller, but mostly, I walked home filled with a hope that I had never known, all because my teacher saw me and believed in me. She really was an amazing teacher and to this day, I am so grateful that she was my teacher.



Jillian Quinton
Membership Services Specialist,
AAE

I’m thankful for my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Gwaltney. She was stern, but it was genuine tough love. She encouraged me to participate in the city-wide oratorical contest. I didn’t even place that year, but the following year I actually won first place in my age division with Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman.” Mrs. Gwaltney helped to build my confidence at such a young age and we still are in contact today.

Tamia Mallory
Communications Coordinator &
Social Media Manager,
AAE



The teacher I am most thankful for was during my middle school years—Patricia Morland. She taught me right away how to stand apart and not to follow but lead. She let me know that being smart, beautiful, and talented were assets and to never hide them or dim my light for anyone. She taught me how to use my special powers in a good way. Her lessons have stayed with me through my life. Mrs. Morland was a teacher, a model, and was very athletic. She was and still is amazing. We keep in contact to this day.



Ariel Elliott
Regional Membership Director,
Professional Association of
Colorado Educators (PACE)

I’d like to recognize Mr. Don Pata (pictured), my high school physics teacher. Mr. Pata did many things well, including teaching me to think critically for myself in science, which pushed me beyond my comfort zone but also helped me understand everything better. When I became a physics teacher years later, he opened up his classroom to me as a colleague and mentor to help, challenge, and encourage me to be the best teacher I could be.



Gary Abud, Jr.
2014 Michigan Teacher of the Year
Member, AAE Advisory Board

When I was in the third grade, I fell in love with my teacher, Mrs. Davis. I don't remember much from the third grade, but I do remember this teacher made me feel very important, and I guess that's why I 'fell in love' with her. To show the extent of her sincere caring for students, when my mother told Mrs. Davis how crazy I was about her, Mrs. Davis invited me to go to the movies. Even more incredible was that Mrs. Davis had two daughters of her own. She could have easily taken them and asked me to go with them; instead, she invited and took me alone. For a teacher to go out of her way like that, and to give more time than required shows a truly remarkable educator. I think it shows the importance of sincerity and caring to accompany teaching skills—and for making third grade a very special time in my life. I'm very thankful for Mrs. Davis.



Ruth Anne Vigil
Membership Support Staff,
AAE



In seventh grade, I needed a little direction in my life inside and outside of the classroom when my parents got divorced. Mr. Kelly provided the structure and discipline that helped me academically and personally get through that tough time and succeed later in life.

Chris Brown
State Senator, New Jersey 2nd District

My seventh-grade teacher, Sister O'Connell, from Immaculate Conception School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, gave me a piece of advice that I have never forgotten. She said that there are two types of knowledge: that which you know, and that which you know where to find. It's a daily reminder to me that it is equally important to know something, as it is to be able to know where to find the right answer when you don't.

Troy Singleton
State Senator, New Jersey 7th District



Gloria Holden sang, created chants, and taught me how to use a graphing calculator. Mrs. Allen taught me how to think logically and to never forget to always ask why I was able to do something. She helped me to enjoy proofs as if I was figuring out a puzzle instead of dreading them like so many students do. Pam Brown was perky and kind and taught me to continue to try hard when things got tough as they often did in Algebra 2. All three of these teachers instilled their love of their math subject in me and encouraged me and all the other students at Newport High School in Newport, Arkansas, to be the best we could be. They were willing to stay after school with me so that I could ask them questions. I could call them when my friends and I were studying for a test or doing homework and couldn't figure out a problem. They would help me figure it out, and then I would help my friends figure it out. They were teaching me how to be a great teacher, and I didn't even realize it at the time.



Ronnie Flowers
Senior Regional Director,
Arkansas State Teachers
Association (ASTA)

“No honey, you can’t be in GT, you’re a resource student.” That was the answer in elementary school each time I asked. However, when I asked in junior high, GT teacher Nova Skaggs advocated for me and the district allowed me to participate. She changed the trajectory of my academic life. I am forever thankful.

*Michele Ballentine-Linch, PhD
Executive Director, Arkansas State
Teachers Association (ASTA)*



One of the keys to a good education is a dedicated teacher. The right teacher makes a difference long after you’ve left the classroom. In my life, I was lucky enough to have such a teacher. Jane Ivy was my algebra teacher at Springdale High School in the 1960s, a time when I wasn’t very interested in algebra. When I tried to give up on math, Mrs. Ivy refused to give up on me. I often think about the lesson she taught me—the importance of sticking to a problem, even when it wasn’t easy. Great teachers change lives, and Mrs. Ivy was a great teacher.

*Asa Hutchinson
Governor of Arkansas*



My son doesn’t like going to school. Many kids don’t like going to school. We all recognize this as parents and educators, but for the parents of children on the autism spectrum going to school every day can take on a whole new meaning. That’s why I’m so thrilled with the difference this year. That difference is his sixth-grade math teacher, Mr. Goodwin. Mr. Goodwin takes the time to get to know his students and show them that he cares about them when they enter his classroom and when they exit. He greets each student by name, and if my son is having a bad day he slips him a note letting him know he cares. Amazingly, this year math is my son’s favorite subject. It never was before, and it’s no coincidence with Mr. Goodwin at the helm. Something that may seem so trivial or minute to some can be the difference between hating school and liking school. Thank you Mr. Goodwin, for making a difference in all of our lives this year. As a mother, I’m beyond grateful to you.

*Liz Parlett Butcher
Regional Membership Director,
AAE New Jersey*



SCHOLARSHIP & GRANT APPLICATIONS DUE MARCH 1!

The AAE Foundation’s National Teacher Scholarships and Classroom Grants competition is held twice a year, in the fall and spring. The deadlines are March 1 and October 1. For more information, visit aaeteachers.org/awards.




AAE and Our Members Giving Back

There are so many ways our members contribute to the lives of their students and their entire educational communities. AAE Foundation wishes to recognize these life-changing efforts and outstanding service by making a year-end donation in the name of AAE members to five nonprofits that support students and educators.

Listed here are the first four highly rated national charities AAE staff have chosen. We ask your help in selecting our fifth charity. Visit aaeteachers.org/givebackvote to review and vote for our fifth charity.

Are you considering organizing a fundraiser to engage your students in serving others in their community? AAE Foundation may be able to contribute to your project! Submit a brief (100-word) summary about your project to lauren@aaeteachers.org for consideration.



My Stuff Bags Foundation is a national nonprofit headquartered in Westlake Village, California, that provides new belongings, comfort, and hope to thousands of children each year who are rescued from abuse, neglect, or abandonment throughout the United States.

► Learn more at mystuffbags.org.



StandUp for Kids, headquartered in Decatur, Georgia, works to end the cycle of youth homelessness by identifying and engaging homeless and at-risk youth. We then connect youth with an array of programs and outside community supports to address their whole-person needs to build healthy and trusting relationships, promote safety, and advocate with and for youth.

► Learn more at standupforkids.org.



National Inclusion Project, headquartered in Research Triangle Park (RTP), North Carolina, is committed to making sure that no child has to sit on the sidelines, and that children of all abilities have the chance to play, laugh, and learn TOGETHER.

► Learn more at inclusionproject.org.



Vision to Learn, based in Los Angeles, California, is dedicated to making sure that every child has the glasses he or she needs to succeed in school and in life. Its mobile clinics solve the problem by bringing eye exams and glasses, free of charge, to children at schools in low-income communities.

► Learn more at visiontolearn.org. ■

Legal Corner: Thankfulness – From a Legal Perspective

As we are overcome with the season of pumpkin spice everything, we also hear people talking about giving thanks, being thankful, and thankfulness. The word “thankful” and its derivatives mean many things to many people. Does thankfulness mean anything legally? We believe it does.

Thankfulness from a legal perspective can be distilled into one word...freedom. For example, not too long ago, the United States Supreme Court ruled that you are free from forced dues for membership in organizations in which you do not wish to participate. You are free to work or not to work in your chosen profession. You are free to believe as you choose, worship as you choose, and associate with whom you choose.

All of this is due to the foresight of our Founding Fathers and laws passed or upheld by our court systems. While it may seem silly to reflect on subjects such as this when we are busy preparing for the holidays and all the delights they offer, take a moment to be truly thankful for all that you’ve been given. AAE Legal Services wishes you a very happy season of thankfulness.



Sharon Nelson is the director of legal services for the Association of American Educators. In this capacity, Ms. Nelson oversees AAE’s legal services team and works daily with

members and panel counsel to address members’ legal concerns.



We are pleased to share with you just a few of the notes our legal services team receives each year from satisfied members:

...I was able to maintain my teaching license because of the help (financial and personal support) and because you all were there for me... My ability to fight those charges and to maintain my good name, my reputation as an educator, and my license was because of AAE... Had AAE not been there to help me when I needed help, I do not think that I could have or would have fought the false allegations made against me.

I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to AAE for helping me to move past an ugly situation and onward toward a new journey. I would not still be a licensed teacher in Utah; nor would I have enrolled in a doctoral studies program, had I not been able to disprove the false allegations made. I will be forever grateful to AAE. And, I will happily look forward to the timely and meaningful articles you share with your AAE members every month!

—Diana, Utah

A huge thank you!!! I got my dues back and now my job is being put back on the agenda with my work partner and I’m being treated equally!! You rock!!! I’m so glad I belong to a logical, common sense association. And I’m so glad after belonging for 10 or so years, when I needed you, you guys came through in such a big way! I’m just thankful!! I encourage and try to persuade everyone to join the AAE. I feel such relief. Thanks again!

—Lindsey, California

I’m extremely grateful for AAE and all of your help and advice. Sharon Nelson was an AMAZING advocate for me on several occasions and I don’t know what I would have done without her! I’m happy (and relieved) to be a part of AAE. THANK YOU!

—Kelly, California

Your assistance was much appreciated. My father always says “With good information, you can make good decisions.” I was given great information and my concerns were answered. That information allowed me to stand up for myself. Thank you again.

—Gina, Texas ■

Research Corner: Better Critical Thinking Skills



Critical thinking skills are core to education today. They are revered as the cornerstone of twenty-first century education, and as such, teaching critical thinking skills has been touted as the answer for turning our student population into an agile workforce, able to adapt quickly to new technologies and careers of the future currently not in existence.

In pursuit of this goal, many schools and districts have adopted curriculum that teach thinking skills explicitly, but is this the best way?

What the Research Says:

A recent study published by a government education agency in Australia is pushing back against the commonly accepted knowledge regarding teaching critical thinking skills. *How to Teach Critical Thinking* acknowledges that one can teach students how to break down concepts and think critically about independent subject areas, but there is less success when students are asked to transfer those same critical thinking skills to other areas. In light of this, the author argues that there are no general critical thinking

skills. Instead, each subject area has critical thinking skills specifically related to it. To learn those skills, students must be immersed in the content knowledge associated with that subject.

This research is echoed in the recently published book *The Knowledge Gap*. Author Natalie Wexler argues skills such as reading comprehension and critical thinking cannot be taught when they're disconnected from subject matter content. Further, students must be immersed in a content-rich environment from an early age to develop thinking skills. Background knowledge is the key that opens the door to higher order thinking.

Both of these works are based on a large and consistent body of research supporting the importance of content-area knowledge.

How to Use This:

The idea that the key to teaching thinking skills might lie in content-area knowledge flies in the face of how we currently teach. For the past several decades, American schools have deemphasized subject-area knowledge, especially for

younger students. The amount of time that students spend in the arts, science, and social studies has decreased while reading and math have received larger and larger segments of the school day. During these classes, teachers are expected to drill students on explicit skills.

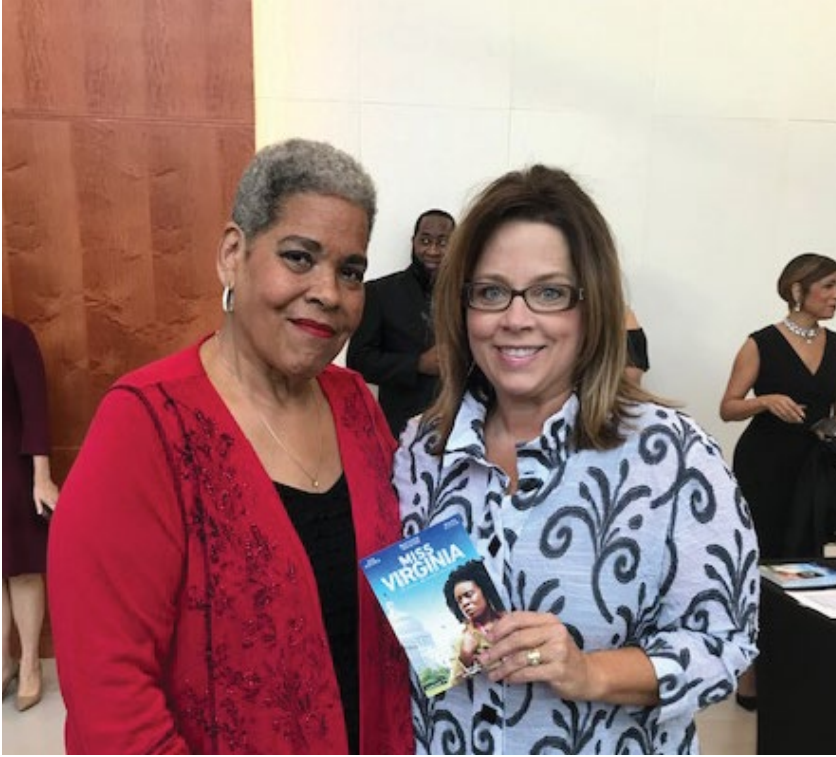
This research turns that on its head. Teaching explicit skills remains important, but it should be done within the context of a specific subject. In short, students should be taught how to think about music, while learning about music. They should be taught how to evaluate a scientific claim, while learning about scientific theory. They should learn how to break down an opponent's argument, while studying different historic claims.

Teachers across subject areas and grade levels can put this research into practice by teaching content-rich materials and explicitly teaching students how to think about and approach that content. The best way to teach students the thinking skills related to the content will necessarily vary from subject to subject as each discipline requires a slightly different skill set. However, this will only strengthen a student's critical thinking skills, not distract from them. ■



Melissa Pratt is AAE's senior professional programs manager. She is responsible for creating and managing programs that help AAE members increase their professional capacity.

Prior to AAE, Melissa taught science and social studies to middle school students in both public and private schools.



The Real Miss Virginia

We at the Association of American Educators are grateful to have Virginia Walden Ford on our advisory board for many years. Ms. Walden Ford's work is the subject of the recently released film, *Miss Virginia*. Ms. Walden Ford is portrayed by the Emmy-winning Uzo Aduba. You may recognize Ms. Aduba from her role as Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren in the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*.

I'm a movie fan, especially for those stories about real people overcoming odds, so I quickly suggested that we profile Virginia. I've only known her for a couple of years but you can't help but feel cared for when you meet Virginia. She listens to you and instantly puts you at ease. I imagine even those who have disagreed with her over the years have also felt this super power of hers.

Virginia Walden Ford founded D.C. Parents for School Choice (1998-2011) as a clearinghouse organiza-

tion for parents. Its mission was to organize and educate parents, to empower them to make the appropriate educational decisions for their children. She was also a founding member of The Black Alliance for Educational Options, Inc. in addition to serving on the D.C. Advisory Committee of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, The Education Breakthrough Network, and the Booker T. Washington Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. She currently serves on the boards of EdChoice and the Arkansas Connection Academy.

However, long before beginning her battle to help all families in the Washington, D.C. area, she had to face a personal one. Virginia was the single parent of three children. She was an active parent despite working two jobs simultaneously during most of the time her children were growing up. Her oldest son and daughter did very well in the traditional public schools in her community; however, her youngest son, William, was not finding the same success at school. She reached

out to the school for help but no one seemed to know what to do or want to do what needed to be done.

After witnessing a young student being beaten up for 'being smart,' Virginia believes her son, a bright student prior to this event, decided the personal risk outweighed any attempt at academic success. She said the crowd around him was quickly becoming one of trouble. One day he was playing basketball with a friend and the friend's older brother who was preparing to graduate. The older brother had words with another boy at the court. Immediately, the other boy went home, retrieved a gun, and came back to shoot William's friend's brother. William never played basketball again.

Virginia also witnessed the unthinkable—she got off the bus after work and found William handcuffed to the fence near their home. The officers standing with him told Virginia that if they didn't know her, he'd already be in a youth detention center.

Fearing she was going to lose her son as so many parents do each year in struggling communities, a neighbor saw her crying. He knew William and he also knew that in the right environment William could excel. He looked Virginia in the eyes and said he'd like to help pay for some of the tuition to any private school she thought might work for her son. She chose her neighbor's alma mater, Archbishop Carroll High School, a Catholic school near their home. The change in William was fast and pronounced. She asked him once why he was being so good. She confesses she started out waiting for him to slip back into his past behavior. He told her that for the first time in his life, someone other than his mother believed he could

succeed. After two years, William transferred to a local charter school and graduated as valedictorian. Fast-forward twenty years and he is happily working for UPS. William also served in the US Marine Corps and was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Honestly, the story could end here and I'd pay money to see the movie. However, spoiler alert: the story doesn't end here. It really didn't take much soul-searching for Virginia to know she had to help other parents in her community. She says she wasn't a better parent. Her kid wasn't a smarter kid. They just found an option to what they were told was the only way William could be educated. She says she knows that putting a child in the right educational environment can make a tremendous difference in his life.

So how did one huge battle turn into Virginia Walden Ford's life's work? I had a few questions to ask and Virginia is never at a loss for words to describe her journey.

Q: You were practicing school choice when William got the opportunity to go to a private school. Had you ever heard that phrase before?

A: Before then, I'd never heard the words, "school choice." My only concern and position was to take care of William. I did try to get him into other D.C. schools but I was always like 500th on the waiting list. It was frustrating and devastating.

Q: What do you think gave you the strength and fortitude to tackle this need in the community? Your kids were taken care of, so why?

A: I wanted more kids to have the option that William had but I wasn't entirely sure how to go about doing

it. I wasn't a trained community organizer or advocate but in 1998, Congress passed the first D.C. scholarship program that President Clinton vetoed. That hurt a little since we were both from Arkansas. The decision, though, really got the parents stirred up. So that's the year I started D.C. Parents for School Choice.

The program has had its ups and downs. Back then we had to persuade people who really didn't have a vested interest in D.C. to feel something for our children. Parents showed up at the Capitol every day. Often if the representative was out, we just signed in as "D.C. Parents for School Choice." Sometimes they'd be in the office and before long we all had chairs and the opportunity to tell our stories.

Over time, parents would become frustrated and want to quit. I get it, I thought about that too. So I told everyone to carry a picture of their child, (this was before we had pictures on our phones,) and each time someone says something ugly, take it out, look at it, and then keep fighting.

Q: Did you get pushback from the community? Parents? Teachers? What did they think about what you were doing?

A: Parents embraced us. We would set up meetings and hope that 25 people showed up and find ourselves talking to 125. They really are incredible! Many parents just need to feel empowered to speak out. So many don't even know they're allowed to say that a school is failing their child.

We also found many teachers were actually very supportive. There were union people out there trying to tell families this wasn't a worthwhile option but true educators want what's best for kids. They would quietly tell me they agreed with this option for families but they feared

getting in trouble. Some would create signs for us and tell a few parents quietly about our community events. They were great.

As a woman of faith, I had a tough time hearing that the large churches in the community wouldn't support our efforts at first. Fortunately many came around when they understood they could help more children at their own schools.

Q: Do you have any regrets regarding your work?

A: No regrets exactly. I lost friends but then I have to ask if they were truly friends. People I'd known half my life walked away. I guess I regret that I couldn't make them understand what I was doing. But that said, I've made tremendous and life-long friends since starting this fight for kids and parents.

Q: So what's this movie *Miss Virginia* about?

A: That one parent's voice can make a difference.

After thirty-four years in Washington, D.C., Virginia Walden Ford moved back to her home in Arkansas where she and her sisters care for their mother. She is also the executive director of the Arkansas Parent Information Network, working to make more educational choices available to Arkansas parents by providing them with information about traditional, public charter, private, and parochial schools. ■



Rena Youngblood is AAE's senior director of charter school services, where she develops and oversees AAE's partnerships with charter schools and charter school advocates.

The Incredible Benefits of Letting Students Drive Their Own Learning

When my children were small, they loved the book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems. In the book, a persistent pigeon begs, with increasing intensity, to drive a bus. As he pleads, children reading along with the story are meant to say "No" over and over again, thus reinforcing the concept for small children that there are limits, and that perhaps letting a pigeon drive a bus might be as foolhardy as letting a child eat napkins for dinner. In other words, we have to learn to accept the concept of No.

As a teacher, I've always disagreed with denial as a pathway to education. In my experience, kids are all too familiar with No, which is why they grow to resent it and spend their lives saying Yes to all sorts of things they should leave well enough alone. From the teen agreeing with a friend that driving drunk is no big deal to the overachiever who never turns down an extra-curricular only to find herself anxiety-ridden and unsure how to cope with too much on her plate, saying Yes can be a major problem.

In classrooms, teachers are taught to set limits through routines and structures, and that's absolutely fine if the limits don't veer off into hyper-controlling classroom processes. When the teacher voice of No becomes too loud, students turn on us and begin saying Yes in unproductive ways. That's why the best way to reach kids is by letting them drive the bus.

About fifteen years ago, the creative writing teacher at the school where I was working left the profession, providing an opening for a new instructor. I had no background in creative writing; all I knew was that it was a class free of curriculum restrictions and standardized tests. When I went to my department chair and begged for the class, she gave it to me almost right away. What followed was a semester of alternating panic and exhilaration as, for the first time, I navigated teaching a class that had no curriculum map.

Having been a rules-driven teacher for my entire career, I felt as though I were losing control of the situation at times. The class was too unstructured, too loose for someone as organized as I was. Sure, the kids were enjoying themselves, but were they learning anything? In

"While most of them don't afford the same freedom as creative writing, I have learned that the best way to make sure that students want to do the work is to build the relationship, to make sure they know why the work matters, and to show them how to drive classroom success so that they can own their learning."

those first few months, I alternated between joy at hearing what teenagers were creating when given the freedom, and worry that I wasn't using the word No enough.

A few months went by and something magical began to happen. With the freedom to write what they pleased, kids began to blossom in front of me. A quiet kid who never made eye contact with anyone wrote a brilliant horror story that terrified everyone, myself included. From that moment on, he was a hero. He took my class for three years, becoming an outgoing role model for others to emulate. Another student, a girl struggling with recovery from drug addiction, spent the first month of my class scrolling through her Twitter feed and ignoring everyone. But slowly, she picked up her pen. Bit by bit, she wrote about her lack of academic identity and how she would never go to college. Eventually, she found her voice, became the editor-in-chief of the school literary magazine; she is now a drug-free college graduate.

It's not just one class, or one school. As the years pass, and as I've replicated the class in another school, each group of adolescents has become a family. Our classroom identity is based on the knowledge that since we write every day together, we are all writers. Each semester I teach creative

writing, and each semester, miracles happen. It's not just because students are given freedom, or that they have a teacher who likes to say Yes (with appropriate limits, of course). It's because they are driving the bus.

As a veteran English teacher (and now a specialist in my school system), I teach a lot of different classes. While most of them don't afford the same freedom as creative writing, I have learned that the best way to make sure that students want to do the work is to build the relationship, to make sure they know why the work matters, and to show them how to drive classroom success so that they can own their learning.

When we surrender rigidity and learn to trust our kids, we realize how little control we had to begin with, and how much talent we were brushing aside by saying No. In a world of Yes, magic happens. Students create, they laugh, and they love to learn. They grow. And as we watch them, we whisper it with them: Yes. ■

This article by Miriam Plotinsky originally appeared in EdSurge, October 3, 2019 <https://bit.ly/32qNu0F>



Miriam Plotinsky is a learning and achievement specialist with Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, where she has worked for nearly twenty years as an English teacher, staff developer and department chair. She is a National Board Certified Teacher, and recently earned her certification in Education Administration and Supervision.

AAE Out and About in 2019



The Association of American Educators Foundation
25909 Pala, Suite 330, Mission Viejo, CA 92691-7963

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID PERMIT 100
CLAREMONT, CA

Education Matters is an exclusive publication for members of AAE and its state chapters. This publication is brought to you by the Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF).
aaeteachers.org • editor@aaeteachers.org • 800.704.7799



Colin Sharkey, *Executive Editor*

Christina Mazzanti, *Managing Editor*

Gary Beckner, *Founder and Editor Emeritus*

Debbie Brown, *Editorial Assistant*

Diane Meyer, *Editorial Assistant*

Yoshika Azuma, *Layout Designer*

merry
Christmas
& happy
holidays

from all of us at
the Association of American Educators