

Thankfulness, Advocacy, and Resilience

By Eli Rolfes

A school is not a factory.

In the face of a global pandemic, the industrial approach to educating students on a massive scale without respect to their individuality is showing its faults. Children were never dropped off and picked up seven hours later with that day's knowledge downloaded into their brains. There has never been any equipment, buttons to push, or switches to flip that made a one-size-fits-all approach pump out educated and productive citizens.

It takes much more. It takes kindness, it takes compassion, and it takes resilience.

It takes you. The educators.

**EXPANDED
EDITION**

SERVING EDUCATORS
25 YEARS
aae
NATIONWIDE

We rely on teachers, custodians, principals, bus drivers, parents, counselors, and support specialists to shape the next generation, and your voices have been consequential in ensuring that schools meet students where they are.

The educators, who are standing up for students, sweating the small stuff, and finessing the finer details to ensure that the education system delivers on its promise to serve ALL students. Your voice and advocacy on behalf of your students and your community have been indispensable this year. No one else is as proximal and responsible to the challenges that our students are facing, and educators have ensured that equity is prioritized in discussions on how to best serve students and families this fall. Teachers are simultaneously serving as educators, digital instructors, curriculum developers, tutors, social workers, and community advocates, all without the space to process the pandemic themselves.

The foundation of the teaching profession has been permanently altered. Teachers had to build the plane as it was flying this spring, and the collective failure to contain the virus has extended the challenges facing educators. There is no guide for lesson plans that can accommodate a global pandemic. In-person instruction has either paused or changed dramatically in most areas of the country, so the demand for creativity in delivering content to students is higher than ever. Teachers are shouldering the responsibility of learning to navigate the pandemic not just professionally and personally themselves but also for the students and families they serve. Basic needs are going unmet as we grapple with this new world. People are hurting. Families are hurting. Communities are hurting, and the weight of all this is felt in the education system. To put it mildly — this year has been difficult.

Nevertheless, you persisted.

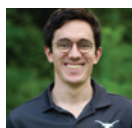
Neat and tidy is not the order of the world. We need people like you to help sort through the noise and make sure that children are receiving the education to which

they are entitled. We rely on teachers, custodians, principals, bus drivers, parents, counselors, and support specialists to shape the next generation, and your voices have been consequential in ensuring that schools meet students where they are.

Don't stop now. Your advocacy is essential in the ongoing conversation about how our education system will look both during and after this unprecedented crisis. You know all too well that "returning to normal" will not work for many of the students and families you serve, and your perspective plays a significant role. The fight for equity is continuous and ongoing, and there is no better advocate than educators like you who are in the classroom with students everyday. Your experience with students has shown you how complicated it is to teach them, and you, of all the stakeholders in the education system, know what needs to change to secure a brighter future for your students.

There has never been a time more dire or filled with more potential and opportunity to truly reform the way children are educated. The choices made now will impact a generation that is already seeing the world through uncertain eyes. This opportunity to drastically improve the way students and their families are served by the public education system cannot be wasted. We need advocates to push for more than just the status quo but to lead the vision for a more equitable commitment to education. Educators: A great deal of this work rests on your shoulders, but don't let that scare you.

After all, you're used to shaping the future. ■



Eli Rolfes is AAE's educator fellow. His most recent educator role was as a secondary mathematics teacher in Covington, Kentucky. Prior to teaching, he worked in the Office of Student Success at The University of Texas at Austin. Eli is originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, and now resides in Arlington, Virginia.

AAE and Our Members Giving Back

For the last two years, AAE staff and member support has made a huge impact on advancing the educational mission of numerous national charitable organizations, including My Stuff Bags Foundation, Stand Up for Kids, Shoes That Fit, National Inclusion Project, Vision to Learn, Mr. Holland's Opus, Blessings in a Backpack, and others. We're excited to announce that we are continuing our year-end tradition for a third year.

This year, AAE staff selected four highly rated national charities that you see here. And once again, it's your turn to help us pick a fifth impactful organization in the lives of children. We invite you to help us by selecting our fifth charity at aaeteachers.org/givebackvote. Review the choices and make your selection today. Your vote will make a lasting difference in the lives of so many children and communities. Thank you!



The National Center for Learning Disabilities, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is dedicated to improving the lives of the one in five children

and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues — by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. Through research, advocacy, and action, they're working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills to succeed in school, at work, and in life.

[Learn more at ncl.org](http://ncl.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. The organization's mission is to make the inclusion of children with disabilities the expectation and not the exception by providing recreational programs and community organizations the tools and training they need to serve ALL children in their communities.

[Learn more at inclusionproject.org](http://inclusionproject.org)



The Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF), located in Washington, D.C., is the nation's largest organization exclusively

representing the Black College Community. TMCF member schools include publicly-supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Through scholarships, capacity building and research initiatives, innovative programs, and strategic partnerships, TMCF is a vital resource in the K-12 and higher education space.

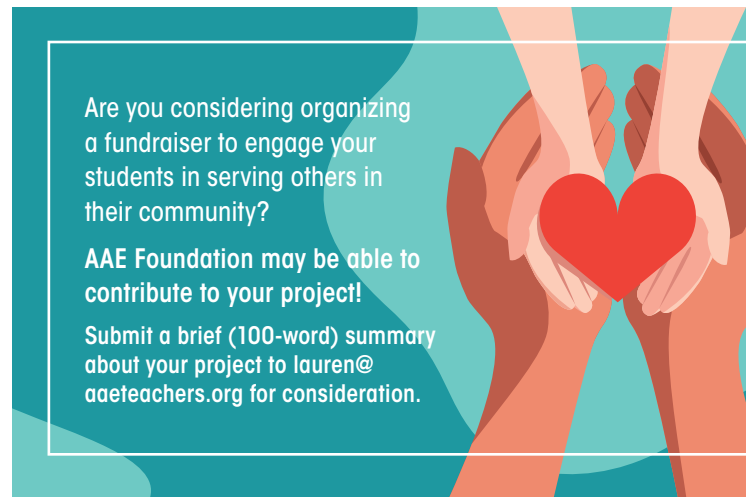
[Learn more at tmcf.org](http://tmcf.org)



Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI), headquartered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a nonprofit working with pre-k through

fifth-grade teachers to improve early literacy instruction so that children become powerful readers, writers, and thinkers, with the goal to close the literacy achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers. By helping educators learn high-impact instructional strategies and nurturing dynamic professional learning communities, CLI builds lasting capacity in teachers and principals over time.

[Learn more at cli.org](http://cli.org)



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.

HELP US SELECT OUR 5TH CHARITY! Vote at aaeteachers.org/givebackvote

The Real Cost of the Digital Divide



As a result of COVID-19, the world has had to quickly learn how to use technology to get things done. Whether technology gurus or novices, many educators, parents, and students were thrust into distance learning due to COVID-19-related school closures in the spring. Thankfully, with time to ideate, initiate, and implement changes, many educators and school districts are more comfortable with distance learning, and some are even excelling in its execution. Perhaps now, educators are slightly more comfortable with the technology they are asked to use for instruction. While teachers may be growing in their capacity to leverage technology, a significant number of students still have not logged in to class, and still lack the technology or bandwidth to do so.

From New York to Arkansas to Oregon, children face similar challenges due to what has been coined the “Digital Divide” loss of

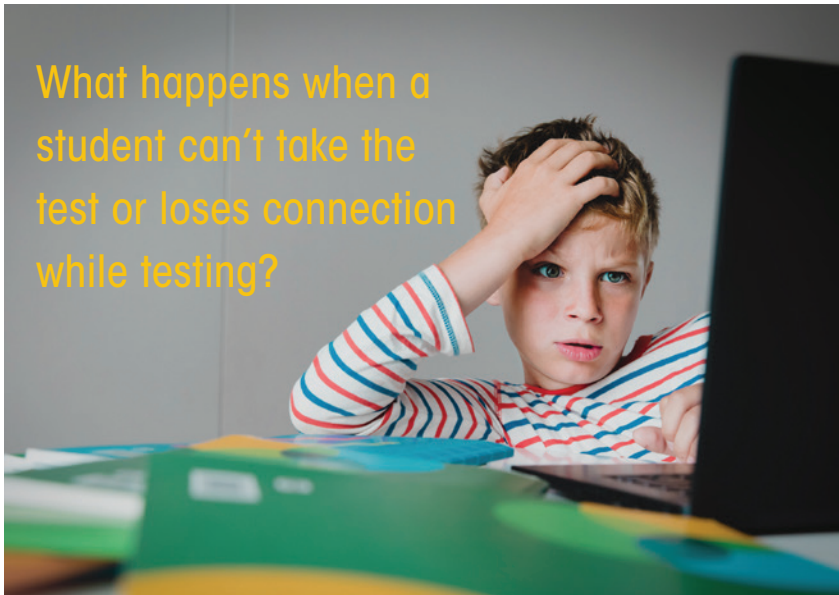
instructional time with a teacher. Typically, when a student was absent from in-person instruction, there were opportunities to make up work, extend the school day, or somehow catch up with the rest of the class. One major issue as a

result of this Digital Divide is that for as long as learning is happening digitally, and for as long as students do not receive supplemental instruction or activities, they are falling farther behind academically.



With the lack of ability to connect with students one-on-one, educators are feeling the pressure of needing to close learning gaps with limited resources.

What happens when a student can't take the test or loses connection while testing?



The Digital Divide is a result of many preexisting societal factors: from generational poverty, limited bandwidth, and lack of infrastructure, to a school's annual budget. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic impacting every community, these societal factors have exacerbated limited access to resources and tools to ensure each child has the technology and reliable internet to learn from home. With the race to close schools in March, and the need for students to learn remotely, reliable internet access and technology, such as laptops or tablets are now basic necessities for students. However, many students, due to no fault of their own, still lack these basic resources.

It is speculated that COVID-19 and school closures have already led to learning loss. With additional school closures, the lack of small group instruction, absent differentiation, and the lack of ability to connect with students one-on-one, educators are feeling the pressure of needing to close learning gaps with limited resources. Add an additional barrier of limited or no technology access for home learning, and

students find themselves facing even greater challenges.

Schools are now approaching fall testing, where quarter-one assessments, diagnostics, and unit tests are required in most districts. What happens when a student can't take the test or loses connection while testing? What about the integrity of the test? How do we ensure data privacy and protection while students are learning from home? Furthermore, how do students without reliable internet demonstrate what they know?

To address these questions, advocacy groups, including the Association of American Educators Foundation, are asking state and federal leaders to address the Digital Divide for students across

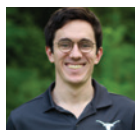
the country. If schools remain closed, and students continue to lack access to reliable technology and the internet, our students not only lose valuable instructional time but also could find themselves facing even greater losses in the future.

We need your help and your voices to advocate for students without technology or bandwidth to access the new learning environment. As an organization committed to a teaching profession that is student oriented, well respected, and personally fulfilling, we know that our educators are exactly who we can call on to help us resolve this real and timely issue. AAE believes that access to the learning environment through proper devices and reliable connectivity is now a fundamental need and should be treated as such, and that we have an obligation to ensure every student has an adequate device and reliable connectivity to participate in robust, adaptable, and effective online learning immediately, as well as after the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures end. Our educators are perfectly positioned to lead this charge.

To get involved with our Digital Divide Focus Group, or to learn more about how you can become an advocate in your state, please contact our director of advocacy, Kira Tookes, at kira@aaeteachers.org ■



Kira Tookes is the director of advocacy for AAE Foundation. In this role, Kira is responsible for recruiting, training, developing, and empowering teachers to make strategic and impactful policy advancements for the benefit of all children.



Eli Rolfes is AAE's educator fellow. His most recent educator role was as a secondary mathematics teacher in Covington, Kentucky. Prior to teaching, he worked in the Office of Student Success at The University of Texas at Austin. Eli is originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, and now resides in Arlington, Virginia.

Looking Back WITH KAREN CUEN



Distilling a lifetime of teaching into a paragraph or two isn't easy, which is why we took the opportunity to have a conversation with early AAE member and thirty-two-year educator Karen Cuen. To recall her inspiration to become an elementary school music teacher, we went all the way back to her own elementary school days.

"I knew when I was a kid that I wanted to be a music teacher because of my music teacher in the third grade. I thought she was wonderful but I was too shy to tell her." I asked if this special teacher and role model ever knew that she was a personal inspiration and Karen said, "No, and I really wish that I got the chance to tell her! But I planned out my career and my life back then to someday teach children music and to be home with my own children during the summer, and that's what I did."



Karen's teaching career began right after college. In that entire time, she has only worked in three districts. The Chino Valley in Southern California has been her school community for the last twenty-six years. There have been many changes in that time and some challenges including an increase in behavior issues, but her love of teaching has not wavered. The rise of technology in almost every aspect of education has, in her opinion, been a mixed blessing, "In some instances, we rely on technology too much. I still think there's a place for textbooks and paper in the learning process." However, Karen noted, "There's also been an increase in collaboration, innovation, and creativity with colleagues and with students, and that's wonderful."

The pandemic, of course, has closed her school since March and that has changed how every lesson is structured. Karen said optimistically, "The biggest challenge is being a problem-solver, which is actually neat! Speaking of creativity – while teaching remotely, I'm being

Reasons to be Thankful for



"I am thankful for the professional development!"

– Marguerite Donaldson

"Not political! I don't like being told who to vote for."

– Matthew Dalke

"Because your hearts match mine when it comes to kids and education." – Gracie Lou Freebush

Reasons to be Thankful for



“My friend and I both joined AAE to have liability coverage as well as legal protection without the constant political views being pushed at us. I don’t think education should be political. We are here for the education of our students.” – Sandra Sniff

“I’m grateful to have the protections by the AAE but even more I’m thankful for the advocacy based on the views of members, not just a few leaders.” – Daniel Elo

stretched to come up with solutions such as how to hear my students’ voices both individually and as a group; and with separate microphones, I have that ability.”

I asked Karen a time-travel question, “If you could go back in time and you could offer your first-year-teacher self a few pieces of advice, what would they be?” She answered with a story.

“My first year of teaching was in an elementary school in a very affluent area. One day a child was upset with me, and said, ‘My daddy’s a lawyer and he’s going to sue you!’ At the time I was terrified. What would I say now? ‘That’s great news! Have your dad call me, I want to talk to him about you.’”

The other piece of advice Karen had for her young professional self and she continues to remind herself to this day: “Don’t take on more than you can manage.” I asked her why this seems to be a universal piece of advice for new teachers. She suggested that even though there may be an extra duty stipend involved, “It’s more that you’re trying to prove yourself, to look indispensable, and that you’ve got what it takes! The concern of ‘last in — first out’ is always in the back of a new teacher’s mind.”

Looking back to the earliest days of her membership in AAE, Karen thought she may be one of the first members, saying, “I think I joined in 1994? Back then, I didn’t even know I could get out of the union, but my AAE membership has been wonderful and opened up so many doors for me. Fortunately, I’ve never needed to reach out for legal protection, but AAE’s always been in the background, supporting me. I’ve met so many people. I’ve had the opportunity to write op-eds because of my involvement with the Rebecca Friedrichs lawsuit. I was even at the U.S. Supreme Court as a plaintiff in the Friedrichs case! Wow. And more recently, I received a grant for my students to start a ukulele club, which is so popular with my students. And AAE has helped make this all possible – you’ve just been my rock all these years.” ■



Karen Cuen, Educator for 32 years, AAE Member for 26 years

VICKI HEGGEM Always a Teacher



We had the privilege of speaking with one of our longest and most supportive members recently. Although in a classroom setting for more than thirty years, Vicki Heggem considers herself to have been a “teacher” for just about her entire life, noting, “I knew I was born to it!” When playing school as a child, she was always the teacher. As a high school student, she taught pre-schoolers and loved it. She began teaching immediately after college and currently teaches third grade at the Camino Grove Elementary School in the Arcadia Unified School District in California. Vicki previously taught lower grades K-2, but third is her favorite grade. She teaches all third-grade subjects, including social studies, reading, and some things that aren’t taught as widely anymore like cursive and phonics. Year after year, *Charlotte’s Web* remains a special class favorite. “Chapter twenty gets me every time,” she reflected. “Boys will

laugh and the girls will cry, and I try not to (cry), but it’s hard!”

Perhaps her deepest passion is music. Her first instrument was the violin and now she feels so privileged to teach all music classes to third grade and performance programs for the entire school. The recorder and ukulele are wonderful for teaching the basics of music, including notes, melody, and rhythm.

Even though Vicki is long settled into her career path, a career she felt destined to have, it was not always smooth sailing. After her first few days of teaching she wondered, “What did I get myself into? I know there are some teachers who say, ‘I loved it from the start!’ but that was not the case for me.” The preparations, planning, and underpinnings of making every lesson look seamless take practice, a lot of practice and flex-



Reasons to be Thankful for



“I’m glad to be part of an organization that sends a meaningful newsletter six times a year! It is always worth reading!”

– Stephanie Case

“Because politics is interrupting education. I want peace of mind with legal protection without the focus being on one side or the other of politics.” – Lorraine Atwater

ibility. “That’s why I love to work with student teachers, helping them to gain that flexibility,” Vicki noted. And that wasn’t something she learned on her own. It took her first principal evaluation at the young age of 22 to hear a bit of blunt, but needed, criticism, “Vicki – you lack flexibility.” “It was hard to hear but good and so true. Children are unpredictable. Go with the flow and have a plan B.” It’s now her number one piece of advice for new teachers as well as colleagues when they sometimes sweat the small stuff. Also on her list of advice, “Get used to evaluations. They’re a part of the rest of your life.”

Having had an opportunity to share years of advice with the next generation of educators, we asked if there was one special mentor or role model whose teaching style helped inform her teaching method. Without hesitation, Vicki said it was her daughter’s first-grade teacher Mrs. Green. “Even though I had already been teaching for seven years, I was struck by her composure. I loved her style with children, her projects, and her attitude. I knew I wanted to emulate her teaching style.”

We also discussed the challenges her school and her students are facing as the pandemic continues to upend the learning process and her academic community. With the many changes that are in place at this time, some are temporary and some may be lasting or even permanent. Vicki noted one change that she optimistically hopes is permanent. Having just completed parent conferences completely online, she was actually pleasantly surprised with the results saying, “The parents and I realized that this is an amazing way to meet – by doing them virtually. Online parent conferences worked and were still effective. All scores, assessments, and projects were discussed without distractions. Everyone was so engaged and focused and had plenty of time for discussion. It was really so much easier. I think it’s a thing of the future.”

Technology has, of course, changed teaching in so many ways. “Our school got on board early. School is one-on-one for the last three years. Children do spend a lot of time on their Chromebooks. Slide shows. Stop motion,” Vicki acknowledged. “But this will prepare them for the future. They will be using that technology for presenting their ideas in the future.” Vicki illustrated this with a description of the highlight of every school year. “Here in LA we have the Academy Awards. My Academy Awards night is Open House. It’s the best night of the year. Children proudly show off all their projects. They share their computer projects with their parents. It’s the culmination of the year and everyone is proud of their accomplishments. It’s our red carpet night.”



Vicki was equally as enthusiastic when she recalled first finding out about AAE. “One of AAE’s first board members, Pann Baltz, was a colleague at my school. She was amazing, a Disney Teacher of the Year, had spoken to Congress about education, and she was beloved by the community. She was the one who handed me a brochure and suggested I take a look and join.” She continued, “I joined right away thinking, ok, this is something I can believe in. AAE had the same ideals I did and was nonpartisan.” Over the years, Vicki has given back too. As a board member herself, she has continued to share the benefits of AAE with other educators, “I’m so happy to let educators know they have options. The other thing that is so appealing about joining is the liability and access to the legal support. To me it’s the most valuable service. And thank goodness for the Janus decision. Now I just belong to AAE.” ■

Vicki Heggem, Educator for 32 years, AAE Member for 26 years

Reasons to be Thankful for



“AAE isn’t giving my money away to support politicians. AAE isn’t actively working to keep kids and teachers out of school.” - Amanda Joy

What AAE Has Meant to Me

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

by **Debbie Brown**

I am not a teacher, but I can honestly say that the Association of American Educators (AAE) has been one of the best companies for which I have ever worked. The organization, as well as my specific job duties, has evolved much over the ten plus years I have worked in the California AAE office, and there have been many challenges along the way. However, Who We Are, What We Believe, and What We Do, as well as the people I work with and those I serve, is what makes this job so rewarding to me.

I have worked in many different fields over the years including engineering, legal, medical, church, and even as a clerk in the front office of an elementary school, but I have never been a teacher. There were a lot of realities about the education field of which I was unaware when I first started working for AAE in 2010. I was very uninformed and had a lot of questions: Why is it necessary for teachers to have liability insurance? Why do most teachers not have a choice about belonging to a union? I also wondered why personnel at the school where my children had attended still had jobs when they would have been fired long ago in the public sector. I had a lot to learn.

What I have learned is that AAE cares about these questions and has endeavored tirelessly to answer and resolve many of the issues that plague education. One of the highest priorities of AAE is customer service. It was impressed upon me early on that every phone call that comes into the California membership services office during business hours is answered by an AAE employee or, after hours, by our answering service. Many times we have answered the phone and heard the person say, “Oh, I didn’t expect to hear a real person’s voice!”

The Association of American Educators is a nonprofit organization. We are not a faith-based organization. However, I can tell you that in our office there have been several times when

finding out that a member or an employee or a relative was in need, we gathered hand-to-hand in a circle and offered a prayer for the person and the situation.

One of the challenges of my job is making sure each member’s application is processed accurately. I also do my best to catch duplicate applications and refund the member as quickly as possible. One Friday afternoon we actually received *sixty-five* \$25 transactions (\$1,625) from a member in Florida applying for student membership. I called her and left an urgent message and then emailed her. I panicked and not knowing exactly how to handle the situation, I alerted our senior director of national projects at that time, Colin Sharkey. In his usual calm, humorous way he replied, “She probably has a cat who likes to click the mouse button 100 times...” When the member finally did return my call later that afternoon, she told me that just as she was submitting the application on her laptop, her roommate’s cat jumped onto the keyboard. I kid you not! Fortunately, she was not upset and we shared a good laugh about it. I was able to refund her all but the \$25 for the student membership and have enjoyed telling the story many times.

In all honesty, there have been many not-so-happy moments when misinformed antagonizers call, or when our website or database crashes, or when those of us in the California office struggle with keeping our heads above water in the crazy busy season. Regardless, I am truly proud, honored, and blessed to work for this organization of human beings who are willing to stand up and fight for teachers and students to ensure a better future for us all. ■



Debbie Brown is AAE’s senior member services specialist. In this role she is responsible for customer service, data processing, and inventory management. She also serves as editorial assistant for AAE publications.

Mental Health During the Holidays



Many educators and students alike normally look forward to the holidays as a break from a stressful school year. However, with a school year unlike any other, holiday breaks this year may be a cause for concern for many teachers. With students traveling and gathering with family amid multiple fall celebrations, there's no guarantee what the school year will look like in 2021. For school districts that have returned to in-person instruction, how can a safe return be guaranteed?

Holiday breaks are still a concern for students who are learning virtually. Some educators already find it hard to connect with students following a break, so what will that look like in the virtual space?

Often, beginning in the fall until the end of the calendar year, teachers are known for their decorations and celebrations of the various holidays that close out the first half of the school year. During these months, classrooms are filled with conversations of where people will go on their long breaks and who they will spend time with. Teachers are typically envied for the privileges of an extended holiday break. However, COVID-19 has teachers, students, and families finding both new ways to celebrate the many upcoming holidays and find the joy during this holiday season.

As we are far from a “normal school year,” there is still uncertainty of how trauma has impacted communities of teachers everywhere. With the holidays soon upon us, there are many questions of how will teachers be able to wish students happy holidays in the midst of such uncertainty.

At this time in a typical school year when everyone would be long settled into their routines, we've now become accustomed to the countless conversations of how each of us is going to effectively transition into the next phase of the school year. However, the reality is that the transitioning is often out of our hands and has overshadowed conversations of how we can all prepare ourselves and the students on how to close out the first half of the year.

The fall and winter holidays are so symbolic, including marking the halfway milestone for students to know that when they return in January, the end of the school year is in sight. High school seniors would normally be excited in planning their senior-year activities such as homecoming, college decisions, proms, yearbook, and senior trips. These are all celebratory moments that teachers look forward to as well, cherishing each moment as a list of final ones before their students will graduate in the spring.

Medical experts are predicting a continued increase in COVID-19 cases throughout the winter months. The predictions further advise that upcoming holidays will have to be celebrated very differently by all of us. During a recent fireside chat with teachers held by AAE Georgia and In School Spirit, panelists expressed that many teachers are still struggling with their own personal and professional loss and grief, which will likely be exacerbated during the holiday months. One piece of advice the panel offered was that we should all be mindful that both families and teachers are going through similar challenges. The best approach in getting through this is doing it together, exercising mindfulness, compassion, and prioritizing self care. ■



Danielle Stewart, Ed.D., is founder and president of the education consulting company, In School Spirit, LLC and the nonprofit, Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc. She is a proud graduate of Hofstra University, where she studied and worked in the New York television industry. After receiving her Doctor of

Education in Education Leadership degree with a concentration in K-12 from Argosy University, she has continued to research, create, and build innovative ways to reach parents and students and ignite the school spirit of underrepresented students. Dr. Stewart is an AAE Foundation advocacy fellow.



Tamia Mallory is communications coordinator & social media manager for AAE. In this capacity she manages AAE's content and messaging across all social media platforms as well as supports internal and external communications and awareness efforts. Prior to joining AAE, she served as digital content producer at NBC 12 in Richmond, Virginia.

Back-to-School Shouldn't Mean Back-to-Normal

While no educator wishes social distancing or hours of Zooming/mask-wearing upon their learners, the mandated and necessary changes to schools in response to COVID-19 have also opened the doors to much-needed introspection and discussion regarding educational issues. The current pandemic is less-than-ideal in many ways, yet it has allowed serious questions to be asked of the educational system, its practices, and, quite frankly, its failures.

In our state (Michigan), schools were allowed to open based upon each individual district's decision. Our district decided to offer both in-person learning and a virtual option. This was intended to offer the best of both worlds: parents who were desperate to have their children return were willing to take whatever "risks" and protocols deemed necessary, while others who didn't feel comfortable or ready, were willing to take schooling upon themselves at home. Several benefits that arose from this plan included smaller in-person class sizes, the opportunity for self-directed learning for students who prefer to work at their own pace from home, and a variety of learning opportunities depending on which option was chosen.

Many families are perfectly comfortable and capable with their children learning outside of physical school, so this provides them with curriculum direction, support, and feedback, along with the home district's ability to monitor their progress. Why can't they have this option at any time and not just during a pandemic? Let students learn in the ways and places that work best for them. While our district used an independent third-party service to deliver virtual instruction, many other schools thrust it upon their teachers to manage in addition to their daily in-person teaching duties. There needs to be more training, support, and compensation for teachers who are essentially expected to perform two separate jobs.

Many health and sanitization requirements and protocols were put in place for schools to reopen: masks, frequent sanitization, separate lunch and recess sessions, etc. The simple impossibility of trying to separate children in crowded, small classrooms became apparent to the Michigan Governor's Return to Learn Advisory Council, so instead of mandating social distancing, it became a "recommendation." This should highlight



Our government spends billions of dollars on infrastructure and technology upgrades in many other sectors, but buildings filled with young children are woefully inadequate.

three of education's biggest problems: ridiculously large class sizes, dysfunctional/outdated facilities, and budget woes. Because schools lack space and funding, instead of hiring more teachers to reduce class sizes, we just cram more kids into a classroom. Last year in our elementary building, there were 29 students in each first-grade class and 35 students in fifth grade. Our government spends billions of dollars on infrastructure and technology upgrades in many other sectors, but buildings filled with young children are woefully inadequate. Schools were built with the bare minimums in mind and maintained haphazardly in the same manner with disregard for anyone's health, regardless of a pandemic: lack of ventilation, dirty air filters, nonfunctioning windows, filthy carpet, uncomfortable furniture not made for children's physical development, asbestos, leaking ceilings, mold growth, poor water/air quality, etc. Schools were also expected to implement all required COVID-19 protocols with no extra financial support to do so. Our district has spent thousands of dollars on hand sanitizer alone, not to mention specialized spraying machines, extra janitorial staff, and more. There

simply isn't enough money to solve all these problems.

Due to indoor social gathering guidelines, professional development (PD) became more independently directed. Teachers worked in their rooms on the material they found personally applicable in their roles, as long as it could be documented and validated. In previous years, many PD sessions were mandated within the whole group staff setting, where many of the skills or instructional methods being presented weren't relevant to all employees' positions. If we can expect teachers to professionally and appropriately instruct their students, why can't we do the same regarding their self-directed instruction for professional development? The same should be said for students: within a broad umbrella of curriculum, allow them to pursue their interests and passions, while meeting expectations and requirements. Just like a veteran teacher in a staff meeting, too many students find what they're learning boring and irrelevant.

After nearly one-half of a year of school closures, many are coming to two polar opposite conclusions: we either need school a lot, or we don't need it at all. If we don't use current events not only to revolutionize our approach to cleaning and sanitation but also for our educational infrastructure, policy and funding, instructional methods, procedures, and expectations, we will have suffered another unforeseen consequence of the pandemic: the wasted opportunity to change a broken, archaic system in desperate need of reform. ■



Meran Khon is a librarian/technology/STEAM instructor with Memphis Elementary School, Memphis, Michigan. She holds a bachelor of arts degree from Spring Arbor University and a Master of Education in Middle-Level Education degree from Walden University. She taught seventh-grade

language arts and a third-grade self-contained classroom before converting the library and computer lab into a twenty-first century Learning Lab/Maker Space, where she currently teaches K-5 students. She is a member of the Association of American Educators (AAE) and an AAE Foundation advocacy fellow.

Thankfulness in 2020

It is the time of year when the air gets crisp, leaves fall, pumpkin-spice-everything pops up, and we prepare for the holidays. It is also the time of year when we make a concerted effort to focus on thankfulness.

This year is different and like no other. Many of you have been touched by or know someone affected in one way or another by the pandemic through illness, job loss, or in some cases, the tragic loss of a loved one. These stressful, uncertain times can make thankfulness seem out of reach. For us, it provided an extra special focus on the importance of you and all that you do for your families and your students.

So here is our list and the reasons for which we give thanks during this difficult season:

1. **We are thankful for virtual communications.** We know many of you never want to see a Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet invite ever again. However, technology has connected us in ways we never thought it would need to, and for many, it proved to be a lifeline during difficult times.
2. **We are thankful you reached out.** Since March we have spoken to so many of you. In addition to being able to help answer your questions or provide support, we've gotten to know you better, and hear about your families and your lives.
3. **We are thankful for you.** In this crazy, chaotic time we were reminded of the strength, resilience, and commitment of teachers. You spent hours learning how to adapt and provide support to your students, and you did it with courage and fortitude that we often envied.

So yes, this season has been hard and the year is not over. More challenges lie ahead but we are here, as always, for you. Please reach out if you need help. We will make it through this together. ■



Sharon Nelson is the senior 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. A passionate advocate for educators, Ms. Nelson has been a lawyer focusing on employee rights issues for more than twenty years.

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The Impact of an AAEF Scholarship During COVID-19



Telia Bennett of Central Jersey College Prep Charter School in Somerset, New Jersey, applied for an AAE Foundation Scholarship to support her interest in taking a “Curriculum Development and Evaluation” course with the goal of improving her curriculum design and implementation skills long before the pandemic was on the horizon for the nation or her school.

SCHOLARSHIP & GRANT APPLICATIONS DUE MARCH 1!

AAE Foundation offers a competitive Teacher Scholarship and Classroom Grants Program twice annually, and has given away hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding to support educator development goals and meet classroom materials and activities needs. Visit aaeteachers.org/awards to find out more. The next deadline is March 1, 2021.



Originally, the focus of the course was supposed to be centered around technology in education. In particular, the course originally set out to explore the benefits and various uses of technology, but also to take into account the viewpoints of parents, students, educators, and administrators. Through our course materials and practice exercises, we were able to brainstorm and test different strategies for technology integration.



By chance, the course coincided with the coronavirus pandemic, when educators nationwide were called upon to quickly pivot learning outcomes and lesson plans to adapt to a 100 percent virtual instructional platform. This course could not have come at a more apt time. The course instructors provided us with a wealth of information and resources that could be used to not only engage students, but also to evaluate the effectiveness of the various instructional strategies that we implemented. We were all encouraged to frequent websites such as iste.org, [edutopia](http://edutopia.com), and [EdTech](http://EdTech.com), as well as trying different content-sharing platforms such as Microsoft Sway, Issu, and PearDeck.

Because COVID-19 exposed so many of the educational inequities that exist in the United States, we were tasked with developing potential solutions that are inclusive of students who may live in rural or nontraditional settings; e.g., homeless shelters, group homes, etc. Through our exercises, we were taught to exercise compassion toward our students who may not have access to technology, devices, or WiFi/internet. Through examination of real-time case studies, we saw how these educational disparities become magnified when students are unable to access school buildings. ■

Teaching Civically Engaged Students

By Melissa Pratt



The past year has been a year of civic strife for our nation. Our country is as divided as it has ever been in modern times. The past summer was marked by protests over both COVID-19 restrictions and unjust policing practices.

With all this in mind, it is more important than ever that civics is taught well in our classrooms. When taught well, the lessons learned in civics class transfer into adulthood, creating a public that votes, volunteers in their communities, and advocates for the issues about which they care.

What the Research Says:

Although civics education gets little attention in the curriculum, there is more known about how to teach civics than many other subjects. A growing body of literature has aligned to define a few classroom practices essential for teaching civics. These practices increase both students' mechanical knowledge of how government works and their engagement with the system in adulthood.

The role of classroom instruction in civic engagement has been controversial for several decades. A 1968 study found that formal instruction didn't seem to make much difference for many students. However, that same study showed it increased civic engagement when the students came from a community that had a history of civic disengagement. Later studies showed small effects on well-to-do students, with larger effects on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

What does seem to consistently and positively increase student civic engagement is the student's involvement

in extracurricular activities and in volunteer activities. With volunteer activities, an emphasis on service-learning results in the highest gains.

There is also a strong correlation between school culture and civic engagement and knowledge. Schools lead to higher civic engagement when they have a culture that focuses on two areas: personal character and growth, and incorporating democratic processes into school life.

How to Use This Information:

Classroom instruction is important to civic education especially when teaching students who come from a disadvantaged background. High-quality classroom instruction can give students the mechanical knowledge they need to engage with government on local and national levels. It cannot increase civic engagement alone.

Educators hoping to increase their students' civic engagement later in life must begin young, by incorporating democratic practices into school. This can range from having students create a classroom constitution as a beginning-of-year practice, to having a student governance council helping the school or district make decisions. ■



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.

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