

By Christina Mazzanti

ABOVE & BEYOND

How an Entire School Community Responded to COVID-19

Tony Bonuccelli is the administrator of the Moscow Charter School in Moscow, Idaho, providing a science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) curriculum to 190 students in grades K-8. He has been in his position for eight years. We spoke with him about what it took for his entire school community to weather the most challenging school years anyone has ever faced. With official school closure on March 15, 2020, everything changed. However, in many ways, nothing changed because of a remarkable dedication to maintaining a healthy, collaborative, supportive school environment that is heavily invested in opening lines of communication and addressing challenges together.

“As a STEAM school, we already had the technology with one-to-one Chromebooks and Google Classroom familiarity. We went fully remote immediately and stayed remote for the remainder of the school year.” No emergency plans were in place to address the magnitude

of this transition but he said, “Through many surveys, check-ins with students and parents, and use of our full-time school counselor, we focused on ‘What can we do to help?’” Mr. Bonuccelli further noted, “When summer break came, we began planning for reopening in the fall, along with finishing construction of our new middle school. We approached reopening in the same fashion, with having survey feedback and parents involved from the very beginning of planning. Because parents knew we were depending on their involvement for the success of reopening, survey responses were strong — almost 100%.”

The school’s return to classrooms was a hybrid model. Teachers had two weeks of contracted time prior to reopening (most were there planning during the summer) to get their classrooms ready for back-in-classroom learning and additional professional development. “We’re chartered through the Moscow school district. We followed their protocols and adapted



them to our school size.” The school population was divided into an A group and a B group, with the A group coming in on Mondays and Tuesdays and the B group on Thursdays and Fridays. All students were remote on Wednesdays. Some students remained fully remote by choice. Additional staff was hired for tutoring and online management. “Swivels” were purchased so students in the classroom could see their classmates at home. Students were so happy to be back in the classroom that winter break actually came too quickly for many. “They are resilient. They want to be in school. You never saw so many kids sad to go on break,” noted Mr. Bonuccelli.



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The school maintained that phase of hybrid learning until spring break. They are now on a four-day-a-week in-school schedule. “Everything’s starting to feel somewhat normal,” said Bonuccelli. “Everyone is so happy to be back. I bought snacks for the staff. It was just nice to see everyone smiling and excited to see kids again. Having in-person classes has been amazing and for people to be back together. My directive to the staff has been: Get kids off technology as much as possible. Have them reading and writing on paper as much as possible.”

All of these transitions have not gone perfectly. “It’s ok to not have everything work out, but our staff culture is very collaborative.” Mr. Bonuccelli continued, “We get along well and we problem solve, always willing to help out each other to prevent small problems from becoming larger ones. It’s been key to us coming back to four days a week. We’re really trying to avoid teacher burnout and continue to look after everyone’s health and well-being.” Frequent classroom visits and getting communications out the way the staff and parents want to receive them have been very important.



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Takeaways and lessons learned from running his school during a pandemic could fill a book. Although he never expected ‘healthcare professional’ to become part of his job description, Mr. Bonuccelli is optimistic. He also remains cautious about new variants looming in the future. However, more than anything, he has a sense of pride in what his school community has accomplished so far. “Acceptance and flexibility have been huge. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has been a big help. I’m very lucky to have the school families that we do. Parents have gained a new acceptance for what teachers do. And I couldn’t be more proud of my teachers. They are acknowledged for the great work they are doing to provide the best education possible. We work hard to be on the same page. I value staff opinions. If I have happy teachers, I have a happy school. If I have happy parents, I have a happy school. We really are a family here.” ■



Christina Mazzanti is the director of communications for the Association of American Educators. She is responsible for advancing AAE’s mission, growth, and member service delivery through internal and external communications strategies.

Lasting Legal Changes for Educators



COVID-19 has changed a great many things in our lives. In fact, the way we live our lives, work, do business, shop, and socialize have all changed. Experts say it won't last forever, but some of the life changes we experienced during COVID-19 may result in lasting changes to the education landscape. Here are a few things we foresee that may be impacted.



TECHNOLOGY may never be the same. You've learned to teach virtually, students have learned to participate virtually, and your meetings have been largely virtual. While it is obvious that many students fare better with

in-person instruction, some have been successful in the virtual learning environment, and some families now prefer virtual learning. A five-day-a-week traditional classroom may be a thing of the past as some school districts attempt to incorporate more virtual options to meet family preferences. At the same time, COVID-19 brought greater attention to the disparities in student access to technology at home, including internet access. As education policy continues to develop post pandemic, the digital divide is likely to remain a major topic of discussion.



MASKS will likely be more common in the future, particularly in times of sickness such as during the flu season. Some experts say that mask wearing during this time has decreased other illnesses.

Many now say they will adopt a mask-wearing approach moving forward when they are sick to help curb the spread of their illness to colleagues or students.



COVID-19 VACCINES may be required in the workplace and, depending on efficacy, may need to be repeated. Many employers are making vaccinations a mandatory requirement

for continued employment — something that so far, courts seem to indicate is acceptable. Absent a few legally recognized exceptions, proof of a COVID-19 vaccination may become commonplace.



HYGIENE PRACTICES have

always existed but never to the extent they do currently. Classrooms and common areas will likely continue to see increased sanitation efforts, while vigilant personal hygiene practices will also continue to be encouraged. Students will continue to learn the importance of handwashing, covering the mouth while sneezing or coughing, and more.



TIME TOGETHER will remain important and valued. Whether it be interaction with family, colleagues, or students, we have learned through this time how much those interactions are

a part of our lives and well-being. So many students depend on each of you for positive interactions, reinforcement, and support. We know this pandemic has challenged us all and stretched teachers to their limits. You rose to the occasion and continued to teach and inspire students, and for that you should be applauded. From everyone here at AAE Legal Services, we offer a heartfelt thank-you for all that you do. ■



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.

AAE LEGAL SERVICES

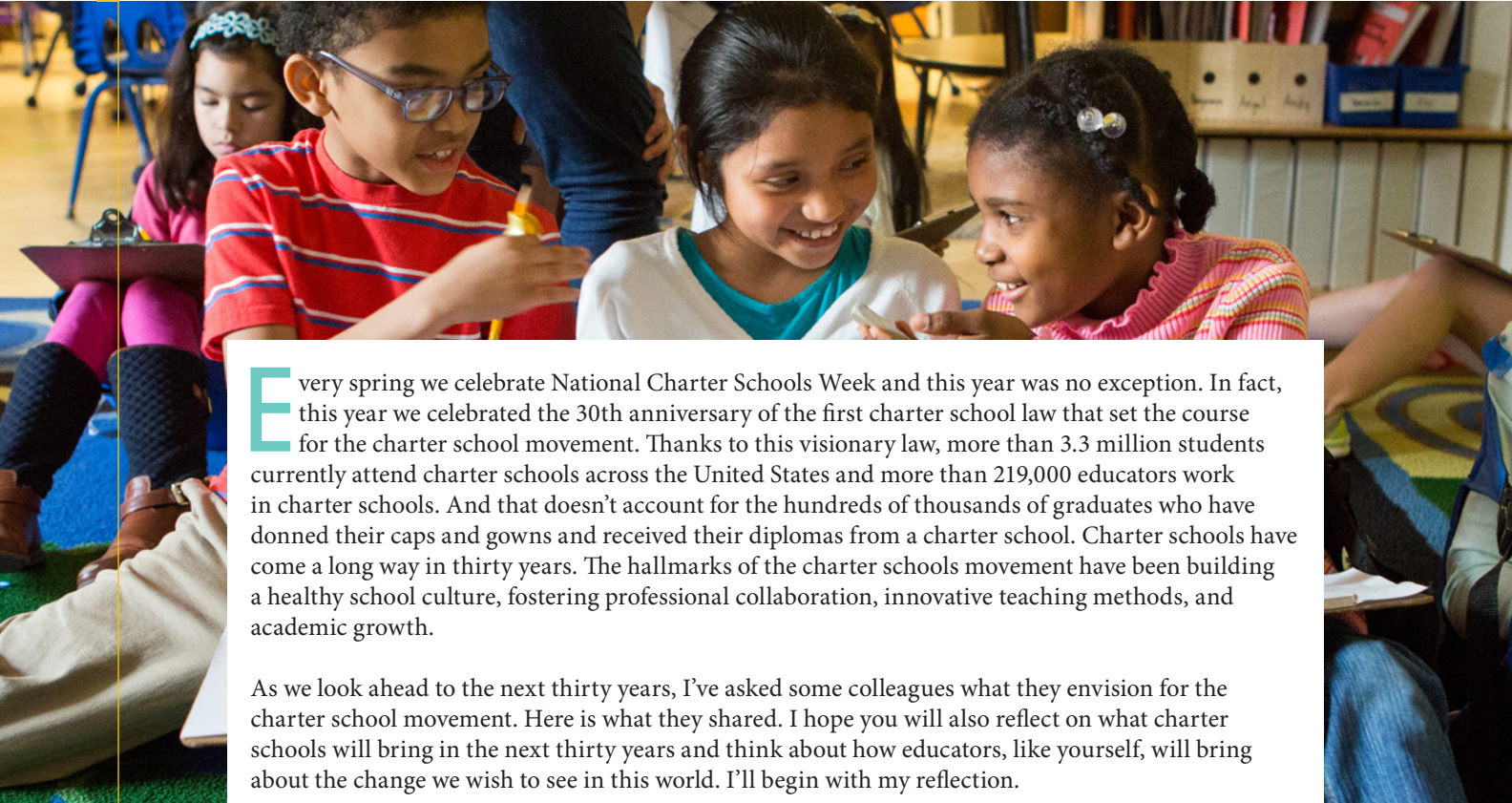
Receive caring, professional support and direct contact with our legal team for confidential advice with no conflicts of interest.

☎ 800.704.7799

✉ contactlegal@aaeteachers.org



CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS



Every spring we celebrate National Charter Schools Week and this year was no exception. In fact, this year we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the first charter school law that set the course for the charter school movement. Thanks to this visionary law, more than 3.3 million students currently attend charter schools across the United States and more than 219,000 educators work in charter schools. And that doesn't account for the hundreds of thousands of graduates who have donned their caps and gowns and received their diplomas from a charter school. Charter schools have come a long way in thirty years. The hallmarks of the charter schools movement have been building a healthy school culture, fostering professional collaboration, innovative teaching methods, and academic growth.

As we look ahead to the next thirty years, I've asked some colleagues what they envision for the charter school movement. Here is what they shared. I hope you will also reflect on what charter schools will bring in the next thirty years and think about how educators, like yourself, will bring about the change we wish to see in this world. I'll begin with my reflection.

"Twenty years ago, I sat in awe at the very first YES Prep high school graduation. Tears streamed down my face watching videos of YES Prep's senior signing day which has now become commonplace at so many charter and traditional schools across the country. I quickly learned that charter schools had endless possibilities. At 24 years old, I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to the charter school movement. **My hope for the next thirty years is that we never take our eyes off the North Star: college and career readiness for ALL students.** My hope is that all voices begin to acknowledge that there is value in all school models and that the charter school movement has proven that the one-size-fits-all model does not fit all."



AMANDA ALPERT KNIGHT is the director of charter school services for the Association of American Educators and a former charter school CEO in Chicago, a charter school authorizer with Chicago Public Schools, and a special education teacher with the Houston Independent School District.

"I have had the privilege of talking to the original charter school legislators in Minnesota and in Colorado. I believe their original hopes are still true today, and I carry those forward after twelve years as a charter school leader. We must make education better every day in every school no matter where students enroll. Our students need not 'us' or 'them,' but we. We, the collective across educational systems and schools, need to collectively innovate, collaborate, and share lessons learned. I dream for both flexibility and foundation to work forward with highest quality standards; that only top-quality charter schools get approved; and that traditional district schools welcome deep and thoughtful restructuring where new ideas from charter, innovation, and magnet schools, work well. I hope for every single educator to have excellent preservice and inservice training that addresses deep needs: the needs of gifted students without stereotypes and dismissal; the needs of students with special education and disabilities without ignorance of strengths; the recognition that a student can have both giftedness and a disability, as 'twice-exceptional' from what most students need; and the needs everywhere for equity for our students of color, and our students with uncertain finances. **My dream is that parents, teachers, and community leaders can discuss specific goals then work together in their community, reaching out to what other schools are learning for these schools of tomorrow.** Our kids cannot afford anything less."



NIKKI MEYERS is the founding and current academy director of the Academy for Advanced and Creative Learning (AcademyACL) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In 2014, Mrs. Myers was inducted into the Colorado Academy of Educators for the Gifted, Talented, and Creative.

"My hope for the next thirty years of charter schools is that they continue to provide options and choices for families and students to thrive. Charter schools have the opportunity to be transformative for families and offer flexibility, freedom, and differentiation to meet individual needs. Charter schools are uniquely positioned to tackle issues of race, equity, and inclusion as we strive to transform the education system to work for all students. **In the next thirty years, charter schools should be exemplars that offer a holistic education that equally focuses on core content and state standards as much as social-emotional learning and twenty-first century skills.** Charter schools and district public schools also have an opportunity to work more closely together to uplift communities and provide families with choice and voice around education."



RYAN FREE is Principal at The Kindezi School- Old Fourth Ward, Atlanta, Georgia (K-8 Public Charter School), M.Ed Educational Leadership, B.A. in Early Childhood Education, 3rd year as Principal, 11 years in education.

ADVOCACY UPDATE

Milestones in Advocacy 2021

Why Educator Advocacy Matters

At the Association of American Educators, we are pleased to continuously serve our members through our advocacy. We know that you are the experts, and we are committed to ensuring that our educators' voices are key influencers when decisions are made. We believe that when our educators are empowered with quality training, critical connections to education partners, and collaboration with like-minded individuals, we can see real change. Your expertise is critical in forming the policies that determine how well you do your noble jobs.

AAE's Theory of Advocacy

Advocacy can often be confused with politics and lobbying. At the Association of American Educators, our philosophy of advocacy is rooted in education. As educators, it is our responsibility to teach, inform, and lead conversations about our profession. Advocacy is something that we each do every day. Whether we are advocating for more cultural inclusion on our campuses, or whether we are advocating for adjustments to the recess schedule, educators are advocates at their core.

Serving You First

As a member of AAE, you have joined an organization that serves tens of thousands of diverse educators across the country. It is with great pride that we represent you at the local, state, and federal levels by educating the public and policymakers. One of the key pillars of our organization is a resolve to prioritize and position the educator voice for direct impact on education policy, and we are pleased to share several of the approaches to educator advocacy that we have effectively implemented this year.

AAEF's 2021 Advocacy Fellowship Cohort

Fifteen educators from across the country have committed to a year-long journey of learning, exploration, advocacy, and action on behalf of their students and their profession. Our advocacy fellows are published writers, esteemed contributors, and leaders of education policy initiatives in their local areas.

AAEF's Letter to Secretary Cardona Supporting Public Charter Schools

Following a transition in leadership, and in a commitment to serving all students well, the Association of American Educators and fifty signatories sent a letter to the Department of Education urging Secretary Miguel Cardona to continue and expand support of our nation's public charter schools. Public charter schools are critical components of public education, and the teachers and students who choose them deserve equitable funding and resources to continue teaching and learning.

Advocacy Training and Professional Development

AAE is committed to delivering ongoing, high-quality advocacy training to its members and the public. AAE has led six advocacy sessions of training to develop educators' voices, deepen educators' commitment to advocacy, and strengthen educators' confidence by sharing their unique voices.

<https://aaeteachers.teachable.com>

(See page 9 for more details on the new professional development portal.)



Micro-Fellowships

In addition to consistently training our educators, AAE has launched an initiative to train even more educators, in a shorter time frame than before. These six-week micro-advocacy fellowships are designed to give busy educators the exposure and confidence they need to be strong advocates for their schools and their profession.

Educator Voices in the Media

The Association of American Educators receives increasing requests for educator voices on various education topics. From school reopening to celebrating successes, AAE members are at the forefront of national conversations about the education field.



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Educator Voices in Congress

AAE continues to support key education legislation. AAE positions educators to uplift their voices in support of policy that directly impacts them.

Hearing From You

AAE is committed to listening to you. Each quarter, we survey you on a myriad of topics, and last quarter we learned that many of you are feeling more hopeful about school reopening and the associated tasks ahead.

National Partnerships

Alongside organizations such as Ed Trust, Aspen Institute, The New Teacher Project, and the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, AAE is committed to ensuring educators across the country represent our diverse student population, are supported in healthy school climates, and are treated fairly as key stakeholders in public education.



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Your Voices Matter

As your chosen professional association, it is our duty to represent you, your experiences, and your voices where they matter most. Our mission is to foster the transformation of the teaching profession by empowering and supporting our community of professionals for the benefit of our students and the nation. Our vision is a teaching profession that is student oriented, well respected, and personally fulfilling. We will achieve this vision with educator voices at the forefront.

We invite you to learn more about how you can leverage your advocacy voice in our new PD platform, and sign up to receive engagement opportunities from AAE advocacy. ■



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.

Meet the New Chairman DeLaina Tonks



The Association of American Educators has elected a new chairman of the board, Dr. DeLaina Tonks. Dr. Tonks has been an AAE member for more than a decade, and she has also served on the Board and the executive committee. With more than twenty-five years of education experience, Dr. Tonks currently serves as the director of Utah's Mountain Heights Academy, promoting collaboration and leveraging technology to improve education.

Tell us about your background in education.

When I was six years old, my family moved to the island of Tahiti for two years. My entire world had been turned upside down, moving from the desert of Utah to the tropical rainforest of French Polynesia, so naturally I was nervous. The first two months in school were a blur. I did not need to understand French to know that the words being hurled at me were not kind. Not being able to communicate in French created an enormous barrier to making friends and learning. My saving grace was my teacher, Ms. Bianca. I could tell she cared about me as she worked to help me learn not just the content but also the language. To my six-year-old self, she was the hero who saved me. Words, then phrases, then concepts fell into place, and within a couple of months I was fluent in French. Being able to communicate meant making friends, and suddenly living in Tahiti became the paradise for me that everyone else imagines it to be. I know personally the difference the kindness of a teacher can make in one student's life. I wanted to do the same for others and decided that I would become a teacher.

I studied French and Spanish at Brigham Young University, and spent thirteen years teaching both languages in Ohio and Utah, in district schools and charter schools, both in-person and online. During my thirteen years in Ohio, I earned a Master of Linguistics: Second Language Acquisition degree from The Ohio State University. When my family moved to Utah, I assisted the founder of Mountain Heights Academy in creating the online charter school where I have been the principal since 2009. Seeing the difference that intentional online teaching and learning can make in the lives of those who need more time, those who can do the work in less time, or any student who does not fit into the traditional one-size-fits-all methods of education inspired me to earn a Ph.D. in Instructional Psychology & Technology from BYU. My research focused on online education as an intervention for special education students. My goals as an administrator include providing a safe haven for students seeking shelter from the storms of life and providing them with

caring teachers as anchor adults, just like Ms. Bianca was for me on a beautiful island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

How did you find out about AAE? Share your experience as a member.

I was searching for a professional teacher association a year before AAE was founded, and it would take many years for our paths to finally cross.

I first learned about AAE in 2008 from a friend who worked there. She invited me to an educators conference in Park City where I met Gary Beckner. As I listened to his passion for education and for elevating the teaching profession, it spoke to my experiences as an educator and I knew I wanted to join immediately, so I did. I am a proud member of this organization that values individual educators as professionals, provides scholarships to innovate, recognizes areas in which educators could use assistance, and works hard to provide insurance options, legal representation assistance, and professional development ideas and resources. I use the AAE Educator Code of Conduct in my professional capacity as a principal and in my work on other education-related boards and commissions.

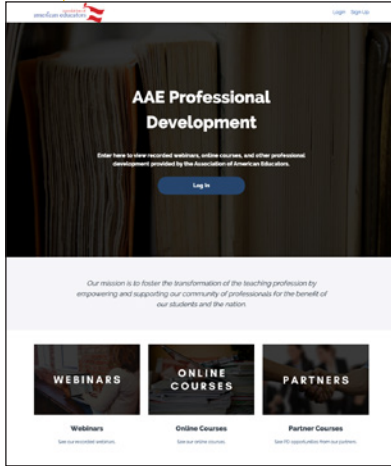
What are you most looking forward to in your new role as chairman of the board?

This transition period in AAE leadership is a time for growth and reflection, which is very exciting. There is a bright light shining on education right now as a result of the pandemic, which allows for innovation that otherwise would have taken years to achieve. I know that AAE educators across America are asking which practices work better with technology, or better asynchronously. For example, did asynchronous learning give normally quiet students a more level playing field to provide thoughtful answers in writing? Were students better able to ask questions with a little more anonymity, without the whole class knowing they did not understand a certain concept? Did flipping instruction highlight inequities that teachers otherwise would not have been able to see? I don't know

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NEW RESOURCE

Professional Development Portal



You can access the new Professional Development Portal by going to <http://pd.aateachers.org>.

Use the coupon code **AAEMember** to access professional development for free!

Questions? Email us at profdev@aateachers.org.

AAE is excited to announce our new Professional Development Portal. Providing this portal is something we've been working toward for a while, and it will make it easier than ever for members to access professional development.

This platform makes the professional development provided by AAE accessible to members as a free benefit. Nonmembers may purchase access to the content. AAE's webinars are recorded and accessible on the platform within a few days. Additionally, AAE is developing several self-paced courses for the new platform. New content is added to the Portal regularly.

This new platform comes with many benefits including:

1. All Your Professional Development Needs in One Place

The new PD Portal puts everything in a single location. You can now easily browse and access webinars and courses.

2. User-Friendly Portal

AAE's new Portal was built using the Teachable platform. This platform allows users to sign up for and access webinars and courses with just a click. As a bonus, the log-in you create for AAE's site can be used on any other professional development site using the Teachable platform.

3. New and Fresh Content

The content offered on the PD Portal is not static. We will continue to update the Portal with new webinars and courses as they become available. With new content being added every couple of weeks, you'll want to check back often.

4. PD Certificates

AAE's PD Portal also makes getting the documentation you need for clock hours easy. Watch your webinar to the end or finish your online course, and an option to download or print a certificate will appear. Of course, if you have questions or need additional documentation, you can always reach us at profdev@aateachers.org.

5. Free to Members

Best of all, all of AAE's professional development content is free to members! Just click on the course or webinar you want and go to the check-out page. Once there, add the coupon code 'AAEMember' and get instant free access.



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.

Children of Military Families Face Challenges Not Always Evident in School

As an educator, I work in a Purple Heart school serving a high number of students from military families, most of whom are connected by at least one parent to Little Rock Air Force Base. I have taught these unique students in preschool through fourth grade as a military spouse myself, while raising two resilient military kids with my husband who is active duty Air Force. My children were both born in Germany, and while they bring diverse cultural experiences to their classrooms, moving and attending new schools does present challenges I never faced growing up.

Each year in April we celebrate the Month of the Military Child as a way to emphasize the important role military children play in the armed forces community. The Month of the Military Child is not only a time to applaud military families and their children for the daily sacrifices they make and the challenges they overcome, but is an opportunity to stress the importance of providing children with quality services and support to help them succeed in the transient military lifestyle.

It is our job as teachers to look for ways to help these students thrive.

Most military children will move between six and nine times before they graduate high school and not every school they will attend is prepared with the understanding of the challenges these students face. Many military kids have traveled the globe with their parents building relationships in different states, countries and multiple continents. They have learned a multitude of hard lessons providing them with the strength to handle nearly anything thrown their way. Military children deal daily not only with these repeated moves, but also with deployments and some even with an injured parent as part of the life into which they were born.

As educators who serve military families, we must make a concerted effort to support an educational system that progressively builds the college and career readiness of these students. As educators serving these resilient students, we must aim to challenge them in ways that maximize their potential while helping them to excel academically, but also socially, emotionally, and physically. It is our job as teachers to look for ways to help these students thrive.

At any grade level, a priority should be placed on cultivating meaningful relationships between these students and school staff including classroom teachers and support members, in addition to guidance counselors and building administrators. We also need to have reasonable expectations and an understanding of their behaviors and attitudes toward education.

These students may arrive at any point in the year and will need clear expectations and guidelines for school and class procedures, as each school they have attended was likely run and organized differently. Military students truly may not know what to expect even as high school students if most of their education was in another state or even country.

Educators must also actively look for learning gaps and areas where a student excels as their previous duty location school most likely used a different curriculum or pacing and planning guide. Peer tutoring with either situation can give these students an opportunity to connect with their peers and begin to form important new friendships and relationships.

April should be used as an opportunity for schools to plan special events to honor military children. I challenge teachers and administrators to incorporate the themes of this month into their everyday school routines, duties and responsibilities. This year more than ever, many military children have had to face new learning from home on top of extended separations from a parent and delayed moves to a new home. The strength and resiliency of military children is truly inspirational. While their experiences and stories are not always the ones found in a book, they are important ones to honor and to tell. ■



Jessica Saum is a native of Columbia, South Carolina but calls Sherwood, Arkansas home. Currently, she is a self-contained special education teacher at Stagecoach Elementary School in Cabot, Arkansas teaching students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Jessica was named "School Teacher of the Year" for 2021. Jessica is a 2021 AAEF advocacy fellow.

This article originally published April 28, 2021 in Education Post <https://educationpost.org/children-of-military-families-face-challenges-not-always-evident-in-school/>

AAEF Grant Winner Wendy Courtney Opens Up the World of Synthetic Biology for Her Students

As the world was gripped by a staggering health crisis, biology educator Wendy Courtney of the Baconton Community Charter School in Baconton, Georgia, knew her students were eager for more challenging content with real-world implications.

She explained in her AAE Foundation Classroom Grant submission the long-ranging benefits receiving this grant would have for her students.

“This grant will help increase the rigor in the high school curriculum while introducing other STEM career possibilities to students by providing at least one resource to introduce synthetic biology/bioengineering. Today’s synthetic biologists are in the early stages of engineering living cells to help treat diseases, sense toxic compounds in the environment, and produce valuable drugs. Based on the BioBuilder curriculum, this valuable book provides open-access, modular, hands-on lessons in synthetic biology for secondary and post-secondary classrooms and laboratories. It also serves as an introduction to the field for science and engineering enthusiasts.

The BioBuilder program provides the only formal curriculum that connects current questions in the field with modular, hands-on investigations that anyone can learn. Aligned with both the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, the BioBuilder curriculum brings modern context to ideas and content



traditionally taught in high school and college classes. At the high school level, it has been used in general, honors, and AP biology as well as in biotechnology classes.

The impact on the students will hopefully be too numerous to specify, but the hope is that it will bring about a new energized interest in the science and engineering field of synthetic biology and bioengineering. Students engaged in this program will potentially become science majors and professionals in the field of synthetic biology to change living cells by reading and writing their DNA with the promise of bringing about life-changing solutions to real world problems such as curing diseases and more.” ■

The next AAEF Scholarship and Grant deadline is October 1, 2021. Find out more at aaeteachers.org/awards.

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the answers to these questions, but I do know that asking questions about what worked well and why is an important turning point in our educational process.

Gary assembled a team of the best and brightest, and I’ve been honored to work with them for the past seven years. I’m looking forward to continuing the good work of Gary and Piete Beckner, the AAE and AAE Foundation board members, and Executive Director Colin Sharkey. Today, more than ever before, educators need the advocacy of an organization that values individual educators and is ultimately interested in the success of each individual student.

In addition to being an experienced educator, what are your other passions?

I was named after my 4th great-grandmother, but DeLaina is an unusual name. Whenever someone remembers my name or pronounces it correctly, that is very meaningful to me. As a result, I have always tried to be conscientious about people’s names and I do my best to remember them, along with something interesting about each person I meet. It has become a useful talent as a teacher and an administrator. I also live in the mountains and love to hike new trails.

AAE Staff Remember Gary Beckner



AAE continues to remember the late Gary Beckner, AAE founder and former chairman of the board. Staff members share their memories of what made Gary Beckner such a phenomenal leader and trailblazer in education.



“Gary was such a talented human being—he could sing, tell engaging stories, was always smiling, and had a gift of making everyone feel special. He was passionate about helping educators across the country know how truly important they are to us all.”

Shanna Morgason, *Membership Team Director*



“I first met Gary in 2005 shortly after becoming an ASTA/AAE member. He always asked for member input, and made me feel important. He always cared about people and how to help school employees learn about this great organization.”

Ronnie Flowers, *Senior Regional Director, ASTA*



“One of my entire family’s fondest memories is from a few years back when we were on a family vacation in California. We had Gary and Piete over for dinner. Gary literally started jumping around with my kids. They were doing 'long jumps' from the lawn out onto the beach sand. I can’t remember if Gary won any long jump rounds but he was front and center. They stayed for dinner and my kids played a game with them where one person started a story and you had to go to the next person at the table and that person continued the story. My son was around 11 at the time and managed to incorporate poop into the story. I was mortified but Gary and Piete thought it was hilarious and kept the story going from there. Their love for and dedication to children was amazing.”

Sharon Nelson, *Senior Director of Legal Services*



“He always — *always* had a smile on his face and an eagerness to serve. His eagerness and focus were contagious and I knew from the moment I met him that I would be working with an organization that kept its mission to serve educators and advance the education profession at the core of everything we do. We won’t let you down Gary, but we miss you every day.”

Christina Mazzanti, *Director of Communications*



“I was deeply saddened by the news of Gary’s death. He was always so kind and welcoming to me. I always looked forward to attending conferences with Gary because I knew we would be in great company, learn a lot, have a ton of laughs, and simply have a fun time. Gary will truly be missed.”

Dana Williams, *State Director, Georgia*



“My best memory of Gary was the warm welcome we received when Michele and I flew out to California to meet them for my orientation. Gary picked us up at the airport and made us feel so welcomed. After the long days of meetings, Gary and Piete would take us out for dinner and sightseeing. The meals were wonderful but the company was even better.”

Margaret Zakrzewski,
Executive Assistant, ASTA



“Gary helped me understand the organization he founded when he presented at KANAAE’s conference in 2019 and continued to learn about my experiences teaching while encouraging me to share those experiences with AAE members through *Education Matters*. He was a cheerful, fun, and happy guy who will sorely be missed.”

Lauren Golubski, *Development Manager, AAE Foundation*



“Gary would call me on my birthday and sing happy birthday to me. He had a fantastic singing voice and it showed how much he cared about me as a person.”

Garry Sigle, *Executive Director, KANAAE*



“I have so much respect for Gary and Piete. They took a leap of faith and started this amazing organization with their own savings. In the process, they created a culture of care — care for educators, care for staff, and care for our families.”

Michele Linch, Ph.D., *Executive Director, ASTA*



“Gary had such a passion for the teaching profession and for AAE. He never wanted us to get comfortable with doing things the same way just because they’d always been done that way. He always urged us to think about the young teachers just entering the profession and what they needed and wanted. I grew so much working under him and AAE benefited from such a forward-thinking founder!”

Melissa Pratt, *Senior Professional Programs Manager*



The Pandemic Creates a Probletunity

We have been preparing for this moment...
The time is now.

Let me begin by first acknowledging your individual and personal accomplishments over the past two academic school years. Congratulations for surviving this past calendar year. Congratulations for keeping your systems flowing, your people safe, and moving forward amidst the chaos. Congratulations for keeping a level head to be present here today.

What has changed for you personally and professionally as a result of your experiences? How will you be different moving forward?

Now is not the time to revert back to old habits or old processes. We must continue the momentum of moving forward into our intentional future.

The change we experienced was a precursor to the real work we have in front of us now. Are you ready? Do you see this opportunity? Reintegration into society is about integrating what we have learned into the current system. In responding to COVID, we demonstrated our ability to do things differently, and most of us moved more actively into the technological world in the process. Now is not the time to revert back to old habits or old processes. We must continue the momentum of moving forward into our intentional future.

We are at the perfect convergence of events for epic change. We can no longer tweak or add onto our current schools as a means to keep up with evolving times. The truth is that these systems were designed for another era. I believe that right now we are in the middle of a "probletunity." COVID has been a problem, but this is like a wake-up call for America. This is an opportunity because our school systems were designed for an environment 100 years ago, and we continuously try to tweak, band aid, reform, make minor adjustments to

fix it. However, the issues that we are seeing today are because the system was designed the way it was.

This is a chance for us to redesign the school system. We have been making slight modifications to the system along the way, but real-world change has outpaced our system modifications. It is time to engage in true dialogue and identify what is needed for a preK-12 educational system and set into motion the design for a new system. Can we agree on the mission of public education? Are we achieving that mission for each student? I believe it is time to bring humanity back into the equation. Yes, it may seem daunting, but if not now, when? If not by you, by whom?

As a leader, I challenge you to take the first step. There has never been a greater time for change leaders to unite and create new systems of inclusive, meaningful, and relevant learning spaces. Seize this moment. ■



Dr. Rabbitt joined Wilkes University in July 2015 as the dean for the School of Education, bringing with her more than twenty years of experience in a variety of educational settings. She began as a public high school Spanish teacher and most recently served as the assistant dean for the School of Education at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Prior to that, Dr. Rabbitt led graduate programming at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse through service in a variety of roles.

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