



THE EDUCATOR

Newsletter of the Arlington Teachers' Association

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'Tis the Season To Voice Your Opinion

Each December an amazing amount of generosity is seen in each of our schools with the donation of items to make the holidays brighter for local families. We go above and beyond our usual purchasing of classroom supplies to contribute to festive gifts and meals for those in our district who may not be able to afford those things themselves.

Physical gifts are added bonuses for the holiday season, but each day we show our students that we care through our thoughtful classroom practices. As a result of that compassion for our students we strive to design our classroom procedures and grading practices in their best interest.

This school year began with a district grading initia-

tive that has left many of us feeling like we're being accused of merely using grades and homework to punish our students. It has also started to cause a divide between veteran educators who are being asked to decide which of their

The ATA Leadership recently sent a letter to the school board (published on the following pages) in order to express our concerns with the district's grading initiative.

practices are "right" so as to standardize them.

Can we assign homework? Should students be allowed to retake tests? Can we give a grade of zero? Should we all weigh our grading categories the same? Who should get to decide this?

The ATA Leadership recently sent a letter to the

school board (published on the following pages) in order to express our concerns with the district's grading initiative. If you have your own concerns, it is imperative that you also speak up; talk to your department head, your principal, or your district coordinator. It is okay to respectfully disagree with a directive from Central Office if you think that it is not in the best interest of your students. Don't

be afraid to take part in conversations that may question top-down mandates. You're the one with classroom experience who is in direct contact with kids every day and your opinion should be valued. This holiday season, give your students the gift of your professional experience.

-Sam Falk, Editor



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Trivia Challenge

Answer the question below correctly and you could be the proud winner of ATA gear!

What city receives the most snow in the world?

Last month's winner, selected as the only correct response received, was **Elise Pattison** from Noxon. She correctly identified **her mother, Lucille Pattison**, as the first female county executive in New York. Elise will be the proud owner of ATA gear.

Submit your answer to the above trivia question to sfalk@acsdny.org by **December 27**. The winner will be randomly selected from the correct submissions.

ATA Letter To the School Board:

December 9, 2019

ACSD School Board

144 Todd Hill Road
LaGrangeville, NY 12540

Dear School Board Members,

As teachers and union leaders, we are concerned with the direction that the district's grading initiative is taking. Therefore, we have come to see the necessity of sharing with you our understanding of the origins of this reform effort; some of the procedural and substantive problems with the proposed changes; and our suggestions about the best way forward, so that we can all work together to ensure that the judgment and experience of Arlington's teachers are respected and the district's students can develop a true passion for learning and not merely a desire for numerical success on a report card.

During a presentation on district initiatives at a recent Board of Education meeting, the deputy superintendent described the push for changes in grading procedures as emerging from a grassroots movement of teachers and as being teacher-led. We believe this statement to be, at best, deeply misleading.

We feel it is important to provide a little history about the beginnings of this process. Three years ago, a grading committee was formed at the high school comprising teachers, counselors, and administrators, the latter group including both middle and high school representatives. The committee met after school on Fridays for an entire school year and discussed important issues surrounding our grading practices and policies. These issues included the ranking system we use to sort students; the role of factoring in honors and AP classes; as well as the utility of the honor roll and principal's list. The conversations were thoughtful, respectful, and informed by hundreds of collective years of experience.

By the end of the school year, the committee had reached a consensus that, if our grading policies should be a tool to inspire student interest and curiosity, and that point-motivated competition often undermined that goal, changes needed to be made. The committee was eager to re-work our ranking system to one that rewards exceptional achievement while at the same time de-emphasizing petty competition and eliminating the structural rewards for gaming the system in an attempt to come out ahead of one's perceived academic rivals. Instead of implementing these changes or continuing the important discussions with different constituents, the committee was summarily disbanded and its ideas discarded. No sufficient explanation was provided as to why this had occurred.

The next year, the district announced that it was forming a new district-wide grading committee to examine possible changes to how we assess students. None of the teachers on the previous committee were invited to participate. Instead, the new group comprised, at least at the secondary level, primarily coordinators and not rank-and-file teachers. This group focused on a new set of grading issues, determined by central administration,

not by the teachers themselves: the use of re-tests, homework policy, etc. The focus of the newly constituted committee on these specific areas of grading was not organic; it was predetermined.

While this second committee spent its meetings discussing these issues, new requirements began to emerge, mandates that were not a reflection of the will of the committee, but simply the priorities of Central Administration. The deputy superintendent sent a letter this fall to all coordinators laying out a timeline of these required changes. First on the list was that all teachers of a particular subject (10th grade English teachers, for example) have to agree to base their grades on the same percentages. For example, 30 percent of the grade would be based on quizzes, 40 percent on tests, etc. The impetus for this requirement was the vague notion that all students should have the same experience no matter their teacher. The reality is that this change would do little to nothing to achieve that goal, while undermining teacher autonomy and, in many cases, making it more difficult for teachers to use their professional discretion to do what is in the best interest of their students.

We fear that there is an assumption on the part of Central Administration that teachers use the freedom they have in the classroom to devise policies to punish students. In reality, the more flexibility we have, the more opportunity there is for us to treat students equitably, something we strive to do every day. We believe that the mandate about percentages, the result of neither a grassroots movement of teachers, nor a reflection of the priorities established by the hand-picked grading committee, is an instrument to increase administrative control, not an initiative to encourage student learning. In fact, before the change was officially announced, there had been only one building-wide opportunity at the high school to talk about this requirement and share our views. There were about 50 or 60 teachers who came to a voluntary meeting with the high school principal and everyone who spoke, dozens of people, expressed their opposition. The response from administration to that feedback was to push ahead with their mandate without making any substantive alterations.

Because of episodes like that, the overwhelming feeling among teachers is that they have been systematically excluded from this process. Asking a teacher how she is going to implement a very specific policy she had no voice in crafting is not providing a meaningful voice to teachers. It is top-down management with a veneer of inclusivity. What teachers are hearing from administration is, "I'll listen to you, as long as you agree with me."

While we recognize that there is a diversity of opinions about grading among the 700 or so members of the ATA, the views expressed in this letter are based not merely on the personal opinions of the ATA leadership, but on what we have learned from scores of conversations with rank-and-file teachers at every level and in every building across the district.

We have never, in our many conversations with teachers across the district, advocated for a blind adherence to the status quo or been resistant to productive change. Any assertion to the contrary is false. We simply want that change to be a reflection of what is important to classroom teachers who are working in the best interest of their students. We think it best to pause, gather information from teachers about what reforms to grading would, in our view, most help realize our district's mission. What policies would help our students focus less on numbers on a report card and inculcate in them a passion for learning and discovery? Let's try to answer those questions together so we can improve how we assess students with genuine buy-in from the very people whose job it is to work with these students every day.

Sincerely,

The ATA Leadership Team

Bob Maier, President
Greg Nieman, 1st Vice President
Steve Hertzog, 2nd Vice President
Dave Cordella, Treasurer
Robert McHugh, Chief Negotiator

Sam Falk, Communications Chair
Kristine Jackson, PR Chair
Brendan Lawler, CAC Co-Chair
Betsy Marshall, CAC Co-Chair

PAGE 4 **ATA Holiday Party 2019**



**Photos by
Kathleen Vogt**



These photos and many more can be found on the ATA's website at www.arlingtonteachers.com

2019 — 2020 ATA Officers

President

Bob Maier

First Vice-President

Greg Nieman

Second Vice-President

Steve Hertzog

Treasurer

Dave Cordella

Chief Negotiator

Robert McHugh

PR Committee Chair

Kristine Jackson

Community Action Chairs

Brendan Lawlor

Betsy Marshall

Welfare Trust Chair

Ron Higgins

Communications Chair

Sam Falk

Senior Building Representatives

ASM — Erica Dunn

BES — Adrienne Pisciotta

NES — Nicolle McMorris

VFES — Gwen Moschetto

OPS — Nancy Thomas

Traver — Diana Judge

JDWR — Betsy Marshall

TIS — Joe Sutka

LMS — Bill Mueller

UVMS — Jim DeBonis

AHS — John Filor

AHS — Noreen Mills Martin

What's Going On?

"What's Going on" is a monthly feature of *The Educator*. It highlights noteworthy accomplishments by ATA members. Do you know of a colleague who deserves recognition? Let *The Educator* know by emailing sfalk@acsdny.org. We can't know what's going on at all of your schools without your help!

Congratulations to the following ATA members for their contributions to the Arlington community and beyond.

Arlington High School

Special Education teacher Michelle Simonetty and her former colleague Christine Schmitt led a speed-learning session titled "Six Useful Tips From a Co-teaching Chameleon" at the Annual Conference For Middle Level Education in Nashville, TN in November. The session was described as "Attendees will hear from a veteran, special education co-teacher who considers herself a 'Co-teaching Chameleon.' If you find yourself having to 'change your colors' in multiple co-teaching partnerships, or are new to co-teaching and have questions, this session is for you! Come hear how this special educator changes her colors without abandoning the beliefs she stands for."



Photo courtesy of Karen Maher

Overlook Primary School

Kindergarten teacher Karen Maher (pictured above, right, with other awardees from around the state) received the New York State Reading Association's 2019 Literature Mini Grant at their statewide literacy conference at the Albany Capital Center in November. The award was in response to a social justice unit she did with her students last year regarding a picture book called *I Walk with Vanessa* in which a character takes a stand against bullying. This grant will provide Maher the opportunity for to purchase additional social justice and equity picture books for her classroom.

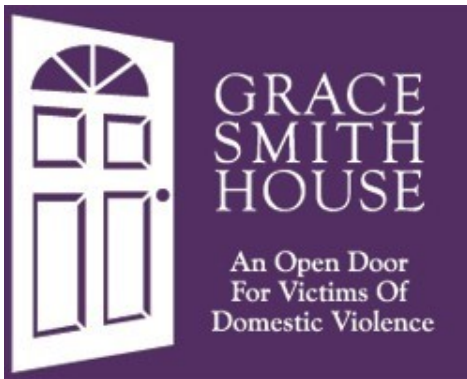
Science teacher Mari-bel Pregnall, working with staff from the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, published an article titled "The joys of teaching ecology in K-12 and informal settings" in the November 2019 issue of the journal *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*.

English teacher Julie Jee was quoted in a recent *Teen Vogue* article about the Hope In a Box organization. This organization donates boxes of LGBTQ-inclusive books and curriculum resources to schools. Regarding

her students' experience with the box she received, Jee said, "It's been really nice for them to either understand the experiences of characters that identify as LGBT or see themselves reflected in the literature around them. I think we have an idea of what is quote-unquote normal in society, and students that identify as LGBT feel that they aren't part of that normal. When we have books that identify their identities, it's an affirming way of letting them know that they

See Great on Page 7

Dress Down Day Raises Over \$2000 For Grace Smith House



once again the ATA came through with generosity and good cheer. On November 26, many schools in the district participated in a dress-down day to benefit the Grace Smith House in Poughkeepsie, a non-profit domestic violence agency offering shelter, advocacy, counseling, and preventative education.

Collectively, the ATA was able to raise \$2,535 as well as donate toiletries and homemade quilts to give to the clients of

the Grace Smith House. The ATA is proud to help members within our own community through these fundraising efforts and good works we continue to do throughout the year. The PR committee extends wishes of good cheer and peace to all members in the New Year and thanks everyone for all you do to make this a wonderful place to work.

-Kristine Jackson, PR Chair

'Tis the season for giving, and

ATA Members Do Great Things In the Community

Continued from Page 6
belong, they're heard, they're reflected, and they're part of the normal."

Arthur S. May School

Physical education teachers Christopher Keenan and Wendy Kane used a PTA grant to purchase a subscription to EZScan, a digital mileage tracking program, for their Mileage Club, an alternate recess activity for students who wish to participate. Students are assigned their own Mileage Club scanner card and simply run, jog, or walk around the recess

track, scan their card with the Mileage Club app (that is on a tablet posted near the recess trail) and the software keeps track of their progress. Keenan and Kane started the Mileage Club when they were in the Raymond Avenue building, but reintroduced this alternate recess activity during fall PE classes so the kids would know what to do at recess. The mileage scanners were also put to use during the school's 2019 Turkey Trot, which took place on November 26.

Beekman Elementary

Band director Leanne Sowul will be reading her personal essay "The Band Room" on stage at Lincoln Center on January 4, as part of the New York Public Library's collaboration with Read650. It is a free event that will also be available via Facebook Live.

Vail Farm Elementary

Special Education teacher Kristen Mateja was chosen as the Amigo Games October Teacher of the Month. She received a prize pack of many board games which she will use with her board game club.



Photo by Kristine Jackson

Magical Movie Morning

The ATA's second annual Magical Movie Morning was held at Roosevelt Cinemas in Hyde Park on October 26. Over 100 people came out to watch *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and many ATA members gave their time, exemplified by those pictured at left. Local businesses and individuals donated to the cause, and there were refreshments and raffle tickets for sale. As a result of the event over \$2300 was donated to the Arlington Education Foundation.

Dates to Remember



DECEMBER

23-31st—Winter Recess - No School

JANUARY

1st—Winter Recess - No School

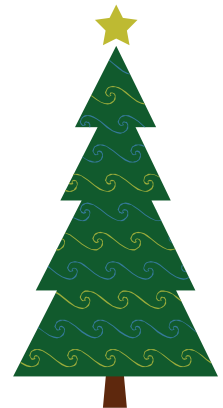
14th—Board of Education Meeting & Budget Workshop, 7 p.m., NOX

20th—Martin Luther King Day - No School

21st—ATA Executive Council Meeting, 4 p.m., AHS Room 1432

21-24th—Regents Week

28th—Board of Education Meeting, 7 p.m., VF



FEBRUARY

1st—Deadline for June 2020 Retirement Decisions

11th—Board of Education Meeting & Budget Workshop, 7 p.m., JDWR

14-17th—Presidents' Day Weekend - No School

18th—ATA Executive Council Meeting, 4 p.m., AHS Room 1432

25th—Board of Education Meeting, & Budget Workshop 7 p.m., CAO



Announcements

Stay informed! *Like* us on Facebook or check out www.arlingtonteachers.com for forms, photos, calendars, and more.

The staff of
The Educator would like
to wish all ATA
members a happy and
healthy
holiday season.

CAC Co-Chair Needed

Community Action Committee Co-Chair Betsy Marshall is stepping down as she nears retirement and is looking for someone to replace her. Please contact Marshall at JDWR or Co-Chair Brendan Lawler at AHS to learn more about the position.