Social Justice in the Classroom

12 Members Save Big Money
18 Alternative Education and You
“So you can’t verify my dad’s stork story?”

“You mean that’s it? Listen to my teachers?”

“Class, I feel it’s my duty to inform you that due to snow days, the end of the school year is going run past the end of my rope.”
COVER STORY
Joining Hands
Race, social justice and equal opportunity in your classroom.

FEATURES
Cha-Ching!
Association members save big bucks.

Time Well Spent
Creating teacher-led professional development.

Shifting Gears
Alternative education can offer a new, positive step for both students and teachers.

Spotsy Lends a Hand
SEA members’ community service activities are making an impact.

DEPARTMENTS
On Point
My journey through NBPTS certification.

Speaking of Education
Reading, driver’s education and more.

Ten Minutes With…
Arlington’s Miles Carey.

VEA News & Advocacy
Results of VEA public polling.

Your Classroom
Energizing your classroom.

First Person
Writing can be a ‘zoo.’

Cover illustration: Brian Hubble
My Journey Through NBPTS Certification

— Natalie W. Randolph

Why I pursued National Board Certification. As a child I always challenged myself academically. In reflection, I now understand I was setting goals. I have continued setting goals throughout my professional career.

I learned about National Board Certification from a colleague who was going through the process. She is an excellent teacher and I was drawn to the methodology when I watched a video she recorded of her class. The approach fascinated me and the professional development met my personal criteria of learning something new and challenging myself. As a career-switcher, I always look for ways to improve my instruction. I want to make sure I’m marketable, but also knowledgeable in education and, specifically, in exceptional education.

The certification process was both intriguing and frightening to me. I was excited about a process that would help me strengthen my skills and promote student achievement. I decided to attend the interest session hosted by my school division, and found the room full of educators with lots of energy, anticipation and curiosity. There were people from all aspects of education, including counselors, teachers and administrators. It was exciting and I was hooked. I decided that day to pursue the process.

The journey begins. I decided to step out on faith and so I began. Once I started, I had no idea what to expect. It was frightening because the process was so rigorous and I was concerned about the “what-ifs.” The biggest what-if: “What if I don’t achieve certification?” As I went through the process, I discovered it advances the quality of your teaching whether you achieve or not. I also found out you have three years to complete the certification. Scores can be banked and portions of the process can be redone. My school division helped offset the cost, which was expensive.

I joined a cohort made up of educators from four local school divisions, sponsored by a local university. This group was extremely helpful as we labored through the journey. We completed homework assignments every week, along with extra meetings. This strategy was helpful because we were able to give constructive feedback to each other all the way through the process. It’s challenging to share your strategies, lessons and classroom with fellow teachers across districts. We formed our own subgroup in this certification area of exceptional education, two from my district and two from surrounding districts. We formed our own subgroup and planned extra meetings. This strategy was helpful because we were able to give constructive feedback to each other all the way through the process. It’s challenging to share your strategies, lessons and classroom with fellow teachers from across districts. We put in hours of writing, reflecting, analyzing and rewriting. In the end, two of us achieved certification and two did not.

Benefits of the journey. I was inspired by the idea that the certification is recognized across the country. I know how fluid education is in the 21st century and the idea of collaborating with colleagues across states was exciting to me. Accountability for teachers is paramount for school systems and networking with teachers across divisions energized me. I learned so much working with other teachers in the cohort.

We shared lessons, websites, strategies and other resources, and often had to encourage and support each other during the journey. We were able to find ways of reinventing the wheel with small adjustments on what we were already doing in our classrooms. Reflecting on everything we did in our classroom became second nature to us. The light bulb in our heads went off and we understood the key to the process of National Board Certification, which is being a reflective practitioner. This was the greatest benefit of the entire experience, whether you achieve certification or not.

I will never be the same teacher since I have gone through the process. I reflect on everything I do in my classroom, with my students’ families, colleagues, and in the community. It’s definitely a win-win process. The goal is to achieve certification, but it is also the greatest professional development I have engaged in during my teaching career. It gave me an opportunity to network with accomplished teachers across the country, it supports student achievement, and it identifies teacher leaders in our schools. I decided to renew my certification at the end of my eighth year (2015) and achieved a renewal for another 10 years. Teachers leading from the classroom is the trend in education, and National Board Certification supports that philosophy.

Randolph, NBCT, a member of the Henrico Education Association, is a Critical Response Teacher- BLISS (Behavior Learning, Intervention and Support Services) at Elko Middle School.
“The most critical skill for success in school or in life is the ability to read well…I can’t say enough about allowing kids to choose the books they want to read, just like adults do.”
— Judy Newman, president, Scholastic Book Club

“Over the past 20 years, we have seen a disturbing rise in the over-criminalization of childhood behaviors that were once handled almost exclusively through the school disciplinary process. Behaviors that once would have led to in-school detention are now leading to incarceration in alarming numbers.”
— Virginia Delegate Jennifer L. McClellan

“Just as new drivers need an education course before they’re allowed to get behind the wheel, young people need guidance from both school and parents to learn digital-citizenship skills.”
— James P. Steyer, founder, Common Sense Media

“Public education is nothing short of bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice with each student that we teach.”
— Harriet Sanford, president, The NEA Foundation

“As a child advocate, I believe that what happens to the kids down the street and those across town has an impact on my family. Whether my daughter’s schoolmates and students throughout the region live in supportive families and communities and succeed in school has a big impact on our quality of life.”
— Margaret Nimmo Crowe, executive director, Voices for Virginia’s Children

“We need to honor the impact teachers make. It’s incredible. It would be foolish not to support them.”
— Elizabeth Green, author, Building a Better Teacher

“This notion that everything can be fixed by fixing what’s happening in the classroom or fixing the teacher, people miss what’s happening around us. It’s all context.”
— Ta-Nehisi Coates, author and national correspondent at The Atlantic
Detailed and in-depth.

Our in-depth, clearly structured education programs for grades K-12 prepare students for life, helping them develop an informed curiosity and a lasting passion for learning.

Learn more at: cie.org.uk
What is a typical school day like for you?
My classroom is one of the more relaxed ones and we usually have music playing—every Friday is “Disney Friday!” The windows let in enough sun that I rarely turn on my lights, so the only artificial light sources are the aquarium and terrarium. My first prep is Environmental Science, which thankfully does not have an SOL tied to it, so I’ve got no strings! Next is Earth Science, which is an SOL course, but we still have fun with labs and activities along with the notes and tests. After that, I serve lunch! Yes, you read that right. Our small program doesn’t have a formal kitchen or cafeteria, so we get the bare necessities from a nearby elementary school. Before we did this, students had to pick from nearby fast food or, if they were on free or reduced lunch, sometimes go hungry. After lunch, a planning period! My last period of the day is either Physics or Chemistry, depending on the semester. This year I’ve been putting a lot of effort into getting away from pre-written labs.

For some reason, the procedures are just never straightforward to everybody so at least some of the students (and occasionally me) are confused. Now I give them a simple task and let them spend some time putting together their own experiment. For example, I’ll tell them to prove Newton’s Second Law. By this point we’ve done a few labs so they’re familiar with the equipment, so they start puzzling out how to record data, make calculations, and prove that force really does equal mass times acceleration. The students feel so accomplished when the data comes out and they finish. One last insight into Langston: the staff here agrees that we’re crazier than the students.

What do you like about your job?
Like most educators, I’m here for the kids. My program welcomes students with challenges including drug abuse, depression, anxiety, troubled home lives, homelessness, pregnancy, criminal history, identity crises (often related to race or LGBTQ issues), and so on. It makes for an interesting, sometimes tough job, but the rewards definitely outweigh the rough days. I love the challenge and reward I don’t think I’d find at most schools. Graduation day here is one of the most emotionally charged events I’ve ever seen; a small, close-knit family sharing a moment as our kids walk across the stage on a day some thought might never come.

What is hard about your job?
It’s really just the downside to what I love about it: When the challenge is too great, and we as a program cannot help a student. When we fail, we usually lose the student from public education entirely, as we’re basically a last resort when life just gets in the way of a student graduating. Sometimes we see them back in a year or two, but not always.

What are some of the most fun and unusual things that have happened on the job?
The Express Yourself Cafe! It’s our own little talent show where staff and students put together bands, read poetry, teach dance moves, and anything else you can imagine. We share out with a community center, so event usually includes some of the senior citizens downstairs. They crush us every year in Wii Bowling, and I think their dance team is in national competitions.

How has being an Association member been helpful to you?
A few years ago, the School Board and Superintendent were planning to cut 80 percent of our funding and merge us into another building, effectively ending the program as we knew it. But we rallied staff, students, parents and alumni to flood meetings and office hours with stories and pleas. The Association had our backs and gave us the skills to organize, not only saving my job, but keeping this program around to help hundreds of future students who might need it.
Joining Hands
Race, social justice and equal opportunity in your classroom.

By Joy Lawson Davis, Ed.D.
In today’s world, it is every educator’s task to help shape a generation of young people who are ‘racially just’ in word and deed.
responsive educators should know. Understanding these terms is a first step in beginning to have very important conversations about race that teachers need to have. Knowing this kind of vocabulary can also help teachers design and implement social justice curricula across content areas. Here are a few helpful terms:

- **Code switching:** Shifting and mixing languages or patterns of speech depending on who we’re conversing with; reflexive, subtle changes in speech, expression patterns. ([www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch))

- **Colorblind:** The belief that the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture or ethnicity. Can be a form of racism by denying history of discrimination. ([www.psychologytoday.com/em/83528](http://www.psychologytoday.com/em/83528))

- **Implicit bias:** Attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect our understanding, actions and decisions, both favorably and unfavorably, leading to attitudes about others people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age and appearance. ([http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/](http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias/))

- **Microaggressions:** Brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by whites, some who are unaware, others who intentionally aim to hurt and offend. ([www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life))

- **Multiculturalism:** An ideology that acknowledges, highlights and celebrates ethno-racial differences, recognizing each tradition has something valuable to offer. It is not afraid to see how others have suffered as a result of racial conflict or differences.

- **White privilege:** A socio-cultural term describing benefits white people have on a daily basis beyond those of other groups. White privilege can exist without white people's conscious knowledge and helps maintain the racial hierarchy in the United States.

Incorporating social justice issues into your curriculum gives students a chance to discuss race and how it affects their lives. Many students are deeply concerned about racial discrimination, injustices against their fellow human being, how laws are designed, systemic discrimination and the impact on society in the past, today and the future. Many social justice giants began their activism as adolescents facing difficult situations in their own communities.

Some of the best lessons I’ve learned about race, culture and social justice over the years have come from frank conversations with my students and from reading their heartfelt autobiographies about their own experiences with bias, discrimination, privilege, micro-aggressions and stereotyping. Lawrence Blum’s book on *High Schools, Race and America’s Future* provides excellent ideas and feedback on lesson plans that he designed for a high school.

### Social Justice Resources

Education advocates are also, by definition, social justice advocates. Here are two more places to look for information and assistance:

- **Teaching Tolerance**, a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center, is an educational outreach offering free material to teachers designed to reduce prejudice and support equitable school experiences for all. Curriculum kits and publications are free. Learn more at [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org).

- **NEA's Diversity Toolkit** is a collection of online resources, including basic information, strategies, tools and suggestions on the many aspects of diversity. Access the toolkit at [www.nea.org/tools/diversity-toolkit.html](http://www.nea.org/tools/diversity-toolkit.html).
course of the same title.

About seven years ago, I began teaching an undergraduate course titled “Curriculum and Instructional Strategies for Diverse Learners,” which has been an opportunity to use some excellent resources I gathered over the years related to diverse students and discrimination in education. The course covers ideas and research on topics such as critical race theory, white privilege, racial identity, poverty, gender issues, micro-aggressions, the history of schooling in America, implicit bias, and stereotype threat—all very important constructs to understand in order to reach and teach an increasingly diverse student body.

This course is mandatory at our university for all elementary, secondary and special education majors. I taught a similar mandatory course at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette a few years ago. I’ve come to learn, however, that such courses are not mandatory in all teacher education programs. As a result, I believe too many new teachers enter classrooms with little or no knowledge of the complexities of addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. When they go into the classroom, those teachers are responsible for children whose experiences, traditions, values, strengths and historical legacy they may only understand in a limited way. That can make those teachers less likely to reach their students in a meaningful, substantive way and less likely to empathize with their daily living conditions.

That shouldn’t be the case. Classroom teachers can become leaders in the social justice movements in our society by making their classrooms “race-safe” spaces where students feel comfortable being who they are, where they feel respected and valued, and where there are opportunities to speak openly about issues that matter most to them. Such an environment is also one where there is no tolerance for stereotyping, name-calling, or denigrating of individuals or groups.

In today’s world, it is every educator’s task to help shape a generation of young people who are “racially just” in word and deed, who contribute positively to conversations and to action-oriented projects designed to help those whose needs are overlooked, and who have the skills to bring our society to a higher, more transcendent level. Will it be a challenge to do this? Yes, it will. But as those responsible for developing the minds and shaping the conscience of a nation, I believe it’s a challenge well worth working for.

Dr. Davis is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Teacher Education at Virginia Union University’s Syphax School of Education, Psychology and Interdisciplinary Studies.

Bringing a sense of social justice to your students and your classroom sounds like a lot to accomplish, but VEA can help. Here are three workshops the Association offers state educators:

- **Diversity.** Participants explore the evolution of diversity and its impact, and learn to recognize ways that cultural values affect a person’s worldview and behavior.

- **Cultural Competence.** This training challenges educators to examine and strengthen their own teaching practices so that every student, from every culture we encounter in school, has the opportunity to be successful.

- **Conflict Resolution.** This covers effective strategies and the appropriate use of those strategies in intergroup and interpersonal situations involving conflict.

To learn more about these workshops or to schedule one in your area, visit the “Training and Workshops” section of the “In the Classroom” heading on the VEA website, www.veanea.org, or email workshops@veanea.org.
ACROSS THE BOARD

- **VEA Access to Savings Program**
  Members are entitled to big discounts, up to 50 percent, on just about anything at selected retailers, restaurants, grocery stores and more. You can register and either download the app or use the service online at [https://vea.accessdevelopment.com](https://vea.accessdevelopment.com).

- **NEA Click & Save**
  NEA Member Benefits has gathered all of the top brands and merchandise into one place where you'll get exclusive pricing. Visit [www.neamb.com](http://www.neamb.com) and go to the “Click & Save” tab.

**AUTO AND PROPERTY INSURANCE**

- **California Casualty**
  The NEA® Auto and Home Insurance Program provided by California Casualty offers special rates that have been shown to save members significant money. To request a free consultation, contact Senior Field Marketing Manager Scott McKenna at 1-866-853-0161 or [www.calcas.com/smckenna](http://www.calcas.com/smckenna).

- **Horace Mann**
  Members get special pricing on car and property insurance.

**BOOKS, MAGAZINES AND MORE**

- **Barnes and Noble**
  The B&N Educators Discount gives PreK-12 educators and librarians 20 percent off publisher’s list price on select purchases for classroom use, including most hardcover and paperback books, toys and games and up to 25 percent off during Educator Appreciation Days.

- **Books Warehouse**
  Show your teacher ID or similar document and fill out an Educator’s Card to join the free Books Warehouse Educators’ Book Club to save 15 percent on purchases.

- **National Geographic**
  Educators can purchase past issues for $3 per issue instead of $6. Read their FAQ for details and for information on additional resources.

- **NEA Magazine Service**
  Choose from over 900 selections at the guaranteed lowest introductory price available.

- **The New York Times**
  An education rate is available to K-12 educators.
CLASSROOM SUPPLIES AND RESOURCES

• **A.C. Moore**
  Present your school ID, pay stub or other qualifying identification to get 15 percent off regular and sale prices on arts and crafts supplies.

• **Blick for Educators**
  Dick Blick offers discounts, coupons, lesson plans and more on art and classroom supplies for schools.

• **Jo-ann Teacher Rewards**
  Save 15 percent on purchases at Jo-ann Fabric and Craft Stores with their teacher rewards discount card.

• **Michael’s**
  Save 15% on in-store purchases. See an associate for details.

• **Office Depot/Office Max**
  The Give Back to Schools Program lets you give your PreK-12 public or private school 5 percent of the purchase price on qualifying school supplies.

• **Party City**
  Provide a signed letter from your administration and receive a 10-20 percent discount on in-store purchases.

• **Pencils.com**
  Save 10 percent with their educator discount program.

• **Staples Teacher Rewards**
  Sign up and get 5 percent back in rewards, plus 10 percent back on teaching and art supplies.

• **A to Z Teacher Stuff**
  Get low prices on teaching eBooks and ready-to-use classroom activities with no membership or shipping fees. Many downloads are free.

• **E-Seedling**
  A complete curriculum for teaching entrepreneurship to kids age 10 and up is available to teachers at an introductory price of $119. Join the mailing list to get a $20 off promo code.

• **Every Kid in a Park**
  Are you a fourth-grade educator? You can get free passes to national parks for your student. These passes give them free access to all national parks, lands and waters through August 31, 2016.

• **Lesson Planet**
  Search 400,000+ teacher-reviewed and rated online lesson plans and worksheets! NEA member get 20 percent off a subscription.

• **“Make Your Point” Vocabulary Builder**
  Boost your own vocabulary or help your students improve theirs with a free daily email subscription.

• **OpenEd**
  More than a million K-12 assessments, homework assignments, videos, games and lesson plans are available free.

• **PBS Learning Media**
  Register free for access to thousands of classroom-ready, curriculum-targeted, digital resources and lesson plans.

DINING OUT

**Restaurant.com**
Get special member pricing on dining certificates through NEA Click & Save.

ELECTRONICS AND SOFTWARE

• **Bose products**
  Members save up to 15 percent on Bose products including music systems, surround sound systems, headphones, earbuds and portable music devices for home and school.

• **NEA Wireless Program**
  Save 15 percent on AT&T cellphone service for you and your family.

HOME GOODS

• **NEA Member Benefits Home Store**
  Get special pricing at Macy’s, Sears, Kohl’s, Bed Bath & Beyond, Home Depot, Williams-Sonoma and more through NEA Click & Save.

• **NEA Member Benefits Food & Wine Store**
  Get exclusive pricing on items from Omaha Steaks, Harry & David, Lindt Chocolate and more.

GIFTS

• **1800Flowers.com**
  1800Flowers.com

And, like we said, this is just a sampling. Go to the NEA Click & Save section of the NEA Member Benefits website, www.neamb.com.
We rush through another Tuesday, with a modified schedule, where students are released at 1:30 p.m. and teachers prepare for the next “tool” to add to the proverbial “tool belt,” and already I have a headache.

I should be happy. At least professional development is being held during the school day this year. We aren’t getting cancellation notices on Outlook every other week. Oh no! We meet, whether we need to or not, because if we don’t, “it would be a disservice to the parents who accommodate for the early release of their children.”

Administrators means well. They get pressure from above to “carve out the time and hold those teachers accountable to attend.” Our administrators believe that PD time is important. Here’s the problem: we have a mixed group of seasoned and brand-new teachers. Some of them were born to teach, while others stay for the time off in the summer. Some join everything, take on coaching positions, set up student clubs. Others enjoy getting a chance to leave work before it gets dark. There are varying degrees of commitment and skill.

I do believe teachers are born and not made. Just like our classrooms, where the needs of our students vary greatly from student to student, so do the needs of teachers.
We are expected to differentiate our instruction when teaching. So, then, it is only fitting and necessary to differentiate the needs of our teachers when it comes to professional development.

I’ve never been a fan of one-size-fits-all. I’m not even a fan of one-size-fits-most. Without differentiation, professional learning starts looking more like mandated compliance than true development. Seasoned teachers often sit in PD that covers the most basic teaching strategy. I’ve found myself on more than one occasion wanting to scream at the top of my lungs “Hey! I’ve had that tool in my tool belt for, like, ever! Why am I here?”

I’ve voiced my concerns, only to be answered with, “Now, now, even if we learn one new thing, it’s worth it.” I wonder how well that would go over if I said that to the parents of my students who are ahead?

Something has to change. I’m talking about something drastic...

How about the “new and improved Many-Sizes-Accommodate-All Method?” In collaboration with several other seasoned teachers, a few colleagues and I took our own time after working hours to develop a PD system that could actually work. It started with the essential question, “What could teacher PD look like if it were differentiated and led by teachers who were experts in that content area?” It would take a simple glance at the teachers’ observations to see where they stood out, and then they would be given time to create PD around that content.

For example, one colleague is exceptional at providing effective Content Language Objectives, something that, as a district, we have to post daily. She writes them so students can understand what we are going to do today, what we are going to do it to, and what supports we will use to do it. This format might look something like this:

What are we going to do today? We are going to practice keyboarding without the monitor turned on, to practice not looking at our hands and focus on our text copy.

We are going to do that to the text on page 117, “The Formal Business Letter.”

And our supports will be Word 2013, the computers, the textbook, teacher and student collaboration.

Many teachers struggle with the format, Bloom’s taxonomy and the function of this process, but my colleague is very effective in explaining it, and at the end of a brief time one-on-one with her, she can get you to write amazing CLOs. She should teach a session of that in PD! It would sure beat her having to take time out of her planning to teach others one-on-one.

If PD looked more like a summer conference, where teachers were given a menu ahead of time, even including pre-reading, and break-out sessions, they could choose which areas they would wish to focus on and which PD sessions to attend.

I liken it to an independent walk through Home Depot, where we intentionally fill our own tool belts with tools that fit, ensuring we are armed with the right tool for the right job, and no one is walking around with two identical hammers.

We must also recognize that not every tool belt needs to be exactly the same, either. I am an electives teacher, and I have sat through so much PD geared only to math and English teachers. I get the things I need specific to my content when I get the chance to meet with other singletons in district meetings—which happens very infrequently. I also attend conventions and seminars specific to my content. It would be silly to ask teachers outside my content area to sit in on my summer conventions, much like it is silly to ask the same of me.

In thinking about professional development, we need to address the way it is delivered, given that there is very little evidence to support that it is effective in its current form. This paradigm shift needs to challenge the status quo that PD should be delivered by administrators (who have been out of the classroom for how long?), thus putting an end to top-down instruction, and must be built from within.

Teachers know what teachers need, and we have already seen the benefits of peer mentoring and instruction. The best thing administrators can do for teachers is trust them to attend professional development, stop micro-managing the ways it “should” be developed, and give the seasoned teachers who show mastery over different areas the time and stage to develop other teachers. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Who in your building seems to be an “expert” teacher that most all go to for help?
2. What technique, process, program, etc. do you feel you have an excellent grasp on and how would you deliver that to others?
3. How can we maximize the time we set aside for PD to really have it mean something and in what ways can we measure its lasting effects?

Martinez is a technology and career and technical education teacher in Colorado. Reprinted with permission from the Center for Teaching Quality (www.teachingquality.org), home of the Collaboratory, a virtual community of individuals who value teacher leadership.
Shift happens.
We’re educators, so we know that just like all of our students are not identical, all teaching is not the same. To succeed, we have to imagine the possibilities for all our students and then devise a plan to make it happen. Often, this means a shift from a more traditional mindset of learning to a more blended approach: No one formula fits all. Far better is an underlying, transparent approach to individualizing to meet student needs.

I could say it this way: If you plant a flower, and its blooms turned out to be less distinctive and beautiful than we knew they could be, would you just pluck it out and hope it does better next year? Not if you’re a good gardener. You’d create a strategic design to uproot the bulb and its roots and replant it, perhaps in better soil, with better drainage and better light. I think it would be a great idea for educators to think of themselves as gardeners within their classrooms.

One very significant shift in the education world is to an alternative classroom. Once viewed as one of education’s ugly stepchildren, alternative education is beginning, more and more, to be seen for what it truly can be—a positive alternative.

That alternative can take many forms, depending on your community. Some see alternative education as a dumping ground for the chronic absentees, fighters, disciplinary challenges, or other extremely difficult students in a county. It doesn’t have to, and shouldn’t, be that way. An alternative placement can be a real alternative—a shift from more traditional styles of pacing and lecturing that don’t necessarily work for all students. It can be a shift towards blended
learning and career readiness, rooted in understanding an individual young person’s needs. There can be a shift from teacher and class to a student-driven, individualized approach. There can even be a shift from negative behaviors to positive worth and improved self-esteem and, often, there is a shift from being one of many at one’s base school to one of a few reaching for success in an alternative setting.

Shifting needs to happen—even for educators. Teaching in an alternative setting can mean shifting into an emphasis on project-based assessment as a way to hook traditionally non-successful students and helping them develop a new mindset about education and learning.

As a 19-year veteran teacher of English and journalism, I shifted, asking for a transfer to our alternative education program two years ago. Although it was very difficult for me to move from the comfort zone of the journalism program and the relationships I’d built, it was time. I had helped the journalism program make the transition to a student-run organization, and I knew the student staff could operate without me. So I shifted.

Understanding how alternative education works required much shifting—gearing down before gearing up—in my own planning in order to fully understand. It is a mindset, just like the traditional teaching role I left, except now the decisions are individualized instead of collective.

As a teacher in a traditional setting, I had to focus on all the students at one time. Everyone read the same story on the same day, and each student turned in writing prompts, all 30 of them on the same topic, and there was a folder for missing work that housed handouts. Although there was differentiated instruction, there was minimal focus on the actual student. Yes, I cared for my students in English, but I must admit, my heart was with my journalism students. I did more than teach the curriculum I wrote; I applied it to their lives. I tried to instill the love of writing and photography in them.

I got to see how much my journalism class knew and could realistically do on their own when I needed to miss school. I was shocked. They shifted their gears upward, and demonstrated they could perform without me guiding them. When I returned, it was if I had not missed a day, so I knew it was time for a change. So, as my editor graduated I did, too, in a sense…I transferred to alternative education.

I was immediately asked by others, “Why would you want to go there?” And to their dismay, I replied that I asked to go. In shifting, I had to change the way I taught. I needed to approach this teaching as I did teaching journalism. I needed to learn about the student and his or her ability level in order to figure out how to help them. This is no different than the summative and formative data collected in any school, except that now data allowed me to plan individually. This required thinking outside-the-box, and in doing so, it created differentiation through blended learning with the help of online platforms and hands-on learning. I thought about learning centers and how that worked in younger grades, and implemented them. I thought about reward systems and implemented them. Most importantly, I thought about what would allow these students, who may be coming from dysfunctional homes and have experienced some degree of trauma, to succeed. I thought about self-esteem and self-confidence and ways to build what I saw lacking. I had to change the soil in which these blooms were trying to grow. I needed to figure out how to make this work for me and for the students I serve.

I have learned now when to shift and which gear and with whom. It is all about approach. Teachers in traditional schools can implement this, too. Thinking about the bigger picture and realizing that not all students learn the same way on the same day, or are interested in the same novel, would allow teachers to individualize the instruction. Yes, it is more difficult to maintain, and yes, it is more preparation up front, but it is more meaningful for success. I now manage 6-12th grade through individualized approaches.

I encourage others to think outside the box, to rethink how you’re teaching. Reflect on your bulbs. Are they growing well? Is the gardener growing? Shifting has allowed me to improve as a teacher, planner and leader. Embrace the shift and the changes it will bring, and if you have not considered alternative education, think about uprooting and making your shift now.

Edwards, a member of the Culpeper County Education Association, teaches at Trier Alternative Services, the county’s Alternative Placement Program.
People who work in our public schools, whether they know it or not, have become foot soldiers in the war on poverty: they work with young people and families in need every day. Members of the Spotsylvania Education Association do know it, and take that mission very seriously.

For years now, SEA has ignored classroom boundaries, working through its Community Outreach Committee to help with the basic needs many Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg citizens struggle to meet.

“Our members have a strong passion for this kind of work,” says Renee Beverly, a special education teacher at Chancellor Middle School and former SEA president. “They’ve seen so many students going without.”

SEA has held drives for a local homeless shelter, gathering clothes, shoes and canned goods; for a nearby domestic violence shelter, collecting detergents, paper products and clothing; for the Boys and Girls Club, providing school supplies; and for a county agency that serves homeless families, supplying clothing, ethnic hair products, school supplies and materials for its food pantry.

In addition, SEA members volunteer at a local food bank.

At Thanksgiving and Christmas, SEA also provides full holiday meals for five families in need, who are identified by Association member Sharon McCurdy, a school social worker. In a difficult commentary on our times, SEA holiday activities now also include helping out some of its own members, usually part-time workers in transportation.

Beverly notes that educators at all levels—elementary, middle and high school—take part. “People want to know when the next project is,” she says. “They’re eager to help.”

SEA’s efforts grew largely out of Beverly’s experiences involving her own family in community service activities. Her two children are grown now, but when they were younger, she’d take them to volunteer at a homeless shelter. Later, she helped form SEA’s Community Outreach Committee, which she then chaired for several years.

“The reception among our members was great and, over
time, our efforts have grown to include several different agencies,” says Beverly, the 2014 winner of VEA’s Mary Hatwood Futrell Award. “SEA has become known as a big community supporter and we’re definitely having a big impact.”

She sees an essential role for community service because economic survival is so precarious for many families. “Being in need can happen to anyone,” she says. “Almost all the people we help had jobs at one time. Now they need help and we’re trying to act on that. You just feel so good when you see you’ve made a difference.”

Virginia Education Association members, including Beverly, are also taking community service efforts a step beyond. Each year at the National Education Association convention, Virginia delegates from around the state work in social service agencies in the convention’s host city. Beverly serves as VEA’s state contact to help coordinate efforts with other delegations, and in the last several years, VEA delegates have worked in homeless shelters and food banks in cities including Chicago, Denver, San Diego and Orlando.

Both in the Spotsylvania area and beyond, Beverly and her colleagues are finding ways to go above and beyond. “When you see specific needs,” she says, “you just want to help. Community service is a form of activism and it’s a form of giving back.”

Allen is the editor of the Virginia Journal of Education.
Public Backs Better School Funding; Association Takes to Airwaves

Two out of every three Virginians believe the state’s public schools are underfunded, and the same percentage also say teachers are underpaid, according to a VEA poll taken earlier this year.

“You see, the public gets it,” VEA President Meg Gruber told a State Capitol news conference in February as poll numbers were released. “They understand that educators will do everything they can to offer a quality education, even when our Commonwealth faces a financial crisis, such as we had during the Great Recession.”

VEA interviewed 600 adults in Virginia for the poll, and 74 percent said they believe the amount of funding schools receive affect the quality of the education students get “a great deal” or “quite a lot.” In addition, support for higher teacher salaries was consistent across all groups interviewed, even families that have never had had children in Virginia’s public schools.

To help spread the word on the financial needs of our students, schools and educators, VEA launched a campaign of radio, television and online advertisements in late February. To see the spots, visit the Association’s website, www.veanea.org.

Don’t Miss Summer School!

For the second straight year, VEA is doubling down on summer training opportunities, helping members around the state hone their advocacy and organizing skills.

The Reggie Smith Organizing School (RSOS) is set for July 20-22 at the University of Richmond and the Southwest Organizing Institute (SOI) will be held in Bristol June 21-23.

Both events, which feature a Mardi Gras flair this year, will help equip local leaders with the skills they’ll need to strengthen both themselves and their Associations, the theme is “Educate, Organize, Celebrate.”

Check VEA’s website, www.veanea.org, for registration and other information later this spring.

Thinking About Retirement?

If so, VEA can help, with a series of workshops this spring that will help you plan well and understand your benefits. Workshop dates and locations are below; visit www.veanea.org/upcoming or check with your UniServ office for details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 30</td>
<td>Winchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 6</td>
<td>Petersburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14</td>
<td>Fairfax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 19</td>
<td>Loudoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 20</td>
<td>Arlington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 27</td>
<td>Roanoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 27</td>
<td>Accomack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 28</td>
<td>Virginia Beach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 28</td>
<td>Danville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 3</td>
<td>Abingdon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we head into spring and the end of the school year appears in the distance, I wanted to fill you in on some of the ways VEA members have been making a difference in our classrooms recently. Working together, we’ve been getting important things done, some of which you may not have heard about.

Three Association members, for the last year or so, have been serving as members of the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee, a group appointed by Governor McAuliffe. Karen Cross of Bristol, Benjamin Williams of Roanoke County, and myself have been working to reduce the length of tests, make sure tests use the appropriate reading level, and reduce the number of tests. Some of the committee’s recommendations, such as reducing the number of tests, are now in place. We’re also pushing Virginia to revamp high school graduation requirements by creating a Profile of a Virginia Graduate for each student, built on skills in what we called the 5 C’s: critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication and citizenship. And I believe we’ll be seeing the implementation of some of our other ideas, such as multiple ways for schools to earn accreditation, with less reliance on standardized test scores, and a move toward fewer, more meaningful Standards.

VEA has also played an important role as Virginia figures out how to put the Every Student Succeeds Act (NCLB’s replacement) in place. We’ve been asked to be on a team charged with formulating plans in areas like how best to evaluate teachers and redefining school accountability and accreditation. Association input is also having an impact on the state’s Standards of Accreditation. We were asked to offer suggestions in a number of areas, including redefining secondary teacher load, and a clearer definition of planning times. Our recommendations are part of the information being put together by the Virginia Department of Education to present to the State Board.

We were forced to play a lot of defense during this year’s General Assembly session and, with an inspiring display of member action, we did so very effectively. Your emails, phone calls, visits and other ways of letting legislators know what’s important to public educators made it possible to again defeat legislation giving a group appointed in Richmond the power to put charter schools anywhere in the state. Under the right conditions, charter schools can be helpful, but there’s no reason to take away local control of such a difficult education issue and place it in the hands of individuals who may have a political agenda.

You were also able to stave off another attempt to slip a form of vouchers into Virginia law, which would have steered some public money into private schools.

These are just a few examples of how, working collectively, we stand up for students and schools every time the need arises. Thanks for putting your principles into action, and making an important impact on the future of our Commonwealth. I couldn’t be more proud to represent you as you do the essential work you do every day.

Meg Gruber

Nobody Does It Better

A MESSAGE FROM THE VEA PRESIDENT

As we head into spring and the end of the school year appears in the distance, I wanted to fill you in on some of the ways VEA members have been making a difference in our classrooms recently. Working together, we’ve been getting important things done, some of which you may not have heard about.

Three Association members, for the last year or so, have been serving as members of the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee, a group appointed by Governor McAuliffe. Karen Cross of Bristol, Benjamin Williams of Roanoke County, and myself have been working to reduce the length of tests, make sure tests use the appropriate reading level, and reduce the number of tests. Some of the committee’s recommendations, such as reducing the number of tests, are now in place. We’re also pushing Virginia to revamp high school graduation requirements by creating a Profile of a Virginia Graduate for each student, built on skills in what we called the 5 C’s: critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication and citizenship. And I believe we’ll be seeing the implementation of some of our other ideas, such as multiple ways for schools to earn accreditation, with less reliance on standardized test scores, and a move toward fewer, more meaningful Standards.

VEA has also played an important role as Virginia figures out how to put the Every Student Succeeds Act (NCLB’s replacement) in place. We’ve been asked to be on a team charged with formulating plans in areas like how best to evaluate teachers and redefining school accountability and accreditation. Association input is also having an impact on the state’s Standards of Accreditation. We were asked to offer suggestions in a number of areas, including redefining secondary teacher load, and a clearer definition of planning times. Our recommendations are part of the information being put together by the Virginia Department of Education to present to the State Board.

We were forced to play a lot of defense during this year’s General Assembly session and, with an inspiring display of member action, we did so very effectively. Your emails, phone calls, visits and other ways of letting legislators know what’s important to public educators made it possible to again defeat legislation giving a group appointed in Richmond the power to put charter schools anywhere in the state. Under the right conditions, charter schools can be helpful, but there’s no reason to take away local control of such a difficult education issue and place it in the hands of individuals who may have a political agenda.

You were also able to stave off another attempt to slip a form of vouchers into Virginia law, which would have steered some public money into private schools.

These are just a few examples of how, working collectively, we stand up for students and schools every time the need arises. Thanks for putting your principles into action, and making an important impact on the future of our Commonwealth. I couldn’t be more proud to represent you as you do the essential work you do every day.
The Candidates Speak

VEA will be holding elections at this year’s Delegate Assembly for the offices of President, Vice President and one Education Support Professionals Alternate At-Large seat on the VEA Board of Directors. Voting will be done at the VEA Convention this month. Carol Bauer of the York Education Association, currently one of Virginia’s representatives on the NEA Board of Directors, ran unopposed for re-election and will begin a new three-year term on August 1, 2016.

Here are campaign statements from the three candidates for President, the two candidates for Vice President, and the two candidates for ESP At-Large, along with a statement from Bauer. Candidates are listed in alphabetical order.

**VEA President**

**Jim Livingston** *Prince William County*

I am Jim Livingston and I ask for your vote for President of the Virginia Education Association.

I believe in the VEA and I believe through my dedication, passion and vision for the future we can build a stronger, more vibrant VEA.

To grow our organization, we must position ourselves as the foremost authority on public education in the Commonwealth. It is time for the VEA to take the lead in establishing the agenda for improving student achievement, establishing effective mentoring programs to enhance professional standards, and championing the human and civil rights of every student and employee in every school in the Commonwealth.

With my work at the local, state, and national levels I believe I have the training and the experience to guide our organization on that pathway to leadership.

I ask for your support and together we will lead the Virginia Education Association into the future!

**Joey Mathews** *Loudoun County*

My name is Joey Mathews and I am running for VEA President. I currently serve as President of the Loudoun Education Association, VEA Executive Board Member, and NEA Director.

I believe we can grow and strengthen the VEA by establishing strong relationships between leadership, management, staff and members all working collectively for the common good of the VEA. Crucial issues face us in the coming years, including confidence in our education system, strengthening the VEA, and adapting to a fluid political landscape. I have worked with local, state, and national leaders on education and organizing issues to ensure positive outcomes for our employees and students. I will bring these experiences and the necessary skills of collaboration, compromise, and a vision to the Association, and will work diligently for the success of the VEA and our members.

It would be a privilege to be YOUR President.

**Sarah Patton** *Covington*

Keeping the VEA strong is my goal. That will occur as I work with you to increase membership and respect so that the VEA continues to lead in all educational matters. I plan to capitalize on the diverse strengths of our members and staff to make the VEA a force that achieves our goal of great public schools in every community. I have unique strengths. I listen, organize, unite people, foster respect, honor diversity, operate ethically, include all voices, and value all members equally. My service as local president, VEA and NEA Board member, committeeperson of numerous state committees, and facilitator/trainer for VEA projects has prepared me for this position. As an educator who has taught K-College, in small and large locals, I advocate for all members. I care passionately for the success of the VEA because I care passionately for the success of every VEA member and every student.

**Carol Bauer to Serve Another Term on NEA Board**

**Carol Bauer** *York County*

Gracias! Merci! Thank you! I am honored to serve as your NEA Director. I am humbled by the confidence you have placed in me, as I continue to represent all Virginia educators at the national level. I am committed to raising my voice for all our students, members, and our Association, drawing on my experiences in my classroom, as a NBCT, and as an advocate for public education. I will continue to promote public education at every opportunity as we work together to make a difference. The opportunities that lie ahead of us as we implement ESSA are both exciting and challenging, so we must step forward and be heard.


**VEA Vice President**

**James Fedderman  Accomack County**
As a Virginian reared in public education, I understand and appreciate the work of our educators. As a long-time VEA member, I am energized by what we have accomplished and look forward to what the future holds.

Working together, we can achieve a true representation of all diverse viewpoints and strive to address the need for smaller class sizes, increased funding, improved testing, and a more collegial workplace. We can increase awareness of social justice issues and teach our students in a way that respects the communities where they live.

My main priorities, with your support, will be to cultivate and grow our membership, empower small-and medium-sized locals, and promote a positive, united community to ensure every educator has a voice. Let's work together to ensure our goal of a great public school for every child in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Public education is our promise to America's future.

**Donald Wilms  Chesterfield County**
Leadership is a practice, not a position. Having been local president twice, without and with full-time release, I have dual experience with the time and dedication needed to support the work of our association. Serving on the VEA Executive/Budget Committee adds another level to my experience.

All members deserve a say in the direction of our union. I will engage with every local so that no voice is ignored. It's time to return to an organization of action where we work together. We can support statewide leadership and staff working together to build activism and engagement of every member, finding solutions to local issues. We can recognize our strength in diversity and continue to bring others into our work and organization.

Give me the opportunity to harness the potential power of our membership to make our organization a national leader in advocacy, activism and involvement.

**Education Support Professionals Alternate At-Large, VEA Board**

**Gwen Edwards  Prince William County**
I am Gwen Edwards, an ESP member with 20 years of experience in Prince William County Public Schools. It is a privilege to serve on the VEA Board of Directors and now I seek your support for re-election.

If re-elected to the VEA Board, I will continue to be:

- A voice and resource for ESP members in Virginia
- A proactive part of the decision-making process at the state level
- Able to bring insight to address issues our ESPs are facing across the state
- Advocate for professional development for ESP members in Virginia

As a Co-Chairperson of the VEA ESP Committee, we held the first-ever "Pre-Caucus" training session for all ESP members attending the VEA Convention.

I am active and engaged at the local, state, and national level.

As your VEA ESP Director, you can count on me to be YOUR Leader, YOUR advocate, and YOUR voice.

**Barbara Powell  Virginia Beach**
I seek the ESP Alternate Member-At-Large Director position because I want to support the ESPs throughout the state. Whether bus driver, teacher’s assistant, custodian, secretary, or cafeteria worker, I’ll be there to speak up for members’ issues, particularly regarding salaries and increased pay and benefits.

I have been involved with VBEA and VEA for my entire career, 23 years, during which time I have worked with special education children. I am a strong advocate of the Association and have held several positions, including Secretary and Treasurer, for VBEA, as well as serving on the VEA Board of Directors as the ESP Alternate Member-At-Large.

I have a passion for education and I believe strongly that we best serve our students’ needs by advocating for the professionals who support classroom learning. With your help, I will continue to advocate for better pay for educators who are so critical to the success of future generations.
Keeping students’ enthusiasm for school alive in the second half of the year can be a struggle, particularly as snow days, standardized testing and spring fever begin to take their toll. Little things can go a long way toward boosting your students’ interest in school. To help you keep things fresh through the closing part of the school year, the National Education Association has gathered eight teacher-tested tips for rebooting your classroom:

1. **Get student buy-in.** To help students stay excited about learning, consider a thematic integrated unit on a topic that your students will grab on to, says Deanna Jump, an education blogger who suggests having the class brainstorm topics and then vote on the ones that draw the most interest.

2. **Hand over responsibilities.** Pass on classroom organizing chores to students, letting them do such tasks as handing out daily materials, changing the daily and monthly calendar, and delivering items to other teachers as needed.

3. **Mix up the routines.** Think about your routines and how they might be changed up a bit. Tinker with items like the format of some class materials or even seat assignments and line-up procedures. Change can spark interest and increase a sense of purpose.

4. **Offer brain breaks.** Incorporate movement, such as stretches, jogging in place or jumping jacks when you have a minute to spare. If you have 3-5 minutes, try a short YouTube video.

5. **Introduce new books.** Make time to introduce new books and read aloud to students. Each January, the American Library Association announces its Newbery, Caldecott, Siebert and other literary awards. Think about incorporating such high-quality literature to keep things fresh.

6. **Redecorate and rearrange.** Introduce new design elements, like plants or lamps, and let students be involved in classroom layout decisions.

7. **Clean up your space.** By now, classroom clutter has likely piled up. Consider a dusting, purging and organization “party.”

8. **Find a PLN.** Turn to Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and education blogs to find a personal learning network (PLN). This will allow you to stay current and find best practices in technology and instruction, and you may also find great ideas for lessons, bulletin boards and classroom organization.

**Resources Created by VEA Members**

- **Sophie and Paige: Soccer Twins**, by Joseph B. Hicks of the Albemarle Education Association, the story of identical twins who are the same on the outside but very different on the inside, each excelling and struggling in their own ways. Available online at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

- **Saving Starfish: A Teacher’s Tale**, by Dina Linkenhoker, former president of the Bedford County Education Association, a memoir. Linkenhoker shares some of her experiences with students, teachers,
Some facts and figures about Virginia’s public schools, from the Virginia Board of Education’s 2015 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia:

**Poverty growing.** Since 2008, the total student population has increased by 4 percent, while the number of economically disadvantaged students has increased by 40 percent. The number of English language learners has increased by 37 percent and currently makes up 10 percent of the state’s student population.

**Autism rates on the rise.** While the number of students identified with disabilities has decreased slightly since 2008, students receiving special education services still represent roughly 12 percent of the student population. One disability category in particular, autism, has risen by 45 percent.

**More schools accredited.** Seventy-eight percent, or 1,414, of Virginia’s 1,823 public schools are rated as Fully Accredited for the 2015-2016 school year, based on the performance of students on Standards of Learning tests in English, mathematics, science, and history. This is a 10-point improvement over 2014-2015, when only 68 percent of schools were fully accredited.

**Achievement advances.** Overall, student achievement in 2014-2015 on SOL tests in English, mathematics, history, and science showed significant progress for all students. Statewide, students posted 5-point overall gains in reading and mathematics, and achievement increased by two points each in writing, science, and history.

**Significant gaps remain.** Students with disabilities had the biggest differences in pass rates from the student average, scoring more than 30 points less in mathematics, science, and English. Black and Hispanic students fell 21 and 18 points, respectively, behind their white counterparts in science, although significant gaps continue to persist in mathematics, English (reading and writing) and history and social sciences as well. Economically disadvantaged students had a 13-point difference in pass rates in English and science from the student average. English language learners struggled the most in writing, falling 27 points behind the student average.

**More students graduate.** Virginia’s on-time graduation rate climbed to 90.5 percent for the class of 2015, and the dropout rate fell to 5.2 percent.
Six Strategies to Reduce Dropping Out

- Build a positive school climate. Reward good behavior.
- Foster connections. Let students know someone cares whether they show up for school.
- Communicate with students and their families to stress the importance of regular attendance.
- Learn about the significant challenges facing your local community, and about the community’s strengths. Find out what resources are available.
- Collaborate with other professionals, such as nurses, counselors and social workers, to plan interventions when needed.
- Alert school staff whenever a student misses more than two days.

A Value Beyond Measure

“This is the value of the teacher, who looks at a face and says there’s something behind that and I want to reach that person, I want to influence that person, I want to encourage that person, I want to call out that person who is behind that face, behind that color, behind that language, behind that tradition, behind that culture. I believe you can do it. I know what was done for me.”

— Maya Angelou
THIS SEASON, SHOP SMART . . .
EXCLUSIVE BENEFITS • NEA MEMBERS SAVE THOUSANDS ALL YEAR LONG!

NO NEED TO LOOK FOR A PARKING SPACE . . . SHOP IN THE COMFORT OF YOUR OWN HOME!
Save BIG on the popular brands you love at thousands of stores!

Through the FREE NEA Click & Save® Program, NEA members have collectively saved over $10 million—you can enjoy the savings, too. It’s our most popular benefit for a reason.

Don’t miss out on all the savings. Sign up today, and you’ll save on dining, entertainment, clothes, electronics, travel, and more in thousands of locations with:

► **Exclusive discounts** not available to the general public.
► **WOWPoints** for purchases that you can redeem like cash.
► **NEA Click & Save** benefits to share with 4 friends and family.

Register now at neamb.com/clickandsave

---

NEA, NEA Member Benefits and the NEA Member Benefits logo are registered service marks of NEA Member Benefits Corporation.
INCOME PROTECTED

As an NEA member, you have access to the exclusive NEA Income Protection® Plan. This comprehensive Disability Income Insurance* plan helps offer peace of mind for you and your loved ones by helping to cover your monthly obligations if you become disabled by a covered accident or sickness.

Call 1-800-637-4636 for more information. Easy online enrollment neamb.com/protection.

*Limitations, exclusions and elimination periods may apply.
Enhance your knowledge
Advance your career

Whether on campus or with ODU Online, the Darden College of Education prepares distinguished professionals to be leaders in their fields.

Explore our innovative, affordable and fully accredited degree, certificate, licensure and endorsement programs that can help you grow as a professional.

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
IDEA FUSION

Now is your opportunity to move forward in your profession. ODU can help you make that happen. Visit online.odu.edu/ednow or call 1-800-497-3445 to learn more.
“Squirrels!” “Birds!” “Chipmunks!”

The second-graders are calling out enthusiastically as I write on the giant chart paper.

We are doing a shared writing activity. Students and teacher compose the text together, sharing ideas, with the teacher acting as a sort of scribe. As with many writing workshop lessons and approaches to instruction, the goal of this activity is more the process than the outcome.

I know this, and yet I try to redirect the ideas being shared. Our story is about a recent field trip to the zoo, and I’m completely baffled that the children are talking about the chipmunks.

“Anything, um, bigger?” I suggest.

Finally, Juan exclaims, “A tiger!” Then he gets on all fours and roars at the girls, who scream on cue.

After that, they share more typical zoo experiences. They talk as I write their words about monkeys swinging on trees, the gorillas making funny faces, elephants spraying themselves with dirt and water.

I encourage as the conversation continues: “Perfect! What great examples.”

As is always the case, there was some talk about having lunch, going to the bathrooms, and the bus ride there. (Even my middle schoolers would frequently ramble on about the pizza and souvenir cup at the amusement park, yet the huge roller coaster got only a sentence.)

We agree to add these other timeline details to the story the next time. And, I completely abandon the brainstorming they did about the squirrels, chipmunks and birds. At the time, it just didn’t seem to fit. But whose story is it anyway? As we redefine the way we teach certain subjects, is there a right and wrong in the modern day writing workshop?

Those of us who grew up with more traditional writing programs, using more specific prompts and a heavy focus on grammar, know how boring and discouraging it can be: All those red marks, ignoring a potentially clever and creative essay, or a fantastically descriptive sentence (albeit laden with misspelled words).

Many of us became educators, in part, to share and instill our passion for certain subjects. If we expect students to also gain a lifelong interest and perhaps even talent, then giving them both choices and a voice in the classroom makes sense. Feeling like ideas are their own will ultimately create motivation and pride, even if it doesn’t always seem to lead to the outcomes we anticipate.

In hindsight, it would have been better if I had helped the second-graders craft two stories—one about those little animals that choose to live in the zoo, another about the actual zoo animals that adorn our books and TV shows. Independent writing time would have also likely produced better quality results this way.

But we’re frequently restricted by time and experiences of never getting children to focus on the goal once they head so far down another path. It’s a skill—that fine balance in letting students feel heard, but staying on task. (Or knowing when deviating from the original plan will lead to an even better outcome.)

Who knows why the class got so excited on that field trip when they saw birds, squirrels and chipmunks. It’s not like they don’t see them every day. Maybe they were expecting all the animals to be in cages, so a squirrel frolicking freely among the trees, or a bird eating bread from someone’s lunch was worthy of a story. At the very least, the kids should have a chance to share their version.

We owe it to our students not only to model process and outcome, but to really listen to their ideas. In How to Talk so Kids Will Listen & Listen so Kids Will Talk, Faber and Mazlish discuss the importance of validating feelings. We are all guilty of telling students (and often our own children) how they are feeling, or immediately negating those feelings.

We make them keep their sweaters on despite pleas of being warm (because the rest of us are cold). We tell students that they cannot possibly have to use the bathroom again. And while we are likely right about many of these things, it makes children feel as if we’re not listening. Even as adults, we just want to be heard, by family, peers, colleagues.

I realize now the irony, the disservice in asking students to blurt out ideas about something they experienced, and then telling them, “no.” If students cannot express ideas freely, based upon their own experiences on a field trip, when can they?

While we might think that the zebras or cheetahs make for a more exciting and classic zoo story, who’s to say that the adventures of a city chipmunk won’t be even better?

Issadore Bloom, a former member of the Fairfax Education Association, is now a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. Read more of her writing at www.bloomindc.com.
We focus on you, so you can focus on them.

It’s California Casualty’s policy to do more for the people who give more. That’s why we are the only Auto and Home insurance provider to earn the trust and endorsement of NEA. Take advantage of the combined buying power of over 3 million fellow members and get your quote today.

Call 1-888-744-9717 or click JustForOurMembers.com

NEA® Auto and Home Insurance Program

Not available in AK, HI, MA, MI, NY, WI. Coverages described are subject to availability and eligibility. NEA, NEA Member Benefits and the NEA Member benefits logo are registered service marks of NEA Member Benefits Corporation. CA Insurance License No. 01415347. W0355-00MC AVIS004560.

A publication of the Virginia Education Association, 116 South Third Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219

POETRY OUT LOUD encourages youth to learn about great poetry through memorization and performance. This exciting program helps students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage. COMING IN APRIL

A production of community idea stations® WCVE In partnership with