Greetings and welcome to the BPS, a school system that strives every day to provide a great education and an equal opportunity for all children who walk into our doors. For this, by the way, we’re not looking for praise—it’s our responsibility. And we welcome that responsibility. We also welcome you to our teaching ranks as a member of the Boston Teachers Union, your employee voice that represents your professional interests and your work life.

My name is Richard Stutman, and I am president of our organization. I would like to wish Mayor Walsh, Chair O’Neill, and new Superintendent Chang well as we start the new school year. We thank all of them for their belief in, and support of, our school system.

We represent 5,200 teachers and other professionals, 1,200 paraprofessionals, and 500 substitute teachers. We also represent more than 3,500 retired members. I am a math teacher, both middle and high school, a graduate of the BPS, as is our daughter, who attended four BPS schools—the Lyndon, the Hennigan, the Irving, and Boston Latin. My wife is a retired teacher. We are proud of our BPS connections.

So, too, are our BTU staff and officers. Our elected staff and leadership team has 23 children and grandchildren, who are or were, students in the BPS. We are proud of our school system and we cling vigorously to the belief and ideal that all children deserve a good, equal, and quality education.

I would like to introduce a few members of our elected staff who are here. They will introduce themselves to you later, tomorrow, when we will have a reception with food and drink. We are all either BPS teachers or paraprofessionals, and and we work to serve you. We also have on staff two organizers, whose jobs are to assist you as well.

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New Teachers Welcomed to the Boston Public Schools & BTU

Photos by Colum Whyte
What is Considered “Corporal Punishment” in the Boston Public Schools?

Do teachers have to perform non-teaching tasks?

The contract states, “The parties [BTU & BPS] agree that the present practice of requiring teachers to perform non-teaching tasks is unenforceable; further it has a deteriorating effect on the vitality and effectiveness of the teacher in the practice of his or her profession. It is therefore agreed as follows:

In Elementary Schools – The Committee and the Union recognize the desirability of relieving teachers of non-teaching duties such as lunch duty, duplicating of materials, collecting money for purposes such as milk, insurance, pictures and school banking. As a first step in effectuating these principles, the parties agree that elementary teachers shall have no bus duty before or after school.

In Middle Schools – A person will not be required to perform street duty where police protection is considered necessary but it is not available. A person is not required to perform traffic control. Teachers relieved by school or areas of administrative assignments shall not be assigned to teaching duties in lieu of such administrative assignments. No industrial arts, vocational education, or home economics teacher shall be required to perform work that is not part of the pupil instructional program or part of the teacher’s job duties. Teachers are encouraged to cooperate in meeting reasonable requests made with reasonable lead time prior to events related to school activities.

Who are the people coming into my classroom?

Our contract language states that, “All visitors to a classroom shall knock at the door, and, if invited to do so, will introduce themselves.” This is significant in that it means you, as the teacher in the classroom have the right and duty to request the person entering your class to identify who they are and what organization they represent. If they are an administrator in the BPS, they are an official, or a member of the Department of Education, we must let them enter. If, however, they are an intern with a University, a parent, or someone not associated with the school or department if not school-based, we do not have a right into our classes without our expressed permission.

Do BTU Building Representatives get any time during the school day to get some of their union work done?

The contract states, “The Union Building Representative in each high school and middle school shall be allowed one administrative period per week for conferring with teachers on grievances or associated matters. The Union building representative in each elementary school shall be allowed 45 minutes per week during administrative time for the purpose of conferring with teachers on grievances or associated matters.” This amount of time is generally not sufficient to perform all of the work entailed in being an effective BTU Rep. However, it is also work which has been contractually agreed to and is the BTU Reps right to insist upon being included in their school site schedule.

Know Your Rights

by Caren Carew

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Boston Union Teacher

BOSTON SCHOOL BUILDINGS

Phone Numbers

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101 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
617-268-2000

School Nurses

School Nurses shall not be required to

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President Obama, Mayor Walsh, Senator Warren and Attorney General Healey Honor the Labor Movement at the GBLC’s Labor Day Breakfast

Photos by Colum Whyte
September’s Monthly BTU Membership Meeting at the BTU Hall in Dorchester

Photos by Colum Whyte

President Richard Stutman surveys the BTU members about a change in start time for the membership meetings.
BTU Back to School Fair Attracts Over a Thousand Parents and Students
Photos by Amika Kemmner Ernst and Michael J. Maguire
What prompted you to pursue National Board Certification?

By Jennifer Dines, NBCT, Gardner Pilot Academy

Sixth grade English teacher Lee Franty taught at the Murphy School in Dorchester, Massachusetts, for the past decade and a half. In 2014 — while in his current position at the Murphy School — he achieved his National Board Certification in English Language Arts - Early Adolescence. Here is how Lee described the experience.

Who Owns You?

By Paul Eaton

We all know and recognize that we have to watch what we say in the classroom. I’ve seen colleagues put on leave, and even fired, because of their choice of words used inside classrooms. Words can denigrate, subjugate, and poison workplace and classroom culture. While all the the above is important, the word-use discussed in this article is not that used by teachers, but that which is applied to us by administrators. Possessive adjectives (“my” and “your”) imply ownership. Although it is common practice for principals and department heads to refer to their staff as “my teachers,” is such a custom either appropriate or healthy? A person can literally only claim actual ownership to a finite number of things: pets, gadgets, and, in days gone by, slaves. But in reality, regardless of ego or assertion, no administrator can ever actually claim ownership over any member of the staff.

By definition: I work for the City and I belong to a school... but that is also true of all administrators. True, there is a hierarchy within the school system. But do people who are higher up the ladder own all those below them and are they entitled to all that goes with it? So why do we accept and perpetuate language employing possessive adjectives that lead to this false illusion?

Sure, there is someone higher up the ladder who evaluates my performance. It is that person’s responsibility to make that evaluation, but can that person take any ownership in my work? Not really. They can only advance or demote me, based on my performance as part of the evaluation process, but in the end my actions are my own. Perhaps the distinctions being made in this discussion could be seen as splitting hairs. However, I see this as a matter of mindset versus language. Empirically, over the last 20 years, studies within the discipline of different states, the worst (and least effective) administrators I have known were also those who seemed most prone to use possessive adjectives when referring to teachers and staff.

Conversely, the best and most respected administrators I’ve ever worked with, if ever, used possessive adjectives in this way; and for the most part referred to staff by name. Whether language precipitates mindset or that mindset leads to word-use is unclear. The fact that there is indeed a connection seems straight-forward and is supported by what we witnessed.

This issue of word-use came to the forefront of my attention this summer when I was cc’d on an email intended for my colleagues to attend a regional event for the Boston Debate League. In that email, the term “your coaches” was used over and over again. The purpose of the email was benign enough, but I felt a visceral dislike to being referred to in that manner. Something felt wrong; I am not and was never was “her” coach. This is not the first time I’ve heard possessive adjectives being used in this way, but it was the first time I said something.

It makes me very uncomfortable to hear either an administrator talk about “my teachers” or someone address an administrator concerning “your teachers.” For one, it is not true in the literal sense. “My teachers” would refer to those who taught or are teaching me; while “your teachers” would refer to those who taught you. But the intent of the possessive adjective is being used in that recent email.

The fact is, I am not “her debate coach” because never once did I coach her to debate: only the students on the team can truly claim me as their coach. Applying the adjective as was done in the email creates an inherent grammatical ambiguity, which in the literal sense is incorrect. And as I was taught by one of my English teachers, personal allegiances should always be avoided.

Then there is the question of ownership. How could I be referred to as “her coach” when I’ve never had any ownership in her education? Does my practice? True, she once did sign something authorizing me to officially work with the Boston Debate League, but that was to represent the school—not her. Never once did I have a discussion regarding debate strategy, the year’s topic, or the skills any of any child on the team. The deepest discussion we ever had was just small talk, like “How’s the team doing?” My answer, “Fine,” would have been my answer to anyone. She didn’t even recruit me into that position, I volunteered. So how could I be one of “her” coaches? True, I am one of the school’s coaches; but “hers?” Not really. Principalship is arguably the most important job title within any school. As mentioned, principals authorize schedules and appointments for everyone else within the building. During times of crisis, it is the principal who will speak on behalf of the entire school community. They are held accountable when things go wrong and a showered with accolades when things go right. However, that does not mean that the principal is the school, or that the school will fall apart without the principal.

I have witnessed many times when for whatever reason a principal became absent, and the school kept on functioning just fine. For such a person to use possessive adjectives to reference teachers is wrong. “My school,” yes we can all say that; “my staff,” sure, they did structure it; but “my Ms. Johnson,” is that person’s responsibility to make that statement? True, they did structure it; but “my Ms. Johnson” was taught by me. But that was not the intent. The possessive adjective as was done in the email creates an inherent grammatical ambiguity, which in the literal sense is incorrect. And as I was taught by one of my English teachers, personal allegiances should always be avoided.

What was the experience like of serving on the Superintendent’s Transition Team?

I was asked to join Dr. Tommy Chang’s team in May and June for the Listening and Learning Tour. It was really exciting. Dr. Chang is a teacher at heart, and he is thinking in quality Ed. I felt like I went to 8 sessions of quality PD, not just meetings. It is exciting having an instructional leader as a superintendent.

We always had inclusion activities at our transition meetings. We actually did mini-skits and improv, and we were playing different characters with Dr. Chang to think about innovative ways to support schools. I can take much of what we did and use the staff with the Murphy School and also with my classes. We had a “culture jam” at the Esperanza Sunday evening over the eight weeks and I feel really invested in helping BPS improve. I hope this culture can grow distinct this year.

There were only three classroom teachers on the 35 member transition team – myself, Erik Berg and Neema Avishad. Dr. Chang continually acknowledged our direct service to children. I hope I was a representative voice for others, and I tried my best to portray teachers’ experiences.

Lee Franty currently teaches sixth grade English at the Murphy School in Dorchester, where he has worked for the past decade. Lee has served in the Boston Public Schools for 15 years as an elementary teacher and a math coach. An active member of the Boston Teachers Union, Lee last year held the position of co-chair of the Peer Assistance and Review Panel, which supports teachers who receive a Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory rating to improve their practice with the support and evaluation of a veteran teacher. Lee received her National Board Certification in 2014 in the area of English Language Arts - Early Adolescence. Most recently, Lee was one of three BTU teachers on the 35-member Superintendent’s Transition Team.)
Who Owns You?...

To prevent this mindset from developing, language used should match, and not overstep, the realities of optimal organizational design. No administrator, no matter what their title or responsibilities, can ever lay claim to owning any other person in their building. I find it much less offensive to the ear when administrators use the plural possessive “our” to say the same thing as they might with the singular “my.” When administrators refer to “our teachers” there is a sense of inclusion and community behind the words and thoughts. It feels as if the administrators are also included as part of that community because they are talking on behalf of the school itself. “My teachers,” on the other hand conveys a sense of top-down control, power, and ownership, where such diminutive possessives could potentially reinforce the notion that teachers and staff are on par with servants, pets, or widgets. To my ear, being one of “our” teachers sounds like being referred to as a thing from a curio box.

Upon reflection, just about everything I’ve discussed in this article can be turned around on me with respect to “my students.” I must conclude that they too are not actually “mine” and that it is technically incorrect to refer to them as such. As a high school teacher I share each and every student with five or six other teachers, and we all borrow them for the day from their guardians. They are not our slaves; they should be considered no-one’s pets, and they are not interchangeable widgets. I am responsible for providing them instruction, but ultimately they are responsible for follow-through. As a result of this discussion, I myself am going to make the effort to not use the word “my” when referring to the students I am assigned. I do take ownership for my work within the classroom, but the students are simply people with whom I work. And they deserve my respect accordingly.

We are all in control of the words that come out of our own mouths. Being cognizant of word-use will directly impact the culture we inhabit. The truth of the matter is, possessive adjectives are irrelevant. Any thought can be conveyed without applying possessives to the sentences formed.

Solution: speak up. Just as one would not stand for gender-biased language to be applied in the classroom with reference to a transgendered or questioning teen, so too one should speak up against possessive adjectives being applied to link the relationship of admin to teachers and/or support staff.

Respectfully I did tell the new coordinator of the Debate League my views against this practice. She understood and said she was going to make the effort to not use the word “my” when referring to the students I am assigned. I do take ownership for my work within the classroom, but the students are simply people with whom I work. And they deserve my respect accordingly.

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For example, all one need do is swap the possessive adjective with an article, like “the,” and the issue disappears. If one wants to be more specific, then the school name or department could be included as modifiers: “The math teachers at Kennedy HS” rather than “my math teachers.” Truly, no benefits are gained by using language that reinforces the notion that teachers and staff are on par with servants, pets, or widgets.

Conversely, using language omitting diminutive possessives could potentially increase mutual respect between admin and staff. And mutual respect is good wherever and whenever it occurs.
A Book Review
by Michael J. Maguire

“This is Not a Test” by José Luis Vilson


José Luis Vilson begins his story of his love of teaching and education – not the same concepts – with a story from his Catholic school days. In one of the most popular stories in the New Testament, Jesus walks on water towards his disciples who are sitting in a boat during a storm. Peter attempts to join Jesus on the water but begins to sink when he shifts his focus to the storm. Jesus saves Peter and encourages him to have more faith. Likewise Mr. Vilson encourages us to leave the safety and comfort of our boats and to have enough faith to advocate boldly for ourselves, our students, and our profession.

Mr. Vilson (a.k.a. JLV or @theJLV) tells the story of contemporary public education from a variety of unique and conflicting perspectives. JLV explains how he grew up caught between two worlds: he is the son of a Dominican mother and a Haitian father. He tried (rather unsuccessfully) to fit into both sides of his family. This experience prepared him for his own education, in both poor and wealthy schools, and later in his own teaching career, both with Teach for America and later as a public school advocate.

JLV tells his tale in an easy, informal style. He mixes his childhood memories with his adult teaching experiences. This back-and-forth pace mimics one’s own internal dialogue when recalling events. Rap and hip-hop references abound, but so do quotes from leading pedagogical figures – often in the same paragraph. JLV knows his profession and his pupils. Such a combination is what today’s public schools need, says JLV.

Admittedly I do not know all of the rap stars JLV mentions, but he quotes heavily from two. I am please to say that I not only know them, but had listened to them when I was a teen. Rakim and KRS-One rapped extensively about education. In many ways the music from the streets of NYC in the early ‘90s set the tone for today’s public school advocates. Today’s social media mean that urban educational ideas need not be confined to a boom box. We can and should pump up the volume, as the expression goes.

Advocacy for our students need not be a binary choice between the status quo and the new reform movement. Just because the present (re-)form model of education works for some kids, warns JLV, it does not give us license to forget the other kids.

Ed-tech is another topic. “This is Not a Test” explores in detail. In New York, as in most every state, there is a vast dialogue between using technology to assist in pedagogy versus tech-nology replacing pedagogy. JLV gives example in NYC of the good, the bad, and the unfortunate reality of “mod-ernizing” urban education.

Most importantly, JLV explores the third rail in pub-lic education: race. Today’s reform movement cannot be fully understood without examining the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education. JLV explores past and current hiring prac-tices of teachers, the reason and reckoning of the suburbanization and co-called white flight, and how even in today’s enlightened atmosphere that vast majority of educational conferences are still dominated by white people both at the podium and in audience. Certainly “This is Not a Test” is a good book for all to read. But it is a must for those who wish to understand the current trends in education reform. There are a list of dos and don’ts for today’s bloggers, as well as practical classroom advice for all teachers.

“This is Not a Test” examines serious topics in a light, realistic fashion. If you put your list and consider giving it as a gift to someone you know who ought to read it.

Excerpts from This Is Not a Test

“When we find our passions, we must enter into them boldly.”

“If the problem is really that public schools lack innovation and creativity, why proffer accountability measures that hinder both those thought?”

“It is critical that we view the racially disparate impact of today’s reform efforts through the lens of institutional racism.”

“Teachers who can relate to their students on a cultural level can reach their students in important ways. I’m not saying people from other cultures can’t help us, but every student of color could use a role model. If their role model just happens to be the teacher in front of them, that’s perfect.”

“If at any point you feel like you’ve failed – and you’ve absolutely tried your best – learn to say to yourself, ‘It’s going to get better.’

“When school systems use only high-stakes tests to determine things like school funding, graduation criteria, and teacher evaluations; the pressure to perform often falls more on the student that on anyone else.”

Film to Watch: “A Perfect Storm: The Takeover of the New Orleans Public Schools”

By Natalia Cuadra-Suazo

Ten years ago Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, taking the lives of nearly 2,000 people and leaving around 1 million people homeless. Many survivors then became victims of poorly planned recovery efforts that were criticized as neglecting the most vulnerable communities. A recent This American Life episode interviewed survivors from the Lower Ninth Ward, who witnessed how their neighborhood was the last to get electricity and running water while black homeowners were deniedassistance to rebuild their homes (accord-ing to a 2010 federal judge ruling). The Lower Ninth Ward now has a little less than half of the population that it had before the storm.

But ten years after this tragic storm, the school system failed and recovery effort, privatizers want us to think the storm was the best thing to ever happen to the city. In 2014, the New Orleans Recovery School District became the first charter-only urban district in the country. The statistic you will hear over and over again is that 51 percent of elementary and middle school students scoring proficient on state tests rose from 37% in 2005 to 63% in 2014. So test scores are up, but at what cost? Black, unionized teachers from the community were fired, special education students neglected, low performing students kicked out. Meanwhile if you are black and you live in New Orleans you are more likely to be living in poverty and more likely to be unemployed than before Katrina. Is this what successful school reform looks like? When we take a closer look at the statistics and the personal stories of the people of New Orleans, will we conclude, as Education Secretary Arne Duncan did in 2010, that Hurricane Katrina was “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans?”

On Thursday, August 27, the Teacher Activist Group of Boston brought together teachers and other community members to watch and discuss a series of short films entitled A Perfect Storm: The Takeover of New Orleans Public Schools. While con-servative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, have been pushing to paint the charter-only Recovery School District as a free market model for education reform, A Perfect Storm tells a very different story from the perspective of parents and lead-ers of the education community in New Orleans who experienced first-hand the illegal takeover of their schools.

To be clear, no one is arguing that New Orleans public schools were doing just fine before Katrina. In fact, many of the parents and education advocates interviewed in the films describe initial feelings of hope that charters might bring innovation and the services that students and families of New Orleans need. But instead of taking pro-charter advocates at their word, A Perfect Storm probes and investigates to find out if the charter-only Recovery School District is actually delivering on its promises of more “parent choice” and “higher perform-ing schools.”

Buzz words that turn out to be hollow of meaning and truth. Ultimately, the films reveal how a school movement used Hurricane Katrina to take advantage of a community weakened and traumatized by disaster.

As we start a new school year, with new threats to public education, A Perfect Storm offers insights and lessons that we here in Boston can learn from. While we, as educators, cannot accept the status quo and must continue to advocate for improv-ing our public schools, we must also be on guard. There are black leaders or black slates. And to anyone who promises reform we must ask two very important questions. Number one: How are you involving and respecting the community? Number two: Who will profit?

To watch the films and learn more please visit www.nolaedequity.org.