Wisconsin Can’t Happen To Us – Or Can It?

By Richard Stutman
BTU President

A serious crisis go to waste. And what line by that it’s an opportu-
nity to do things you think you could not do before.” This crisis has
truly given the Scott Walkers of the world ample leverage to seek
change they have long sought. An example close to home is simi-
larly seen in an attempt by our governor and our mayor to remove
health insurance coverage from collective bar-
gaining for all municipal workers statewide. Stay
tuned on that one.

But it’s more than the economic crisis. There’s
been a steady, constant
demonization of public em-
ployees, specifically teach-
ers, over the past few years.
All of this, too, has helped
pave the way for Scott Walker.

President Obama’s “Race to the Top”
program and its over-reliance on blaming
teachers – to the exclusion of all other
contributing factors of failing schools –
has paved the way for Scott Walker. When
the Los Angeles Times released student
test data and tied it to teacher effective-
ness, that helped pave the way for Scott
Walker. When President Obama and Fed
Ed secretary Arne Duncan
announced their approval of the threat to fire close to
100 teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Is-
land, that helped pave the way for Scott
Walker.

So Scott Walker’s gotten a lot of help.
And he’s just the type of opportunist to
take advantage of it. Others will likely
follow in his footsteps. The Scott Walker
training is heading East. Make no mis-
take about it. There’s no sigh of relief here
because Madison is 1,100 miles away.
We’re certainly not going to get too com-
fortable. We have our own problems here
in Massachusetts. We already know how
our governor and mayor feel about our
being able to continue to negotiate over
our health coverage.

On the plus side, we of course under-
stand that we have a democratically-con-
trolled legislature in Massachusetts, and
a governor who has exhibited no such
predilections to go the Walker route. But
that’s for comfort. The proposed loss of
our right to collectively bargain health
coverage is not too distant a cousin to the
loss of other benefits, as espoused by the
Scott Walkers of the world.

On the negative side, the attacks on us
and our benefits will not stop until the
economy improves, and workers in the
private sector begin to recapture their
standing. Most importantly, we need to
rise up and take issue with those who blame teachers and their unions for ev-
erything wrong with schools.

The demonization of teachers and their
unions simply gets everyone else off the
hook. It relieves everyone else on the
need to look deeper for problems that
plague our schools. And it misleads
people. To give just one salient example:
The income gap between the super
wealthy and the rest of us has never been
greater. Instead of talking about Goldman
Sachs executives raking in billions of dol-

ers, we close a dozen schools in Boston
to save what amounts to chump change.
Instead of using some of those billions to
improve the housing and the healthcare
for our students – and trying to measur-
ably improve their chance for success –
we instead pretend that tying student test
score data to teacher performance will
have the same benefit. Unfortunately, the
Obama administration has led this dy-
namic, and teachers and their unions are
on the defensive. Little wonder Scott
Wallier thinks he has a free ride. We
ought to take away his vehicle.

By Richard Stutman
BTU President

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Boston Teachers Union members were among the people participating in the rally supporting Wisconsin
workers in front of the Massachusetts State House.

Photo by Michael J. Maguire
The Art of Educating At Its Finest

When ever students are actively involved, it is likely that good teaching is going on.

Martin Haberman

We look for validation, for evidence, something concrete. We search for it in test scores, teacher awards, and newspaper reports. We spend long, bleary-eyed hours at our desks, compiling, and collating data in a desperate and ultimately futile attempt to solve a quintessentially human question with test data.

And then the questions start spinning in our heads: Where does our school fit?... If we improve on this one last column... If we improve on this one last assessment... If my students would only realize how important this test really is... What about ANET... MCAS... MEGA... BPS... SELI... MELIA... ELCALL... ELL... ay-say... NCLB... AARBGHH!

It’s nine-thirty on a cold Wednesday morning, historically one of the toughest times of the week, particularly on a dreary March day. The control weekend is still far away and the blissful rest of the last day off seems but a distant memory of a time long forgotten. The two visitors creep quietly into the kindergarten class hoping to remain unseen. Little faces turn their way as the two plant themselves rather awkwardly in the tiny seats, any semblance of dignity on the floor. The intruders glance quickly at each other and then turn their attention to the class, but not before peering sharpened pencils above the pristine pages of their notebooks, ready to take note of what needs to be fixed.

The few students who had taken notice of this rather unceremonious entrance have now fixed their gaze on something infinitely more interesting, their teacher’s lesson. Their eyes, you might say, are on the prize. But off in the back, outside this circle of learning, one stands alone. Then sits along with peering, sharpened, stands again, and then moves towards a classroom. He pole his classmates, fidgets, poles him again, and then, recognizing a lost cause – a man has got to know his limitations – he finally gives in. A – a smaller, bespectacled classmate. “Ah!” one of the observers thinks to himself, “now he’s got his man!”

The visitor asks. Her voice is raised slightly and tinged with a serious- ness not noticeable a moment before. The visitor is jarred from his cynical musings of a class ready to implode, and not notice a moment before.

The visitor is jarred from his cynical musings of a class ready to implode, and the like, recognizes that the teacher is about to say something important. He is intrigued. She continues, “What do we do when a classmate is not doing what he or she is supposed to?”

As if on cue all heads turn towards the following day. But there are no accusa- tions, there are no warnings, and there is no shame. The class seems intent upon welcoming him into the fold, but he’s not buying it. The boy, momentarily cowed by the sudden attention, remains silent, then glares back at his classmates defi- nitely, uninterested, no show down at the O.K. Corral. Not in this class, not on this day, and not on any day is what the visitor is now thinking. The situation is intriguingly lively and interestingly target to their lesson. The boy, with no one to answer his challenge or join in his hijinx, looks quietly around to make sure that he is not caught being good, and inches slowly towards the circle of learners. Moments later, he is on task, answering questions, and most importantly, learning. The visitors, look up, nod to each other, and head for the exit, the pages of their notebooks bare.

Fast forward. It’s a couple of hours later and the school day is now in full swing. The two observers have gradually made their way into an elementary class. What they have walked into is a swarm of activity.

What is this? The traditionalist thinks to himself. “Don’t these kids know how to sit and listen? How are they ever going to learn?” He quickly grabs a chair and settles in to try and see if there is anything that he believes is chaos. After shooting a knowing glance towards his accomplice, he sits back for a moment to see if they are going to be a wild ride. Noise con- tinuously, the notebook will fill up. And it quickly does.

What the notebook fills up with, how ever, is not the cynical blatherings of a critical observer, but the observations of a fellow educator watching a master at work. The class is not in chaos, as the unin- formed and uninformed might incor- rectly surmise. The students are all en- gaged: reading, learning, inquiring, and doing the right thing. In one area, two students sit discussing a book. In an- other, three are reading silently to themselves; and in yet another area, the teacher sits with a group asking probing ques- tions. She smiles, she understands, and that learning is unquestionably taking place.

Periodically students move to differ- ent stations around the room. All the while their teacher watches with a cool and dignified grace over the supermarket she silently yet superbly directs. The music that greets the ear of the observers is the pleasant buzz of students working diligently in an environment that truly fosters high academic achievement. Chaos? Hardly. This is the art of educating at its finest.

And this, truly, is what we do in the Boston Public Schools. Recently, I was privileged to be a part of a team that went through our school and observed teach- ers. What I saw humbled, as- tounded, and amazed. I saw teachers en- gaged in this most noble of professions and engaged in ways that reflected only the highest of standards. Educator Lois Jean White has said, “It is the unique responsibility of the teacher to acknowl- edge and respect the unique characteris- tics of each child.” I saw this dynamic at work in every class and every school that we visited, in every subject area, and across all grade levels.

So what of the harried educator at the beginning of my story? Simply this: We don’t need to be constantly looking outward, seeking validation where we may never find it. We need only look inward.

We have hidden inner reserves of strength that we have barely scratched the surface in harvesting. We are a strong and rich community of educators daily teaching just how powerful and wond- erful we can be.

What does it mean to have a public school system that strives to excel? It means that what we do here is right here in our schools. We sometimes be- lieve it a thankless task, toiling long hours for little reward, but the fruit that our work bears is an immeasurable treasure.

And while the harvest may appear at times to be meager, we need to remem- ber that it will always pay off.

Our work, our sweat, and even our tears will pay off. Think ahead to years from now, when a BPS graduate from our school might look back in fondness in order to sow the seeds of knowledge we nurtured and grew. This, then, will be the harvest of the future, of some- one who has benefitted from it. The sys- tem will sustain itself, live on, and prosper. This is fostering high academic achievement, teaching us what we do and who we are. We are teachers! (Mike Lally teaches at the Eliot K-8 School.)

Letter to the Editor: Richard Kiley

Let’s Learn From Europe

We, not just as teachers but also as a country, are in huge trouble. I have heard the term “education reform on ste- reoids” many times, but does anyone real- ize that being on steroids leads to irre- sponsible, impulsive and dangerous choices? (Perhaps our leaders do realize this connection.)

Some Americans welcome the attacks on seniority, due process rights, decent health insurance, and pensions. Do they not realize that they too once had these benefits? Do they not realize that if we lose our benefits, they will never have any chance of regaining theirs? Does the private sector not realize that what mea- ger benefits they have will be eroded even more? This is a downward cycle that will literally ruin our country.

When President Obama said in the 2011 State of the Union address that Americans can no longer expect to keep the same job for a working lifetime, what does that mean to the American public? The answer, in a word, is insecurity. Studies, experience and common sense state that once a good job is lost, it is impossible for a worker to obtain a better paying job. In the case of older Americans, they become permanently unemployed.

Moreover, when people are insecure, they are not willing to invest in occu- pations for which people who make cars or build homes will not have jobs.

Some people mock Europe for its So- cial Security benefits. Most Europeans of working age are employed with better benefits than Americans. The GOP will say that we have a higher standard of living. Indeed our GDP is higher, but that is akin to Bill Gates strolling into a bar: an average everyone at the watering hole is a billionaire but the bill is one that has a surplus of wealth.

I think Americans can learn a few things from Europe. When their econ- omics raise the pension age or increase college tuition, the Europeans take to the streets. We, however, surrendered our pen- sions, health care, and college in order to pay for college. In the case of older Americans, they become permanently unemployed.

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Moreover, when people are insecure, they are not willing to invest in occu- pations for which people who make cars or build homes will not have jobs.

When we attack the basic working rights of one group of Americans, we are attacking them for all Americans. We are tearing down a road where we have hoped for more labor for less compensa- tion. We shall become a mean country, a greedy country, a country in which our children will not want to live.
Is the Massachusetts Department of Education moving to a paperless licensure process?

Yes. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education projects that effective April 28, 2011 their online Educator Licensure & Recruitment system (ELAR) will serve as the official record for educator licensure. After then, they won't send hard copies as a matter of expediency and to save an educator's credentials.

The DESE is instituting these changes in an attempt to become more efficient and cost effective in challenging economic times for both current and prospective educators. The move to an increasingly paperless system is an effort to streamline the process, reduce waste, and become more nimble and responsive to national and global economic trends. All communication regarding licensure application will be processed electronically and via email.

As of the effective date, when their license is issued, educators will receive notification via email, directions on how to look up their license status on ELAR, as well as an overview on how to move licensure application or related materials within their accounts online. The DESE has a 24-hour automated system that can validate an educator’s licensure status by calling 781-338-3000 and then pressing 2.

Why does the principal present a class and give us only negative written feedback?

This would be considered an informal evaluation. On this topic the contract reads, “Principals/headmasters, the Superintendent and their designees may from time to time visit classrooms to observe informally the classroom management and instructional practices of teachers. If the observer notes need for improvement in any area, the observer will provide written feedback to the classroom teacher within five days of the informal visit.” The BTU contract elaborates, “Designees will be administrative employees of the school district assigned to the P-TU or the BTU. In other words, academic coaches [math, literacy, history], ETFs, etc. that are BTU members cannot evaluate other BTU members or contribute to the evaluation of the class.”

The intent of providing feedback related to issues in need of improvement based on an informal evaluation is to give the teacher an opportunity to make immediate changes in areas that are working well. The written feedback based on informal observations is a way to make the classroom teacher aware of areas in need of improvement. It is often being employed by administrators. As teachers, we often bemoan the lack of acknowledgement of what is positive about our teaching and our classrooms. In the case of informal observations, you can see that the contract language calls for written feedback based upon areas where there is a perception of the need for improvement. The contract does not mandate written feedback in areas that are working well. The written feedback based on informal observations is almost like a warning signal pointing to areas that have been addressed in the same manner, may be reflected negatively in the teacher’s formal evaluation. It would appear the intent of this contract provision was to curb an administrator from blindsiding or ‘kitchen sinking’ a teacher in a formal evaluation without ever having warned them about areas of concern prior to their formal evaluation write-up.

I suggest that teachers begin to collect data on their own behalf. We do it ‘for the children’; we should also do it for ourselves. Teachers should make written note of the date(s) and the time(s) of the informal visit(s) that the administration makes into their class and a short, anecdotal record of what was being taught, what the students’ behavior was like, etc. These written notes should be kept in the teacher’s possession or book bag, not left in school for obvious reasons. You may query, ‘why go to all the trouble of keeping records on the informal visits?’ What if that principal uses anecdotes or references activities from one of their previous informal observations in their formal evaluation without having provided written feedback in a timely (5-day) basis as called for in the contract, the inclusion of same may be grievable.

What is the ‘contractual hourly rate’ for teachers?

According to the contract; “individual parent/teacher conferences shall be held at the school at a time that is mutually agreed upon by the parent and the teacher. If a parent is unable to come to a conference at the school, the teacher may arrange for the parent to conduct a telephone conference. All K-5 elementary homeroom teachers will arrange for individual parent/teacher conferences in the fall. Follow-up individual conferences with all parents in the spring shall be encouraged. Class members shall schedule a second individual conference with any parent whose child is in danger of not being promoted to the next grade.”

What is the “contractual hourly rate” for teachers?

The current contractual hourly rate for teachers is $41.03. During the standard school day, individual teachers are paid at their own rate based on the amount of years teaching (step level) and the like. Any response written by teachers concerning an informal or formal evaluation should be written in a factual manner, depersonalized and without emotion. Keep copies of any response you write as well. Several teachers have told me that they barely read the written feedback they have received and do not address the issues listed as needing improvement. When a supervisor has made the teacher aware of these areas, they assume the teacher will endeavor to improve/correct the stated concerns. When the supervisor returns and views the same concerns occurring, it tends to hasten more visits and increased written [negative] feedback. While not particularly an efficacious manner of supervision, it is what is currently called for in the contract. It is important that teachers take the opportunity to address the areas identified as needing improvement rapidly. The only thing less desirable than the informal written feedback, is a formal written interim or overall evaluation containing the same areas of concern which were not earlier addressed by the teacher, now compounded by their not having done so.

Letter to the Editor: Karenen-Se En Hines

A Time to Redefine Public Education

J oanna Weiss’s article “Unions are Losing the PR Battle,” in the Boston Globe Sunday, February 27, 2011 posed a compelling question of what happens when billionaires, politicians and the over burdened middle class taxpayers clash? Her article was that hard fought benefits gained through unions could be lost. Well, there is a greater loss than to the unions. Her answer is that hard fought benefits gained through unions are working well. The written feedback based on informal observations is almost like a warning notice pointing to areas that if continued in the same manner, may be reflected negatively in the teachers’ formal evaluation. It would appear the intent of this contract provision was to curb an administrator from blindsiding or ‘kitchen sinking’ a teacher in a formal evaluation without ever having warned them about areas of concern prior to their formal evaluation write-up.

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Always keep a copy of all written feedback given to you by the administration. It is up to us to keep track of these and to respond to them in writing if the observation requires further clarification and the like. Any response written by teachers concerning an informal or formal evaluation should be written in a factual manner, depersonalized and without emotion. Keep copies of any response you write as well. Several teachers have told me that they barely read the written feedback they have received and do not address the issues listed as needing improvement. When a supervisor has made the teacher aware of these areas, they assume the teacher will endeavor to improve/correct the stated concerns. When the supervisor returns and views the same concerns occurring, it tends to hasten more visits and increased written [negative] feedback. While not particularly an efficacious manner of supervision, it is what is currently called for in the contract. It is important that teachers take the opportunity to address the areas identified as needing improvement rapidly. The only thing less desirable than the informal written feedback, is a formal written interim or overall evaluation containing the same areas of concern which were not earlier addressed by the teacher, now compounded by their not having done so.

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Know Your Rights: Caren Carew, BTU Secondary Field Representative

Caren Carew
BTU Secondary Field Rep.
BTU Members Join Others in Rallying to Support Wisconsin Workers

Photos by Michael J. Maguire and Mary T. Glynn
Artists impact society on many levels. From the clothes we wear to the machines we use. Product design, the cars we drive, the pictures we hang to enhance our environment, advertisements telling you what to buy, dance to, the movies to watch, the plays we go to, and much more. Society is driven by the arts, artists, creators and designers of the things we use in our everyday lives. Art is not only the products produced. Art is deeper, and has inner, hidden layers. These layers are revealed by directly experiencing the making of art.

The artistic experience offers the opportunity of growth and expansion of self, through the making of art, instilling understanding and appreciation of art, product, and process. The understanding of art is engendered through the intimate experience of making art with expressive media. Your inspiration for the product and the process increases, and your appreciation of art is accentuated. It is a humbling experience, and a dynamic one. It is an inner experience and it is even a mystical one.

While reading and writing about art has its merit, it is a limited, vicarious, experience. It offers an experience which is not direct, but you can still learn to understand and appreciate art, although in a limited, incomplete way. The actual making of art is a direct experience of process and product for the maker of the art form.

Making art is an effective, right hemisphere-brain function or experience having to do with creativity, creative thought, inventiveness, originality, uniqueness, outside of the box, emotions, feelings and the inner working of the human make-up. Art is right dominant.

Reading and writing are left hemisphere-brain functions of the cognitive domain of rational thought and reason, analyzing and figuring and external things. Math and Science and those areas, are left dominant.

We live in a left brain dominant society. Research proves that humans use a small percentage of the brain. We are a Science and Technology driven society, which is cognitive. This cognitive, left brain world we exist in needs the balance of emphasis on the affective, right brain modalities of existence. In such an external oriented world we are driven further and further away from our inner selves, our inner workings. We need the balance. Art engenders the refinement “The Arts”, experience refines human nature, and hones the character according to tradition.

We need reading, writing and math; we need painting, drawing and sculpture. We need the cognitive experience. We need the affective experience. We need the Sciences, we need the Arts. We need development of both modalities within the brain that houses our mind. The outer brain, the inner mind. We need the place, space, time and experience to work out the things of the cognitive, external realities of human existence. We need the same to work out affective, inner realities of our internal life. We need the therapy of art as the balance to a holistic education in an industrial, technology driven society.

(Kilola Maishya is a Visual Arts Instructor at the Winship School.)

What is Art? Why is it Important and Valuable?

Retired Teachers on Cape Cod Show Solidarity With Wisconsin Workers

In Falmouth, a small, but determined group of retired teachers and public workers who demonstrated solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Wisconsin! As we stood in front of the Falmouth Post Office, we were greeted with positive responses, lots of horns and even met a man whose wife teaches in Wisconsin! Former BTU members in the group were Doreen Kelly, formerly of the Office of Technology (2nd from left) and Martha Gillis, formerly the Director of Reading (far right).

Does someone you know work at a charter school?

AFT Massachusetts needs your help reaching out to employees of Massachusetts charter schools in order to share with them important information regarding:

❖ A voice in decision making
❖ Quality professional development opportunities
❖ Job security
❖ Competitive salaries and benefits
❖ Classroom resources

For more information, contact Dan Justice at justice65@gmail.com or call 802-324-5886.

Learn more about AFT’s Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff by visiting: www.aftacts.org

BOSTON UNION TEACHER  March 2011  5
 Commentary: John Enright

The Last Bastion of Customer Service

It amazes me when I walk in a store during these economically difficult times and the brazen attitudes I receive from clerks and other store personnel. I don’t know where this “I don’t want your business” approach to customer service originated but I neither like nor understand it. My immediate reaction was to take offense but I have to admit I felt relieved to see them mistreat others. I now understand it wasn’t personal, they just despise the public. That’s when I realized that education is the last bastion of that old axiom “the customer is always right.” Outrageous and inappropriate parents are politely listened to by teachers and one side might be completely dismissive like the cable company. Or, charging them a $25 cancellation fee like the doctor’s office does if they can’t make it. The sign-in sheets for visitors entering our schools should become mailing lists which we then sell to credit card companies or magazines.

Next open house I intend to install a lighted number which I will turn off when I don’t feel like meeting with parents anymore. I call this my “Off the Mark at Target Maneuver.” Of course there’s always the “Home Depot Detour.” This involves cordoning off the area that the customer; or in this case a concerned parent needs to get to. I intend to barriercast myself out but instead of a simple chain or gate I prefer placing a burgundy crushed velour rope around me like you see at the movies. That’s more my style. Better yet, parents need to be subjected to the “Proof to be an American Airlines Final Approach.” This entails having them report to a certain gate two hours before we are willing to meet with them. Then we make them remove their shoes and wait for seven hours before we say “Hi, we don’t have your child’s report card but we are willing to give you another student’s report card and voucher good for a free lunch in our cafeteria.” (Too bad we can’t lose their bags for them as well.)

If you don’t feel comfortable with any of those methods you might want to get on the offensive. Take a stab at the “Radio Shack Attack.” To do this you need to position yourself at the entrance to your school. Whenever a parent enters the building immediately leap at them and relentlessly ask “Can I help you?” Be vigilant and don’t let up. Be so eager to assist them that they feel you’re stalking material and are scared to ask you anything.

There’s always the idea of consistently giving out bad information. This ploy was developed by the US government and perfected by the national media. It really helps if you work in a building that has a large, confusing floor plan. That way you send promotional emails I see no reason to stop availing myself to the parents of them. I was then passed around to so many different agents that I started to develop a reputation. Each time I felt like a bad first date where I had to tell them my story only to have them push me on to someone else. Once I found that special someone that really understood my situation the distance and language barrier proved to be too much for both of us and the conversation disintegrated like all the others.

In closing, I would like to state that I always encourage parents to come up to school and meet me and I will continue to do so. It’s our job and we all know that the student success is usually connected to parent involvement. So, as long as they have their serial number, password, can repeatedly answer twenty or so security questions correctly, and allow me to send them promotional emails I see no reason to stop availing myself to the parents of my students.

If we really intend to follow the guidelines laid out by industry then parents who are concerned about their child’s education will have to start paying by the minute for advice. This approach is referred to as the Microsoft-Sell or Tech Support Hose Job. You’ve heard about companies selling a product which they no longer support? How about offering classes we no longer teach.

Worried about student defection to charter schools? This one’s easy. The BPS just needs to hire some staff members from AOL. Nobody makes a clean departure from them. Try canceling your service with AOL and you’ll understand perfectly. If they’re mangling the phones and handling the transfers then a kid would graduate before getting out of the school system.

You know the old saw about the three types of lies. Well, it’s been amended. It now goes like this: lies, damn lies, and statistics, and “Welcome to AT&T please hold.” Last time I dealt with them I experienced a longer hold time than Elmer’s glue. Finally, after enjoying a brief moment of human contact, I was then passed around to so many different agents that I started to develop a reputation. Each time I felt like a bad first date where I had to tell them my story only to have them push me on to someone else. Once I found that special someone that really understood my situation the distance and language barrier proved to be too much for both of us and the conversation disintegrated like all the others.

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(John Enright teaches at the Madison Park Technical Vocational School.)

From Egypt to Wisconsin…

An Egyptian protester in Tahir Square voices his solidarity with Wisconsin Public Employees.

INFORMATION FOR NEW RETIREES

When you retire, you are no longer a member of the Union because you no longer pay dues. And, you are no longer a member of the Health and Welfare Fund, which means you no longer have dental coverage and eyeglass coverage.

If you wish to continue your connection to the Union, you can join the Retired Teachers Chapter (RTC). The dues will be taken from your retirement check each month ($5 for teachers, $2.50 for paras). The RTC offers a dental insurance benefit to its members for a fee each month. Our Dental Plan covers members only and their spouse. You can also avail yourself of COBRA coverage through Health and Welfare for 18 months after retiring. For info on COBRA, call 1-617-288-0500.

FILL IN THE COUPON AND RETURN TO THE RTC TO RECEIVE A PACKET OF INFORMATION ON THE RTC, Hopefully, after reading the information below and we will send you the application form. (Eileen Ganley is RTC Membership Chairperson.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City/Town/State/Zip:</td>
<td>Email:</td>
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<td>Telephone:</td>
<td>Circle your previous position:</td>
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<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
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Send this form to: BTU-RTC, 180 Mount Vernon Street, Dorchester, MA 02125

Got Heat?

Shortage of heat has been an issue at McKinley South End Academy, as at other schools. By February, 60% of students were wearing blankets. The trend in customer service relations, it’s an attitude that I just despise the public. That’s when I realized that education is the last bastion of that old axiom “the customer is always right.” Outrageous and inappropriate parents are politely listened to by teachers and one side might be completely dismissive like the cable company. Or, charging them a $25 cancellation fee like the doctor’s office does if they can’t make it. The sign-in sheets for visitors entering our schools should become mailing lists which we then sell to credit card companies or magazines.

Next open house I intend to install a lighted number which I will turn off when I don’t feel like meeting with parents anymore. I call this my “Off the Mark at Target Maneuver.” Of course there’s always the “Home Depot Detour.” This involves cordoning off the area that the customer; or in this case a concerned parent needs to get to. I intend to barriercast myself out but instead of a simple chain or gate I prefer placing a burgundy crushed velour rope around me like you see at the movies. That’s more my style. Better yet, parents need to be subjected to the “Proof to be an American Airlines Final Approach.” This entails having them report to a certain gate two hours before we are willing to meet with them. Then we make them remove their shoes and wait for seven hours before we say “Hi, we don’t have your child’s report card but we are willing to give you another student’s report card and voucher good for a free lunch in our cafeteria.” (Too bad we can’t lose their bags for them as well.)

If you don’t feel comfortable with any of those methods you might want to get on the offensive. Take a stab at the “Radio Shack Attack.” To do this you need to position yourself at the entrance to your school. Whenever a parent enters the building immediately leap at them and relentlessly ask “Can I help you?” Be vigilant and don’t let up. Be so eager to assist them that they feel you’re stalking material and are scared to ask you anything.

There’s always the idea of consistently giving out bad information. This ploy was developed by the US government and perfected by the national media. It really helps if you work in a building that has a large, confusing floor plan. That way you

– David Russell


From Egypt to Wisconsin...

– David Russell

March, 2011

BOSTON UNION TEACHER

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Ellen Demers has been teaching in the Boston Public Schools for 39 years. She has taught students in self-contained special education classrooms including a LAB class for students with primary emotional and behavioral disturbances. Ellen has taught in K2 ESD (Educational and Social Development). This is a class room for middleressed students with moderate cognitive disabilities. The special education department is in the process of making major changes to how it teaches its students, with a new model of special education. Ellen is retiring at the end of this year.

Ellen has been in the Boston Education System for 39 years. These last few years have been a change in the way special education is delivered. No one has called on Ellen, or the many other special education teachers like her, about how she would improve education for her students. Well Ellen is retiring at the end of this year. So this is a great opportunity for us to better understand what Ellen has been doing with her students and plan together with colleagues. Having an ESD strand in one building will also allow regular education students to have mainstreaming opportunities with our students in the classroom, as regular education teachers and students can and have been aggressive towards our students. These ESD classes need to be equipped with the same resources and materials as our students. Currently my single ESD class is my longest and most recent assignment. I was able to do this having taken specialized professional development that focused on adapting books and provided me with the knowledge to help me develop our students. The ESD classes need to be equipped with the academic and functional skills that will help us students become educated, independent and productive members of their community.

I feel strongly that ESD classes need their own bathrooms. A single toilet either in a classroom or in the hallway is not enough. There is also a need for the ESD classes to be equipped with the same resources and materials as our students. Currently my single ESD class is my longest and most recent assignment. An important change that would allow for more effective instruction is class size. ESD classes are presently too large and understaffed.

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We’re Learning Here  
A project by Amika Kemmler Ernst, Ed.D.

The Agassiz Elementary School in Jamaica Plain has a long history. I do aqua aerobics with Maureen, who attended the original Agassiz in the 1950s, although when it opened in 1894 it served boys only. The current building, erected in the 1970s, is destined to close at the end of this school year, sadly, sadly... for reasons beyond our control: budgets, building woes, test scores, political expediency. I feel privileged and honored to be able to share some of the voices of its students and teachers in this column.

On a frigid Friday morning in between snow days and a 3-day weekend, I visited the Agassiz to take photos. I wandered freely in the halls, stopping in classes and looking for learners – kids engaged in literacy activities for the most part. Teachers faced half-empty classes because of the weather and late buses. Students in uniforms gathered on colorful round rugs to listen to a story or talk about the day’s plans; in upper grades many were reading independently or writing responses to reading questions in their notebooks.

Everyone was so welcoming! I was thrilled to hear from one teacher that she enjoyed this column every month and was using something she learned teachers in another school were doing. Her “Worry Wall” was covered with all kinds of concerns and I think it must’ve been a comfort to her students to be able to share them. Ms. Driscoll was teaching character education through puppetry and her kindergarten students were acting out emotions ~ I love visiting classrooms where all the kids are so completely engaged!

Louis Agassiz, a noted 19th century scientist, and his daughter (Pauline Agassiz Shaw) both had Boston public schools named for them. I can only hope that the staff and students of the Agassiz bring the curiosity that drove him as well as the collaborative spirit of their school with them to their new assignments. My heart goes out to all of those who are being forced to make this transition.

I was writing about The Chi-Lin Purse, a story in our reading book. I’ve become a more fluent reader, paying attention to periods and other punctuation when I read. – Marc Cassio, Grade 5

We were acting out and trying to guess feeling words like “scared”. We’ve also made animal puppets with Ms. Driscoll (character education teacher). – K2 students Yuslis Ramirez, Adrian Santana, Naysha Guerreiro, Abrianna Pimental, & Mariangelis Villalona

We were in science class, building a car that could go 100cm. We’ve learned about things that make vehicles go and stop. For example, the more pieces you put on your vehicle, the slower it will go. – Cameron Durocher & Desmond Barnett, Grade 4

In this photo, paraprofessional Maria Borrero is singing to Amaria Hall, a visually impaired kindergartener, and demonstrating a movement. Amaria is learning the letters in her name and uses a touch screen computer to identify shapes.

We were finishing up our math assignment. We’ve learned how to find the dimensions and volume of a box. – Rosay Brilla, Alexandra Reynoso & Adonis Canapaj, Grade 5

We were listening to our teacher. We read different stories and we learn new words every day. We’ve also learned how to find little words inside big words. – Ms. Mullin’s first grade students

We were correcting one another’s papers about “Moe McTooth,” a poem we read. I’m learning not to skip over words when I read. – Nayely Livingston, Grade 3

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