

NORTANews

January 2007

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A Professional Learning Community

By Robin Brennan, NRTA President

Dear Members,

Welcome back and Happy New Year. Welcome back to what will be an interesting year, of that I am sure! You are probably at least hearing mentions of something called a "Professional Learning Community". You may already be giving, working on or have been directed to create common assessments. You have had staff development or reconstructed your curriculum using Rubicon Atlas. I also know that many of you might not know what the heck it is all about! Believe it or not, it is not a flavor of the month and it is all connected.

The NRTA officers and I have the privilege of seeing our district from a bird's eye view.

We attend every meeting on every issue Kindergarten through high school. The curriculum, building conditions, special education issues, state and federal mandates and legislation, retirement, tenure, contracts, medical plans, every building's administrative concerns, political and community concerns, staffing needs and teaching and learning initiatives are all part of our view. If Robert and Ileana go to a workshop, we know about it! If it affects a teacher, teaching assistant or a child's education in **any** way, we have the information we need to understand it. Sadly, it is difficult to transfer that knowledge to over 1,000 members but I will endeavor to explain, ease your concerns and lay out the path we find ourselves on.

Often, due to the daily demands of teach

ing we are isolated in our classrooms, struggling with the needs of challenging students, which leads us to a lack of productive interaction with colleagues. In addition, administration may not know how to address each building's or teachers' critical needs. A professional learning community is a school that engages the entire group of professionals; administrative, teaching and support staff who come together to improve the learning process for every child.

The philosophy of a professional learning community is a twenty-year-old concept that was developed to help move public schools away from the factory model of education. The core of the philosophy asks three essential questions:

1. What do we want our children to learn?
2. How will we know when they learn it?

What will we do if they don't?

Rubicon Atlas is the tool that aided us in finding the answer to, "What do we want our children to learn?" Most of us examined our curriculum and have created an outline on Rubicon Atlas but have little idea of how it has value in our day to day. It is meant to eventually be a resource, especially for our new teachers. It is a resource that can, over time, give professionals direction and continuity in all levels and in every curriculum.

A common assessment is the tool that may answer, "How will we know when they learn it?" The assessments that you have been discussing are tests created for either a grade level or course that everyone teaching that grade level or course gives his or her students. The outcome is analyzed to see what concepts the kids understand, if they have progressed to higher order thinking, what they may have prior knowledge of and what they don't grasp yet. The tests will constantly be revised and are only used as a tool to help kids learn and teachers teach. Anyone who uses results in any way to compare or judge teachers is ill informed and not invested in the spirit of a learning community.

"What will we do when they don't learn?" is the big piece. You may be involved in AIS, IST teams, 504 committees and success programs in your buildings. All of these are **mandated** by NCLB and N.Y. State standards as a recorded response to intervention. They must be in place to support our most vulnerable students to help them succeed and to ensure our schools get off the cited list. These interventions still need to be discussed, negotiated and organized in a way for us to reach more students more effectively. **Ultimately, the key to success often is student accountability that matches our commitment to them.**

This is the connection between all you have heard and seen recently at your faculty and department meetings. Change is difficult, especially when the process takes more of our time and increases our work without having a full understanding of the positive potential. There is value in all these initiatives but there is also the necessity to do all this while maintaining our contractual agreement with the district.

The initial question is when will we have time for all this? Watts & Castle (1993) state, "*Time is a significant issue for faculties who wish to work together collegially, and it has been cited as both a barrier (when it is not available) and a supportive factor (when it*

is available) by staffs engaging in school improvement." We need time to communicate with one another and administration. We need time to spend doing constructive things with students rather than having to stand in a cafeteria or hallway. The district needs, and we need, to be creative.

Teachers are overwhelmed with increased class size, fewer teaching assistants, more mandates, less parental support and more needy students. We cannot work harder so we need to work smarter. Establishing a learning community does not occur spontaneously. **It requires a dedicated and intentional effort** on the part of administration and the professional staff. The NRTA will support anything that supports our students but our support will only sustain to the degree that the administration's observable support is equal to its verbal pronouncements. Your union, the NRTA, is a core of communication, decision-making and problem solving across all levels with the district.

We are facing a crisis in our North Rockland community. The Mirant settlement ended costing more than it would have if it had been settled earlier. The community understandably wants someone to take the blame and, even though we have nothing to do with Mirant, our students and we will suffer the consequences. If this year's budget does not pass, we are facing the possibility of budgetary constraints that may further decrease staff through attrition, possible transfers to other buildings, increase class size, decrease the number of formally classified students, decrease the presence of security and SRO officers, and eliminate the arts, music and sports programs, summer school, educational programs, staff development and field trips. Building improvements are already on hold due to state laws of austerity and only emergency improvements can take place. **It is important that you understand the extent of the crisis we are facing.**

This is our reality. Yet we are still looking optimistically to innovative educational initiatives such as Rubicon Atlas, Professional Learning Communities, common assessments and Robert Marzano's work on what works in schools. The education and well being of our students always comes first. I am saddened that, in order for our students and us to survive the burden of another failed budget, we may have to drastically slow the pace of change. We will need to focus on getting through the teaching day and the curriculum with a larger class size and additional state and federal mandates.

Understanding this, the NRTA will move forward at a pace that allows conversation and agrees to uphold our collective bargaining agreement with the district for the sake of all teachers, teaching assistants and ultimately all students.

We will move forward this year in good faith. We are committed to a partnership with the district that gives us the sense we are all being heard. We are committed to change that gives our students, their families and ourselves time, direction and hope.

**Haverstraw Middle
School's
Annual Beach
Clean Up**

Haverstraw Middle faculty members were joined by over 130 HMS students, parents and community leaders for their annual clean-up of the Hudson River shoreline, reported NRTA member Jennifer Bodkin.

The cleanup was part of the Keep Rockland Beautiful initiative, in which over 6,000 pounds of garbage were collected.

According to Bodkin, some of the more interesting items found this year were: two mattresses, the frame of a riding lawn mower, a metal bird cage and a typewriter!

Representatives of the Sierra Club, Water Sentinels and Keep Rockland Beautiful were on hand to thank the faculty members and students on their hard work.

According to NORTANews records, this was the 14th consecutive year that faculty members participated!!!

**NRTA
Upcoming Events**

- Friday, March 2** NRTA Dream Team vs. Harlem Rockets, 7 p.m. NRHS Annex Gym
- Late April—May** Phone Banks/School Budget
- Tuesday, May 15th** School Budget Vote
- Saturday, June 2** North Rockland Community Fun Day @ Bowline Park
- Tuesday, June 26** *10th ANNUAL NRTA Scholarship Golf Outing*

**North Rockland Teachers' Association
Office Hours**

****Meet with an NRTA Officer**Discuss Union Issues**Discuss Building Issues** Discuss Educational Issues**Learn about Your Union****

*Our Location:
15 Liberty Square
Stony Point, New York 10980
845.942.0175*

**We are available to meet with any member on the following Wednesdays
3:00 p.m.—5 p.m.**

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Jan. 10th | Jan. 17th | Jan. 24th |
| Jan. 31st | Feb. 7th | Feb. 14th |
| | Feb. 28th | |

More days to be posted soon!

**Marc Pritsky—
Climbing the Summit**

This summer Marc Pritsky, a North Rockland High School science teacher will be participating in a climbing series called, "Summit for Someone."

Summit for Someone is a series of benefit climbs supporting the at-risk teens of Big-City Mountaineers (BCM). BCM is a non-profit, volunteer organization created to provide under-resourced teenagers with a dramatic wilderness-based learning experience that has shown to build self-esteem and positively impact their beliefs about themselves and others.

Pritsky will be climbing Gannett Peak, the highest peak in the state of Wyoming (13,804') and is required to raise \$3,500—the amount needed to fund one youth member in a wilderness program.

For more information, log onto www.summitforsomeone.org or you can contact Marc at mpritsky@nrhs.nrcsd.org. Best wishes from the NRTA Marc!!!

Congress Approves Extension of Tax Breaks for K-12 Educators

Extension of several important tax benefits that will help AFT members has been included in a tax extension package passed by Congress before it recessed earlier this month. The AFT had lobbied hard to keep a modest \$250 tax deduction for K-12 educators who buy school supplies for their students, as well as a broader tax deduction of up to \$4,000 for college tuition that is of special value to educators. This benefits teachers and paraprofessionals who continue their education through graduate and professional development. Both provisions had been due to expire if Congress had taken no action.

Both were included in a broad tax and trade bill, the Tax Relief and Health Care Act of 2006, signed by President Bush on Dec. 20. It also included an extension of the Qualified Zone Academy Bond (QZAB) program, which will provide more than \$800 million in federally subsidized school bonds. These bonds will be used to repair and upgrade K-12 public schools and serves as an important model for AFT's school construction efforts. With QZABs, the federal government pays the interest on the bonds, which will reduce the cost of repair and renovation by almost 50 percent.

The \$250 above-the-line tax deduction allows K-12 educators to write off that amount of their out-of-pocket expenses for classroom supplies, even if they do not itemize. While the amount of the deduction is small, it is an important provision that would provide classroom educators—many of whom spend more than \$250—over \$379 million in tax relief over the next two years.

The continuation of the \$4,000 above-the-line deduction for higher education expenses also is available to those who do not itemize. This is a vital benefit both for the children of workers and for teachers, paraprofessionals and others who incur higher education expenses for professional development. It will save taxpayers \$3.3 billion over the next two years.

Give us Ten Minutes and we'll give you An Orchestra???

How can an orchestra be successful only rehearsing ten minutes a day? Focus and a lot of practice, says NRHS ten-minute orchestra leader John Bjorkman.

The North Rockland High School Ten-minute orchestra was founded in 1998 as a sight reading group to accommodate students who were sitting or practicing in their chairs at 7:20, ten minutes before the start of first period.

The idea was so well received that the group transformed itself into an ensemble that has performed in Solo and Ensembles concerts in February and the spring concert in May. The group has been honored by NYSSMA and has attained Level 6 (the highest award a group can receive) for the past five years.

This year, the group has been invited to the ASTA National Orchestra Festival in Detroit, MI and The Disney Honors National Concert Band, Orchestra and Choral Invitational. It's repertoire is diverse, ranging from Bach to Led Zeppelin.

Bjorkman notes that the group wouldn't exist without the support of the other music classes and instructors, which allow the students to develop the needed skills. The ten-minute orchestra is the icing on the cake, he says.

www.nrta.net

Check out the Website home of the North Rockland Teachers' Association

- Upcoming Events Calendar
- Executive Council Links
 - Member Benefits
 - NORTANews

*Please e-mail any comments or suggestions to
Reyna Texler, NRTA Webmaster*

ATTENTION NRTA Members

The 2007 North Rockland Teachers' Scholarship applications will be available **ON LINE** only beginning Friday, February 16th at:

www.nrta.net

All applications must be postmarked no later than **March 30, 2007.**

There will be no exceptions made.

All applications ***must be mailed to:***

**North Rockland Teachers' Association
15 Liberty Square
Stony Point, New York 10980**

Please be reminded this scholarship is open to all members of the North Rockland High School Class of 2007.

NRTA Holiday Gift Drive

The North Rockland Teachers' Association recently completed its' annual Holiday Gift Drive and it was a rousing success!

Over 400 toys were donated to the children and families of the North Rockland community through the members of the NRTA. This is the 9th year of the holiday gift program through the union.

The toys and gifts are distributed throughout the community in conjunction with the Child Assistance Program, through the Department of Social Services of Rockland County.


NORTANews

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Now That He Is Safely Dead

Now that he is safely dead
Let us praise him
Build monuments to his glory
Sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
Such convenient heroes: They cannot rise
To challenge the images
We would fashion from their lives.
And besides,
It is easier to build monuments
Than to make a better world.

From the poem by Carl Wendell Himes, Jr

FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH

NRTA Food Drive a huge success!!

The NRTA Thanksgiving Food Drive was a huge success, as we collected 1,871 pounds of food throughout the district. In addition, \$750 in cash donations were also received.

The collections were distributed throughout the North Rockland community through the Child Assistance Program of Rockland County.

Thanks to all who participated!

