

# YOU *Union News*

Cleveland Heights Teachers Union Local 795



## Special points of interest:

- A teacher of AP history eliminates homework as a requirement
- Boulevard teachers work with coaches to align curriculum to standards
- Benefits we hope you will never use
- Banquet highlights, tutoring at library, and scholarship funding
- Classroom assessments based on state standards in an Algebra class

## Cleveland Heights Teachers Union

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## Help Us Set a New Standard

Writing a newsletter for a union of teachers is intimidating. Teachers are both bombarded with reading material and highly critical readers. Professional journals, emails, homework assignments, newspapers, and advertisements for graduate degrees from dubious online universities compete for our limited reading time. It is our hope that the following newsletter will fill a particular niche and be worthy of your time. Additionally, we welcome your feed-

back so that future editions will benefit from your constructive criticism. Each issue will focus on a timely topic and show how the issue is affecting our union. This issue will focus on the standards movement. At the national level, both of our Presidents—Barack Obama and Randi Weingarten of the AFT—have recently voiced support for national standards. Cleveland Heights Teachers Union members have had an active history in the standards movement.

## By David Egbert

The following issue will highlight some of the ways our membership is responding to the standards movement. Members are realigning curricula, altering grading practice, and receiving coaching to improve their practice to aid students in meeting standards. Please enjoy the following articles and send us your comments so that our humble publication can meet your standards.

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## Standardizing the Standards

As I'm sure you all know, for years now we have been deeply immersed in the standards movement in nearly every aspect of public education. It is a key element in our working lives. I for one had always viewed standards as clear, universal and measurable; similar to what the EPA or FDA uses, or similar to standards set by the Consumer Products Safety Commission when they ram those shiny new cars with crash test dummies inside against concrete walls. Not so in our business. When we examine what children are expected to know and be able to do K - 12; as teachers, we are confronted with two profound realities.

First: There are hundreds, if not thousands, of standards across all content areas and grade levels. For example, if you look at Ohio's Academic Content Standards just for Social Studies K-12, the document consists of 185 pages of standards and benchmarks. While this may seem overwhelming, the larger question is whether or not these standards reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills on which we are placing so much emphasis.

Second: In the United States there are fifty-one sets of academic standards; each state

and the District of Columbia have their own. It is likely there is some similarity and consistency among the states, but what we have at the moment is a tilted playing field that doesn't serve our students very well when academic content is determined by geographic boundaries. Nonetheless, our students, schools and states are subject to the benchmarks established under NCLB.

We are constantly reminded of the low performance of US students compared to students in other industrialized nations. While this is a cause for alarm, keep in mind U.S. students who participate in both national and international assessments have had their instruction driven by their respective state standards. Moreover, there is a social justice issue inherent in this problem. As AFT President Randi Weingarten pointed out, "Should fate, as determined by a child's Zip code, dictate how much algebra he or she is taught."

The movement to push for national standards is gaining momentum among leaders in the education community including AFT and the new Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. In addition, the National Governors

## by Tom Schmida

Association issued a recent policy statement calling for rigorous national academic standards. Previous efforts under the Clinton administration failed to secure the necessary funding from Congress.

The AFT has proposed that a broad-based group of education stakeholders be convened to create a strong set of voluntary national standards, a model that can be adopted by all states. But standards on paper won't accomplish much unless there is a national commitment to provide the professional development and the instructional resources needed to ensure that improved teaching and learning occur.

Implementing national standards does not necessarily mean we will see American students move up in the international rankings. That should not be the intent. We are all well aware that the U.S., unlike many other countries, is committed to the premise that education is a fundamental right, and we will educate all children. In our mobile society and global economy, it just makes sense that a common set of national standards guides us in "what" to teach. "How" to teach is on us. Your thoughts?

## Blazing a New Trail at Boulevard

By David Egbert



*"Boulevard's teachers were open to honestly assessing their practice and working together to improve"*  
Beth Rae  
Literacy Coach  
Boulevard Elementary

According to the union-bashing site, [teachersunionsexposed.com](http://teachersunionsexposed.com), "union leaders' suggestions for reform are best summarized as 'more money to hire more teachers.'" The author of that sentiment should spend an afternoon with two passionate education reformers, who are active CHTU members. Beth Rae and Candace Summers, literacy and math coaches respectively, tirelessly champion research-based teaching reforms. They have spent the past year assisting teachers at Roxboro and Boulevard Elementary Schools designing instruction that enables students to meet and exceed state standards. The work of talented coaches like Beth and Candace shows that union advocates are often leaders of sound education reform like standards-based instruction and assessment.

Beth Rae, who also serves as CHTU's Secretary, is clearly proud of how teachers at Boulevard are using strategies studied during PLC time, staff meetings, and after-school sessions to produce success in their classrooms. Teachers have spent much time developing short-cycle assessments based on the Ohio Department of Education's indicators. A deliberative process that emphasizes teacher leadership ensures that the assessments would truly measure if a student met a specific standard. First, teachers de-

constructed the state's indicators. Teachers then developed learning intentions using kid-friendly language. Doing so broke complex, abstract state standards into lesson-sized pieces that 1<sup>st</sup> graders were soon explaining to one another. (see the March 2009 article in [Heights Observer](#) ) Some teachers have already begun using short-cycle assessments. Next year's goal at Boulevard is for teachers to use their own teacher-created short-cycles to inform their instruction on a daily basis.

Boulevard's students took a standardized math benchmark assessment near the beginning of the school year. Boulevard's third grade teachers went beyond Candace's best hopes and analyzed the results of that test and decided to focus on four difficult indicators. They then worked with Candace to develop common short-cycle assessments and lessons. The teachers would deliver the same lesson and identical short-cycle assessments to their students before lunch. Based on the results, the students were grouped according to the level of mastery. Those students needing remediation received targeted instruction. Students needing a bit more practice, practiced more. And

students showing mastery either worked on an extension or on a different topic. Boulevard's third grader's benefited from this targeted, collaborative effort and showed tremendous gains on the winter administration of the benchmark test .

When asked what was the key to helping teachers transform their practice, Beth and Candace cite a number of key factors. "Boulevard's teachers were open to honestly assessing their practice and working together to improve. Teachers also dedicated significant time to the process. Teachers met during PLC time, after school for two-hour work sessions and during lunch," Beth stated. Boulevard's TAP committee dedicated funds to enable teachers to meet during and after the school day. Administration also provided Beth and Candace with time during each staff meeting to work with teachers on their understanding of formative assessments, learning intentions, and other practices that will help Boulevard's students shine. "I'm very excited about the energy I've seen this year. Boulevard's teachers are really focusing their instruction and the kids are benefiting," Candace said reflecting on the year.



Lita Gonzalez wins a gift basket through the raffle following her recognition as a *Friend of the Heights Schools* award.

## Banquet Highlights

### Glenn Altschuld Scholarship

Local 795 awards a scholarship to a high school senior who is interested in becoming a teacher. This year the funds raised for the scholarship came through our basket raffle at the annual banquet. Each school brought a basket for the raffle – they were thoughtfully and creatively put together by various members. The local raised over \$1200 and had a great time. Special thanks for Tina Reynolds for getting everyone or-

ganized. Thanks to Tamar Gray and Beth Rae for helping make this a success, and lastly to Darryl Lausche for prompting everyone to buy more tickets than they wanted.

### Friend of Heights Schools

At the annual banquet April 24th the Cleveland Heights Teachers Union awarded Lita Gonzalez the Friends of the Heights Schools Award. The only other recipient of this award was long time Reaching

## By Ari Klein

Heights director Susie Kaesar. Gonzalez, a former teacher, is a super advocate of the school system. She created the PATH program – where perspective parents are given personalized tours of our schools, heads up programs to give our Career Prep students opportunities to reach out to the community, and countless other projects. We are fortunate to have Lita Gonzalez working on our behalf.

## An Historic Shift in Grading

When CHTU member Karen Bauer-Blazer agreed to attend the Assessment Training Institute's 2008 Conference on Sound Grading Practices she intended to play devil's advocate. As a distinguished teacher with over 30 years of experience, she has seen reform initiatives come and go. She assumed that the presenters, many of whom are not active teachers, could not offer arguments that would hold up to her critical analysis that is based on real, current classroom experience. She had read Ken O'Connor's book, [A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades](#), over the summer and found it, "interesting, yet unrealistic."

Karen has been concerned with the issue of fairness and grades for some time. She said that O'Connor's book showed her that, "fairness doesn't mean uniformity. Fairness is about giving students equal opportunity to learn." However, she did not think that his ideas could be implemented in a real classroom.

However, something funny happened in Portland, Oregon.

Karen suddenly found herself seeing validity in many of the proposals. She visualized how she could implement various assessment practices in her AP Government, AP U.S. History and Government classes to accurately communicate what content students truly mastered. Despite her best intention not to be swayed by "nationally-renowned experts," she was convinced that her methods of grading and assessing needed to be changed.

During meals with colleagues after conference presentations, she began brainstorming ways to implement standards-based grading practices. Those conversations turned into action when she returned to her classroom in the P.R.I.D.E. School at Cleveland Heights High School. One of the first changes was an end to giving points for completing homework. She continued to assign homework, log who completed the assignments, and provide students with descriptive feedback. However, students were no longer penalized or rewarded for homework in her gradebook.

After administering an assess-

ment, she was able to reflect on areas that need re-teaching. Students had the opportunity to work with Ms. Bauer-Blazer during special help, prep time and lunch to gain the knowledge needed to show improvement on a second assessment of the same standard.

The transition to a more standards-based grading approach was not without challenges. Karen was disappointed by how many students stopped completing homework. "Many of my students stopped doing their homework when I stopped giving points, especially in the beginning. Some students began doing homework after seeing how poorly they performed on my tests—but more need to do the homework."

On the whole, Karen is happy to have begun the transition to standards-based teaching and grading. "I believe my grades have more integrity now. The grades really represent what the kids know. Students are responding to the new method. It [standards-based grading] is difficult but worth it."

## By David Egbert



Karen Bauer-Blazer busily enters her students's grades.

*"I believe my grades have more integrity now."*

*Karen Bauer-Blazer  
Social Studies Teacher  
CHHS  
P.R.I.D.E. School*

## Security Monitors Denied Supplemental Contracts

As you may know, effective this 2008-2009 school year our Local 795 Security Monitors have been denied the opportunity to receive supplemental contracts for coaching or advising student groups. Early on during contract negotiations the Board announced that hourly employees would no longer be issued supplemental contracts. The Board's position is based on their interpretation of the Fair Labor Standards Act which calls for the payment of overtime for hourly employees who work in excess of 40 hours per week. The Board argued that since supplemental contracts

are really salaries, and hours worked is not a factor in determining supplemental pay, the granting of supplemental contracts to district hourly employees violates the aforementioned provisions of federal law.

The Union disagreed pointing out that the relatively low rates of compensation for most supplemental contracts and the amount of hours dedicated to coaching and advising student groups could qualify as exceptions. To that end, last November the Union asked the Board to join us in filing a request for an opinion on the matter to the

## By Tom Schmida

US Department of Labor. The Board declined, so we filed our own request. To date we have not received a response. We know there are a number of Monitors who have held supplemental contracts for years and have dedicated countless hours as coaches and student advisors. Unfortunately, non-teaching employees from outside the district have been given preference over our Monitors in filling supplemental contract slots. To us, this is an unfairness that we hope will be corrected. Stay tuned.







CHTU: Insuring your family's well-being.

## Benefits We Hope You Never Need

The Union has bargained for and manages two benefits we hope that you never have to use. One is our life insurance policy that pays out \$63,000 to your beneficiary in case you die while employed by the district. The second benefit is our income disability policy. When a member is out of work for medical reasons for more than 30 days, other than for pregnancy, the policy kicks in to supplement expenses by paying out \$10 per day. This is not intended to replace an income, but an extra \$300 per month helps out. When a member is on long term disability under this plan and is approved for an STRS or SERS disability retire-

ment, our policy does two things. It not only continues to pay out the \$10 per day, but also allows the member to continue having the life insurance policy up to age 70 without paying the premium. Keeping up with our retired members who are disabled is an ongoing job for the local, but one that we believe makes a difference in the lives of teachers beset by conditions that would not allow them to continue working and who have had their incomes reduced due to disability retirements. Some of these people have been gone from full time employment for quite a while. In fact, the life insurance company that covers

## By Ari Klein

our plan has changed twice over the last ten years due to merger and an acquisition which made the last payout for a disabled retiree quite cumbersome. In the end we persevered, but only after an enormous struggle and digging up of old policies and proof of employment. We bargain for these benefits in the hope that no one needs them, but unfortunately, this is not the case. It is important for members to know these benefits exist and that we stand ready to assist if needed.

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*"I find written feedback very effective because kids don't see a grade and shut down."*

*Melissa Egbert  
Algebra and Geometry  
Teacher  
CHHS*

## A Standard Test

I am constantly assessing, both formally and informally. Homework, classwork, and bellwork give me up-to-the minute knowledge of where my students are and I adjust accordingly. I check and recheck bellwork assignments at the beginning of every period. I do periodic binder checks to make sure students are staying organized and their notes are complete and accurate. I have "clickers" in my classroom which allows me to produce quick reports on my missed questions and topics. I use them for pre-assessing and formative assessing. Although I

plan a week ahead, I am often tweaking how and what I teach based on how each class went.

My students regularly help contribute to their multiple choice assessments by writing the questions (which allows me to see where they are before an assessment) plus it provides them with added ownership. Each test is broken down by learning objective and students are able to take parallel tests just on those objectives. I am able to review the tests by objective to identify class-wide weaknesses to revisit. Students complete three drafts of their performance assessment

## By Melissa Egbert

and in between each draft I revisit certain topics they are still struggling with. Although they may have finished a unit, they still may be talking about the old material a month later.

I find the written feedback on the performance assessments very effective because students don't just see a grade and shut down. They see what level they're at against the rubric and read the feedback. They appreciate the ability to fix mistakes. Often in math, the mistakes are minor but affect the entire problem.



Tutoring is held every week on Tuesdays from 4-6pm at the Lee Road library.

## Library Tutoring

Thanks to members of the our Union who have been volunteering their time Tuesday afternoons from 4-6 pm at the main library on Lee Road. Students have been dropping in to get help with assignments.

Thanks to Marion Ciepluch, Brian Schaner, Beth Rae, Janett Korb, Lisa Berusch, Kim Kolecki, Denise Lackey, Amanda Masters, Jessica Tayse, Lorene Varley, Kristen Kase-Janowski, Tom Schmida and Michelle Jackson.

## By Ari Klein

Special thanks for retired teacher Dave Tomberg (also a grandparent in the district.) At the end of the year we will evaluate our partnership with the library and determine how we will work together next year.