

Random Notes

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Obama's Remarks on School Firings Unacceptable

In less time than it takes to punch a ballot, President Barack Obama probably lost a huge bloc of supporters pivotal to his election in 2008, and upon whom, we're certain, he is relying for future support. Obama's endorsement of the wholesale firing of the faculty and staff at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, combined with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's reckless and irresponsible characterization of the action as "courageous" and "what's right for kids" were met with disbelief by teachers and other educators across the country.

Just last spring, a Rhode Island Education Commission report highlighted the recent progress in reading and writing proficiency. Rather than scapegoating teachers, the report singled out as problematic teacher concerns such as leadership instability and the frequency of the abrupt termination of programs in favor of new programs. Under the section of the report entitled "next steps," the Commission wrote, "Take the time to celebrate as a learning community the accomplishments, successes and positive changes that have taken place over the past few years."

Since the decision to fire the entire staff and faculty was announced, the administration and the union representing the teachers have returned to the bargaining table in an effort to reach agreement on a reform plan. In the meantime, Washington is reportedly spending considerable time on damage control.

The AFL-CIO, an affiliate of the local teachers' union, released the following statement in support of the Central Falls High School teachers:

Students in every high school, no matter its ZIP code, deserve a great education. Obtaining a great education depends upon a number of factors, including having well-prepared and supported teachers; well-trained, dedicated and collaborative administrators; solid curricula and focused instruction; and, for our most disadvantaged students, wraparound services that address the out-of-school factors that should not be allowed to impede teaching and learning.

Central Falls High School is the only high school in Central Falls, R.I., a community of working-class families, many of whom are struggling in the economic downturn facing so many communities. The dedicated and committed teachers and teaching assistants of Central Falls High School are making real progress in improving academic achievement, as noted in a state report issued last April. However, even this progress is not sufficient, and the

school's teachers agreed with the superintendent in January that a transformation model should be employed at the school.

Unfortunately, their attempt to engage through their union with the superintendent on the design and details of that model were rebuffed at only their second meeting. The superintendent then unilaterally decided to impose a turnaround model that called for the entire staff to be fired, disrupting teaching and learning at the school, scapegoating teachers and staff and upsetting the whole community instead of working in partnership to employ proven models of reform.

The approach embraced by the Central Falls superintendent—mass teacher firings—has been demonstrated to be a failed model that will not result in the
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District Needs to Analyze Professional Development Offerings

Professional Development is being pushed harder than ever as one of the surest means—if not the surest—to improved student achievement. The idea is so popular that a few years back even the Mayor questioned whether the district provided (and the contract allowed) enough time for teacher professional development. On occasion, a board member will suggest more time is needed for professional development. Staff development, in-service, teacher education—call it whatever you like—is in such high demand that it has become a very lucrative industry, especially for former educators who grew tired of the daily grind and decided their expertise was more useful when made available to other adults than to children, and a lot more profitable.

As far as Akron is concerned, those who lament that we just don't do enough are not very well informed. We have waiver days, we have the six-hour option program, we have designated days within the school year that are not waiver days and we have training taking place routinely within the workday. We have countless offerings over the summer months. In fact, with respect to training during the workday, *we may have too much*. Case in point: intermediate teachers in selected elementary schools recently took part in a mathematics cohort. By the time the training was completed, some teachers spent five (5) full days away from their classrooms. And some complained vehemently that they'd had enough, that they did not want to be away from their students anymore.

There doesn't appear to be any evidence that the district is tracking the number of days a teacher is away from students for professional development reasons (being away for personal illness is an entirely different story). For example, it is entirely possible that those who missed five days for the math cohort may have been out at other times during the year for, let's say, Earobics. Not that we're interested in starting a "Most Missed School Days by a Teacher for Professional Development Reasons" category in the Guinness Book of World Records, nor are we advocating that workday training stop altogether; but we do believe the district needs to get a better handle on just how many days teachers are missing. If there is a mindset among some administrators that teachers would do anything to get out of the classroom every now and then, it is misguided. Whining about the contract not allowing adequate time for staff development is not acceptable...it's a luxury that

Akron, like any other district, simply can't afford. A frequent complaint we hear about workday staff development is about the time that is lost "catching up" if an ill-prepared sub was assigned to cover a teacher's class. Many districts have taken steps to address this problem by creating a cadre of subs with outstanding records, and making sure those subs are the first to cover for staff development absences. We've lost the services of some of our most experienced subs because we do the opposite. We have a pool of hundreds of subs, some without teaching credentials, who compete for and win assignments on the basis of how fast and how often they dial a machine.

For the most part, Akron does a good job providing homegrown, low-cost staff development opportunities. However, a practice needs to be adopted that tracks and regulates how many school days a teacher misses each year, and that reasonably attempts to match a substitute's strengths with the position he or she is assigned to cover.

STRS AWAITS LEGISLATION

Advocates Propose Alternative Benefit Changes

The Healthcare & Pension Advocates for STRS (HPA), a group of teachers, administrators and other stakeholders under the State Teachers Retirement System, has proposed alternatives to the changes proposed and adopted by the STRS Board. While not calling for any changes in the increased levels of employer and employee contributions, the group does suggest a phased approach to increasing the number of years of service required for full retirement benefits. The phase in would begin in 2015 in two-year increments until reaching 35 years in 2023. STRS has neither rejected nor adopted HPA's suggestions as of this date.

Relatedly, STRS is anticipating that the Legislative Service Commission will soon complete writing legislation for introduction in the Ohio legislature. It is expected that the bill will incorporate benefit changes recommended by the STRS Board, will be introduced in the Ohio House and that sponsorship will be bi-partisan. At this time, the co-sponsors are expected to be House Assistant Minority Leader Louis Blessing (R-Cincinnati) and Ohio Retirement Study Council Chair Rep. Todd Book (D-Portsmouth). Additional information about the bill and HPA's proposed recommendations can be found on STRS' website at www.strsoh.org.

Ohio Makes Cut for Race to the Top Award

Ohio is among the fifteen states and the District of Columbia still in competition for the federal Race to the Top grant awards. The list of finalists was carved out of the 41 state applications received by the U.S. Department of Education. Besides Ohio, states remaining in the competition include Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Tennessee.

A team from ODE will travel to Washington this month to further present Ohio's proposal and to participate in a Q & A session with the selection panel. The winning states will be announced early in April.

Ohio has requested slightly over \$400 million in its grant proposal. If not selected, Ohio may re-submit its proposal for Phase 2 of the funding process. Winners in Phase 2 probably will not be announced until late this summer.

Akron, Columbus, Toledo, Cleveland and Cincinnati are among the more than 400 Ohio districts applying for funding. Dayton, which originally rejected applying, reconsidered and is now on board, leaving Youngstown and Canton as the only two urban districts not participating. Youngstown has its hands full with the presence in the district of an Academic Distress Commission (none of whose members, to our knowledge, are from Rhode Island) and a Financial Supervision and Planning Commission whose job it is to oversee the district's spending decisions. Canton teachers elected not to participate in part because the state of labor-management relations in the district is not conducive to the collegial nature of the work required to implement the project successfully.

Just When You Thought You Had Heard It All...

A bill introduced in the Ohio House late in 2009 would require Body Mass Screenings for students upon enrollment in school and in grades 3, 5 and 9. The bill also requires that a "weight status" category, based on the body mass screenings, be reported on local district and building report cards.

The weight status categories are: underweight, healthy weight, overweight and obese. The proposed legislation would also permit breakfast to be offered in the classroom and as part of the school day, a subject that in recent years was discussed in Akron, but which met with stiff opposition, for obvious reasons, from teachers, principals and custodians.

There is some merit to the bill, including a requirement that physical education teachers must be certified and licensed as PE teachers. Schools would be required to offer more nutritious foods and beverages during the regular school day in school vending machines.

Further information about the bill can be found at www.healthychoiceshealthychildren.org.

AKRON AFTER SCHOOL TIFF RESOLVED

The Expansion of the Akron After School program last fall to more than twenty elementary schools was not without its share of complaints. Several of the complaints apparently have been addressed, but new irritations surfaced shortly after the program's second semester start.

At issue was direction from the administration that teachers, who are paid hourly at the extended time rate, were required to write lesson plans and keep other building teachers informed of student progress in the after school sessions.

While there is disagreement over whether or not teachers were told to plan, etc., the district and we have settled on a resolution to the problem. Teachers are paid a minimum of 1.75 hours per day. That time is divided among instruction (1 hour), planning (15 minutes) and transitioning with students (30 minutes) including snack, entering, exiting, etc. Unlike salaried positions, teachers are not expected to work beyond the 1.75 hours for which they are compensated.

As buildings are used more and more as community centers, additional problems will arise for which solutions will have to be found.

Central Falls

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kinds of changes necessary to continue improving instruction and learning. The superintendent refuses to meet with the leadership of the teachers' union, has rejected offers from community and elected leaders to meet and discuss what is best for the students of Central Falls and has refused offers to engage in mediation. At the same time, the superintendent refuses to accept personal responsibility or acknowledge the responsibility of any of the school's administrators for the challenges faced at Central Falls High School.

The students of Central Falls High School, their parents and the surrounding community have demonstrated overwhelming support for the dedicated teachers and staff at their school.

We are appalled at recent comments from President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan condoning the mass firing of the Central Falls High School teachers. These comments are unacceptable, do not reflect the reality on the ground and completely ignore the teachers' significant commitment to working with others to transform this school.

The comments are particularly disappointing in light of the recent state report, which found that the high school's reading and writing proficiency have gone up 22 percent and 14 percent respectively over the past two years. None of these facts is reflected in the comments from the Obama administration.

The affiliated unions of the AFL-CIO condemn the actions of the Central Falls superintendent in unjustly terminating the employment of the dedicated teaching faculty of Central Falls High School. We stand in support of the Central Falls Teachers Union in its fight to improve the teaching and learning in Central Falls schools, preserve the rights of its members and keep the teachers where they belong—in the school, working with the students and making progress on academics.

We call on the Central Falls administration to return to negotiations with the Central Falls Teachers Union and seek, in good faith, a collaborative path to proven reforms that provide, students with the opportunity to succeed. We further call on the U.S. Secretary of Education to demonstrate leadership in seeking a resolution to this crisis that supports students and teachers alike and that focuses on creating an environment that allows them to succeed.

This battle is about more than Central Falls High School. It is about working together to lift all boats, transform society and give children the education they deserve. It should not be about pitting teachers against students or school district against school district. This is a cause that unites working families and the labor movement.

X Dale Price, STRS Board



WORTH NOTING

Members who are planning to retire this year are eligible for a \$500 payment if they announce their intent prior to April 1, and then actually retire between the last workday in May and June 30.

We have received petitions from the following members for elementary seats on the AEA Board of Trustees: East District, **Carol Caughron** (Barber); Garfield District, **Leigh Conti** (Barrett); Firestone District, **Lisa Feist** (Essex); Kenmore District, Connie Kubilus (Smith); Buchtel District, **Stephanie Baugh**, Rankin. Seats remain available for the Ellet and North Districts.



29th Annual AEA Night at the Stadium
Friday, May 21 – Indians vs. Reds
Tix: \$16
Watch for Order form in your school mailbox.

Focus groups are or will begin meeting to address a handful of issues that have become hot spots in our schools. At the elementary level, a group will examine the role of IAT's, how their role has changed in recent years. At the present time, there is widespread dissatisfaction with how the role of IAT's has changed. Another group will examine workload issues of hourly tutors, particularly in the 100 Book Challenge, Fusion and LLI programs. Growing demands placed on hourly employees by their supervisors has led to angry complaints over the amount of work that must be done outside the workday. Tutors are not salaried employees nor do they receive benefits from the district.

Informational meetings are scheduled for members interested in the AEA/U of A Master's Cohort Program. The meetings are scheduled on March 16 from 5-6 and May 10 from 4-5 at AEA. RSVP to outreachgal@uakron.edu.



4th Annual AEA Golf Scramble
Brookledge Golf Course
May 15
Watch for flyer in your school mail

Tell us what you think about professional development in APS. Answer our online survey question at www.akronteach.org